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MENTORING PROCESSES STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP: A PILOT STUDY

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Abstract

Providing support to principals through mentorship has been studied across many fields and at various points along the career continuum. This qualitative pilot study was designed to explore the perceived impact of a mentoring handbook on the professional development of principals involved in a mentoring initiative in one school district context. This handbook served as a guide for relationship-building and professional growth for novice and early career principals. The handbook presented a self-guided approach to professional development and addressed the roles of mentor and mentee principals. An analysis of the female study participants' perceptions contributed to the surprising interpretive finding that the female mentors were more likely to link their mentoring work to their individual growth. Female mentors also discussed their mentoring in the context of their relationships with others. The formal mentoring relationship was dyadic. This confirms research on females and mentoring and suggests future approaches to investigating the impact of more team-orientated forms of mentoring.

Keywords: educational leadership; gender; mentoring; novice principals

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O PROCESSOS DE MENTORAMENTO FORTALECENTO A LIDERANÇA RELACIONAL DE MULHERES: UM ESTUDO PILOTO

Resumo

A prestação de apoio a diretores por meio da orientação tem sido estudada em vários campos e em vários pontos ao longo do ciclo de carreira. Este estudo piloto qualitativo foi elaborado para explorar o impacto percebido de um manual de mentoria sobre o desenvolvimento profissional de diretores envolvidos em uma iniciativa de mentoria em um contexto de distrito escolar. Este manual serviu de guia para a construção de relacionamentos e o crescimento profissional para principiantes e primeiros carreiristas. O manual apresentou uma abordagem auto-orientada para o desenvolvimento profissional e abordou os papéis das diretoras mentora e aprendiz. Uma análise das percepções das participantes do estudo feminino contribuiu para o surpreendente achado interpretativo de que as mentoras do sexo feminino tinham maior probabilidade de vincular seu trabalho de mentoria ao seu crescimento individual. Mentoras do sexo feminino também discutiram sua orientação no contexto de suas relações com os outros. A relação formal de orientação era dual. Isso confirma pesquisas sobre mulheres e mentoria e sugere abordagens futuras para investigar o impacto de mais formas de orientação orientadas para a equipe.

Palavras-chave: liderança em educação; gênero; orientação; diretoras novatas

The educational reform agenda that commenced in the United States in the past decade increased the focus on the ability of the building principal to be an instructional leader and accountability for student achievement outcomes. Critical to a school's success is the building principal who is the instructional leader shouldering the responsibility for ensuring that all students meet challenging grade level and college- and career-ready standards. The context in which principals now enter their leadership positions include increased accountability standards, the implementation of the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of State Chief School Officers (2010) *Common Core State Standards*, new assessments connected to those Standards, a new teacher and principal evaluation system to design and enact, coupled with new policy mandates related to special populations such as English Language Learners and students with disabilities. It is often the principal's leadership skill-set that determines whether a school becomes one with a culture of learning or an organization focused on survival with little impact demonstrated for the great effort exerted.

These educational shifts are spurred by the technological, economic, political and social changes that coalesce in the United States' educational system and require a transformation for which skilled leadership is necessary. Research strongly suggests the actions of a principal influence the capacity of teachers and are the single most important influence on student learning beyond the teachers themselves (LOUIS, LEITHWOOD, WAHLSTROM & ANDERSON, 2010; LI, 2012). Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, and Meyerson (2005) identify the attributes of successful principals along with the two pathways in which they influence student learning-the support and development of teachers and the implementation of effective organizational processes.

Given the significant impact of the principal leadership position providing support for leaders assuming this role is crucial. Mentoring has been identified as one of those supports. Beyond initial preparation programs new principals benefit from positive mentoring relationships (DAVIS et al., 2005; GARDINER,

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ENOMOTO, & GROGAN, 2000). This pilot study commenced following the implementation of a mentoring framework using a district-designed *Mentoring Handbook for Principals and Mentors*. The research question pursued was: What is the perceived influence of the use of the *Mentoring Handbook for Principals and Mentors* on the professional growth of new principals and their mentors?

