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SECONDARY PRINCIPAL PERCEPTIONS OF PREPARATORY EXPERIENCES

By
Renita GriffinJordan

A Dissertation Submitted to the
Gardner-Webb University School of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University
2021

Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Renita GriffinJordan under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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Acknowledgements

I am so blessed to have experienced such an amazing journey in completing my doctoral program. I must start by thanking my dissertation committee, led by Dr. Steve Laws. My committee was amazing and supported me throughout this process. Dr. Laws never let grass grow under my feet and always kept me on my toes. He was inspiring when I needed reassurance and guided me when I needed direction. His knowledge and wisdom are unmatched, and I was fortunate to have him serve as my dissertation chair. Dr. Laws also values family; I thank him for showing an interest in mine and supporting me as I found that “balance” between work, school, and home. I appreciate all his morning walks/editing sessions and am still not sure how he remembered every little detail of my paper to discuss as he walked. I also want to thank my mentor and friend, Dr. Jackie Tobias, for introducing me to the EdD program at Gardner-Webb University. Her continuous encouragement, cheering, and pushing me through from start to finish will always be cherished. Without her support, I would not have been able to complete this dissertation in the summer of 2021. Dr. Steve Stone was my most intriguing professor. I thoroughly enjoyed our class chats and the topics he introduced. Thank you for being on my committee and providing me with an abundance of support.

I would like to recognize my families, for they all played a part in my success. First, I give gratitude to Shandua and Teri, who told me to stop procrastinating and enroll in the doctoral program. I needed that push! Next, I thank my GWU cohort family, as we have been through something special. Earning a doctoral degree during a pandemic is a first for all of us, but we pulled through each class together. My work family has made my life blissful. It is indeed an honor and pleasure to serve such an exceptional group of

educators who truly have the same vision: success for every child. My church family, led by Pastor Connelly and First Lady Joyce, has been instrumental in helping me keep the faith and know that I am always covered by God's grace. My incredible family, especially my amazing mom, is irreplaceable. From the late-night checks to tell me to get some sleep to the simple words of encouragement that helped me to the finish line, thank you mom, and I love you fam.

My dear Nina, you are my best friend, my rock, my angel. I never dreamed that I would be so lucky to have a daughter like you. When you were a baby, I wished time would stand still because I did not want to let go and let you grow; but as each year passed, I loved you more and more, to levels I did not know existed. Now, you are a beautiful young lady, ready to take on the world and beyond. I am so proud to be your Mommy and continue to watch in amazement as you, in your quiet yet captivating way, break down barriers and shatter glass ceilings. You did it in high school, and now I will be cheering from the sidelines as you head off to college to realize your deepest dreams. You have forever changed my life; you have made me a better person, and I will always treasure the bond we share. You are my Why; you are the reason I will never give up on my own dreams. I have learned so much from you and look forward to learning even more as you enter the next chapter of your life. Always hold your head high, keep God first, and remember—I love you to Mars and back!

Above all, I thank God for granting me the knowledge and endurance to successfully complete this journey. My faith has kept me grounded and assured me that through Him, I could accomplish whatever I set my mind to achieve.

Abstract

SECONDARY PRINCIPAL PERCEPTIONS OF PREPARATORY EXPERIENCES.

GriffinJordan, Renita, 2021: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain insight from current principals regarding principal preparatory experiences and to reveal which assistant principal experiences contributed to principal readiness. Through this study, 17 current secondary principals in an urban school district completed a 21-item survey using a 5-point Likert scale; 10 principals also participated in a follow-up interview. The survey instrument was constructed based on practices within seven primary standards of the North Carolina Standards for School Executives. The content validation index was utilized to measure the validity of the survey tool. The theoretical framework chosen to explore these relationships was the Contingency Theory of Leadership, developed by Fred Fiedler. The segment of the contingency theory that was explored to support this study was the situational leadership model, introduced by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard. In the Situational Leadership Model, learners are divided into four categories. The ultimate goal is to reach Readiness Level 4, where the learner has optimized learning experiences, has been delegated responsibilities, and is able to lead with little monitoring or support. Nine themes emerged from surveying and interviewing participants about their experiences as assistant principals. Two themes focused on the need for networking and professional development, four highlighted the need for assistant principals to have opportunities to facilitate school-level initiatives, and three stressed the fact that North Carolina standards accurately address the tasks that assistant principals should experience.

Keywords: assistant principal, principal, preparation, principalship, secondary

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Chapter 1: Introduction

There have been plenty of changes in education over the years: Class spaces are more crowded, school system spending has increased, there are more English-language learners enrolled in school, teachers remain underpaid in terms of college-educated professionals, and student demographics are changing (Troyer, 2019). As the field of education continues to grow, transform, and adjust to technology, innovation, and valid expectations to personalize the education experience to meet the needs of every student, the role of the school administrator remains forefront in assuring that our school communities are successful in meeting these demands. “School principals are crucial to student outcomes. They are the ones holding the organizations together, ensuring students are prepared for their academic challenges and that teachers have the support and tools they need to run classrooms effectively” (University of Kansas School of Education & Human Sciences, 2021, para. 1). Stakeholders depend significantly on the success of administrators to maintain a sustainable and effective school district; more specifically, to educate students, train and support staff, and promote the elements of the district's strategic plan by implementing practices that embrace its vision and mission. Unfortunately, there is sometimes a failure “to create the conditions that make it possible for principals to lead school improvement effectively” (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010, p. ii). Bottoms and Schmidt-Davis (2010) continued by stressing the absence of comprehensive strategic planning may deny the school administrator the direction and support needed to design an effective, personalized school improvement plan.

Since school administrators are accountable to students and families, faculty and staff, district leaders, and community partners, it must be determined how these essential

education professionals should be supported in their quest to provide the exceptional services expected, resulting in the ultimate goal of any successful school district—student growth and academic achievement. Even with numerous national, state, and local initiatives in place to support all school administrators, there tends to be a lack of uniformity within these efforts, leading me to question the school leader's preparedness for the role, as studies tend to indicate that training often leaves them feeling unprepared for the challenges of the job (Bartoletti & Connelly, 2013). Being assigned relevant tasks and responsibilities is crucial in having an impact on those being served, and it allows assistant principals to build upon their training and gain skills needed to eventually advance to the role of principal. It is further noted in a study by Mitgang (2012) that of approximately 500 principal training programs, roughly 200 were strong, stressing the realization that districts must act as the main investors of principal training.

From the beginning of their careers as school administrators, assistant principals are faced with the overwhelming charge of learning the school culture as well as student and staff needs, while manipulating a host of responsibilities to which they may or may not be accustomed. Whether dealing with a shortage of teachers, unpredictable funding, or social turmoil, many challenges are faced (Portin et al., 2003). It is imperative that when new school administrators are assigned the role of assistant principal, they understand their role, the importance of their responsibilities, and how their day-to-day tasks are preparing them to one day lead their school community. It is not disputed that managerial tasks are important components of a fully operational school and that school administrators should be well-versed in fulfilling such assignments, but these tasks should only be a portion of the training provided. While Hall et al. (2016) pointed out that

assistant principals tend to “serve as chief disciplinarians, organize athletics, support the management of the building, lead extracurricular activities, and perform other duties as assigned” (p. 10), it is crucial for these new administrators to also gain valuable experience as instructional leaders, culture organizers, and capacity builders.

After scanning the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction website, I was not able to find a uniform or detailed description of responsibilities or duties for assistant principals to follow in order to ensure they receive the knowledge and training to prepare them for the principalship. Yes, the North Carolina School Executive Evaluation Rubric was highlighted with a rather verbose description of standards to meet or exceed proficiency, but a detailed description of day-to-day tasks, routine duties, and school-level expectations for an aspiring principal could not be found. If an educator new to the position of assistant principal is expected by the school community to be a leader within their school; support students, parents, and staff; and effectively consult and collaborate with district leaders, a structured system of support should be in place from day one. Gail Connelly, the Executive Director Emeritus of the National Association of Elementary School Principals, noted that to ensure assistant principals learn to fulfill their responsibilities most efficiently, they must be afforded opportunities to gain experience and develop the skills that lead to the principalship. She affirmed that the assistant principalship is now considered the most reliable and effective pathway to assume the role of principal (Communicator, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

Insufficient Training and Professional Development

The assistant principal position is one of the least researched subjects in the field

of educational leadership. Its ambiguity allows for the misinterpretation of its intended purpose, making it a difficult role to effectively fulfill (Weller & Weller, 2002). While there may be a wealth of literature relating to the notion that it takes a successful school administrator to lead a successful school community, there is not as much research on the specific experiences that influence aspiring school leaders in their quest to grow and learn in the role that is the precursor to the principal. Instead, an increasing amount of data is being captured on the managerial duties with which assistant principals are tasked. As illustrated in an earlier report by Austin and Brown (1970), 83% of assistant principals reported that one of the most crucial tasks they perform is discipline, followed by student attendance at 76% and scheduling at 72%. Disappointingly, responsibilities such as curriculum development and teacher support did not receive such high rankings, falling below 70%. The assistant principalship is often seen as an introductory or foundational role that affords the new school administrator the training, opportunity, and experiences needed to one day assume the role of principal. Too often, however, the disconnect between how principals are trained and the realities of today's principalship is forcing colleges, universities, policy makers, and school districts across the nation to reexamine leadership preparation programs (Pannell et al., 2015).

No longer are school leaders just maintaining the status quo by managing complex operations, but just like their colleagues in business, they must be able to create schools as organizations that can learn and change quickly if they are to improve performance. (Public Schools of North Carolina Educator Effectiveness Division, 2013, A new vision of school leadership section)

Effective administrators also need to understand the special education model

implemented in today's school system. Oftentimes, however, administrators may not be equally expected to receive ongoing training and preparation that teachers receive in special education to meet this requirement. As a result, there is likely to be a lack of training and continued professional development in this area (Keith, 2011).

Principal preparedness also comes in the form of sensitivity and diversity training. Two programs that the district in this study has implemented in recent years are related to equity and social-emotional support. Administrators in the district are expected to be knowledgeable and effective in spearheading and facilitating these initiatives within their schools. When considering diversity, Young et al. (2010) reported from Madsen and Mabokela (2005) that oftentimes administrators are reluctant to draw attention to or address diversity concerns. Without the proper training or prior experience confronting these issues, some administrators may not be capable of addressing issues of race, gender, or cultural inequities within the school community. Further, administrators who have not had relevant, real-life experiences within a multicultural environment may face feelings of incompetence and be unable to realize the full complexities of this issue. Likewise, when considering social and emotional learning (SEL), training must be relevant and reflective. The SEL process supports children and adults in effectively managing their emotions, achieving their goals, showing empathy, maintaining positive relationships, and making good decisions (CASEL, n.d.). School leaders are expected to lead in the implementation of an SEL plan for the school community, ensuring that priorities are discussed and determined, a continuing roadmap of process and procedures is sketched out, and 1 year of goals are planned out.

Effects on Student Achievement

When a principal is not prepared to lead, studies show that student achievement is affected. In research conducted by Branch et al. (2013), results indicated that students of an ineffective principal may suffer lower achievement gains by between 2 and 7 months of learning in a single school year. Whereas teachers have a direct impact on students in their classroom, a deficit in principal quality and preparedness can affect all students in the school. Further, research by Ozdemir (2019) highlighted the evidence that the leadership behaviors exhibited by school administrators can be compared to the instructional practices of teachers when responsibility and common practices are shared. Studies have shown that the effectiveness of a prepared principal can have a positive effect on student achievement. Research done in this area suggests that “significant relationships have been identified between selected school leadership practices and student learning, indicating that evidence existed for certain principal behaviors to produce a direct relationship with student achievement” (Nettles & Herrington, 2007, p. 724). In a study by New Leaders for New Schools (2009), principal and teacher effectiveness is directly related to nearly 60% of a school’s influence on academic achievement, proving to be the most important component driving school success. Additionally, Nettles and Petscher (2006, as cited in Nettles & Herrington, 2007) studied the correlation of principal effectiveness on student achievement among students in a Florida reading grant program. The role of the principal in implementing the program was examined in relation to the reading achievement of student participants. The conclusion of the research found some significance; specifically, through the successful implementation of literacy intervention practices, student participants made significant

gains on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills ORF subtest and were able to read an additional five words per minute. Further, with the principal's increased involvement in the implementation of the specific assessment practices, the ORF scores for the school improved by three words per minute. Likewise, Khan and Shaheen (2016) concluded in a study that the role of "professionally trained principals was considerable in students' academic achievement" (p. 78). This stemmed primarily from a high level of qualifications and relevant experience. Khan and Shaheen also determined that trained and prepared principals were more likely to conduct workshops for the professional growth of teachers, employing the latest methods of instruction and encouraging teachers to use digital and visual aids to make the content more engaging to students.

"Schools with the most disadvantaged students—those with low average test scores and those serving high percentages of students in poverty and students of color—tend to have less experienced and lower-rated principals" (Superville, 2019, para. 1). More specifically, Superville (2019) stressed that administrators leading schools with the greatest needs may not be in the optimal position to bring about substantial improvements. As a result, principal sorting may likely contribute to opportunity and performance gaps between schools serving higher and lower concentrations of marginalized student populations.

High Turnover Rate

A study conducted by Wahlstrom et al. (2010) focused on the extent of principal turnover and how it affects different aspects of the school environment. Survey and interview data were used to determine the extent of principal succession in schools and how students were affected. The following are some of their findings regarding rapid

principal turnover: Principals tended to leave the position every 3 to 4 years; there was a significantly negative effect on school culture; and there was a significantly negative effect on student achievement.

Louis et al. (2010) found that principal turnover has a significant influence over student achievement and is one of the most substantial risks to the stability of a school and its district. While most assistant principals aspire to a leadership role, the lack of experience and knowledge can hinder student learning, and the effective management of their school and can lead to higher turnover (Communicator, 2016). Increasing by only 7% over the past 2 decades, the demand to hire new school principals continues to remain somewhat constant. The turnover rate for school administrators, however, has tended to increase over the years as career professionals age and retire and others seek alternate career opportunities (Clifford, 2012). In a principal retention study, Branch et al. (2013) concluded that, except for principals in high-poverty, low-performing schools, ineffective principals typically did not remain in their leadership position long; some even left public school altogether. If not dismissed, ineffective principals of high-poverty, low-performing schools oftentimes would be placed at another school. This practice never benefits students or struggling principals. A study by Beteille et al. (2012) indicated that principal turnover is detrimental to a school's success and that the majority of new principals in struggling schools lack prior leadership experience to be effective; they often resign if a more attractive position become available.

It is worth noting that assistant principals contribute to the administration turnover rate as well. Schermuly et al. (2011) reported that assistant principals may possess low confidence in their competence, caused by an overwhelming volume of expectations and

responsibilities to complete within their role. In addition to this, Schermuly et al. noted that Spreitzer (1996) and Wallach and Mueller (2006) described how the perception of incompetence and restraint can be displayed when assistant principals do not have a clear understanding of their roles. Schermuly et al. continued by suggesting that the many roles and responsibilities assigned to an assistant principal may lead to mounting tensions from the pressures of conflicting roles.

North Carolina Standards for School Executives

Currently, the state of North Carolina utilizes the North Carolina Standards for School Executives as the evaluation tool to assess the effectiveness of school administrators as leaders and as they consider their own growth and development throughout their career (Public Schools of North Carolina Educator Effectiveness Division, 2013). With the insight of current school administrators, this study took a closer look at the effectiveness of the evaluation tool in determining the types of tasks in which assistant principals actually engage and those they believe to be ideal in preparing for the principalship. As with the evaluation tool of any profession, the new school administrator must have an evaluation tool that is relevant and challenging but straightforward and reflects the tasks that contribute to the growth and success of school leaders.

There are eight standards for school executives in North Carolina; each composed of several practices, or statements, of specific tasks in which a school administrator is expected to engage. When school administrators are evaluated, the standards evaluation rating scale is utilized to assess competency. The rating scale is a rubric consisting of several components: the performance standards; performance elements, or subcategories of performance-based expectations; and performance descriptors, or specific

responsibilities and tasks within the standards administrators should be practicing. The eight standards are (a) strategic leadership, (b) instructional leadership, (c) cultural leadership, (d) human resources leadership, (e) managerial leadership, (f) external development leadership, (g) micropolitical leadership, and (h) academic achievement leadership (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015).

As education leaders across the state and nation begin to address the pertinent issue of principal preparedness, we must bring school administrators to the table to speak on the topic. A shared focus of success throughout the district should be promoted as school administrators and district administrators collaborate to promote authentic knowledge sharing and a purposeful and visible change in outlook (Hannay et al., 2013). Current principals can attest to which assistant principal tasks best prepared them to find success as a school leader and offer insight into where they felt unprepared and insufficiently trained to assume the role of principal. Given recent conversations regarding leadership and educator effectiveness, this is a suitable time to examine how the actual tasks and responsibilities of assistant principals align with ideal assignments intended to prepare them for the principalship, as perceived by secondary principals within an urban school district.

Purpose

This qualitative study embraced a very distinct purpose: to gain insight regarding actual versus ideal assignments and experiences of assistant principals in one of the largest urban school districts in the state of North Carolina as perceived by current principals in the district. This study revealed which assistant principal experiences contribute to principal readiness as perceived by the leaders of our secondary schools.

Identifying preparatory tasks administrators were assigned as assistant principals helped establish an awareness of current strengths and opportunities state and district leaders can expound upon to ensure a more competent and confident pool of future school leaders. In addition, tasks being investigated in this study were reflective of the North Carolina School Executive Evaluation Rubric, which is used to evaluate the performance and growth of school administrators throughout the state.

Research Questions

Through this study, principal preparatory roles and experiences of assistant principals in an urban school district were explored through the eyes of current principals. The study investigated the actual tasks and responsibilities as compared to ideal tasks and responsibilities assistant principals experience and how these assignments prepare aspiring principals for the principalship. The research questions that guided this research were

1. What tasks were actually experienced as an assistant principal to help in the preparation for the principalship?
2. What were the ideal tasks that would have helped in the preparation for the principalship had they been experienced as an assistant principal?
3. In reference to principal preparation, how do principal perspectives differ when comparing actual versus ideal tasks experienced as an assistant principal?
4. How were the North Carolina Standards for School Executives incorporated into the tasks experienced as an assistant principal?

