LEADERSHIP SUPPORTS FOR FIRST-TIME VICE-PRINCIPALS:
COACHING AS A FORM OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

by

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for the degree of Doctor of Education
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to learn about how coaching serves as a form of professional learning for newly-appointed vice-principals. This study is intended to add to our understanding of the ways in which coaching supports the professional learning of vice-principals in a context where their role is ill-defined and determined by their principal. A qualitative research approach was used which included personal interviews with fourteen first-time elementary vice-principals in five Ontario school districts. The study was based on the following research question: How does the coaching experience support the professional learning of first-time school administrators?

The participants reported positive feelings about their coaching experiences. Specifically, they described that they appreciated the confidential and non-evaluative nature of the coaching relationship, that the focus was on their individual learning needs, and that the coaching provided opportunities to engage in reflective thinking. In terms of their learning, the participants reported that through coaching they built confidence, gained knowledge about both the managerial and leadership aspects of school leader roles, and that they learned about themselves and their own well-being in the process. Several challenges were reported. These included a desire for increased frequency of scheduled coaching sessions while maintaining a focus on learning during the sessions, and financial constraints for those who needed to be
released from teaching responsibilities in order to participate in coaching. Based on their experiences, the participants described the vice-principal role as being determined by the principal, offering limited opportunity to exercise their own leadership, expecting them to follow decisions made by the principal, and serving to prepare them for the principalship.

The thesis concludes that coaching for newly-appointed elementary vice-principals is a valuable experience because it serves as personalized professional learning that engages participants in reflective thought. The lack of clarity about the vice-principal role creates a situation where vice-principals understand their role principally through their experiences of it, not through research, policy, or training. As a result, each vice-principal has unique learning needs based on their experience of the role thus they benefit when their learning is personalized.
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I first met Professor Susan Padro when I was an aspiring doctoral student and she willingly allowed me to audit her course on research methods. After this tremendous journey, it seems fitting to reflect upon the support that was offered so generously by her along the way. I would like to begin by thanking Susan Padro, my supervisor, who has been inspirational to work with. Susan models qualities that I respect and admire in a supervisor. She has the ability to be kind, gentle, and supportive while at the same time setting the rigorous standards that have taken my learning to a higher level. I treasure the learning that I have gained from her over the years.

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As with any challenging task in life, it could not be accomplished alone. Without the support of my family, this work would never have been completed. I thank my parents for giving me the desire to learn and many opportunities to do so. With endless patience and tolerance by Chris for perpetual attention to my studies, I was able to complete this project. Such support is rare and words fail to describe the support I felt in pursuit of this goal when at times, I believed I really should have been carving out more time for my family than my studies.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

As Ontario’s provincial school districts struggle with the issue of an aging cohort of school and system leaders the issue of the preparation and support of school leaders in public education has become increasingly urgent (Hargreaves, Moore, Fink, Brayman, & White, 2003). To date, significant focus has been given to the number of school leaders who will be retiring which creates a potential provincial vacuum of leadership not only in Ontario but internationally (McIntyre, 1999; Spiro, Mattis, & Mitgang, 2007; Browne-Ferrigno 2003). Shifting the focus away from those who are leaving to those who are entering the ranks of school administrators, one sees a cohort of young leaders entering an educational context that is dramatically different from that which their predecessors entered. Professional learning for this new cohort is a significant aspect of leadership development in the current educational context.

Rationale for the Study

An accountability policy context has shaped the education agenda in Ontario and globally. School improvement has become the expectation of schools across many western countries (Leithwood & Levin, 2005; Harris, 2002) with school leaders being held accountable for how well teachers teach and how well students learn (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). To respond to this environment, The Ontario Ministry of Education and school districts have acknowledged the importance of the principal’s role in leading publicly funded education. The Ministry and local school districts are using recent research (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach 1999; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty 2005; Fullan 2005, 2006) to reinforce the importance of developing school leadership.

In order to respond to the human resource demand for new school leaders and the
concomitant demands of school leadership in the twenty-first century, the Ontario Ministry of Education created the Ontario Leadership Strategy (OLS) (http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/actionPlan.html, 2005). The purpose of the OLS was, among other things, to identify the competencies and practices that articulate effective school leadership in the current context. This aspect of the Strategy is known as the Provincial Leadership Framework (2007). In addition, the OLS provided direction for the design and implementation of professional development for school leaders with mentoring as one of the key elements.

Within the OLS, the professional development of school leaders came in the form of varied learning activities and an Institute for Education Leadership that aligned with the Provincial Leadership Framework. In the fall of 2008, the Ontario Ministry of Education launched Mentoring for Newly Appointed School Leaders as one additional learning support. In this case, the focus of the support was exclusively newly-appointed vice-principals and principals in their first two years in the role. The intent behind the provision of this service to newly appointed school leaders was to support their professional learning relative to the Provincial Leadership Framework within the current accountability context.