The effective components and potential pitfalls in the development of mentoring programs has been well-documented in the literature and informed the handbook's creation (CICERO, 2011; DARESH, 2004; HALL, 2008). The *Mentoring Handbook* was developed by this author to address an identified need for mentoring relationships and professional development for both mentors and their protégés. The handbook's creation drew heavily from the national research agenda related to principal preparation and school leadership studies (DAVIS et al., 2005; LI, 2012; LEITHWOOD & MASCALL, 2008; LOUIS et al., 2010). The *National Leadership Standards* as well as the *New York State Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness* were accessed to guide the content and specifically the goal-setting process included in the handbook (NATIONAL POLICY BOARD FOR EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION, 2015; UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK, 2012). In addition, it formalized a mentoring framework where one had not previously existed. The handbook needed to promote self-direction as it was not embedded in a larger system of professional development for principals. It was meant to serve as the system. The handbook introduced a structure to the mentoring process and was designed to facilitate relationship-building within the work of leading a school. Therefore, this pilot study "tests" the usefulness of the handbook in providing professional growth to the novice and mentor principals using it. The focus of the findings reported here center on the perceptions of the female protégés and mentors as they forged relationships and utilized the handbook to facilitate their work.

THE CONTEXT AND NEED

This educational context nested in the political, economic and social forces at work has produced job projections by the United States Department

of Labor of 8% job growth for all categories of principals (elementary, middle and high school) by 2024 (UNITED STATES DEPARMENT OF LABOR, 2018). However, within the field there is another documented phenomenon. According to a study completed by the School Leaders Network (2014) 50% of new principals will leave their leadership positions within their first three years. The study revealed that principals in the United States leave their jobs in higher numbers than professionals in nearly all other white-collar positions (SCHOOL LEADERS NETWORK, 2014). This can contribute to a lack of stability in schools, declines in student performance and a financial cost to the institution. How then can principals be better supported to be successful and for the ultimate goal of improved learning outcomes for students?

MENTORING STRUCTURES AND ROLE

Mentoring and its impact on career development and advancement has been studied in many fields including education and is widely accepted as having positive outcomes. In some instances, it has been noted as a necessary condition for increasing the leadership skills in the critical attributes and roles in which principals are asked to fill. This is especially true for the success of women in educational leadership (DARESH, 1995; EHRICH, HANSFORD, & TENNENT, 2004; GARDINER et al., 2000; MOOROSI, 2012). As researchers have noted in most mentoring studies, the focus has been on traditional mentoring relationships organized as a dyad of mentor and protégé, yet mentoring models of the last decade or so have reflected various approaches to mentoring including group mentoring (PETERS, 2010; MOOROSI, 2012). Moorosi (2012) distinguishes group mentoring from the dyadic model stating that group mentoring occurs when one or more senior staff members facilitates interactions with a group of protégés. Mullen (2012) suggests that intentional mentoring can positively affect retention and satisfaction with the profession. However, many mentoring programs have become mandatory as a result of reform policies and state directives to achieve accountability measures. The tension between mandatory and voluntary programs and their contribution to

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individual identity development and achievement of outcomes is where the use of this handbook rests in the discussion.

Mentoring relationships can evolve naturally and be informal, develop by chance, or can result from the formal mentoring structures implemented by a local school district. Formal mentoring occurs when the organization implements the structures and coordinates the relationships, and participants are instructed and guided in the activities associated with the mentoring and novice principal roles (PETERS, 2010). Formal, intentional mentorship programs have been implemented and their attributes assessed. Hall (2008) identifies several characteristics that are required to overcome barriers to success including: development of a common language, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, dedicated time, careful matching of mentor and novice principals, and clearly defined goals for the program. Two of the key considerations highlighted by Hall (2008) are the opportunity for the protégé principal to engage in productive self-reflection, and mentor actions that cultivate this. The purpose of mentorship is for guidance and professional growth not to assist the novice principal in running his/her school. However, it can be argued that mentors, by virtue of their support role, may peripherally assist new principals in the running of their buildings, particularly in the early days of their principalships.

In the Gardiner et al. (2000) study of mentoring relationships the pairs were formal in the supervisory sense but were informal in that the district did not impose a structure or specific partnerships. Many of the mentoring activities engaged in by persons in these informal pairings extended beyond the formal work day and subsequently enhanced the personal dimension of the relationship and the work. As in the Gardiner et al (2000) research, both mentor and protégé voices were captured in this pilot study. In contrast, the mentoring structure in this context was formalized by the organization through the use of the handbook. Expectations were established and communicated, the handbook reviewed and explained, and mentors assigned to the novice principals by the Superintendent of Schools.