Significance of the Study

The growing demand for school administrators to take on more of a leadership role as opposed to merely a managerial role justifies the need to explore the day-to-day tasks and assignments experienced by assistant principals. Preparatory routines and encounters should guide these aspiring school leaders through their voyage toward the principalship. The finding of this research provided a better understanding of variables that may tend to influence an aspiring principal's ability to be prepared to lead a school.

Some states and districts have become more deliberate about grooming assistant principals for the next step by providing regular coaching and other supports that prepare them to be instructional leaders. More recently, though, the job of assistant principal has evolved from managing buses, food services, and student discipline to a more complex role that more closely mirrors what principals' jobs entail. (Education Week, 2017, Assistant principals section)

Results of this study informed educational leaders at all school levels of the necessity of continuously revisiting and redesigning evaluation tools to meet the needs of a transformational education system that embodies educational leaders poised to grow and learn and accept the challenges in order to advance to the next level in their professional career. Assistant principals must be given the tools and experiences needed to acclimate to a variety of school settings, educational levels, and district and state expectations while fulfilling their own professional goals.

Finally, we must stay focused on the ultimate goal of all school districts: student success and academic achievement. School leadership often has been overlooked as an education improvement strategy, despite the evidence that leadership influences student

achievement (Wallace Foundation, 2011). Addressing this issue allows school districts and the state department of education to reflect on the state of principal preparedness through the eyes of current school administrators as we continue to focus on school improvement and student success. Further, by using the state evaluation tool as the criterion for which survey questions were derived, it is my hope that an enhanced understanding of the specific experiences that best prepare assistant principals for the principalship was thoroughly reviewed.

Setting

The school district researched in this study is an urban school district located in central North Carolina. Comprised of 30 elementary, nine middle, 10 high, two secondary (6-12), and two alternative/hospital schools, the district serves more than 32,000 students within the 53 schools and is one of the top 10 largest districts in the state. The ethnic composition of the student population is quite diverse. Over 40% of students are Black, more than 30% are Hispanic, nearly 20% are White, and approximately 7% are other races. As noted, minorities make up nearly 80% of the student population. Further, 62% of all students enrolled are eligible for free/reduced lunch. It is worth stating that this breakdown does not correspond to the overall population of the county, which is roughly 42% White and 58% minority. Over the years, there has been a steady departure of White students from the school system. The beneficiaries appear to be local charter and private schools. Low graduation rates, low school report card grades, low test proficiency rates, and high discipline rates could very well be the cause of the multi-year enrollment decline.

Role of the Researcher

I am currently a secondary assistant principal serving the North Carolina Public School System. I am a veteran educator who has served in elementary and secondary public school systems. I have experience as a teacher, school counselor, and for the past 5 years, a high school administrator. Credentials include B.S. in Elementary Education with a second major in Psychology, M.S. in Counseling Psychology–Mental Health/Agency, K-12 School Counseling Licensure, Post Master’s Certification in Educational Leadership, K-12 Education Administration Licensure, and EdD in Educational Leadership (in progress). I have also earned National Board Certification in K-12 School Counseling. In my current role, I facilitate state and local assessments, coordinate student transportation, supervise custodial services and facilities, evaluate instructional and student support personnel, facilitate school-based emergency response efforts, and conduct professional development training for staff and out-of-district learners. I aspire to be a secondary principal and was eager to complete my dissertation on a topic that affects my colleagues, staff and students, the school district, and educators everywhere.

Definition of Terms

Actual

For purposes of this study, actual is defined as existing in fact or reality; existing or occurring at the time (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.a). Actual task is one of the independent variables of the study.

Assistant Principal

Executive of a school community under the supervision of the principal.

Ideal

For purposes of this study, ideal is defined as an ultimate object or aim of endeavor; goal (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.b). Ideal task is one of the independent variables of the study.

North Carolina School Executive Evaluation Rubric

A composite matrix of the standards, elements, and descriptors of the North Carolina Standards for School Executives (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015).

North Carolina Standards for School Executives

These standards serve as the state guide for principals and assistant principals as they continually reflect upon and improve their effectiveness as leaders throughout all the stages of their careers and as they consider their growth and development as executives leading schools in the 21st century (Public Schools of North Carolina Educator Effectiveness Division, 2013).

Perception

For purposes of this study, perception is defined as a belief or opinion, often held by many people and based on how things seem (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). This is one of the independent variables of the study.

Principal Preparedness

The level of confidence and self-assurance of an assistant principal that they are fully prepared to assume the role of principal. This is the dependent variable of the study.

Principal

Primary executive of a school community; supervises the assistant principal.

Professional Development

For purposes of this study, professional development is defined as a wide variety of specialized training, formal education, or advanced professional learning intended to help administrators, teachers, and other educators improve their professional knowledge, competence, skills, and effectiveness (Glossary of Education Reform, n.d.).

School Leader/Executive/Administrator

For purposes of this study, school leader/executive/administrator is defined as a principal or assistant principal employed as an officer of a school responsible for the daily instructional leadership and managerial operations in the school building (National Association of Elementary School Principals, n.d.).

Summary

This study explored the experiences of the assistant principal as a precursor to leading a school. In doing so, the perceptions of current principals were analyzed to compare which actual versus ideal experiences most accurately prepare assistant principals to lead their schools. Chapter 2 illustrates the theoretical framework for which this study is based; reviews the changing role of the school administrator over time; highlights preparation, training, and professional development efforts and opportunities for the aspiring principal; assesses educator effectiveness and evaluation implemented by the State Board of Education; and assesses school administrator perceptions regarding principal preparation. Chapter 3 describes several elements of the study to include the research design and procedures, a detailed description of the population and sample of participants, dependent and independent variables utilized, instrumentation and materials applied, and an in-depth data analysis. Chapter 4 presents the data collected to answer the

research questions and determine the results of the study. Last, Chapter 5 summarizes the study and its findings and suggests recommendations for practical future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Overview

The purpose of this literature review is to provide foundational research regarding the assistant principal experience and whether current principals perceive those experiences ideal in preparing for the principalship. Since the tasks being investigated in this study were obtained from the North Carolina School Executive Evaluation Rubric, it was of interest to assess if elements within the rubric properly evaluate the readiness of an assistant principal to lead a school. In this chapter, literature presented also addressed the four research questions of this study:

1. What tasks were actually experienced as an assistant principal to help in the preparation for the principalship?
2. What were the ideal tasks that would have helped in the preparation for the principalship had they been experienced as an assistant principal?
3. In reference to principal preparation, how do principal perspectives differ when comparing actual versus ideal tasks experienced as an assistant principal?
4. How were the North Carolina Standards for School Executives incorporated into the tasks experienced as an assistant principal?

With this in mind, the review of literature for this study was conducted within the structure of five distinct components. The first component introduces the theoretical framework for this study along with the presentation of influential and scholarly sources for each theory. The second component presents and highlights the changing role of the school administrator through the modernization of educational leadership over time. The

third component focuses on principal preparation initiatives and professional development for the aspiring principal. The fourth component explores the North Carolina Standards for School Executives and the evaluation of school administrators. The fifth and final component takes an in-depth look at perceptions school administrators have on assistant principal preparedness for the principalship. A summary of the main points from this literature review follows, highlighting substantial evidence of a clear need to support the continued exploration of the responsibilities and experiences assistant principals endure in preparation for the principalship.

Theoretical Framework

Through this research, the role of an assistant principal is explored in relation to their readiness to advance to the principalship. The conclusion of this study highlights the relationship between the independent variables (actual tasks, ideal tasks, principal perceptions of each, and standards for school executives) and their effects on the dependent variable (preparedness for the principalship). For this study, the theoretical framework chosen to explore these relationships was the Contingency Theory of Leadership developed in 1958 by Fred Fiedler (Leadership-Central.com, n.d.).

According to Chance (2013), Fiedler acknowledged leader personalities as task-motivated or relationship-motivated. He reasoned that the effect of training, which is to increase the favorableness of a situation by learning how to structure given tasks, would cause task-motivated leaders to perform well after gaining significant experience and training from their situation. Chance continued by stating, “Contingency theory attempts to identify variables that impact the effectiveness of leadership. Approaches to contingency theory fall into one of two categories offering different perspectives from

which to view variable conditions” (p. 109). The category that relates the closest to this research is the leadership perspective category, as it focuses on examining variables that impact the effectiveness of leadership styles. Considering the research questions for this study and how they directly address the impact experiences have on the effectiveness and readiness of assistant principals to assume the role of the school leader, this model proved to be relevant, while aligning the theoretical foundation for the study.

The segment of the contingency theory that was explored in detail to support this study is the situational leadership model, introduced by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard (Leaders, 2021). Chance (2013) further noted that the two theorists took Fiedler’s task and relationship leadership personalities and added a third dimension related to the learner’s level of readiness. They then formulated a four-quadrant model highlighting both tasks and relationship behaviors in correlation with the level of readiness. Table 1 provides a visual for the situational leadership model.

Table 1

Situational Leadership Model

Leadership behavior	Learner’s readiness level
Telling/directing	R1 (low ability, low willingness)
Selling/coaching	R2 (low ability, high willingness)
Participating/supporting	R3 (high ability, low willingness)
Delegating	R4 (high ability, high willingness)

Note. R=readiness level.

In the Situational Leadership Model, learners are divided into four categories. The ultimate goal is to reach Readiness Level 4 (R4) where the learner is delegated responsibility and able to lead with little monitoring or support. For this study, we considered how the components of this leadership model correlate with the role of an

assistant principal as the learner.

Readiness Level 1 (R1) is supported by a supervisor who employs a directive leadership approach where communication typically travels from leader to learner. This readiness level is designed to be short-term and provide extensive assistance to encourage continuous improvement. This level complements those who have very limited to no skills or experience executing the tasks they have been assigned. Because of their lack of experience, they may be too insecure and unwilling to make decisions, take chances, or use initiative to meet a goal (Situational Leadership, n.d.).

At this level, the supervisor takes more of a hands-on approach, spending a great amount of time directing the learner through the day-to-day operations of the school and providing guidance in identifying any signs of growth and progress (Leadership, 2020). New assistant principals with no administrative experience are learners who may fall into this category, relying on their supervisor to provide extensive guidance.

Readiness Level 2 (R2) is supported by a supervisor whose leadership approach encompasses increased regard for relationship behavior while continuing to rely on task behavior. The learner is recognized for their commitment and interest in learning. While still being the overall decision maker, the supervisor takes the time to coach and explain the *what*, *when*, *how*, and *why* of those decisions with the learner. This level complements those who have limited experience performing the tasks assigned but, due to the coaching received, may be more motivated and eager to learn (Situational Leadership, n.d.).

At this level, the learner is becoming familiar with some of the responsibilities and tasks assigned; although their overall ability may still be low, a level of comfort is developing with certain tasks and responsibilities. As a result, the learner may be willing

to lead and show initiative in those particular areas of comfort. Constructive feedback in response to efforts made is critical to continued growth (Leadership, 2020). Assistant principals who are growing professionally and showing an interest in more leadership roles are learners who may fall into this category, relying on their supervisor to be a coach and provide feedback through their assigned tasks.

The next level, Readiness Level 3 (R3), is supported by a supervisor whose leadership approach heavily relies on relationship behavior. The supervisor takes a step back, allowing the learner to perform assigned tasks independently at a sustained level. Engaging in increased responsibility may be concerning to the learner, so continual support and strong communication from the supervisor are a must. This level complements those who have demonstrated a level of task proficiency but may still have hesitations about performing the tasks without guidance (Situational Leadership, n.d.).

At this level, the learner has developed the necessary skills and gained the knowledge required to excel on assigned tasks but may not be willing to do so for many reasons. The learner may not have the confidence to perform the task with only a little guidance and support, may fear failure, may fear the unknown, or may simply be unmotivated to comply with the supervisor's request. This behavior is likely to be temporary, as the learner's commitment may gradually grow when approaching Level 4 (Leadership, 2020). Assistant principals may feel they understand their role and have experienced many of the responsibilities of a principal; however, they may question their true ability to lead a school if they have not engaged in all the relevant experiences as their principals. This may cause an assistant principal to be less willing to assert themselves to new levels of responsibility.

The final level of the Situational Leadership Model is Readiness Level 4 (R4). This is known as the delegating level, supported by a supervisor whose leadership approach is follower-driven, allowing the learner can complete tasks at a sustained level with confidence and proficiency without interference. The direction of communication has changed in Level 4, as it now flows from learner to supervisor. This level complements those who have proven their ability to build capacity as a leader through successful performance while being willing to continuously take on greater levels of responsibility without hesitation or coercion (Situational Leadership, n.d.).

At this level, the learner is highly trained in their responsibilities and comfortable with executing them. They are competent and able to successfully engage in tasks and assignments and take full responsibility for their outcomes. At this stage, the level of commitment is high, and the learner is reliable and responsive (Leadership, 2020). Assistant principals may enjoy feelings of accomplishment at this stage, as their principal supervisor comfortably relinquishes instructional and managerial principalship responsibilities, indicating their readiness to lead.

In many ways, the levels of the Situational Leadership Model depict the progression of growth, competency, and self-confidence of a new school administrator. They highlight the dire need for assistant principals to receive relevant, real-life experiences at their school site to gain the greatest opportunity for success as the leader of a school community. Geis (2016) suggested that if new team members are to be groomed to assume leadership roles, the delegating style should be considered. This allows potential leaders to take an active role in decision-making and shared responsibility while maintaining a high level of engagement and involvement in

leadership matters. The types of responsibilities delegated to assistant principals and the quality of training received may determine if and when they progress to the level needed to be a successful, well-prepared principal. In fact, principal training programs should put more emphasis on instructional leadership, do a better job of integrating theory and practice, and provide better preparation for working effectively with the school community (DeVita, 2007).

The Changing Role of the Secondary School Administrator

Veteran educators may recall how different the role of a school principal was only a few decades ago when administrators served as the lead disciplinarian and the staff's boss (Lynch, 2012). Decisions were made from the top down, instruction was less autonomous, and school culture did not include an emphasis on relationship building. That period in public education emphasized how the main role of the principal was to manage the staff and oversee school operations. Though the role of a school administrator has changed over time, the expectations from stakeholders have not. Copland (2001) satirically brought to light the perceived expectations of a school administrator. Within his article, Copland posted a fictitious job announcement and suggested the candidate qualifications include a sage's wisdom, a CEO's vision, a scholar's intellect, a counselor's compassion, a firefighter's courage, a senator's political savvy, a soldier's toughness, a saint's humility, and a stage performer's charisma. One may think Copland depicted the characteristics of a superhero or supernatural being, as opposed to a leader of a school. This brings to light the tremendous responsibility that has always been placed on school administrators.

Contemporary school administrators play a daunting array of roles. They must be

educational visionaries and change agents, instructional leaders, curriculum and assessment experts, budget analysts, facility managers, special program administrators, and community builders (Darling-Hammond et al., n.d.). While being accountable to all stakeholders to ensure the ultimate success of the school, administrators could be confronted with a mountain of obstacles at any given time; the expectation is that obstacles are overcome expeditiously, and the school continues its upward trajectory toward success.

Ironically, although administrators are expected to be accountable for the successes and failures that may occur, there is a growing push in recent years to empower teachers and even parents to have a decision-making role within the school.

Administrators should consider the resulting impact of deciding to engage in shared responsibility; investing in and securing teacher, parent, and student input; and supporting and enforcing recommendations that are not their own (Cushman, 1993). As others are empowered, the administrator must have the skills to balance this power shift, continuing to be the leading influencer and most qualified executive at the table.

It has been made quite apparent that while the importance of the principalship has not changed, the skills required to be successful in the role have (Hayden, 2020). As Pannell et al. (2015) declared, “Education reform has brought about legislation transforming the principal’s role from a building manager and disciplinarian to a multi-faceted role responsible for strategic planning, managing funds, ensuring legislative compliance, implementing reforms, and increasing student achievement” (p. 2). School administrators are also realizing the pressure to elevate their knowledge and skills through advanced education degrees. According to a study conducted by the National

Center for Education Statistics (2019a), nearly 40% of secondary school administrators have continued their education to earn a degree beyond the master's level. Also highlighted in the National Center for Education Statistics (2019b) is a table of earned doctorate degrees by field of study. In 1970-1971, there were slightly more than 6,000 conferred doctorate degrees in the field of education. Nearly 50 years later, in 2017-2018, there were nearly 13,000 doctorate degrees in education conferred, doubling earlier statistics. In fact, education doctorates were surpassed only by healthcare-related fields and legal professions.

According to a survey on the challenges of school leadership (MetLife, 2013), 69% of principals indicated that the expectations of their position have changed over the years and responsibilities are not the same. Further, approximately 75% say the profession is becoming excessively complex and report high stress levels and limited influence over key school operations as a major concern.

Issues surrounding curriculum and assessment as well as school safety are central in the thoughts of a high school administrator, as claimed by Couros et al. (2019). Couros et al. added that over the past 10 years, expectations of high school administrators have changed dramatically, and the recent infusion of technology has made already high demands quite hard to meet. Sheninger (2019) acknowledged that “expectations are also changing in a knowledge- and information-based society in which information can easily be accessed from virtually anywhere” (p. 22).

Principal Preparation Initiatives and Professional Development

For the first time, the field has compelling evidence that points to a set of actions to address longstanding weaknesses in leadership training. There are early

indications that investing in better leadership training can pay off in higher student performance and lower principal turnover. (Mitgang, 2021, p. 25)

An article by Sutchter et al. (2017) focused on supporting principal learning and reiterated several ways to develop effective principals. First, the program institution and school district must collaborate to ensure consistency with curriculum standards, recruitment protocols, and internship expectations. Next, aspiring principals must be given the opportunity to participate in professional learning teams to maximize collaboration and networking. Further, providing real-world and relevant learning experiences must be a priority. Problem-based learning and on-the-job coaching are essential in principal preparation and developing effective leaders. Other research tends to suggest focusing on novice administrators rather than their veteran counterparts as needing the greatest amount of professional development and then affording veteran administrators the opportunity to serve as mentor principals (Fleck, 2008, as cited in Keith, 2011).