DEFINING MENTORING

As Mertz (2004) describes, there are varying definitions for mentoring. She presents a conceptual model to distinguish mentoring from other workplace relationships by isolating *intent* and *involvement*. "Intent is concerned with why the relationship was undertaken….and involvement is concerned with what is required of each party to the relationship" (MERTZ, 2004, p. 547). The *Mentoring Handbook for Principals and Mentors* delineated the role of the mentor and the novice principal and established the initial parameters of intent and involvement (LIPKE, 2015). Davis et al. (2005) provide the intent of a mentoring relationship as it is enacted with the handbook, suggesting the primary role of the mentor is to guide the protégé through coaching, asking questions and promoting self-reflection as well as to provide feedback and to gradually release support as the protégé grows in competence. The mentor, Davis et al. (2005) explain, is to guide the novice principal in the search for strategies to problem-solve and expand the repertoire of leadership skills. Both mentor and protégé are encouraged to approach the relationship as learners with the goals as described by Davis et al. (2005, p. 11) "to reduce the distance between a learner's independent problem-solving performance and his/her potential development level achieved through problem-solving with an expert".

SHIFTING PARADIGMS OF MENTORING

As more diversity of gender and race are reflected in leadership positions the mentoring relationship may begin to shift to reflect a change in the balance of power and disrupt the preservation of exclusivity and isolation that often characterize administrative cultures (DARESH, 1995; GARDINER et al., 2000). The traditional model of mentoring consists of a one-to-one relationship based on an androcentric (White, male, middle-class) perspective (PETERS, 2010). For many years this has characterized the mentoring that occurs in educational leadership. However, as Peters (2010, p. 115) writes, "this perspective has proven inadequate in many cases," especially when individuals reflecting other

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genders, races and ethnicities have assumed leadership roles. In addition, utilizing the traditional structures has caused women and others representing diversity to continue to perpetuate the process that discriminates and makes access difficult for diverse groups. Gardiner et al. (2000) caution against using the structures of networking and mentoring activities to promote the power structures that include and exclude some from positions of leadership. They advocate using the power that results from mentoring to transform educational leadership. Gardiner et al. (2000) suggest that this is accomplished by providing women opportunities through the mentor-protégé relationship where women can shape the discourse and lead in ways that are different from traditional examples provided to leaders.

The changing needs in our schools may also require a shift in the conceptual theories of mentoring to address the needs of leaders working in these systems. Mullen (2012, p. 15) proposes alternate approaches to mentoring to empower and encourage practices that are sensitive to power structures, "nonauthoritative dynamics, progressive learning and open solutions." One theoretical approach to mentoring Mullen (2012) explores is the mentoring mosaic theory where shared interests and respective strengths activate peer interaction. Mentors and protégés may interchange roles through a synergistic, flexible structure where there is communal learning (MULLEN, 2012). Sherman, Munoz, and Pankake (2008) furthered this web-like conception of mentoring when one of their study participants, who was unable to identify a single mentor, described a self-made network of support for herself that replicated what a single mentoring relationship provides.

In this pilot study, the mentor-novice principal pairings reflected collegial dyads. Mentors had no supervisory responsibility for their protégés. All served as more experienced colleagues currently in the principal role. Additionally, the handbook was organized around a timeline of activities and interactions that corresponded with the dynamic shifts in conditions and timing associated with a school year. It encouraged relationship-building tasks beyond the mentor to include other stakeholder groups and individuals with whom the new principal would partner to accomplish the daily and strategic work of

running a school (LIPKE, 2015). This structure signals a shift from one aspect of the androcentric mentoring paradigm to a more formal, collaborative mentoring paradigm.

MENTORING AND WOMEN'S EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

A transformation of educational leadership may also be facilitated by collaborative mentoring as Gardiner et al. (2000) suggest through the distinguishing features of female leadership and conceptions of power that have been documented in the literature. This needs to be accomplished by positioning women more powerfully without reinforcing the status quo. That is, "mentoring needs to look like wide pockets of support rather than narrow inner circles of preference" (GARDINER et al. 2000, p. 197).

This is in concert with Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) who examined women's lived experiences in leading to reveal there is some departure from traditional male models and that are transformative. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) note that women conceptualize power differently and connect it to the importance placed upon relationships. The approach through relational leadership results in a collective expansion of power. Women discuss goal attainment *with* and *through* other people (GROGAN & SHAKESHAFT, 2011). "Power used to help others strengthens relationships, while power used to control damages relationships. (BRUNNER, 2000)" (GROGAN & SHAKESHAFT, 2011, p. 7). Additionally, it is noted that women's leadership is learning-focused and collective. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) examined a number of studies where women were more likely to support and implement strong programs of professional development for their teachers and to involve others in decision-making. "…Women were described as forming webs, rather than pyramids in their institutions…" (GROGAN & SHAKESHAFT, 2011, p. 43). Mentoring, in the right conditions, can foster women's leadership through the strengthening of relationships and collective approaches to the work of their buildings and organizations.

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CONTEXT OF STUDY

In the setting of this pilot study, there was an anticipated turnover of half of the principal leadership staff in a suburban, New York State school district. This created urgency to design a framework that would support the newly hired principals, meet the ambitious goals of the Superintendent's strategic plan, and address systems gaps particularly in the area of professional development. From this the *Mentoring Handbook*, a three-year guide addressing the knowledge and skills required of high performing principals, was created (LIPKE, 2015). The guide focused on practical transition points for any new principal, and the instructional leadership capacity-building that would be supported through the mentoring relationship, professional development, school visitations and supports to the novice principals. This approach was designed and implemented where no history of leadership mentoring, formal or informal, had existed previously. It was imperative that the novice principals defy the research that suggests new principals need at least five years to have a lasting positive impact on change (MASCALL & LEITHWOOD, 2010). In many schools principals do not have the luxury of five years to begin exhibiting highly effective leadership to produce strong student achievement results. The goal, through this mentoring framework, was to provide new leaders with the capacity to be successful earlier in order to address pressing needs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The pilot study explored the research question: What is the perceived influence of the use of the *Mentoring Handbook for Principals and Mentors* on the professional growth of new principals and their mentors? The theoretical standpoint that shaped the research question and subsequent data analysis is rooted in both constructionism and symbolic interactionism. Constructionism is described by Crotty (2003, pp. 8-9), "Truth or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered but constructed." Symbolic

interactionism grows out of the concept of constructionism and when partnered with grounded theory assumes, as Charmaz and Mitchell (2001, p.160) further explain, multiple realities exist and the "mutual creation of knowledge by researchers and research participants, and [they also] aim to provide interpretive understanding of the studied world".

RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative research design was followed for this pilot study to learn more about the lived experience and perceptions of each principal who used the mentoring handbook from its inception. Individual, structured interviews were conducted with six principals-three of whom were novice (newly hired) and three serving in the role of mentor. Four of the six participants were women. The female mentor and protégé data was analyzed and presented for this discussion. Interview notes, transcriptions of the audio-recordings of interviews along with the *Mentoring Handbook for Principals and Mentors* artifact were the data collection methods.

The interview protocol was organized around several concepts. The first concept was relationships and the questions focused on perceptions of how the handbook may or may not have influenced the mentoring relationship and individual professional growth. Other questions centered on how the handbook was utilized by the principals and how its use may or may not have changed over time. And, finally it posed questions around which aspects of the handbook were helpful and which aspects might be improved upon to enhance the mentoring experience.

The research design made use of grounded theory methodology throughout the data analysis process. Charmaz (2006, p.10) explains this, "serves as a way to learn about the worlds we study and a method for developing theories to understand them…We *construct* our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives and research practices." A combination of open and focused coding was employed to identify the major themes emerging from the data.

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The questions posed during the interviews also acted as a labelling device (SALADANA, 2009). As the themes emerged the unifying concept revealed for the female participants was that of relational leadership.