Bastian and Goff (2017) took a closer look at the day-to-day experiences and tasks of assistant principals. Bastian and Goff stressed that the amount of time assistant principals engage in completing relevant tasks is as important as the number of tasks they may have been assigned. According to Bastian and Goff, assistant principals spent the greatest amount of time engaged in administrative tasks, accounting for one third of their overall time. Time completing administrative tasks also accounted for the largest range of responses. Instructional management and internal relations both fared slightly over 20%, which indicates that many assistant principals may spend less than 2 hours per day in the classrooms, providing instructional support to teachers, and enhancing relationships

throughout the school community. Organizational management captures about 14% of assistant principals' time during the school day. Keeping the school running smoothly is important; and assistant principals need to gain practice in tasks involving facilities, scheduling, transportation, and programs. Finally, it was reported that only 7% of the time is spent on external relations. A study by Kiriago (2013) concluded that 100% of respondents indicated the need to develop a public relations policy for secondary schools to expand relationships with the external audience, such as parents, alumni, local businesses, large corporations, government entities, and others in order to "sustain the public good will it gets" (p. 85).

A study by the National Center for Education Statistics (2016-2017) displayed the many types of professional development opportunities experienced by public school principals in a variety of educational settings. Interestingly, principals serving in urban districts were able to grow and learn by visiting other schools to shadow fellow principals. Nearly 78% of principals took advantage of this opportunity, which was more than the degree of experience by principals in rural, town, or suburban districts. At over 90%, principals in all types of districts and school levels attested to their participation in professional workshops and conferences, though the amount of time allotted for such professional development opportunities was not indicated in the survey. Further, about six in 10 principals in urban districts admitted to having a mentor or coach to support their practice; slightly more than half of secondary principals reported that they had a mentor or coach. Again, this is more than the degree to which those in other types of districts and school levels experienced. Notably, when asked about opportunities to enroll in university courses for continuous growth and knowledge enhancement, roughly 20%

of secondary principals in urban districts indicated that additional coursework was a desired or available option.

Research continues to support the fact that continuous, on-the-job professional development improves learning outcomes and should be prioritized (Sheninger, 2019). Considering that assistant principals are consumed with duties and assignments throughout the day, it is difficult to find time to leave the school to participate in professional development opportunities. Because of this, professional growth should be entrenched into their everyday responsibilities (Hutton, 2020).

A common form of professional development for new administrators is the internship experience. According to a multi-state study by Darling-Hammond et al. (2007), it was reported that over 71% of North Carolina principals completed an internship experience before becoming the leader of a school. It was interesting to discover the degree to which these interns experienced various educational leadership tasks; the scale used was 1 to 5, with 5 being experienced to a great extent. Average rankings ranged from 2.8 to 3.7, showing that while the experience may have had some good qualities, there are also components upon which to improve. The lowest average ranking was regarding opportunities to work in schools that served student populations with a wide array of socioeconomic backgrounds. Only slightly more than half of the principals experienced working in settings where diversity is considered on a large scale when making decisions and sustaining a strong culture for the school. Considering that assistant principals may enjoy their first principalship in a multicultural environment, this experience is essential.

As an added note, Young et al. (2016) revealed that diversity policies and various

diversity initiatives throughout their school districts did not prove to be a high priority for school administrators. Consequently, it was further discovered that administrator lack of understanding about what diversity really means may hinder the growth of a school community in many ways. The highest ranking was regarding the overall internship experience. When asked if the internship was an ideal experience to prepare for the principalship, principals had an average ranking of 3.7. While this is much higher than the previous, it still suggests there is work to be done. Young et al. surveying principals from North Carolina and seven other states, yielded a concerning trend for our state. The average ranking of 2.8 for experiences with diversity was the lowest of all states; likewise, the average ranking of 3.7 for the overall internship experience was again the lowest of all states. Impressively, one state even had an overall experience average ranking of 4.4. In reviewing all the data provided, it is clear that during the timeframe of this study, North Carolina had room to improve in the area of principal preparation.

According to Schiavino-Narvaez et al. (2020), school leaders have “different strengths and needs. We need to be flexible enough to individualize and differentiate our approach, including the pace at which we work with leaders to help them set and accomplish their goals” (p. 47). A handful of education programs across the nation are known to be successful because there has been an emphasis placed on leadership training within the school building rather than through traditional preparatory methods. With budgeting in mind, new administrators received valued training by working alongside mentor principals for a period of time. This practical, hands-on experience was beneficial to new administrators, as this provided them the opportunity to improve their skills instead of experiencing the administrator shuffle (Dillon, 2011).

In an article focused on principal well-being, Safir (2019) suggested that although training programs may have benefits, they often tend to be quite generic and focused on operational management, while overlooking the social-emotional aspects of the leadership position. Safir continued by declaring that many school districts consider essential professional learning to entail meeting at a central location for an information gathering session; when in reality, it should be composed of learning that meets the needs of the whole leader to include peer collaboration and dialogue revolved around real-world, everyday matters administrators face at their particular schools. Such a robust coaching model and support system should be implemented and available during the first 3 years of the assistant principalship.

Although much research regarding mentoring of aspiring principals has been positive, coaching and mentoring is not a very common and expected part of the assistant principal experience. Bastian and Goff (2017) conducted a North Carolina leadership study emphasizing the availability of supports for assistant principals. Results found that a formally assigned mentor/coach was least accessible to assistant principals, with administrators ranking coaching/mentoring availability 1.17 on a scale of 4. This was the lowest ranking of all supports, falling below other variables such as leadership activities, feedback, collaboration, professional development events, and informal coaching.

After exploring a multitude of educational literature and highlighting initiatives of various methods and structures to promote sustainable educational change, Owen (2020) stated that the “best choice is a coaching model that provides a framework through which problems, concerns, new ideas, and organizational or personal goals can be addressed in an objective, nonthreatening, collaborative way” (p. 24). According to Kimbrel (2020),

when coaching is individualized, focused, and specific, it can provide promising results.

As highlighted in a report by Lewis and Scott (2020), the experiences of school administrators may be determined by their school characteristics or location. There was a higher percentage of urban school administrators benefitting from districts supporting both a system-wide mentoring initiative as well as opportunities to visit other schools to receive coaching. Lewis and Scott also referenced a report from Grissom and Harrington (2010) on research that indicates principals who had the opportunity to benefit from the guidance of a coach or mentor tend to be more effective leaders. Lewis and Scott (2020) further noted that Herman et al. (2017) and Gates et al. (2020) stated that principals are most likely to receive the greatest benefit of such support early in their careers.

National Initiatives

There are many education associations throughout the country that provide ongoing professional development opportunities to current and aspiring school principals. These organizations support the continuous growth of the school leader by offering workshops and conferences; journals and other publications; and leadership positions on a local, regional, or national level to represent the organization as well as the education specialty of the administrator. Membership is often available and comes with various discounts and other perks. Some organizations, to name a few, are the National Education Association, American Association of School Administrators, National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), National Association of Elementary School Principals, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, North Carolina Principals & Assistant Principals Association (NCPAPA), North Carolina Association of Educators, and the Association of Educators for the study district.

One well-known professional development platform for school leaders was developed by NASSP and can be utilized to grow and enhance the leadership program within a school district while addressing hyper-change in education. Building Ranks is a comprehensive framework designed to enhance the effectiveness of school leaders. The framework contains 15 dimensions within two specific domains: building culture and leading learning. Table 2 provides a detailed view of the dimensions within each domain.

Table 2

Building Ranks Framework–15 Dimensions Within Two Domains

Building culture domain	Leading learning domain
Student-centeredness	Vision and mission
Wellness	Collaborative leadership
Equity	Result-orientation
Relationships	Curriculum, instruction, and assessment
Communication	Innovation
Ethics	Human capital management
Global-mindedness	Strategic management
	Reflection and growth

As noted in Table 2, all dimensions are created with a shared purpose in mind. A school leader's leadership skills can be enhanced with a clear understanding and implementation of these domains, leading to the success of students and staff throughout the school community. Regarding building culture, it is emphasized that “an effective school culture is defined as an environment that nurtures each individual to live the shared norms, values, and beliefs to grow in a safe, caring, and high-performing school community” (NASSP Building Ranks, n.d., p. 4). Building Ranks provides school leaders a plethora of ways to lead and shape the culture of the school. Likewise, leading learning “involves empowering each individual to apply the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to grow and contribute productively in a global society” (NASSP Building Ranks, n.d., p.

6). Building Ranks supports school leaders in reflecting on the many ways their influence can impact successful teaching and learning throughout the school.

This program can be used throughout the career of a school leader, ensuring continued growth and a holistic approach to educational leadership. As a practice-based framework, Building Ranks is a flexible, yet inclusive tool school districts can use to support school administrators at all school levels and years of experience to grow professionally while adhering to the National Policy Board for Education Administration's Professional Standards for Educational Leaders. Further, it is noted that "when school leaders are properly supported, they foster better learning environments that promote better staff retention and greater student achievement" (NASSP Building Ranks, n.d., The Framework section).

There is an abundance of educational products available for schools, districts, and even states to purchase at their choosing. Educational organizations such as the National School Public Relations Association offer a host of educational material exclusively intended for school and district use. One item they tout is the revised and updated School Communication Workshop Kit. Schools have the option of purchasing a box kit or CD. Guidance on instruction and delivery is also available (National School Public Relations Association, n.d.). Another educational resource is the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (n.d.), as it also provides professional learning for all educational leaders. The list of resources this national organization makes available includes books, webinars, conferences, on-site PD, online learning, videos, and means to advocate and network in the educational community.

State Initiatives

The state of North Carolina makes sufficient efforts to provide professional growth opportunities to all educators. In recent years, an increase of support for the school administrator has been initiated and publicized through state and local education platforms. Several opportunities for new administrators to grow and learn are now available.

Current assistant principals can enjoy the benefits of a signature leadership development program, established by NCPAPA, that is aligned to North Carolina's performance evaluation standards for school leaders. This program, the Future-Ready Leadership program, is a cohort-driven, face-to-face model where participants engage in a series of professional development sessions designed to build their capacity as school leaders. Any current assistant principals who are committed to professional growth can participate in Future-Ready Leadership activities. NCPAPA will cover the program costs for those who commit to participating. The learning sessions, six in all, provide assistant principals with the following: an in-depth understanding of their role and their application to the standards for school executives that all assistant principals must follow; an awareness of school leadership competencies and where their specific strengths and weaknesses lie; engagement in role clarification alongside their principal to assure significant progress is being made toward fulfilling requirements of the standards; collaboration with their principals to determine strong professional growth goals to work toward; and participation in a statewide community of educational leaders (NCPAPA, n.d.).

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2015) highlighted how regional education facilitators supervise local education administrations (LEAs) as they provide valuable induction programs that cultivate and guide the professional growth of an inexperienced teacher. Subsequently, at the local level, the school district has designed an exceptional beginning teacher program. As stated in the district's Beginning Teacher Program website, beginning teachers benefit from the support of one-to-one mentorship, monthly beginning teacher meetings, and professional development activities facilitated by mentors. This system of support enables teachers to receive the structured experience needed to gain essential skills and training that will positively impact their practice.

In recent years, the state department of education has acknowledged the urgency to put similar steps in place to support the training of new school administrators as well. Available through the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System, new assistant principals across the state can participate in an AP Webinar Series to gain knowledge and support as they transition into their new roles. When referencing the Webinar Series 2020 Agenda Outline, the NCEES coordinator notes the purpose of the webinar series is to consider all relevant topics, making sure the experiences of assistant principals to support growth and professional development are consistent and reliable (Simmons, n.d.). Topics such as teacher observation and evaluation, assistant principal evaluation, using data, and effective professional learning communities (PLCs) are all points of discussion. This is a great start to delivering the much-needed support assistant principals require to be most effective in their roles.

Opportunities posted are created both in the district as well as through the Unified Talent's catalog and outside providers such as NCCAT, The Friday Institute, and Google.

PLCs that utilize the PD Catalog enjoy the ability to sort and filter types of PD that are relevant to their team's objectives. Content development, digital learning competencies, general education, leadership models, and literacy education are all available for teams to pursue and gain insight into to support their PLC goals.

District Initiatives

The district in this study has devoted tremendous efforts and resources toward providing effective training and continuous learning to aspiring school leaders. The superintendent of the school system realizes the importance of grooming and preparing administrators to lead school communities and has made professional growth and development a key component of the district strategic plan. Forming partnerships and innovative collaborations with local and state education stakeholders has afforded new administrators the support needed to grow and excel in their roles.

In 2016, the school district partnered with North Carolina State University to establish the Principal Leadership Academy as part of a unified effort to increase academic achievement by ensuring principals receive training and preparation to be successful while serving in low-income, hard-to-staff, and academically challenged schools. Program participants receive a full scholarship to include all expenses such as textbooks and technology materials, conference travel, and a paid internship. Through this 2-year leadership program, candidates will earn a Master of School Administration degree and K-12 principal license for the state of North Carolina (North Carolina State Principal Preparation, n.d.). The program grant administrator, North Carolina Alliance for School Leadership Development, contracted with GrantProse to evaluate the effectiveness of the program at all participating institutions. North Carolina State

partnered with the district in this study and three additional LEAs; thus, the results of the evaluation encompass all four participating districts. A portion of the evaluation involved a survey in which participants were to rate perceptions regarding their knowledge and competency of the North Carolina School Executive Standards. Results indicated that on a 7-point Likert scale, participants rated their knowledge between 5.00 and 5.69.

Additionally, participants rating their mentoring, coaching, and internship experience between 3.43 and 4.68. It is worth noting that when asked about their confidence level to be successful as a principal, the presurvey rating of 5.45 dropped to 5.33 during the postsurvey. At the conclusion of the program, of the 34 North Carolina State partnering participants, 30 of 34 secured a school administration position in the first funding cycle; one additional participant secured a position in the second cycle (Carruthers et al., 2020).

The LEA has published an online one-stop site of professional opportunities for staff throughout the district to consume in order to expand their personal growth. The site houses massive amounts of information such as active links for live webinars and sessions; listings of professional and virtual learning resources for core curriculum adoptions and digital learning tools; and professional learning tools for coaches, mentors, and beginning teachers. Finally, there is a drop-down link for staff to choose specific professional development opportunities by filter. This professional development catalog houses information about a variety of professional development opportunities that can serve as a guide to PLCs of all levels. The catalog also provides a wide range of available delivery modules such as face-to-face, hybrid, and online course options. Instructor-led and self-paced courses afford staff the option of expanding their learning over time or having a set schedule of instruction led by a facilitator.

An in-house district initiative that has been in place for several years is the district's Assistant Principal Leadership Academy (APLA). At the local level, the district offers a monthly PLC called the Assistant Principals Leadership Academy, in which all assistant principals throughout the district participate. During these 2-hour sessions, assistant principals of all levels enjoy hearing words of wisdom from experienced principals and other education experts, networking with peers, and receiving pertinent information regarding leadership within the district. The superintendent of the school district often addresses the group, which in itself speaks volumes. In addition, each year a few assistant principals are invited to join an assistant principal cohort to receive additional leadership training. The current assistance principal leadership program is arranged in a format where all assistant principals in the district gather to participate in a seminar-style session. These sessions usually consist of an ice breaker, motivational remarks and district updates from the superintendent, a leadership presentation by a district representative, a principal panel discussion of relevant issues, and a preassigned breakout session to discuss a predetermined topic. Bottoms and Schmidt-Davis (2010) noted that conducting district-wide professional development sessions may be a sufficient way to disseminate information regarding district priorities; but without addressing the context of school needs on an individualized basis and offering an extension of key district topics for building-level interpretation, its impact will be minimal.

North Carolina Standards for School Executives

The North Carolina Standards for School Executives is the evaluation tool the state education system utilizes to assess the effectiveness of school administrators as leaders and as they consider their own growth and development throughout their careers.

When reviewing the philosophical foundations of the standards, it is important to understand that the standards are predicated on certain beliefs. One that stands out is that the concept of leadership is naturally complex and systemic. “Isolating the parts of leadership completely misses the power of the whole. It is not just knowing what to do, but why to do it, how to do it and when to do it” (Public Schools of North Carolina Educator Effectiveness Division, 2013, NC Principal Evaluation section). This statement reflects the theoretical framework presented in this study. As earlier stated, the contingency theory attempts to identify variables that impact the effectiveness of leadership; thus, knowing what, when, why, and how as a leader are the variables in determining overall effectiveness.

Each standard is composed of several competencies. According to the Public Schools of North Carolina Educator Effectiveness Division (2013), a competency is a real and investigative combination of experience and skills needed to effectively implement the practices. Further, factual knowledge is knowing content, while experiential knowledge is the skills gained from understanding when and why. It is when accumulated knowledge is put into practice.

There are eight standards for school executives, seven of which mirror the leadership areas in a study by the Wallace Foundation (Portin et al., 2003). Instead of focusing on what school administrators might or should do, which oftentimes results in an overstated perception of the expectations of the job, the Wallace Foundation study (Portin et al., 2003) looked at what administrators actually do and then tied that to leadership development. The state education department added one additional standard, academic achievement leadership, to the seven that were presented in the Wallace

Foundation study (Portin et al., 2003). This standard is evaluated through state assessment measures. For purposes of this study, the seven standards highlighted in the Wallace Foundation study (Portin et al., 2003) were explored through the survey component, as they focus on specific skills administrators should be experiencing. The following section details the standards referenced in the Executive Principal Evaluation Process Manual published by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2015). This manual offers an in-depth description of the standards used to evaluate school administrators and the practices for effectively executing those standards, as they were applied in the principal survey for this study. The executive publication is formatted so each of the eight standards is highlighted at the beginning of a new section; this is followed by a summary of the standard, which provides more detail to the content and rationale of the standard. Following the summary are statements supporting the standard containing tasks an effective administrator should be practicing. Artifacts follow, which include samples of specific evidence an administrator could collect to build upon their performance portfolio. Finally, competencies inherent in each standard are listed. Standard 8, although not measured in this study, is introduced below for knowledge and informational purposes.

Standard 1: Strategic Leadership

“School executives will create conditions that result in strategically re-imaging the school’s vision, mission, and goals in the 21st century” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015, p. 12). Strategic leadership involves understanding the school and needs of its students where inquiry into the future and building upon core values are challenged and supported. As illustrated in the manual, a few examples of tasks school

leaders can participate in to practice strategic leadership skills include creating a shared vision, challenging the status quo, considering and being comfortable with change, spearheading major initiatives, creating systemic review processes, following guidelines for School Improvement Plan implementation, communicating strong professional beliefs, and distributing leadership through the school.