The following themes emerged from the focused coding and contributed to the interpretive findings discussed here:

- Relationships with other leaders
- Mentor and protégé collaboration
- Professional growth

INTERPRETIVE FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The interpretive findings connect to the major conclusion identified as the strengthening of women's relational leadership through several themes that emerged from the data analysis. The first theme related to the influence of the *Handbook* as a mentoring structure in support of relationship building and collaboration between the female mentors and protégés. The second theme linked the mentoring relationship to the female novice principals and mentors' mutual professional development. The data analysis also offered preliminary evidence for a shifting paradigm for mentoring that is team-oriented. The final theme connected to relational leadership was the impact, through their relationships, the female leaders identified they were having on their buildings. As the mentors and protégés reflected upon their work individually and collectively they often returned to the relationship established and how that impacted their work as well as the work towards the broader district goals. For example, goal-setting informed by data was a newer approach introduced by the Superintendent and the protégés and mentors found that establishing goals for their work as mentor and protégé then led to discussions of building-level goals that were linked to the established district goals. It all was rooted, however, in the initial work between mentor and novice principal using the structures suggested in the handbook. The female mentors discussed their mentoring in relationship to the success of the organization as well as their growing collective self-efficacy as a leadership team. Mentors also described

how mentoring their protégé prompted self-reflection and focus on the broader administrative team and goals of the district. The interpretive findings contributing to these themes are discussed below.

The handbook structure supported female protégé and mentor collaborative work.

The handbook was introduced and designed with the purpose of developing the leadership skills of the novice principals while also providing guidance to mentor principals who were new to serving in a mentoring role. This was described in the opening pages of the handbook. "In order to hone the skills critical to a principal's success there is a need for guidance, coaching and support from a mentor who is typically a practicing administrator. In the mentor-principal relationship there is a mutual commitment to work collaboratively and to support the new principal to accomplish her professional goals…. In order to hone the skills necessary to lead a highly performing school the new principal is encouraged to approach this guide as a learner" (LIPKE, 2015, pp. 1-2).

Given that premise, study participants were asked, "How have you used the *Mentoring Handbook*?" The responses of the female protégés and mentors demonstrate their focus on working together and utilizing the handbook to become more comfortable in their role as principal as well as in their mentoring relationship. The principals shared descriptors such as, "it's a guide, roadmap, a way to get started." They also offered that the handbook describes "how we are working together and getting ourselves comfortable." A mentor principal said,

> this was the first time we had an administrative mentoring program in the district. The handbook for us, for mentor and mentee, was a guide for what this experience could look like. It gave us a picture of what we could engage in together to help with [our work]. And quite honestly, it's been a good professional development for me, as well, as a principal who's been doing this for 8-9 years.

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Another mentor participant shared,

> I think setting aside the time and making sure you have that touch base with somebody on a regular basis is extremely important. This is my first mentor experience.... It's really just covering all of those pieces and just the challenges and the conversations about what's going well, what's not going well.

The handbook was viewed as a tool for the novice principals to use to become comfortable in their roles and to offer guidance about how the mentor and novice principals would work together throughout the school year. Mentor principals described how the *Handbook* focused them on what needed to be accomplished and to give them suggestions for tools needed to support both the day-to-day work and relationship and the ongoing professional development. It also aided the provisioning of time the pairs would set aside to meet on a regular basis which all of the females viewed with high importance. The female study participants signaled in their responses that their collaboration is relational rather than traditional with one of them being the source and the other the receiver of information and guidance.

These findings begin to provide a glimpse into the effect of gender in a more formalized mentoring program. O'Neill (2002) notes that studies of the role of gender and race in mentoring functions have shown mixed results. When the focus of studies shifts to the role of gender and race in mentoring outcomes with the focus on protégé outcomes, the career outcomes of that mentoring have also been mixed. Hypothesized differences between outcomes for men and women have also yielded mixed findings (O'NEILL, 2002). Ragins (2002) summarizes findings from studies to conclude that formal mentors may be less effective for women than for men. However, Ragins (2002) discusses evidence to show that the quality of the relationship may be as important a consideration as whether the program is informal or formal. Studies may also indicate

that formal mentoring should not serve as a substitute for informal mentoring and that both are needed to support the advancement of women and people of color (RAGINS, 2002).

Relationship building fosters mutual professional growth

All the female principal participants referred to the school visitations built into the mentoring framework and encouraged by the Superintendent as formational to their relationship-building as well as their own professional growth. Novice female principals stated that they went on school visits with their mentor. And a novice principal described how the school visits and other activities contributed to a stronger mentoring relationship.

> We're very different and it's a common ground for us to talk about and I have so much respect and have learned to have such an enriching, amazing relationship with her and I think this has been the common ground to start off of.

She went on to share,

> We do book studies together, we talk about the books, like that's what starts our conversation then the conversation takes off and this level of trust that I have with her quite honestly,…we didn't have in our previous roles….because we've had such deep discussions about the readings or the assignments, if you will, that then it was easy to talk about other things then. I don't hesitate for one second to call her for anything, not one second.

Mentor principals described similar developments and one shared,

> It's building a relationship with her…when you start a mentor relationship with somebody they have to feel supported, you have to make sure you have that trust so that she can say things that are not going to go somewhere maybe they shouldn't go, you know.

Another mentor principal explained the importance of the school visits.

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> I set up two [school] visits locally during the course of the year…and it was valuable because we travelled there together, had talking time in the car away from distractions…. One thing we also tried to do was attend professional development opportunities together and then plan out how we as colleagues, not mentor and mentee, could use the information to enrich the experiences of our faculties.

This finding is similar to what Peters (2010) uncovered in her study. Mutual learning occurred most often in the context of shared activities and she found that as the relationship evolved so too did the frequency and complexity of the shared activities (PETERS, 2010).

Collaborative team-oriented mentoring paradigm

The novice principals described the handbook structures as fostering relationship-building with a variety of stakeholders as they began the work of their new role. One protégé explained that the handbook referenced other people in the district to meet with as "critical friends." She began that process of reaching out during her first summer and stated,

> I'm glad I did, because although I didn't need them right at the moment I started a relationship with them and started to learn who was in charge of what, so that was really important.

Another principal responded to the question: "Has the *Handbook* supported your relationship-building across stakeholder groups and other administrators in the District? In what ways?" by saying,

> Oh, absolutely because, as I told you, I was over in the business office today working with a colleague on the budget and there were things that I didn't understand from my building and we talked and now I'm going to someone else…So I think it's just making me reach out.

A second mentee principal noted that she has sought other administrators' feedback on her budget and staffing ideas.

The traditional model of a dyad consisting of a mentor and a protégé is inherent in the structure provided by the district and this handbook. However,

the perceptions from the principals suggest that the recommended activities and the relationship-building that occurred while using the *Handbook* began to shift the mentoring model from the traditional paradigm of androcentric mentoring as described by Gardiner et al. (2000). While the mentor served, as the protégé described, as the "critical friend above all others" there was active work on the part of the protégés to reach out and learn from other leaders in the organization. This was found to be a feature of the Peters (2010) study where the mentor did not assume the role as the sage but rather guided the novice principal to various supports as she grew in her leadership role.

Making an impact through relational leadership

Having the handbook coupled with the mentoring relationship caused the principals, protégé and mentor, to consider explicitly the impact of their individual work as a principal. Their perceptions indicate that they engaged in self-reflection about their leadership and considered how and what the impact of their work was in the context of their school building. This is similar to other studies on mentoring as Ehrich et al. (2004) noted in their review of the literature on mentoring in education, self-reflection is an unsurprising outcome due to the focus on this across the profession for a number of years. In the field of education, the mentoring process has been identified as a means for both mentors and protégés to reflect upon their practice. When asked how this structure has supported their work as principals, one novice principal participant offered this reflection:

> […] this brings me back to the instructional leader piece, reminds me of the greater role that I should play than just making sure[…] that I'm helping in the lunchroom…you get caught up with all that [management] and you forget your bigger role is academic success and how are you guiding and supporting your teachers to achieve that academic success. It is about how academic leadership and what to fight for and what effect[…] have change that's meaningful.

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This principal is recognizing her role is to achieve meaningful change by working and supporting her staff. The mentor principals shared their reflections:

> Yes, it has, because you're guiding someone who's new, you're putting yourself in a position where you're making time to grow professionally…I am a better principal because of this. Definitely.
>
> It [The Handbook] "Caused me to look at the data and ask what is your priority and how are you going to move forward? How do you identify that, what does that look like and then how do you make a change, how do you set goals according to that?
>
> [The process] has helped recognize the importance of things that you might not otherwise think about such as the visitations or the memberships in professional organizations.
>
> The conversations have led me to be a better instructional leader, network and do more professional reading.