Standard 2: Instructional Leadership

“School executives will set high standards for the professional practice of 21st century instruction and assessment that result in a no-nonsense, accountable environment. The school executive must be knowledgeable of best instructional and school practices” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015, p. 12). Instructional leadership involves being knowledgeable of best practices to sustain a high level of student engagement and invites collaboration for continuous peer review among staff. As illustrated in the manual, a few examples of tasks school leaders can participate in to practice instructional leadership skills include focusing attention on instruction and student achievement; practicing distributive leadership and teacher empowerment; leading conversations about curriculum, instruction, and assessment; ensuring alignment between school curricula and state accountability standards; establishing processes and schedules that encourage collaboration; identifying student needs and providing tools to meet them; ensuring strategic resource allocation; and providing staff feedback through formal and informal observations.

Standard 3: Cultural Leadership

“School executives will understand and act on the understanding of the important role a school’s culture contributes to the exemplary performance of the school. School

executives must support and value the traditions, artifacts, symbols and positive values and norms” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015, p. 13). Cultural leadership involves taking the lead in assuring the school community develops and maintains a sense of school pride and identity that resonates throughout the school and infuses passion and purpose in and out of the classroom setting. As illustrated in the manual, a few examples of tasks school leaders can participate in to practice cultural leadership skills include creating a collaborative “team” work environment; communicating positive values and ideals about school, teaching, and professional growth, using a shared vision and values to establish a strong and healthy school identity; supporting traditions that are culturally responsive; and being encouraging and empowering when staff are faced with challenges.

Standard 4: Human Resource Leadership

“School executives will ensure that the school is a professional learning community. School executives will ensure that processes and systems are in place that result in the recruitment, induction, support, evaluation, development and retention of a high-performing staff” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015, p. 14). Human resource leadership involves empowering accomplished teachers by affording opportunities to lead and supporting teacher initiatives by protecting them from excessive noninstructional duties. The school leader must take an active interest in planning the career path for teachers while supporting district plans for succession. As illustrated in the manual, a few examples of tasks school leaders can participate in to practice human resources leadership skills include establishing structures for professional learning that are focused on results, stressing the importance of continuous learning, encouraging staff

to achieve sustainable results, inspiring teachers to take on leadership roles and supporting their plans to advance, using data from the Teacher Working Conditions survey as a guide to maintaining a nurturing work environment, providing a fair and equitable evaluation of teacher performance, and allowing teachers to lead in courses that reflect their instructional strengths.

Standard 5: Managerial Leadership

“School executives will ensure that the school has processes and systems in place for budgeting, staffing, problem solving, communicating expectations and scheduling that result in organizing the work routines in the building” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015, p. 15). Managerial leadership involves taking responsibility for ensuring the school budget is inclusive to the needs of all teachers and students, allowing teachers to focus on instruction and student success. As illustrated in the manual, a few examples of tasks school leaders can participate in to practice managerial leadership skills include ensuring a balanced budget for school events, hiring quality teachers who meet the needs of a diverse school environment, identifying and resolving conflict in a fair and just manner, designing an effective system for information sharing and communication among all stakeholders, including staff in the scheduling process to ensure the needs of all students are met, developing a master schedule that focuses on student learning by providing consistent collaboration and planning opportunities, and enforcing expectations that are structured and clear to students and staff.

Standard 6: External Development Leadership

A school executive will design structures and processes that result in community engagement, support, and ownership. Acknowledging that schools no longer

reflect but in fact build community, the leader proactively creates with staff opportunities for parents, community and business representatives. (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015, p. 15)

External development leadership involves the acknowledgement that stakeholders are needed to secure the continued investment of resources and sustainability of the school community. As illustrated in the manual, a few examples of tasks school leaders can participate in to practice external development leadership skills include empowering parents and stakeholders to make meaningful decisions, creating a system of shared responsibility with stakeholders, implementing protocols that ensure compliance to all mandates, advocating on behalf of the school, sharing school accomplishments in the district and community, and building alliances in the community to support the school agenda.

Standard 7: Micropolitical Leadership

“The school executive will build systems and relationships that utilize the staff’s diversity, encourage constructive ideological conflict in order to leverage staff expertise, power and influence to realize the school’s vision for success” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015, p. 16). Micropolitical leadership involves being aware of the professional needs and interests of staff members and building cohesion as the school community works toward shared decision-making for the future. As illustrated in the manual, a few examples of tasks school leaders can participate in to practice micropolitical leadership skills include utilizing the School Improvement Team as a resource for school-wide decision-making; ensuring the voices of all staff members are heard and respected; pledging to be accessible to all staff members; transparently

managing staffing and budgeting resources; showing compassion to staff member personal needs; recognizing the importance and positivity of informal groups as well as any potential discord among them; utilizing insight to forecast potential issues from day to day; actively engaging and maintaining visibility; and encouraging respectful, open, and free communication around the school.

Standard 8: Academic Achievement Leadership

“School executives will contribute to the academic success of students. The work of the school executive will result in acceptable, measurable progress for students based on established performance expectations and using appropriate data to demonstrate growth” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015, p. 17). Academic achievement leadership involves acknowledging the overarching goal of the school leader—to ensure students make significant progress in order to reach and exceed academic goals. As illustrated in the manual, the best task school leaders can participate in to practice academic achievement leadership skills is to “demonstrate acceptable school-wide growth as calculated by the statewide growth model for educator effectiveness” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015, p. 17).

The tasks listed for each standard provide a detailed account of what assistant principals should actually be doing or leading on a regular basis. These tasks should coincide with the elements of each standard in which administrators are evaluated. It is extremely important to keep in mind that evaluation should not be something done to school administrators; effective evaluation system designs are most accurate and useful when administrators are active contributors to the process (Leadership Matters, 2013). As noted, for an evaluation tool to be most effective, leadership standards should be

carefully transposed into routine and essential tasks by introducing strategies that foster success (Hutton, 2020).

School Administrator Perceptions Regarding Preparedness for the Principalship

In speaking on the experience of entering her new role as assistant principal, Infante (2020) noted that although her undergraduate and master's degree programs taught her about high-profile, education-related court cases and best practices in curriculum over the past 50 years, she was ill-prepared to manage the overwhelming responsibilities of communicating with stakeholders and prioritizing the many day-to-day tasks expected of her. This account is all too familiar with new administrators everywhere. Increasingly, institutional programs seem to miss the mark on fully preparing aspiring administrators for the role in which they will soon command. Portin et al. (2003) concluded that all 21 principals interviewed indicated they did not benefit from their principal preparation program; thus, they were not prepared for the demands of the job. As a result, it was recommended that school districts make substantial efforts to prepare assistant principals for their new role as school administrators.

A study of North Carolina school administrators compared the relationship between their actual experience practicing professional standards for educational leaders as assistant principals with the quality of the principal preparation received. It was found that the overall experience as an assistant principal ranked ranged between 3.30 and 3.79 on a 5-point scale; this supports the concept that the assistant principalship may not be fulfilling to those experiencing this role. Further, for every standard listed, the ranking for principal preparation was lower than that of the assistant principal experience; the range was 2.81 to 3.43 on a 5-point scale. The lowest ranking involved being prepared to

conduct meaningful family and community interactions. With this study highlighting a mediocre assistant principal experience, coupled with feelings of unpreparedness for the principalship, it is determined once more that more support is needed in principal preparation (Bastian & Goff, 2017).

Take-aways from a focus group surrounding the challenges school administrators face included the realization that relationships with colleagues were invaluable for professional growth and support. In addition, many administrators voiced appreciation toward mentors who advised them through perplexing experiences and trying times (Levin et al., 2019). Findings from a similar study revealed that assistant principals tend to be most appreciative of guidance directed at improving their decision-making and communication skills and that their preferred way to receive professional development is through current or former principals they trust and respect (Barnett et al., 2017).

A strong developmental mentoring relationship can support new administrators in developing needed skills to be school leaders, while affirming the complexity of their new role, building their leadership capacity, and providing individualized learning opportunities (Hayes, 2019). “The best way a principal can show appreciation to an AP is to contribute to their success and growth,” said JoAnn Bartoletti (2020, p. 7), former executive director of NASSP. Bartoletti encouraged principals to empower assistant principals through opportunities to reflect, lead, and grow into competent, confident leaders.

Summary

“The demands of school leaders have changed and the entrenched traditional role of one principal leading an entire school community is outdated and debunked” (Hutton,

2020, p. 43). Assistant principals may be earlier in their administrative careers and naturally not have the same level of decision-making authority as principals; however, this can be used as an advantage. It may simply be a case of nuance and semantics, but these two concepts are just as important in leadership as is perception (Holloway & Sgambelluri, 2019).

Building and sustaining a “strong principal pipeline will require a sustained commitment from state legislators, state education leaders, school districts and other key stakeholders” (Shelton & Welu, 2014, p. 6). As these essential entities engage in continuous evaluation and improvement efforts to support new administrators, obtaining feedback and insight from current and aspiring school principals will be vital. The effectiveness of the preparation they receive to perform their duties, as well as the alignment between the field and mentoring support provided, will determine the growth of their school leadership skills and the ability to overcome the challenges they face. It is clear that aspiring and current principals should have opportunities to provide meaningful feedback regarding the experiences and supports they receive (SREB, 2011).

School leaders who are to succeed in an ever-changing system of education require the support of the state department of education as well as LEAs. Efforts to enact policies supporting continuous growth and development will provide optimal conditions for leaders to accelerate in the practice; this will ultimately lead to an increased level of success for all children (DeVita, 2007).

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter introduces the methods that were used in this study to explore whether current secondary school principals consider the tasks and responsibilities assigned to them as assistant principals to be acceptable preparation for the principalship. Considering there is insufficient research focused directly on assistant principal day-to-day experiences and how those experiences prepare aspiring principals to become school leaders, this inquiry is aimed to offer a better understanding of role expectations through insight, as well as recommendations and possible solutions for improving the structure of support assistant principals receive. The perceptions of current principals were analyzed to compare which ideal versus actual experiences most accurately prepared them to lead their schools.

Through this study, current secondary principals in an urban school district were surveyed and interviewed to determine the principal preparatory tasks and responsibilities experienced during their assistant principalship. This qualitative study investigated the actual tasks and responsibilities experienced as assistant principals compared to the ideal tasks and responsibilities current secondary principals feel would have helped in preparing them for the principalship, had they had the opportunity to experience them. The research design, description of participants, instrumentation, and data collection and analysis are highlighted in this chapter. The four research questions chosen to guide this investigation were

1. What tasks were actually experienced as an assistant principal to help in the preparation for the principalship?
2. What were the ideal tasks that would have helped in the preparation for the

principalship had they been experienced as an assistant principal?

3. In reference to principal preparation, how do principal perspectives differ when comparing actual versus ideal tasks experienced as an assistant principal?
4. How were the North Carolina Standards for School Executives incorporated into the tasks experienced as an assistant principal?

Research Design

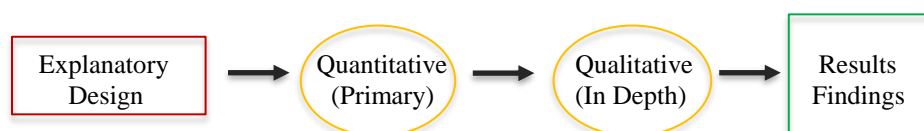
This research design has the capacity to evaluate the beliefs and perceptions of secondary school principals concerning experiences that prepared them for the principalship. “The research question guides the study and determines which components of quantitative and qualitative models are used. In other words, what determines the combination or integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches are the research questions of the study” (Ponce & Pagan-Maldonado, 2015, p. 115). Based on the research questions of this study, the assessment of actual tasks and responsibilities performed as assistant principals were captured in a survey model. Further, perceptions of what principals deem to be ideal experiences were captured through specific interview questions about those experiences.

The pipeline to the principalship has received plenty of attention from educators and researchers. Thus far, this has proven to yield a solid explorative foundation for the research to be conducted in this study. This study was built upon previous exploratory research to provide further explanation and insight into the topic of principal preparation. As presented by Ponce and Pagan-Maldonado (2015), several types of research designs explain sequencing of research. For this study, the design most compatible is the

explanatory model, which utilizes sequential phases of quantitative and qualitative research. The main function of this type of design is to thoroughly illustrate the current research problem. This is achieved by first using a quantitative study to measure the characteristics or conditions of the problem (Phase 1) and then to probe deeper into the findings from Phase I, shifting to a qualitative study (Phase 2), as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Explanatory Design Sequential Phases



The rationale for utilizing this design lies in the fact that the quantitative data (primary data) and the results offered a rather general overview or depiction of the problem the study is addressing. When followed by the qualitative data (in-depth data), a more significant analysis is provided through further data collection to clarify and enhance that basic depiction of the problem (Subedi, 2016). As such, this study introduced a survey model in Phase 1 to entertain any possible trends, correlations, or other distinctions in the data. Phase 2 reviewed these special circumstances within the data and utilized an interview model to gather further details from previous findings from the survey.

Another type of research model used in this study is the descriptive design, which is known to focus on describing people, occurrences, and artifacts. Because it mainly describes characteristics of populations based on the various data collected from relevant samples, it tends to require the utilization of probability sampling. Descriptive research produces data that may be qualitative or quantitative (Timans et al., 2019). Data from this

research were conducted and classified as descriptive as well. While the descriptive component of the design uncovered the facts about principal preparedness through data collected from a survey instrument, the explanatory component attempted to understand the various factors that caused those beliefs and perceptions.

Participants

The school district chosen for this study is one of the 10 largest districts in the state of North Carolina and prides itself on the ethnic composition and diversity it possesses. Over 40% of students are African-American, and minorities make up 80% of the entire student population. The district is comprised of 53 schools and serves nearly 32,000 students. Of these students, over 10,000 are high schoolers and attend one of the 10 high schools, two alternative/hospital schools, or two secondary (6-12) schools in the district. For this study, secondary school administrators include those leading schools that serve students in sixth through ninth grades.

The population for this survey includes the 23 secondary principals within the school district. There is one principal at each of the 14 specialty and high schools as well as one at each of the nine middle schools. Each principal currently supervises a range of zero to five assistant principals, depending on student population and need. Considering the total number of secondary administrators is currently 23, the goal was to have full participation from all administrators.

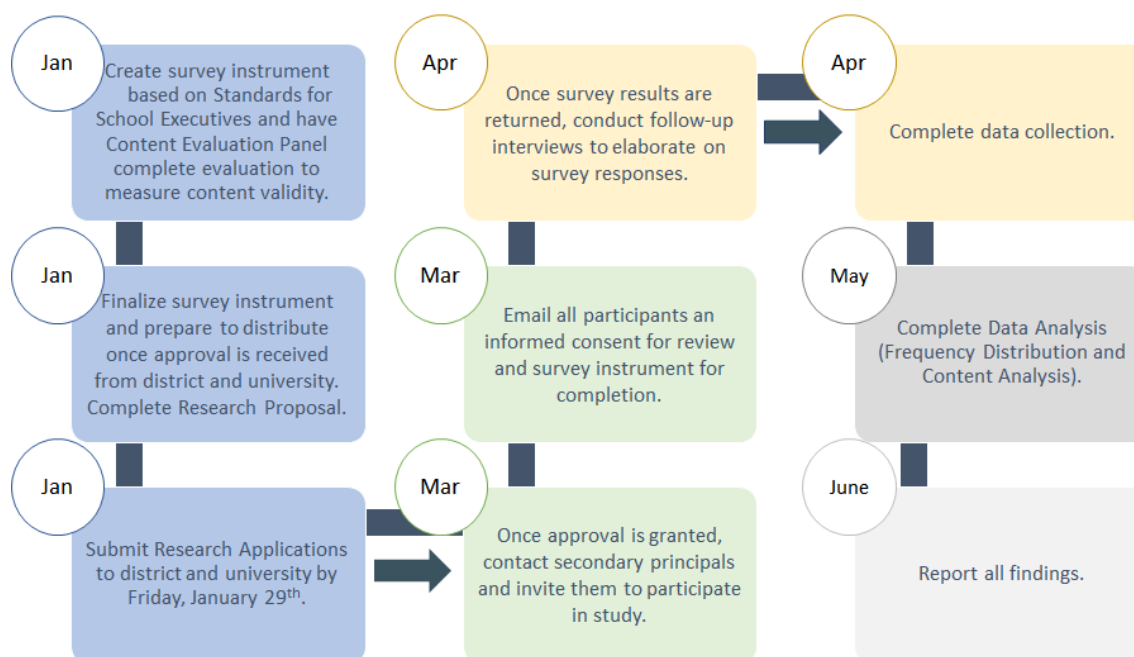
Procedures

There were several steps to follow before beginning the data collection phase of this research study. First, I met with the district coordinator for research studies to discuss my research plan and the feasibility of the study. The process the district has established

for researchers to follow was discussed, along with the timeline. Afterward, I met with my dissertation committee chair to schedule a date to meet with the dissertation team. Measuring the content validity of the tool was completed by five current school administrators not participating in the study. The next step was to obtain permission from my school district and the Gardner-Webb Institutional Review Board to conduct the study. Once approved, I submitted the Application for Research to the district for approval to continue my study. Finally, permission came from the participants in the study. The letter of consent (Appendix A) was delivered to participants electronically, along with the survey instrument. Figure 2 illustrates procedures from creating the instrument to reporting findings.

Figure 2

Procedures Flowchart



As noted in Figure 2, the research procedure began with validating the survey instrument. Afterward, secondary principals were contacted for participation in the study.

Surveys were emailed to participants and the follow-up interview invitation was sent shortly after. After data were collected, a full data analysis was completed, and results were reported.

Instrumentation

Phase 1: Survey

The nature of the survey was cross-sectional, as the collection of data from the survey occurred all at once. The cross-sectional design is intended to show a snapshot in time of how people think, believe, or behave. This type of design uses a survey approach to collect information about various subgroups sampled from a larger population. The purpose of the cross-sectional design is both to describe trends across all groups and to identify any differences among the subgroups (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011). Fitzpatrick et al. (2011) continued by asserting that “descriptive designs are the most common designs in evaluation and serve many useful purposes. Cross-sectional designs provide useful quantitative information on large numbers of individuals and groups” (p. 414).

The method for collecting data was through the creation of a survey that consists of 21 items, structured within a 5-point Likert scale (Appendix B). The Likert scale, created by psychologist Rensis Likert, is a survey tool in which respondents mark the level of degree to which they concur with a group of statements. General conclusions, as well as results regarding specific subcategories within the survey, can be formulated after analyzing all responses (Rosala, 2020). The survey for this research is constructed based on practices within each of the seven primary standards of the North Carolina Standards for School Executives, as presented by the Public Schools of North Carolina Educator Effectiveness Division (2013). Within this publication, eight standards are highlighted

with a summary, practices, artifacts, and competencies. Since the eighth standard speaks to the school-wide student growth and proficiency rating, as measured through state test results and opposed to direct tasks and responsibilities experienced, it was not included.