These reflections may be evidence of the women in these mentoring relationships beginning to consciously expand their relational leadership; especially the mentor principals. Their search for purpose and root causes for the instructional gains being made in their buildings and the reflection on the intentionality of both management and leadership signal the shift that Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011, p. 46) describe, "Because many women see themselves in relationship with others instead of in charge of others, relationship leadership generates political power. When this kind of leadership is grounded in purpose, relationships build the capacity that can be harnessed to make change." Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) also describe relationships that are facilitated by the view of people as networked both inside and outside of the organization. As these women continue to engage in this reflection prompted by their collaborative activities their relational leadership may be strengthened.

What is striking in the reflections and descriptions of the mentors and their observations of the changes noted in the broader administrative team of principals, some of whom were not mentors. They reflected upon the question:

"Has the *Handbook* supported your relationship-building across stakeholder groups and/or other administrators in conjunction with your work as a mentor? In what ways?" One of the mentor principals shared,

> I would say with other administrators for sure. …now there's more of us who are mentoring. So that it supports the conversations about how we are helping one another, not just new principals but one another. I think it's brought more cohesion to our group because we have a joint purpose of taking care of one another and insuring not just that the new people are successful, but that we're all successful. I have to say I don't think that we've had in the six years that I've been here as many conversations that we have now, we didn't have them before, and I do think it's because we have this commonality about seeing that new people are successful.

The focus on the impact on the leadership team and the empowerment that has occurred as a result of the mentoring relationships speaks to the relational power discussed by Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011, p. 47) who state, that

> leaders who develop coherence around shared values are likely to deepen the sense of community within an organization-a sense of being in relationship with others who are striving for the same goals. So the power that women are likely to use for change is relational power, or 'power with', which encourages collective action.

With this realization, there may be a growing awareness of the power of collective leadership which Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) describe as focused on relationships, events and activities. Leithwood and Mascall (2008) used the term collective leadership in their research on the impacts of distributed leadership among teachers and principals on student learning. Elements of this collective leadership are hinted at in these female mentors' responses. The use of the handbook and the relationships forged by these women while mentoring may plant the seeds for collective power among the female leadership team as they work to advance the goals of the district.

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LIMITATIONS

A number of limitations must be considered as a part of this pilot study. The first of which is that no baseline data was collected at the initial stage of implementation of the mentoring handbook. As a result, there are no data for comparison and measurement of impact. The questions posed in the interview are also a limitation as they focused on the use of the handbook and its perceived impact. These along with additional questions focused on relationship-building specifically may have influenced the interpretive findings. The small sample size in a single school district setting limits the generalizability of this study. While these limitations need to be taken into consideration, the results from this pilot study suggest the mentoring processes for strengthening women's relational leadership remain viable for thoughtful consideration.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This pilot study focused on the structures of a formal, local mentoring program implemented to support and influence the effectiveness of new principals. The results suggest that the structures supported the formation of strong mentoring relationships and subsequently may strengthen the women's relational leadership at the building and district levels. The data collected focused on both the mentor and protégé principals with the focus here on the female participants responses. This research might be extended in future studies with a focus more exclusively on the voice of the female mentors in support of relational leadership. Specifically, the connection between the framework, the co-learning that occurs and its impact on the principals at later stages in their careers. Further investigation, as suggested by Daresh (1995), of how this district-specific program impacts on the ways female mentor principals serve as role models for other women who want to become school administrators might enhance the conversation. The male mentor principal's

perceptions in this study were dissimilar to the women's responses specifically in the area of mutual professional growth. A mixed method design to ascertain if potential improvements made to mentoring structures support female protégés and mentors specifically to change patterns of isolation and exclusivity common to school administrative cultures is an important consideration. Lastly, an exploration of the extent to which a more collaborative team-oriented mentoring paradigm impacts learning outcomes for students might be of considerable interest. Exploring comparative data to further illuminate the relational leadership of women with other styles exhibited by both men and women will deepen understanding of the impacts of mentoring. As educational leaders continue to shape the reform of education to their local district contexts, the design of structures that support leaders will contribute to the transformation of leadership opportunities for women as well as the outcomes for student learning.

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