The survey for this study was composed of statements describing the types of tasks an effective administrator should be practicing within each standard to effectively lead a school. Within this close-ended survey, a clear picture of the tasks and responsibilities actually experienced by assistant principals was rendered. This was later compared, through the collection of qualitative data, to more ideal experiences.

Phase 2: Interview

After participants completed and submitted the survey, survey participants were invited to participate in a follow-up interview. Every effort was made to ensure the interview group was a diverse sampling of the larger group, to include veteran and novice principals, females, males, and those leading in the middle and high school settings. Interviews were conducted via Zoom (n.d.), as it serves as one of the online video platforms used by the district to conduct meetings during the current pandemic.

The purpose of the interview sessions was to gather significant qualitative data regarding the perceptions of ideal tasks and responsibilities assistant principals should experience to best prepare for the principalship. Interview questions were predetermined and were ordered sequentially. The type of interview used is the semi-standardized format, which acknowledges a schedule of specific questions but also allows for the unanticipated responses that lead to additional follow-up questions. The fourth and final question captured any supplemental information, as participants were asked if there were any other comments they would like to share.

Data Collection and Analysis

A variety of data collection methods are used in the field of education to assemble the data, analyze the data, and then provide a detailed interpretation of the data. The appropriate collection of data in educational research is a crucial and essential step in conducting research because it has the potential to influence results significantly (McMillian & Gogia, 2017).

A pilot study of the instrument was conducted with a small group of current school administrators to validate the instrument. Administrators in the pilot study were not participants of the actual research study and are currently experienced secondary administrators. The Lawshe method was utilized to measure the content validity of the instrument and secure the content validity ratio (CVR) for each survey item. From there, the content validity index (CVI) was computed, which measures the validity for the entire survey instrument. According to Gilbert and Prion (2016), when used by a panel of content experts, the CVR is a valuable instrument in determining validity for both the individual instrument items as well as the overall validity for the whole instrument. Both the CVR and CVI offer a quantitative measure of validity of a survey instrument. The CVR computes the validity of a single item; the CVI on the other hand measures the content validity of the entire instrument or tool. As noted by Gilbert and Prion, Tilden et al. (1990) suggested CVI values must exceed 0.70 to be considered valid; however, Davis (1992) suggested a CVI over 0.80 is the better indicator of validity. In many situations, it is more efficient to report the overall CVI score than each individual item CVR.

For this study, each member of my evaluation panel was emailed a list of survey items on a content evaluation. These items were chosen by me from the North Carolina

School Executives Standards. The panelists were asked to rate each of the 21 items as “essential,” “useful, but not essential” or “not necessary.” Once completed, responses were collected and the number indicating “essential” for each item was determined; these items were used to compute the CVI for the survey instrument. The CVI of the survey instrument to be used in this study was 80, indicating this survey was valid to use for my research (Appendix C).

The panel was also asked to provide verbal feedback about the survey, according to the following six aspects as noted by Fisher (2020):

- 1) Comprehension–Introduction, instructions, and questions are clear to the participant.
- 2) Logic and flow–Items are in a logical order and there is no confusion.
- 3) Acceptability–Items are not offensive or inappropriate.
- 4) Length and adherence–Survey is not excessively long whereas the participant may lose focus or interest in completing.
- 5) Technical quality–The online survey platform is reliable, and no usage issues were experienced.
- 6) Introduction and gaining consent–Survey introduction and presentation clearly instruct participants on consent before beginning the survey.

The first step in survey distribution was preparing to email principals an invitation of participation in the study. As a district employee, I was able to secure the contact information quickly from our district server, although this information is readily available through the district’s public website. Participants were contacted via email, and the survey was administered online. All correspondence was virtual; no face-to-face

communication was required to complete the study.

To capture as much relevant data as possible, data collection for this survey instrument is structured into three sections. The first two sections are components of the survey. Part A includes pertinent background indicators for each participant. Collected data include gender, race/ethnicity, years as an assistant principal, years as a principal, years as an educator, and position held before becoming an assistant principal. The second section, Part B, includes the actual survey tool, categorized with three statements under each of seven North Carolina Standards for School Executives. Participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they experienced each task/responsibility as an assistant principal. The five points of the Likert scale to which participants rate are almost never, seldom, sometimes, frequently, and almost always. The third and final section is Part C, the interview. The interview component consists of four open-ended questions about ideal tasks and responsibilities current principals experienced or would have liked to experience to prepare for the principalship. Upon answering each leading question, participants were asked follow-up questions based on their original response, to provide a more in-depth assessment of their perceptions. All interview responses were audio-recorded and transcribed for this report (Appendix D).

As an added dimension to this study, data were disaggregated by race and gender. These data can provide specific insight into whether perceived and real experiences differ by demographic.

Specific precautions were taken to ensure validity and reliability of the study, such as analyzing returns, checking for response bias, and conducting a descriptive analysis. Through the data analysis process, I gained the necessary knowledge needed to

analyze the data, answer research questions, and evaluate the rational effects of the results. The results were interpreted through the presentation of tables and figures as a visual way to reference results. Table 3 illustrates how each analysis tool aligns with the data collection instruments and research questions used in this study.

Table 3*Data Analysis Table*

Research question	Instrument	Explanation	Research methodology
Research Question 1 What tasks were actually experienced as an assistant principal to help in the preparation for the principalship?	Participants completed a 21-item survey. The survey was designed in a 5-point Likert scale: Questions were devised North Carolina School Executive Principal Evaluation Standards.	Participants responded by rating the degree to which they experienced specific tasks and responsibilities that prepared them for the principalship.	Quantitative
Research Question 2 What were the ideal tasks that would have helped in the preparation for the principalship had they been experienced as an assistant principal?	Participants completed an interview containing open-ended questions.	Participants responded by giving their perceptions on ideal experiences to help in preparing for the principalship.	Qualitative
Research Question 3 In reference to principal preparation, how do principal perceptions differ when comparing actual versus ideal tasks experienced as an assistant principal?	Participants completed an interview containing open-ended questions	Participants responded by discussing how their perception differs when comparing actual vs ideal experiences that help in preparing for the principalship.	Qualitative
Research Question 4 How were the North Carolina Standards for School Executives incorporated in the tasks experienced as an assistant principal?	Participants completed a 21-item survey. The survey was designed in a 5-point Likert scale: Questions were devised North Carolina School Executive Principal Evaluation Standards. Participants also completed an interview containing open-ended questions	Participants responded by rating the degree to which they experienced specific tasks and responsibilities that prepared them for the principalship.	Quantitative/ qualitative

As displayed, the table is composed of four sections, divided by each of the study's research questions. Beside each research question, the instrument to be used, an explanation of how it is to be used, and the methodology for that particular component are detailed.

Summary

This study explored the tasks and responsibilities of the assistant principal as preparatory experience for the principalship. In doing so, the perceptions of current principals were analyzed to compare which actual and ideal experiences most accurately prepared them to lead their schools. In the sections that follow, the findings of this research were analyzed and shared. Chapter 4 takes a final look at the research questions and research design as well as provides an in-depth report of the findings of this study. Chapter 5, the summary chapter, further analyzes the findings and makes additional comparisons to other studies discussed in Chapter 2, Literature Review.

Chapter 4: Findings

A summary of the findings, as well as results obtained from the research study, are presented in this chapter. To review pertinent information, the purpose of the study, correlating research questions, and research design are revisited before reporting the findings.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain insight regarding actual versus ideal assignments and experiences of assistant principals in one of North Carolina's largest urban school districts. Considering the role of assistant principal oftentimes precedes the appointment of principal, having current secondary school principals assess which experiences contributed to their readiness for the position helps to establish an awareness of current strengths and opportunities key stakeholders can address to ensure a more knowledgeable and confident pool of school leaders.

Description of Participants

The population for this study included secondary school principals from one of the largest districts in the state of North Carolina. Of the 23 secondary principals who were invited to be a part of this research study, 17 agreed to participate. Although I did not have 100% of the principals respond, the 74% who were able to participate is commendable, considering the current state of education—reopening school amidst a global pandemic. Table 4 details specific demographics and attributes of the school principals who participated in this research study. As presented, participant data were disaggregated according to gender, race/ethnicity, years as assistant principal and principal, years as an educator, and position held prior to assistant principal.

Table 4*Demographics and Attributes of Research Participants*

Demographic/attribute	n	Percentage
Gender		
Female	11	64.71
Male	6	35.29
Race/ethnicity		
Black	14	82.35
White	3	17.65
Years as assistant principal		
0	1	5.88
1-3	6	35.29
4-8	9	52.94
9-15	1	5.88
Years as principal		
0-3	2	11.76
4-8	6	35.29
9-15	8	47.06
16 or more	1	5.88
Years as educator		
11-20	6	35.29
21-30	9	52.94
31 or more	2	11.76
Position prior to assistant principal		
Teacher	11	64.71
Counselor	3	17.65
Central office staff	1	5.88
Other	2	11.76

Number of years as assistant principal was broken down to highlight the fact that one participant served no years as assistant principal prior to assuming the role of principal. With that aside, the breakdown was as follows: 1-3 years, 4-8 years, and 9-15 years. There were no participants who served as assistant principals for longer than 15 years. Likewise, number of years as principal was broken down by 0-3 years, 4-8 years,

9-15 years, and 16 or more years. Number of years as an educator was broken down by 11-20 years, 21-30 years, and 31 or more years. Last, position prior to assistant principal was broken down into the following categories: teacher, counselor, central office staff, and other.

It is noted that nearly two thirds of the participants were females and over 82% were Black. Over 80% have been a principal for 4-15 years, and nearly 90% spent 1-8 years as an assistant principal. This suggests that ample time is spent in the role that is preparatory for the principalship. Further, since nearly two thirds of participants were teachers prior to becoming school administrators, teaching and modeling may be helpful skills used to coach assistant principals they supervise.

Research Questions

Through this study, principal preparatory roles and experiences as assistant principals in an urban school district were explored through the eyes of current secondary school principals. The study investigated the actual tasks and responsibilities as compared to ideal tasks and responsibilities assistant principals experience and how these assignments prepare aspiring principals for the principalship. Participants in this study completed a 21-item survey highlighting the standards for school executives in North Carolina that mirror the leadership areas in a study by the Wallace Foundation (Portin et al., 2003). These leadership areas were designed to emphasize what school administrators actually do in their day-to-day roles. In this study, the seven standards highlighted in the Wallace Foundation study (Portin et al., 2003) were explored through the survey component to determine the extent to which these specific skills are actually experienced by assistant principals. To provide additional analysis to highlight the experiences of

assistant principals, several research participants agreed to partake in a follow-up interview to expound upon responses in the survey.

Four research questions of this study were used to frame the survey and interview items and to analyze the findings. The research questions guiding this research were

1. What tasks were actually experienced as an assistant principal to help in the preparation for the principalship?
2. What were the ideal tasks that would have helped in the preparation for the principalship had they been experienced as an assistant principal?
3. In reference to principal preparation, how do principal perspectives differ when comparing actual versus ideal tasks experienced as an assistant principal?
4. How were the North Carolina Standards for School Executives incorporated into the tasks experienced as an assistant principal?

Overview of Survey Responses

The primary method for collecting data was through the creation of a 21-item survey, which was structured with a 5-point Likert scale. The five points of the Likert scale in which participants rated were almost never, seldom, sometimes, frequently, and almost always. Results from the survey highlighted a wide range of practice and experience as assistant principals among the group of participants.

Responses to the survey instrument were key to analyzing the four research questions. Research Questions 1 and 2 focused on the tasks that were actually experienced as an assistant principal to help in the preparation for the principalship as well as tasks that would have been beneficial had they been experienced.

The micropolitical leadership and cultural leadership standards yielded the highest level of practice experienced among participants. A total of 94% of participants indicated they frequently or almost always engaged with staff and students while maintaining visibility in classrooms and at extracurricular events. It was also confirmed that 94% frequently or almost always provided opportunities for the voices of staff members to be heard and respected. Concerning culture, 94% indicated they frequently or almost always communicated positive values about school, teaching, and professional growth while using a shared vision to establish a strong school identity.

In contrast, the standard in which participants indicated they seldom or almost never received practice was within the managerial leadership standard. Nearly half of the participants indicated they seldom or almost never collaborated to ensure a balanced budget to support the school community. This was the lowest rating of the entire survey, although other areas within this standard yielded a higher degree of experience. Eighty-eight percent indicated they frequently or almost always engaged in the teacher interview process, and 82% noted they frequently or almost always collaborated to develop a master schedule that focused on student success. Table 5 highlights the ranking of actual versus ideal tasks and experiences of assistant principals. Considering the survey model reflects what school administrators should be doing on a regular basis, the Likert scale rankings of frequently and almost always are considered ideal tasks to best prepare the assistant principal for the principalship. This was viewed in comparison to what principals indicated they actually experienced as assistant principals, from almost never to almost always. For each of the 21 tasks, the lowest, or minimum (Min) rating is noted along with the highest, or maximum (Max) rating.

Table 5*Ranking of Tasks Performed*

Task	Min	Max	M	SD
As an assistant principal: I spearheaded major initiatives and created systemic review processes.	3	5	4.18	0.73
I facilitated the implementation of the School Improvement Plan.	1	5	3.76	1.15
I took the lead in distributing leadership roles among staff.	3	5	4.18	0.81
I facilitated conversations about curriculum, instruction, and assessment.	3	5	4.29	0.77
I provided staff feedback through formal and informal observations.	2	5	4.41	0.87
I Identified student needs and provided innovative tools and programs to meet them.	3	5	4.18	0.73
I created a collaborative “team” work environment.	3	5	4.24	0.83
I communicated positive values about school, teaching, and professional growth while using a shared vision to establish a strong school identity.	3	5	4.53	0.62
I actively supported traditions that were culturally responsive.	3	5	4.41	0.71
I used data from Teacher Working Conditions survey to lead in maintaining a nurturing work environment.	2	5	4.06	0.90
I assigned teachers to courses that reflect their instructional strengths.	2	5	4.18	0.88
I established structures and models for professional development, continuous learning, and new teacher support.	2	5	3.76	0.97
I collaborated to ensure balanced budget to support school community.	1	5	3.24	1.68
I interviewed and recommended quality teachers who met school needs.	1	5	4.35	1.17
I collaborated to develop master schedule with focus on student success.	1	5	4.18	1.33
I implemented protocols to ensure compliance of all local, state, and federal mandates.	2	5	4.06	1.03
I advocated on behalf of the school and shared accomplishments in the district and community.	2	5	3.94	0.90
I created a system of shared responsibility with stakeholders.	2	5	3.71	0.99
I actively engaged with staff and students while maintaining visibility in classrooms and at extracurricular events.	3	5	4.65	0.61
I collaborated with the School Improvement Team to lead in school-wide decision-making.	1	5	3.88	1.17

(cont.)

Task	Min	Max	M	SD
I provided opportunities for which the voices of staff members were heard and respected.	3	5	4.29	0.59

Note. N = 17.

The mean of a data set is the sum of all values divided by the total number of values. Being the most commonly used measure of central tendency, it is often referred to as the average (Bhandari, 2020). The mean was calculated for each of the 21 tasks, emphasizing the average response rating for each participant.

The standard deviation is the average amount of variability in a data set. It indicates how far each value is from the mean. A high standard deviation means that values are far from the mean, suggesting a wide range of scores. The lower the standard deviation, the more clustered the rankings are toward the mean (Bhandari, 2021). This would indicate more of a consensus among participant rankings. The standard deviation was calculated to determine how far the ratings for each task vary from the mean.

Each of the 21 survey items represents a task assistant principals should experience regularly. As shown in Table 5, the minimum (Min) and maximum (Max) ranking for each of the 21 tasks are highlighted, along with the average (M) ranking and standard deviation (SD) for each item. The lowest rankings ranged from 1 (almost never) to 3 (sometimes). For purposes of this study, these rankings indicate that the participant did not have the opportunity to experience that specific task on a routine basis. The highest ranking for each item was 5 (almost always), indicating the participant experienced what is considered an ideal task to help prepare them for the principalship. A ranking of 4 (frequently) also indicated the participant experienced the task on a routine, or frequent, basis.

The mean for all tasks fell between 3.24 and 4.18, indicating that on average, participants sometimes or frequently were exposed to experiences and tasks considered to be ideal for the preparation of the principalship. A more in-depth look at the mean shows that only six tasks within the survey yielded a response below 4.0, stressing that the average of the majority of responses highlighted the fact that participants frequently experienced the ideal tasks needed to prepare them to lead a school.

The lowest standard deviation from the mean was 0.59, indicating the task of providing opportunities for which the voices of staff members are heard and respected is one that is most closely shared in ranking among the participants. Fifteen of the 21 tasks noted on the survey fall under the standard deviation of 1, suggesting responses were relatively close to the mean. The highest standard deviation from the mean was 1.68, indicating varying experiences among participants and that collaboration to ensure a balanced budget to support the school community may not happen consistently. The range was wide, with over half of the responses revealing that this task is not experienced frequently or almost always.

The most frequent mean score, or mode, of the data set notates the ranking that was most frequently indicated. The mode for this data set was 4.18, which also appeared as the average for five survey items and falls in the middle of the entire distribution of scores. Table 6 shows the tasks that display the most frequent rating.

Table 6*Tasks With the Most Frequent Response Average*

Mode	Task
4.18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I spearheaded major initiatives and created systemic review processes. -Standard 1: Strategic Leadership • I took the lead in distributing leadership roles among staff. -Standard 1: Strategic Leadership • I identified student needs and provided innovative tools and programs to meet them. -Standard 2: Instructional Leadership • I assigned teachers to courses that reflect their instructional strengths. -Standard 4: Human Resources Leadership • I collaborated to develop master schedule with focus on student success. -Standard 5: Managerial Leadership

The five tasks in Table 6 represent the most repeated ranking of 4.18, which is categorized as frequently on the 5-point Likert scale used in the survey instrument. Several North Carolina Standards for School Executives are noted in the table as well, revealing the standards participants ranked frequently. Among them are strategic leadership, instructional leadership, human resources leadership, and managerial leadership.

Research Question 3 focused on how principal perspectives differ when comparing tasks experienced as an assistant principal. Overwhelmingly, it was noted that principals had more similar than varying perspectives regarding tasks that were

experienced as assistant principals. To gauge the extent of similarity, all tasks that were routinely experienced frequently or almost always by at least 80% of principals are displayed in Table 7. To provide details as to the type of task listed, the corresponding North Carolina Executive Standard is also presented.

Table 7

Principal Perspectives of Tasks Experienced Routinely as an Assistant Principal

North Carolina executive standard	% of participants	Task routinely experienced
Managerial leadership	82.35%	I collaborated to develop master schedule with focus on student success.
Strategic leadership	82.35%	I spearheaded major initiatives and created systemic review processes.
Instructional leadership	82.35%	I facilitated conversations about curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
Instructional leadership	82.35%	I identified student needs and provided innovative tools and programs to meet them.
Human resources leadership	82.36%	I assigned teachers to courses that reflect their instructional strengths.
Instructional leadership	88.23%	I provided staff feedback through formal and informal observations.
Cultural leadership	88.23%	I actively supported traditions that were culturally responsive.
Managerial leadership	88.24%	I interviewed and recommended quality teachers who met school needs.
Cultural leadership	91.11%	I communicated positive values about school, teaching, and professional growth while using a shared vision to establish a strong school identity.
Micropolitical leadership	94.11%	I provided opportunities for which the voices of staff members were heard and respected.
Micropolitical leadership	94.12%	I actively engaged with staff and students while maintaining visibility in classrooms and at extracurricular events.

When reviewing the 21 standards-based survey questions, a majority of the participants viewed their experience to be significant, as indicated by the task ratings. The greatest consensus among participants regarding tasks experienced as assistant principals was in the area of micropolitical leadership. All but one participant, or 94.12%, indicated they actively engaged with staff and students while maintaining visibility in classrooms and at extracurricular events frequently or almost always.

There was one additional micropolitical leadership task that was rated among the highest of all participants as it was tied for second most agreed-upon task. A total of 94.11% of participants indicated they provided opportunities where the voices of staff members were heard and respected frequently or almost always. This includes giving staff and students a platform where they can honestly and openly express themselves, actively supporting and encouraging self-advocacy, and supplying them with the necessary resources to carry out the task effectively. Other standards are represented among the top rated, such as instructional leadership, strategic leadership, human resources leadership, managerial leadership, and cultural leadership. The only standard not represented is external development leadership, which is highlighted in Table 8. In addition, all tasks that were routinely experienced less than 50% of the time are noted as well. To provide details as to the type of task listed, the corresponding North Carolina Executive Standard is presented.

Table 8*Principal Perspectives of Tasks Not Experienced Routinely as an Assistant Principal*

North Carolina executive standard	% of participants	Task routinely experienced
External development leadership	41.17%	I created a system of shared responsibility with stakeholders.
Managerial leadership	47.06%	I collaborated to ensure balanced budget to support school community.

Just as the majority of participants experienced certain tasks on a routine basis, there were a couple of tasks the majority of participants *did not* experience regularly. Table 8 shows the two tasks most principals agreed were not routinely experienced as assistant principals. The external development leadership standard is highlighted in this table. As the lowest of all average ratings, only 41.17% of participants suggested they created a system of shared responsibility with stakeholders on a regular basis. Types of activities for this element within the standard include facilitating a business alliance, networking with stakeholders on behalf of the school community but in venues outside the school building, and leading efforts to inform and include stakeholders in decision-making forums to benefit the school and students. At this rate, the amount of experience received to master this task is not ideal.

The other task participants did not experience on a regular basis was in the area of managerial leadership. Only 47.06% of participants indicated they regularly collaborated to ensure a balanced budget to support school community. School leaders must work hand-in-hand and collaborate with the school bookkeeper and district finance staff to maintain a balanced school budget. Key duties within this element may include determining teacher allotment and payroll funding options; deciding if and when field

trips occur; appropriately allocating local, state, and federal funds to mandated programs and line items; and deciding on the instructional supplies needed for staff.

Research Question 4 focused on how the North Carolina Standards for School Executives were incorporated in the tasks experienced as an assistant principal. Survey responses indicated that the North Carolina Standards are routinely incorporated in the actual experiences of assistant principals. Though varied in scope, the survey noted that the vast majority of tasks within standards were practiced at least sometimes by participants when they were assistant principals. To keep consistent with the concept that to be ideal, the tasks must be practiced frequently or almost always, Table 9 features the seven North Carolina Executive Standards and the average percent of participants who practiced the standards frequently or almost always as an assistant principal.

Table 9

Standards and the Percent of Participants Who Practiced Them Frequently or Almost Always

North Carolina executive standard	% of participants
Micropolitical leadership	86.27%
Cultural leadership	86.27%
Instructional leadership	84.31%
Strategic leadership	74.51%
Human resources leadership	74.51%
Managerial leadership	72.55%
External development leadership	68.63%

Table 9 highlights the seven standards by which three specific tasks or experiences were represented in the 21-item research survey. The percentage of participants displayed in the table was derived from averaging the ratings of each of the three tasks per participant within each standard and noting which tasks were performed

frequently or almost always. From those specific tasks, the average was calculated and recorded. North Carolina Executive Standards were ranked from frequently practiced to limited exposure in terms of the tasks and experiences of an assistant principal. At the top of the list was micropolitical leadership. As noted previously, this standard contained the task that 16 of the 17 participants stated they experienced frequently or almost always; it involved active engagement with staff and students while maintaining visibility in classrooms and at extracurricular events. Common everyday assistant principal tasks such as bus duty, carpool duty, game duty, theatre or arts program duty, and lunch duty all fit into the scope of this standard. Also at the top of the list was cultural leadership, where participants indicated they actively supported traditions that were culturally responsive and communicated positive values about school, teaching, and professional growth while using a shared vision to establish a strong school identity.

On average, participants rated their experiences within each standard positively, indicating that tasks performed as assistant principals aligned with tasks expected to be practiced. The lowest overall rating was within the standard of external development leadership, with less than 70% of participants asserting they routinely participated in tasks within that standard. As noted previously, this standard contained the task of creating a system of shared responsibility with stakeholders, which only 41.17% of participants experienced frequently or almost always.

Overview of Interview Responses

Of the 17 secondary principals who agreed to participate in this research study, 10 also agreed to take part in the brief follow-up interview. The survey model entertained possible trends and correlations in the data, while the follow-up interviews reviewed

special circumstances within the data and gathered further details from previous findings from the survey. Perceptions of what principals deem to be actual and ideal experiences were captured through specific interview questions about those experiences.

Table 10 acknowledges specific characteristics of the principals who participated in the follow-up interview as compared with the overall pool of participants for the survey component of the research study. Percentiles were computed to provide a clear analysis of the results.

Table 10*Demographics/Attributes of Follow-up Interview Participants*

Demographic/attribute	Total participants	%	Interview participants	%
Gender				
Female	11	64.71%	6	54.55%
Male	6	35.29%	4	66.67%
Race/ethnicity				
Black	14	82.35%	9	64.29%
White	3	17.65%	1	33.33%
Years as assistant principal				
0	1	5.88%	0	0.00%
1-3	6	35.29%	4	66.67%
4-8	9	52.94%	5	55.56%
9-15	1	5.88%	1	100.00%
Years as principal				
0-3	2	11.76%	2	100.00%
4-8	6	35.29%	4	66.67%
9-15	8	47.06%	3	37.50%
16 or more	1	5.88%	1	100.00%
Years as educator				
11-20	6	35.29%	4	66.67%
21-30	9	52.94%	4	44.44%
31 or more	2	11.76%	2	100.00%
Position prior to assistant principal				
Teacher	11	64.71%	5	45.45%
Counselor	3	17.65%	3	100.00%
Central office staff	1	5.88%	0	0.00%
Other	2	11.76%	2	100.00%

In comparing principals who participated in the main survey component of the study, 58.82% agreed to provide additional feedback on a follow-up interview regarding their particular experiences as an assistant principal and how those experiences prepared them for the principalship.

Data showed notable trends in participation rate for the follow-up interviews. First, although female principals made up 64.71% of survey participants, it was the male principals who made up the majority of interview participants, having 66.67% to share their views. Additionally, although Black principals made up 82.35% of study participants, only 64.29% agreed to complete the interview. It is noted that there are some areas with 100% interview participation: the two principals with 31 or more years of experience as educators; the one principal with 16 or more years serving in the principal role; the two principals serving 3 years or less in the principal role; and the one principal who served 9-15 years as an assistant principal. Last, participants who served as a school counselor or who worked in a position other than teacher or central office personnel had a 100% participation rate for the interview.

There were consistent talking points noted in the interviews. Trends and themes shared by several participants regarding their individual experiences as assistant principals were made apparent through this process. Interview questions were asked to address each research question, resulting in the discovery of specific themes that align with the assistant principal experience. As an added dimension to this study, the 10 interview participants, identified as Participant 1 through Participant 10, were assigned a participant number and identified by gender and race to further disaggregate the findings. These data provided specific insight into whether experiences differ by demographic. Table 11 denotes the participant number assigned to each interviewee as well as the participant's race and gender.

Table 11*Participant Designation by Race and Gender*

Participant Designation	Race	Gender
Participant 1	Black	Male
Participant 2	Black	Male
Participant 3	Black	Female
Participant 4	Black	Male
Participant 5	White	Male
Participant 6	Black	Female
Participant 7	Black	Female
Participant 8	Black	Female
Participant 9	Black	Female
Participant 10	Black	Female

As noted, 10 interviews were conducted with the majority of interviewees being Black females. Only one White principal was interviewed, thus indicating more precise data gathered with regard to gender than race. Through the review of various interviews and the discovery of aligning themes, interview participants were identified by their participant number, 1 through 10.

Emerging Themes

In response to the research questions, a total of nine themes emerged from the survey and follow-up interviews. Data from the interviews are presented narratively to show how themes were developed. Each research question posed was addressed by one or more interview questions. Responses to interview questions were disaggregated based on the specific research question they addressed.

Research Question 1: What Tasks Were Actually Experienced as an Assistant Principal To Help in the Preparation for the Principalship?

Two specific interview questions were answered by participants to address this question. The first was, “What experiences were the most beneficial in your preparation

for the principalship?” Participant 1 discussed his actual experiences as an assistant principal:

Well, to be specific, I know that I had experience with the master schedule. I had experience with talking to a lot of parents and being the final say once I've made decisions. At times, the principal was not there, so I was the authority figure a lot. People ended up coming to me for some things. And so you know my job was making sure that the ship is still running when the principal gets back. This is what central office is looking for, and when they're asking for a reply back or to report out, I did that. There was a reading program that the district had put a lot of emphasis on across the district, and nothing had been done. So I was put in a position to work with it. I completed the reports and got everything in order and thought, well, maybe it'll work. I had the Deputy Superintendent and Area Superintendent saying that it was outstanding and so basically, I was set up to have an experience that a lot of APs will never get. One year, we were in transition between principals and were all supposed to work on the master schedule as an AP team. People took the summer off; I stayed in learned how to do it. So then the lead on the master schedule was mine by default.

Participant 9 shared a similar experience:

I was the AP over the administrative staff. The opportunity to work with the school treasurer and the principal on financial and budgeting decisions as well as the district's auditor and finance manager were the most valuable experience for me in preparation for the principalship.

Participant 3 disclosed different experiences that were helpful in preparation for the

principalship:

I found my work with PLCs, school improvement team and leading initiatives was most beneficial. My work with PLCs helped to develop my instructional leadership. My work with the SIT initiatives helped to development my strategic, cultural and micropolitical leadership.

The next interview question answered by participants to address Research Question 1 was, “Beyond experiences within the seven standards listed in the survey, what preparatory experiences were most beneficial in your readiness for the principalship?” Participant 7 supports and is satisfied with the coverage of essential experiences within the North Carolina Executive Standards that are needed for the principalship:

Oddly enough, everything that makes me a good principal is within the standards. It possibly could be worded a different way. Like I think my biggest success is my positivity during this pandemic. The feedback I've received from my staff is that they appreciate that, when everyone else around them is gloom and doom and so it's not something I intentionally try to tie back to the standards, but if you go back and look at that cultural leadership, it's right there. That's what it hits on and so that's kind of important. I can't think of anything that would be outside of the standards that I do or that has been beneficial, because I think it all ties somewhere within those seven.

Participant 6 shared similar beliefs:

I can't think of anything; I actually liked the fact that we [principals and assistant principals] are evaluated on the same tool, particularly if we're saying that's a way

to change the narrative over the years of how we look at assistant principals.

Because if we have two different evaluations, it's like, okay so what are we saying? I like it being the same because then it prompts me as a principal to be sure I give opportunities to my assistant principals. It'll tell me things I need to do if I'm not able to observe something because I'm not giving them the opportunities. A lot of what we do, we do collectively anyway, so it's really about being an administration team. We meet every week and whether I'm taking the lead or not, it's happening because of us as a team. We're all exposed to many of those standards and sub-standards on the evaluation process so it's not just about what you're leading. They may not set the vision, but are they are part of leading and ensuring that the vision is implemented with all stakeholders. Even though they may not be the lead per se on a particular area, we're all leading it in the school as a team, so I can't think of anything else that would need to be in there.

Participant 9 was able to identify two components not covered within the standards that supported the preparation to be a principal:

Having a principal mentor and working as a guardian-ad-litem. As a guardian-ad-litem, you work with many different types of students, families, attorneys, judges, and you also get to work with many different people in the community that help families. The exposure to the community resources is invaluable and has helped me a great deal to navigate as a principal in the school community.

From the responses of Research Question 1, the following themes were discovered: (a) master scheduling, school-based decision-making, finance and budgeting, and district reports management (managerial); and (b) interaction with parents and

community, central office staff, and school improvement team (micropolitical, strategic, cultural). These are all tasks listed within the North Carolina Executive Standards as tasks expected of assistant principals.

Research Question 2: What Were the Ideal Tasks That Would Have Helped in the Preparation for the Principalship Had They Been Experienced as an Assistant Principal?

The interview question answered by participants to address Research Question 2 was, “Which experiences would you have liked more exposure to?” Participant 6 shared,

I would say that the budget would probably be an area that, as a principal coming into the role, I knew the least about. A lot of that you do learn in the moment, but I would say, budget and testing are two areas as a principal if you don't know can get you fired or in jail.

Participant 2 agreed and stated, “Budget. Some things at that time [when he was assistant principal] were preset by the district and didn’t have much school level responsibility [as principals do now].” Participant 10 also agreed and commented,

Definitely the school budget was something I wish I had more exposure to. I would have at least liked more experience handling components of the overall budget, just to get practice. Fortunately, as a principal, I’ve always had a good bookkeeper to keep me out of trouble.

Participant 3 added to this trend with a very short and simple answer: “I wanted more exposure with budgeting and creating the master calendar.” Participant 7 continued the trend and added further insight:

I would say budget, and really understanding the budget and the budget codes.

Like why can't I pull from this pot of money for this, you know those kinds of situations and knowing what's right. Also, I think that as an assistant principal I spent so much time working on discipline that the finance piece was not there. I would have liked to understand more about ESSA and the finance component in business rules because sometimes there are things on your report for your school that shouldn't be there, and unless you know those business rules to say "No, this should not be here," then you miss that opportunity. The finance piece, I kind of learned on my own. I didn't get it from a principal, I learned it on my own.

Participant 1, who previously indicated that he had the opportunity to work with the school budget as an assistant principal, went in a different direction with his response:

I saw it on your survey; it was like the School Improvement Team and the PTSA. So those are things that the principal went in by themselves, except one principal I had. It was something different, but when I became principal, it was something I had not done in a while. But like the school improvement team and building that plan, I had to figure that out on the go when I started, which was a huge stretch.

Participant 9 added, "I would have liked more opportunities to see and experience working in micro-political situations." Participant 8 provided detailed examples of tasks she would have liked more exposure to:

That budget—because the budget [guidelines] in public schools are the same, especially for a small school like mine. We get federal money, we get state money, we get local money. It took me a while to wrap my head around this because in the corporate world, we were given this big pot of money and it was

like, “I’m going to spend it on this” and it was Ok; it would get approved. But in public school, it is a lot different. For instance, if I want to buy pens, I have to write a requisition for it. And then there are certain things you can’t buy with federal money, so it’s a lot to learn and I’m grateful that I have a good team around me. My bookkeeper is the type who will keep me out of prison, I tell her that all the time. She helps me stay abreast of the things I can and cannot do; she obviously knows the process of filling out requisitions, the process of completing budget codes, and knowing what you can spend money on. If you don’t have the money in this budget code then you can’t spend the money because it is too late to move it. There are deadlines; there are a lot of moving parts. My bookkeeper has taught me a lot, as has my federal person; I’ve learned a lot in the past two years. In terms of micropolitical, I also wish I had more experience with that. I was pretty much in the building, helping with the culture and making sure I uplifted my principal’s vision. But in terms of outside my building, like meeting other assistant principals and other things that they do now, they didn’t do that when I was there. The opportunity to rub elbows and other things assistant principals get to do now, I wish I had more experience doing that. I was coming in as a new principal not really knowing anybody because I had not been in the district for a very long time.

From the responses to Research Question 2, the following themes were discovered: (a) hands-on school budget experience; and (b) PTSA, School Improvement Teams, networking, and other micropolitical experiences.

Research Question 3: In Reference to Principal Preparation, How Do Principal Perspectives Differ When Comparing Actual Versus Ideal Tasks Experienced as an Assistant Principal?

Two interview questions addressed differing principal perspectives between actual and ideal tasks experienced as assistant principals: “What experiences were the most beneficial in your preparation for the principalship,” and “Which experiences would you have liked more exposure?” I reviewed responses from both questions and captured statements that reflected varying perspectives about the significance or intensity of an actual experience that would qualify it to be ideal.

Participant 1 stated,

Unlike other system principals, they gave me a lot of experience in a lot of different areas. I had experience with budget; I signed checks. That's something that many APs do not experience. I also signed off on monthly reports to the district. And so, I was able to have experience with that. In the master schedule I got to talk about a lot, like hiring and allotments. You know, so now I have those conversations with central office. If I had to go in without that experience, I just don't know if I would have been able to make it.

Participant 6 explained the reasoning for not exposing an assistant principal to every single responsibility or duty that they may experience in the principalship:

They also need to have an opportunity to perfect areas because you definitely want to make sure that, as an assistant principal, you have strengths. You don't want to be a jack of all trades but a master of none. An assistant principal is not going to be at every budget conversation with the principal and the bookkeeper

because they wouldn't be able to do their other job duties. Sometimes we do have to stay in our lane and staying in our lane means you're not going to be exposed to everything all the time. And that's by design, I think it has to be a delicate balance of making sure our assistant principals are exposed to lots of things. But sometimes budget work is something that happens in the moment and so an assistant principal wouldn't be a part of the conversation a lot of the time; so I would say budget.

Participant 6 suggested that although not having a direct, hands-on learning experience, one could acquire specific knowledge of certain tasks that would suffice as appropriate training:

But even if you don't have lots of experience, say, with the budget for instance, you just want to make sure that you know the basics; like you want to know your different codes, your different money sources, and where they're used, particularly if you're a brand new principal at a title one school. You have title one funds which have stipulations about that so you want to make sure you do have a basic knowledge of things.

The response from Participant 5 was similar in that he also considered general knowledge coupled with indirect experience to be adequate preparation. Regarding assistant principals working with the budget, he stated,

Now as principal, it is your name that goes on the check and everything else. I am over that, but I have taught my assistant principals. In fact, I've given them my budget cheat sheet and I've shown them how you can take certain parts of money and be flexible with it and do certain things in certain ways.

Participant 10 added additional insight:

I did not have lots of experience with the school budget. Like many other assistant principals, the principal and bookkeeper mainly handled that. I learned a few things about allotment and budget coding just through our meetings and conversations, but never had official training or given actual responsibilities over the budget. I would have liked to know more as a new principal because you're working with finances from day one; but having a competent bookkeeper was very helpful to me. I learned all that I need to know through experiencing it as a principal. Considering there was someone else in the building who knew budgeting, I don't feel it was detrimental to me that I didn't. Now there are things, like hiring, instructional leadership, building a strong school culture, and understanding the overall management of a high school, that assistant principals definitely need experience with prior to becoming a principal. These are things that you can't expect someone else in the building to be an expert in; that would be the principal's role.

From the responses to Research Question 3, the following theme was discovered:

There are varying perspectives regarding the relevance of direct experience needed for an assistant principal to have an ideal preparatory experience, particularly with regards to school budget and finance.

Research Question 4: How Were the North Carolina Standards for School Executives Incorporated in the Tasks Experienced as an Assistant Principal?

One interview question specifically addressed this question: "Beyond experiences within the seven standards list in the survey, what preparatory experiences were most

beneficial in your readiness for the principalship?” This question was posed to determine if the standards were embedded throughout routine and practical experiences or if participants were able to identify other relevant experiences not identified within the standards that helped them prepare for the principalship.

Participant 6 shared the following:

We're all exposed to many of those standards and sub-standards on the evaluation process so it's not just about what you're leading. When you break it down, it's a very comprehensive evaluation so I think that we need to make sure we understand all of the standards, like what micropolitical is and how can it be assessed. I think most everyone pretty much understands managerial leadership, instructional leadership, strategic leadership, and human resources leadership. Those are the easy ones, but what does the micropolitical really look like? And what are examples of how we do that? So I think, maybe just being a little more educated on what this looks like in the leadership role. Just breaking out all of those standards to make sure that everyone understands each one and the sub-standards under them. This is particularly important for principals because if we don't understand it, then we can't explain it to assistant principals and hold them accountable for it.

Participant 3 stated, “Most of my experiences tied into my evaluation [the standards] or PDP; the ability to lead and run a grade level was beneficial. I ran it like my own school and gained much from that experience.” Participant 1 also indicated that the standards encompassed the work he did as an assistant principal:

Tasks were covered in the standards, like the master schedule. It is more than just

building classes for teachers and students for the next school year because you are talking a lot about things like budget. You are talking HR; it's just so much that you're dealing with in the master schedule that if I would have to say was needed going into a principalship. I mean some things could have gone wrong, you know, and some things could have gone over my head to where maybe I would have found out later on. It can slow your process down if you don't know the master schedule. I think the thing is, people want to do it because that's the insight to all information.

Participant 8 added another perspective. Although not directly evaluated on these components, it is the expectation that administrators reflect on their implementation of these tasks through various elements within the standards. Participant 8 stated,

I would say experience teaching, and the value of teaching the Teacher Working Conditions survey; I helped my staff understand that this survey is very much about you and your school. It is not the time, because you're mad at [someone from the district level], to slam us. This is the time to look at what's happening in our building so we can make teaching and learning better. This was something I continued to learn as I grew into the role. Something else was the importance of the School Improvement Plan, and it being a living document that reflects your goals and visions for your school. Whatever your five-year plan is for your school, your school improvement plan should be reflective of that. The third thing was the PDs I facilitated on teacher evaluation, and really understanding what I'm trying to get at with the teacher evaluation, and how I'm trying to coach you up or out. All these things fall under the various types of leadership that the standards

are broken into.

From the responses to Research Question 4, the following themes were discovered: (a) assistant principal tasks were covered in the standards, and (b) skills learned can usually be directly or indirectly attributed to the standards.

There was one statement made by Participant 8 that was noteworthy to share with any aspiring principal as they navigate through all their experiences as a school administrator. This statement did not “fit” in my summary for any one question but is sound advice Participant 8 received and wanted to share:

Advice from a mentor that helped me was, “When you take that role as a supervisor, you’re going to have people working under you and for you. You don’t have to walk around like, ‘I’m the principal’ because they are going to know who you are.” So what you have to do is form the culture that you want to live in every day, because you’re going to have to come to work and work with these people every day so be true to who you are as a person. Also, you are a coach; eventually, you will coach people up and out because they are not supposed to stay there forever.

Table 12 displays themes discovered from surveying and interviewing principals about their experiences as assistant principals. This table provides a summary of the correlation between each research question as stated, along with the themes that emerged from participant responses.

Table 12*Correlation Between Research Questions and Themes*

Research questions	Emerging themes
<p>Research Question 1: What tasks were actually experienced as an assistant principal to help in the preparation for the principalship?</p>	<p>Based on this research question, the following themes emerged:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitating master schedule process, finance and budgeting, reports management, School Improvement Team and other school-based decision-making • Networking and collaboration with parents, community, and central office staff
<p>Research Question 2: What were the ideal tasks that would have helped in the preparation for the principalship had they been experienced as an assistant principal?</p>	<p>Based on this research question, the following themes emerged:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hands-on school budget and finance • Opportunity to facilitate the School Improvement Plan, PTSA, and other district mandated or school-based initiatives • Networking and collaboration with various stakeholder groups
<p>Research Question 3: In reference to principal preparation, how do principal perspectives differ when comparing actual versus ideal tasks experienced as an assistant principal?</p>	<p>Based on this research question, the following themes emerged:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are varying perspectives in regard to the relevance of direct experience needed for an assistant principal to have an ideal preparatory experience, particularly with regard to school budget and finance.
<p>Research Question 4: How were the North Carolina Standards for School Executives incorporated in the tasks experienced as an assistant principal?</p>	<p>Based on this research question, the following themes emerged:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tasks assigned to assistant principals are covered in the standards • Skills learned can usually be directly or indirectly attributed to the standards • Other school experiences such as school counseling and central office roles embraced elements within the standards and assisted in the preparation for the principalship

Summary of Findings

Chapter 4 revealed a detailed description of the findings of this research study. An

assessment of actual tasks and responsibilities performed as assistant principals was captured in a 21-item survey representing seven standards as outlined in the North Carolina Executive Standards model. Seventeen secondary school principals participated in the survey to provide insight into their perceptions of actual and ideal tasks experienced when they were assistant principals. Further, perceptions of what principals deem to be ideal experiences and those they would have liked to experience as assistant principals were captured through specific interview questions about those experiences. Nine themes were revealed through both the survey and the interview.

In Chapter 5, a comprehensive summary of this research project is highlighted, along with a reflection and comparison of other research studies, as discussed in Chapter 2. In addition, recommendations for further research are examined.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this research study was to gain insight regarding principal preparatory tasks experienced by assistant principals in one of the largest urban school districts in the state of North Carolina. Seventeen current secondary principals in the district participated in a survey, most of whom also participated in a follow-up interview, to share their experiences as assistant principals. This study revealed which assistant principal experiences contributed to principal readiness as perceived by the leaders of secondary schools. Identifying preparatory tasks administrators were assigned as assistant principals helped establish an awareness of current strengths and opportunities state and district leaders can expound upon to ensure a more competent and confident pool of future school leaders. In addition, tasks investigated in this study were reflective of the North Carolina School Executive Evaluation Rubric, which is used to evaluate the performance and growth of school administrators throughout the state.

Four research questions provided the framework for both the survey and interview items and to analyze the findings. The research questions guiding this research were

1. What tasks were actually experienced as an assistant principal to help in the preparation for the principalship?
2. What were the ideal tasks that would have helped in the preparation for the principalship had they been experienced as an assistant principal?
3. In reference to principal preparation, how do principal perspectives differ when comparing actual versus ideal tasks experienced as an assistant principal?
4. How were the North Carolina Standards for School Executives incorporated

into the tasks experienced as an assistant principal?

There are five sections within this chapter. The first section includes a summary of the findings as well as a discussion of the supporting theory introduced earlier in the research. The second section highlights the implications and recommendations for practice. The third section details the delimitations and limitations of the study. The fourth section offers recommendations for further research. The final section emphasizes my reflections and closing views of this study.

Summary and Supporting Theory

Through this research, the role of an assistant principal was explored in relation to readiness for the principalship. The relationship between the independent variables (tasks experienced, principal perceptions, and standards alignment) and their effects on the dependent variable (preparedness for the principalship) was highlighted. The theoretical framework chosen to explore these relationships was Fred Fiedler's Contingency Theory of Leadership (Leadership-Central.com, n.d.). The segment of the Contingency Theory that best addressed the research questions and provided supportive evidence as to the impact of experiences on readiness for the principalship was the Situational Leadership Model, introduced by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard (Leaders, 2021). This model proved to be relevant and aligned the theoretical foundation for the study.

The four leadership behavior levels within the Situational Leadership Model—directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating—depict the progression of growth and competence of a school administrator. The first level, directing, is designed to be short-term and provide extensive assistance to encourage continuous improvement. This level would support assistant principals who have very limited to no skills or experience

executing the tasks they have been assigned. Because of their lack of experience, they may be too insecure and unwilling to make decisions, take chances, or use initiative to meet a goal (Situational Leadership, n.d.). At this level, the principal takes more of a hands-on approach, spending a great amount of time directing the assistant principals through the day-to-day operations of the school and providing guidance in identifying any signs of growth and progress (Leadership, 2020). New assistant principals with no administrative experience are learners who may fall into this category, relying on their supervisor to provide extensive guidance.

The second level, coaching, complements assistant principals who have limited experience performing the tasks assigned but, due to the coaching received, may be more motivated and eager to learn (Situational Leadership, n.d.). While still being the decision maker, the principal takes the time to coach and explain the *what, when, how, and why* of those decisions with the assistant principal. At this level, the assistant principal is becoming familiar with some of the responsibilities and tasks assigned, although their overall ability may still be fairly low. The assistant principal may be willing to lead and show initiative in those particular areas of comfort; thus, constructive feedback in response to efforts made is critical to continued growth (Leadership, 2020). It is during this stage that the principal must realize the assistant principal is growing professionally and begin to provide more opportunities to lead. Matriculating through this stage is crucial if the assistant principal is to make timely strides toward principalship preparedness.

The third level, supporting, is demonstrated by a principal who takes a step back, affording the assistant principal the opportunity to perform assigned tasks independently

at a sustained level. This level complements assistant principals who have demonstrated a level of task proficiency but may still have hesitations about performing the tasks without guidance (Situational Leadership, n.d.). At this level, through actual tasks performed and continuous opportunities for a variety of experiences, the assistant principal has developed the necessary skills required to excel on assigned tasks but may fear failure or may fear the unknown. Assistant principals may feel they understand their role and have experienced many of the responsibilities of a principal; however, they may question their true ability to lead a school if they have not engaged in all the relevant experiences as their principals. This behavior is likely to be temporary, as the assistant principal's commitment may gradually grow when approaching Level 4 (Leadership, 2020). This confirms the importance of ensuring assistant principals have opportunities to gain experience in as many areas as possible in order to be comfortable and prepared to assume the role of principal.

The final level of the Situational Leadership Model is Level 4, delegating. The direction of communication has changed in Level 4, as it now flows from the assistant principal to the principal. This level complements assistant principals who have proven their ability to build capacity as a leader through successful performance while being willing to continuously take on greater levels of responsibility without hesitation or coercion (Situational Leadership, n.d.). At this level, the assistant principal is highly trained in their responsibilities and comfortable with executing them. At this stage, the level of commitment is high, and the assistant principal is reliable and responsive (Leadership, 2020). Assistant principals may enjoy feelings of accomplishment at this stage, as their principal supervisor comfortably relinquishes instructional and managerial

principalship responsibilities, indicating their readiness to lead.

The levels of the Situational Leadership Model depict the dire need for assistant principals to receive relevant, real-life experiences at their school site in order to gain the greatest opportunity for success as the leader of a school community. Geis (2016) suggested that if new assistant principals are to be groomed to assume leadership roles, the delegating level should be the ultimate goal. This allows potential leaders to take an active role in decision-making and shared responsibility while maintaining a high level of engagement and involvement in leadership matters. The types of responsibilities delegated to assistant principals and the quality of training received may determine if and when they progress to the level needed to be a successful, well-prepared principal.

The need for well-prepared principals highlights the need for assistant principals to receive relevant, real-life experiences so they can gain skills needed for success as a principal. This research study proved the theory to be true since participants who were most engaged in principal tasks and experiences as assistant principals indicated they felt most prepared for the principalship.

Participant 1, for instance, stated that he had experience actually running the school since his principal was out of the building quite often. He handled the budget and signed checks, reviewed allotments, and hired and evaluated staff. He noted that his promotion to the principalship was seamless and that he was well-prepared. In final comments shared by Participant 7, she elaborated on the effects of not having those types of experiences as an assistant principal by suggesting that the opportunity to experience tasks ideal for principalship preparation varies from school to school and boils right down to the principal they have. She continued by stating the principal has a direct impact on

the assistant principal's experience and that if the principal never involves the assistant principal in interviewing and hiring, for example, they will not gain the preparatory knowledge that is needed.

Implications for Practice

This study informs educational leaders of the necessity to continuously revisit and redesign principal preparatory experiences to meet the needs of a changing educational system. To be successful, assistant principals must be supplied with the tools and practical experiences needed to acclimate to a variety of school settings and educational levels while fulfilling their own professional goals. If the goal of education is student success and academic achievement, school leadership should not be overlooked as an education improvement strategy, as effective leadership influences student achievement (Wallace Foundation, 2011). Addressing this issue allows education stakeholders to reflect on the state of principal preparedness through the eyes of current school administrators as we continue to focus on student success. Further, by using the state evaluation tool as the criterion for which survey questions were derived, an enhanced understanding of the specific experiences that best prepare assistant principals for the principalship was carefully reviewed.

In this section, research results collected in Chapter 2, Literature Review, are reviewed and then compared to the findings of my current research. How my findings coincide with or expand existing knowledge is also explored.

The Changing Role of the Secondary School Administrator

When considering how the role and expectations of the school administrator have changed over time, it is noteworthy to assess these changes through the lens of race and

gender. According to a recent research report (Matias, 2019), women now make up the majority of the college-educated workforce, marking a defining moment in gender equality. This holds true regarding secondary school leaders in this district, as female administrators represent well over 50% of the population. Further, as noted in Chapter 2, a study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (2019a) indicated that nearly 40% of secondary school administrators earned a degree beyond the master's level. In the school district of this research study, 35% of principals, or eight of 23, have earned a doctoral degree, which is in line with the findings of the earlier study. More specifically, 75% of principals with doctoral degrees in this district are Black, with Black females making up the majority of those doctoral degrees at 42%. Within this research study, three of the 17 participants have earned their doctoral degree; all of them are Black women. Each of the three is a very successful principal within the district, as measured by student growth and proficiency rates on the North Carolina School Report Card (2020) as well as the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey (2020), and they each noted having an overall positive and enriching experience as an assistant principal.

When reviewing how roles have changed regarding the types of tasks performed, Pannell et al. (2015) stated that educational reform has transformed the principal's role from a manager and disciplinarian to a leader who facilitates strategic planning, budgeting, and reforms and ensures legislative compliance while increasing student achievement. Participant responses in my study corroborated this, as all indicated their experiences exceeded those of a disciplinarian or building manager.

With regard to quality of tasks performed, Kiriago (2013) concluded that 100% of respondents expressed the need to expand relationships with the external audience, such

as parents, alumni, local businesses, large corporations, or government entities. Further, Bastian and Goff (2017) revealed that assistant principals spend only 7% of their time on external relations.

My research study supports this finding since it was reported that only 41% of participants indicated that as assistant principals, they routinely created systems of shared responsibility with stakeholders.

Principal Preparation Initiatives and Professional Development

As noted in Chapter 2, Bastian and Goff (2017) also highlighted the availability of supports for assistant principals. Results found that a formally assigned mentor/coach was rarely accessible to assistant principals and was essentially ranked lowest of all supports. Participants in my study proved this correct. Several noted that although there were no formally assigned mentors, they took the initiative to choose a mentor to support them in their administrative role. Other participants spoke to what the benefit having a mentor would have been as they navigated their new role. Grissom and Harrington (2010) indicated that principals who had the guidance of a coach or mentor tend to be more effective leaders. Principals who had a mentor and participated in the interview portion of my study expressed being well-prepared for their new role and spoke with confidence, giving many examples of the great preparatory experiences they encountered as assistant principals.

A noteworthy finding regarding the state and national initiatives implemented to support and prepare aspiring principals for this role is that none of the participants in this study mentioned any of these professional development opportunities as being instrumental in their preparation for the principalship. It was clear that hands-on, practical

experience was what participants articulated as necessary in their preparation.

As far as district initiatives are concerned, there has been a recent push to provide resources and training to aspiring principals through the APLA. Assistant principals meet monthly to hear remarks and district updates from the superintendent, leadership presentations by district representatives, and principal panels. Afterward, they are assigned to breakout sessions to discuss a predetermined topic. As presented in Chapter 2, Bottoms and Schmidt-Davis (2010) noted that participating in district-wide professional development sessions may be a sufficient way to disseminate district information, but without addressing the context of school needs on an individualized basis and offering an extension of key district topics for building-level interpretation, its impact will be minimal.

My research study supports this statement, as only one participant in the study mentioned the APLA as a way to prepare for the principalship. She simply stated that when she was an assistant principal, there were no opportunities like the APLA for her and her colleagues to attend. The APLA has been a component of the district's aspiring principal training initiative for 7 years; surprisingly, of the eight study participants who have been a principal for 8 years or less, none of them indicated the APLA was instrumental in preparing them for the principalship.

North Carolina Standards for School Executives

Each of the North Carolina Standards for School Executives recommends tasks that provide a detailed account of what assistant principals should be doing on a regular basis. These tasks coincide with elements of each standard in which administrators are evaluated. Results of this research study concluded that the use of the standards in

assessing tasks actually experienced as an assistant principal is consistent in the responses of all participants. Specific tasks experienced on a routine basis spanned through six of the seven standards. The only standard not represented was external development leadership, indicating that participants did not believe they had routine or ideal preparatory experiences in this area.

Of the 21 survey items, 11 were tasks participants viewed as being practiced routinely as an assistant principal. All but one participant indicated they actively engaged with staff and students while maintaining visibility in classrooms and at extracurricular events. This falls under the umbrella of micropolitical leadership. Ironically, micropolitical leadership is also the area in which many participants verbalized they would have liked more experience as an assistant principal. This particular survey item spoke of tasks that take place on school grounds; participants stated during the interviews that they would have liked more exposure to other micropolitical experiences such as networking, district and stakeholder collaboration, and facilitating school-level initiatives. The one area that was overwhelmingly consistent between the survey and the interview was budgeting. As a component of managerial leadership, all interview participants mentioned budgeting in their responses, either to confirm actual experience working with it or to express the need to have had more experience working with it.

Administrator Perceptions Regarding Preparedness for the Principalship

When reviewing effective and meaningful principal preparatory opportunities, one must consider every aspect of preparedness, including education programs. Referenced in Chapter 2, Portin et al. (2003) concluded that 100% of principals interviewed indicated that they did not benefit from their principal preparation program,

thus they were not prepared for the demands of the job. In this current research study, only one interview participant indicated that she benefited from certain components of her preparatory education program. This supports the earlier study since most participants did not suggest education preparatory programs helped them become better prepared for the principalship.

In Chapter 2, a study by Bastian and Goff (2017) was introduced to compare the actual experience of practicing professional standards with the quality of the principal preparation received. The study revealed that for every standard listed, the ranking for principal preparation was lower than the assistant principal experience, indicating that more support is needed in the area of principal preparation. This is consistent with my current research, as participants reported they were pleased with their overall actual assistant principal experience but less so when discussing the details of such preparation. Specifically, a majority of participants viewed their experience to be significant; however, there were certain components within some standards where a deficiency was identified.

It was also noted in Chapter 2, through a study by Barnett et al. (2017), that assistant principals' preferred way to receive professional development is through current or former principals they trust and respect. This goes back to the concept of having a mentor as part of an assistant principal's preparatory experience. Several participants in my study indicated that as assistant principals, their principals taught them key concepts needed in the principal role; they were exposed to a variety of tasks because their principals allowed them to work alongside them and manage responsibilities independently. Although not given the official title of mentor, these principals behaved as

if they were.

Summary of Implications for Practice

The research conducted in this study and the findings that followed strongly contribute to the field of education administration in the secondary school setting. Indeed, there were many perceptions confirmed through the findings as well as some concepts that may not have been thoroughly explored. A summary of the implications derived from this research include

- The school district should consider implementing a principal mentor program to provide aspiring principals and novice principals a structured support system needed to be successful.
- The school district should ensure that assistant principals receive the experiences and trainings at the school level (in areas such as budgeting, finance, and program facilitation) in order to best prepare for the principalship.
- The school district should implement informal networking events where school administrators can build strong supportive relationships outside of the structured work sessions in which they usually meet.
- The school district should encourage assistant principals to attend professional development conferences and workshops and present on topics of expertise.
- The school district should encourage principals to only rate assistant principals on standards in which they have provided adequate opportunity for the assistant principal to practice.
- The school district should continue to invest in the APLA and fine-tune its

purpose so more assistant principals will perceive it to be an invaluable experience in their preparation to be a school principal.

- The school district should meet with institutions of higher education regarding their M.Ed. program curriculum to realign the course work and evidences to mirror the ideal experiences for administrators in the district.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

In conducting this research, there were delimitations and limitations to consider. The delimitation of the study involved the population, which is restricted to secondary school principals in one school district. Of the 23 secondary school principals, my goal was to have 70% participation, or 16 administrators. The probability sampling method was used for this study in order to afford me the greatest opportunity to secure the most representative sample of the population. Through probability sampling, secondary school principals were invited to participate in the study by receiving an email explanation of the study. District rules prohibit multiple solicitations of participation, so only one invitation email and one follow-up request to participate were delivered. There is a possibility that the sample size may not be large enough to make generalizations for the entire population; however, it is imperative to keep in mind that the primary purpose of this study was to gain general insight regarding the significance of specific responsibilities and experiences of secondary assistant principals as they prepare for the principalship and add to the growing research of this important topic. This study was able to meet this goal.

There were a few significant limitations to consider as well. First, the potential for inaccurate survey data must be acknowledged. If tasks represented within the survey, which were pulled from the North Carolina Executive Standards, were interpreted

differently by various principals, their responses may vary. Also, if principals served as assistant principals in the research district, they may have encountered personal issues; for instance, they may have been somewhat uncomfortable about being truthful in the survey if their experiences or lack of opportunities as an assistant principal caused them to rate significantly low. Further, they may not have been truthful if they felt their responses could lead to their identity or the possible negative perception of their former principal. In addition, there is the potential for uninformed responses. Both veteran and novice principals completed the survey; varying years of experience may affect the level of comprehension of certain survey items, thus influencing likely responses to the survey. Finally, with consideration that this research study was conducted during the global COVID-19 pandemic, the level of participation may have been affected due to continuous and critical obligations and responsibilities posed to school principals.

Suggestions for Further Research

Suggestions for further research revolve around building upon the findings of this research study. Several components within this study are very interesting; explaining how results could possibly be used to further explore these components or ideas is beneficial to the education community. This section speaks to such expansions to include exploring the principal and assistant principal mentor relationship; increasing participation in the study by including all administrators in the district, not just secondary; and focusing more on the North Carolina Standards for School Executives and its relation to preparatory experiences for the principalship.

Principal/Assistant Principal Mentor Relationship

As noted in Chapter 2, Schiavino-Narvaez et al. (2020) suggested that because

school leaders have varying strengths and needs, their training should be individualized and differentiated to assist them in accomplishing their goals. Education programs across the nation have found success because emphasis is placed on leadership training within the school building rather than through traditional (large group) methods. New administrators received valued training by working alongside mentor principals. This practical, hands-on experience was beneficial to new administrators, as this provided them the opportunity to improve their skills (Dillon, 2011).

Through survey responses as well as interview discussions, participants who indicated they worked with a principal who gave them a high level of responsibility enjoyed more of an ideal experience as an assistant principal. This research could be expanded by focusing more on the principal/assistant principal working relationship. One participant in this research study shared the following during the final thoughts of her interview:

You may have a principal who never involved you [in specific tasks] knowing that's part of the general side of principalship. I've seen different types of principals, and under the many principals I've worked under, some were very deliberate in saying, "Okay here are the things in which you need support, based on the standards." And then I've had some who are just like, "You will just do this [task]—which would not cover nearly what you need to know or experience."

This statement only reiterates the need for further research on the role principals play in preparing assistant principals for the principalship.

Increase Participation by Conducting a District-wide Study

The target audience for this study was all secondary principals within the school

district. This limitation yielded a total of 17 study participants who were all secondary principals. To secure a more comprehensive findings report, it would be essential to expand this study to include all elementary principals as well. Even further, to compare what current assistant principals also think are ideal tasks to experience in preparation for the principalship, the study could include all K-12 administrators in the district. This would surely yield a larger sample size. The gathered data could then be disaggregated to analyze results from a variety of variables, such as (a) the different types of elementary principal preparatory tasks considered to be ideal as compared to those in secondary schools, (b) how the standards align to elementary preparatory tasks, and (c) the preference of mentor principals as opposed to whole group district training and professional development. The possibility of disaggregating the data to include these three variables is excellent justification to expand this research study.

Focus on the North Carolina Standards for School Executives

The standards are derived from the Wallace Foundation (Portin et al., 2003) and do not focus on what school administrators might or should do, but instead, what administrators actually do. These tasks are then tied to leadership development. For this study, only three elements for each standard were chosen, although several were combined into one. By providing a more in-depth assessment of how school administrators feel about each one of the elements for each standard would allow for a more detailed account of specific tasks experienced, and to what level, for all administrators. It would be interesting to know if the results of this limited study would prove consistent with those of an inclusive study.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research study was to gain insight into the experiences of assistant principals in one of the largest urban school districts in North Carolina. This study revealed which assistant principal experiences contribute to principal readiness as perceived by principals of secondary schools within the study district. Identifying preparatory tasks principals were assigned as assistant principals helped establish an awareness of current strengths and opportunities state and district leaders can expound upon to ensure a more competent and confident pool of future school leaders. This study also provides insight to aspiring school principals as to which tasks and assignments are most beneficial for the principalship if they have the opportunity to experience them as assistant principals. In addition, tasks being investigated in this study were reflective of the North Carolina Standards for School Executives, which is used to evaluate the performance and growth of school administrators throughout the state.

Four research questions were posed and answered through this study. This was accomplished through the completion of a 21-item survey using a 5-point Likert scale and a follow-up interview. In response to the research questions, a total of nine emerging themes were identified. Each research question posed was addressed by one or more interview questions. Responses to interview questions were disaggregated based on the specific research question they addressed. Through the data analysis process, I gained the necessary knowledge needed to analyze the data, answer research questions, and evaluate the results successfully. Each theme is listed below.

1. Facilitating the master schedule process, finance and budgeting, reports management, School Improvement Team, and other school-based decision-

making opportunities were actually experienced as assistant principals.

2. Networking and collaboration with parents, community, and central office staff were actually experienced as assistant principals.
3. In-depth and hands-on school budgeting and finance experiences would have been helpful in preparation for the principalship.
4. Regular opportunities to facilitate the School Improvement Plan, PTSA, and other district-mandated or school-based initiatives would have been helpful in preparation for the principalship.
5. Regular opportunities to network and collaborate with various stakeholder groups outside the school building would have been helpful in preparation for the principalship.
6. There are varying perspectives in regard to the relevance of direct, hands-on experience needed for an assistant principal to have an ideal preparatory experience, particularly with regard to school budget and finance.
7. Tasks assigned to assistant principals are covered in the North Carolina Standards for School Executives.
8. Skills learned can usually be directly or indirectly attributed to the North Carolina Standards for School Executives.
9. Other school experiences such as school counseling and central office roles embraced elements within the North Carolina Standards for School Executives and assisted in the preparation for the principalship.

Researching principal perceptions of experiences that prepared them for the principalship has allowed me to appreciate the magnitude of responsibility entrenched in

the role of a secondary school administrator. Not only must principals acquire the knowledge and competence to successfully lead a school community, but they are also a key factor in the success of their assistant principals. Balancing what to share with novice administrators and when to share it is a skill that principals may not have been taught but are expected to practice. This concept was stated best by Participant 10:

It is my job as a principal to train and prepare my assistant principals to be able to run this school without me. I am responsible for making sure they get the experience they need so they are confident when they become principals. If I do not prepare them, they may not succeed; and I have not done my job.

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Appendix A

Participant Letter and Consent

Greetings,

I am requesting your help with my doctoral study, which focuses on your preparation for the principalship. In order to carry out my study, I am asking all secondary principals to complete a short 21 item survey about your experience as an assistant principal. In piloting the survey, the estimated time for completion is 10 minutes. This survey is designed to identify the degree to which specific tasks you experienced as an assistant principal

I am also asking you to consider participating in a 10 minute follow-up interview to help identify the experiences you wished you had as an assistant principal. The interview is composed of four primary questions; however, depending on your responses, follow-up questions may be asked. As a current high school assistant principal, I am cognizant of the demands on your time, and promise to respect the need for brevity.

Joining this research study is voluntary; you have the right to decline participation and to ask any questions regarding the research. All data will remain confidential and destroyed as appropriate.

Participant Agreement:

Please read the attached Informed Consent. Your consent to participate is indicated upon completion of the online survey.

Yours in Education,

Renita Griffin-Jordan

Assistant Principal,

Appendix B
Survey Instrument

DEMOGRAPHICS FOR SURVEY Check appropriate identifier in each area. (Part A)

Last Name _____ First Name _____	
Gender ____ a. Female ____ b. Male	Race/Ethnicity ____ a. Black ____ b. Hispanic ____ c. White ____ d. Asian ____ e. Other
Years as Assistant Principal ____ a. 0 – 3 ____ b. 4 – 8 ____ c. 9 – 15 ____ d. 16 or more	Years as Principal ____ a. 0 – 3 ____ b. 4 – 8 ____ c. 9 – 15 ____ d. 16 or more
Years as an Educator ____ a. 0 – 10 ____ b. 11 - 20 ____ c. 21 – 30 ____ d. 31 or more	What position did you hold prior to Assistant Principal? ____ a. Teacher ____ b. Counselor ____ c. Central Office ____ d. Other (Please specify) _____

SURVEY This survey contains statements that depict a variety of tasks/responsibilities of school administrators. Please rate each statement **1** (almost never) to **5** (almost always), indicating the degree to which you experienced each task/responsibility as an assistant principal. (Part B)

	Almost Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Frequently	Almost Always
I. STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP					
a. Spearheaded major initiatives and created systemic review processes	1	2	3	4	5
b. Facilitated the implementation of the School Improvement Plan	1	2	3	4	5
c. Took the lead in distributing leadership roles among staff	1	2	3	4	5
II. INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP					
a. Facilitated conversations about curriculum, instruction, and assessment	1	2	3	4	5
b. Provided staff feedback through formal and informal observations	1	2	3	4	5

c. Identified student needs and provided innovative tools and programs to meet them	1	2	3	4	5
III. CULTURAL LEADERSHIP					
a. Created a collaborative “team” work environment	1	2	3	4	5
b. Communicated positive values about school, teaching, and professional growth, while using a shared vision to establish a strong school identity	1	2	3	4	5
c. Actively supported traditions that were culturally responsive	1	2	3	4	5
IV. HUMAN RESOURCES LEADERSHIP					
a. Used data from Teacher Working Conditions survey to lead in maintaining a nurturing work environment,	1	2	3	4	5
b. Assigned teachers to courses that reflect their instructional strengths	1	2	3	4	5
c. Established structures and models for professional development, continuous learning, and new teacher support	1	2	3	4	5
V. MANAGERIAL LEADERSHIP					
a. Collaborated to ensure balanced budget to support school community	1	2	3	4	5
b. Interviewed and recommended quality teachers who met school needs	1	2	3	4	5
c. Collaborated to develop master schedule with focus on student success	1	2	3	4	5
VI. EXTERNAL DEVELOPMENT LEADERSHIP					
a. Implemented protocols to ensure compliance of all local, state, and federal mandates	1	2	3	4	5
b. Advocated on behalf of the school and shared accomplishments in the district and community	1	2	3	4	5
c. Created a system of shared responsibility with stakeholders	1	2	3	4	5
VII. MICROPOLITICAL LEADERSHIP					
a. Actively engaged with staff and students while maintaining visibility in classrooms and at extracurricular events	1	2	3	4	5
b. Collaborated with the School Improvement Team to lead in school-wide decision making	1	2	3	4	5
c. Provided opportunities for which the voices of staff members were heard and respected	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix C

Content Validation Index

Survey Items	Expert 1	Expert 2	Expert 3	Expert 4	Expert 5		CVR
Ia. Spearheaded major initiatives and created systemic review processes	X	X	X	X	X		1
Ib. Facilitated the implementation of the School Improvement Plan		X	X	X	X		0.6
Ic. Took the lead in distributing leadership roles among staff		X	X	X	X		0.6
IIa. Facilitated conversations about curriculum, instruction, and assessment	X	X	X	X	X		1
IIb. Provided staff feedback through formal and informal observations	X	X	X	X	X		1
IIc. Identified student needs and provided innovative tools and programs to meet them		X	X	X	X		0.6
IIIa. Created a collaborative “team” work environment	X	X	X	X	X		1
IIIb. Communicated positive values about school, teaching, and professional growth, while using a shared vision to establish a strong school identity		X	X	X	X		0.6
IIIc. Actively supported traditions that are culturally responsive	X	X		X	X		0.6
IVa. Used data from Teacher Working Conditions survey to lead in maintaining a nurturing work environment			X	X	X		0.2
IVb. Assigned teachers to courses that reflect their instructional strengths	X		X	X	X		0.6
IVc. Established structures and models for professional development and continuous learning		X	X	X	X		0.6
Va. Ensured a balanced budget to support the school community		X	X	X	X		0.6
Vb. Hired quality teachers that meet the needs of the school	X		X	X	X		0.6
Vc. Developed a master schedule that focused on student learning and success	X	X	X	X	X		1
VIa. Implemented protocols to ensure compliance of all local, state, and federal mandates	X	X	X	X	X		1
VIb. Advocated on behalf of the school and shared accomplishments in the district and community	X	X	X	X	X		1
VIc. Created a system of shared responsibility with stakeholders	X	X	X	X	X		1
VIIa. Actively engaged with staff and students while maintaining visibility in classrooms and at extracurricular events	X	X	X	X	X		1
VIIb. Collaborated with the School Improvement Team to lead in school-wide decision making	X	X	X	X	X		1
VIIc. Provided a platform for which the voices of staff members will be heard and respected	X	X	X	X	X		1
CVR(Critical) for a panel size (N) of 5						CVI	0.8

Appendix D

Interview Questions

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (Part C)

1. What experiences were the most beneficial in your preparation for the principalship?
2. Which experiences would you have liked more exposure?
3. Beyond experiences within the seven standards list in the survey, what preparatory experiences were most beneficial in your readiness for the principalship?
4. What other comments do you have regarding your preparation for the principalship?