For ten years I worked as vice-principal and then principal in four schools in one district school district. For the past five years, I have worked as a principal on assignment to a leadership development team in the same school district. During my years as a vice-principal and principal, I have participated frequently in professional learning for school leaders. These experiences, coupled with my current role, have stimulated my interest in the areas of leadership and professional learning, thus my desire to pursue doctoral studies. In my current role as a leader of professional learning for school administrators, I am eager to examine how professional
learning processes support individuals and their professional practice because this relates directly
to my current work. I am fascinated by the processes individuals go through in their
development as leaders. Through the process of leading learning for newly-appointed vice-
 principals I became aware of the concerns and struggles they had with their role and what they
needed to learn and to do in order to feel successful. These experiences have led me to have a
particular interest in the experiences of vice-principals and their learning.

Purpose of the Study

Inasmuch as professional supports for first-time schools leaders appear to be welcome initiatives, it has yet to be determined the support such initiatives have on the professional practice of school leaders. Professional learning processes for school leaders have typically taken an approach where ‘experts’ in the field have determined what knowledge and skills are needed, and once the learning is completed, participants are sent into schools to apply their learning (Zellner, Jinkins, Gideon, Doughty, & McNamara, 2002; Male & Daresh, 1997). Neither a purely academic nor a purely practical form of professional learning is seen as adequate (Royal Commission on Learning, 1994; Male & Daresh, 1997; Hartzell, 1994; National Policy Board on Administrative Preparation, 1989). In fact, questions are being raised about the effectiveness of existing professional development processes for educators (Cole, 2004; Fullan, 2007). In some circles current models of ‘professional development’ are actually seen as an impediment to the professional learning required for educators to improve their practice (Cole, 2004; Fullan 2007). Even professional learning that meets the highest standards of adult learning can be ineffective because it is not designed to engage participants in on-going, sustained learning in the setting where the actual work takes place (Fullan, 2007; Elmore, 2004).

It is the intent of this thesis to examine the experience of mentoring as a form of
professional learning for newly-appointed vice principals. Specifically, coaching will be examined as one of a range of supports within mentoring. Within education, mentoring is an ongoing and structured process to support individuals through significant transitions in their careers (NCSL, 2005) and induction into new roles (Daresh & Playko, 1992; Spiro et al. 2007; Daresh, 2004; Daresh, 1995). Coaching is one of the support processes found within mentoring that is intended to focus on specific aspects of an individual’s practice (NCSL, 2005). Despite the current groundswell of interest in coaching as a form of professional learning, there is a lack of empirical research relative to coaching (Patterson, 2010).

Research Questions

This study is based on one primary research question that intends to examine how the coaching experience supports the professional learning of first-time school administrators. The primary question is:

*How does the coaching experience support the professional learning of first-time school administrators?*

Within this research question, there are four sub-questions. These questions provide opportunity for detailed responses that can provide focus and depth in the study. The four sub-questions are:

1. How do first-time school administrators experience their role?
2. What perceptions do first-time school administrators have of their coaching experience in terms of the key elements of coaching: the coach, the processes, and the relational aspects?
3. To what extent do first-time school administrators feel that the coaching experience provides a positive support for them in their new role?
4. What challenges do first-time school administrators encounter in their coaching experience?

Definitions for this Thesis

For the purposes of this thesis, it is essential to work with clear definitions. Within the field of education, ‘mentoring’ is the more commonly used term to refer to a professional relationship between a knowledgeable and experienced individual who supports and assists a less experienced colleague (Daresh, 2004; Kram, 1983; Hobson, 2003). In the United Kingdom, The National Council for School Leaders (NCSL) and the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE) delineated the difference between mentoring and coaching within education in the National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching (2005). This document defines mentoring as a “structured, sustained process for supporting professional learners through significant career transitions” (p.3). Mentoring then is seen as an important series of supports for the induction of newly-appointed school leaders (Daresh & Playko, 1992; Spiro et al. 2007; Daresh, 2004; Daresh, 1995). Embedded within mentoring, is coaching which is defined as a structured, supportive, and sustained process for enabling the development of a specific aspect of a professional learner’s practice (National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching). It is important to clarify the differences between mentoring and coaching while recognizing the relationship between the two phenomena. For the purposes of this thesis, the term ‘coaching’ is defined as a structured, supportive, and sustained process of professional learning that focuses on the development of a specific aspect of a newly appointed school leader’s practice (National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching, 2005).

Educational terminology can vary from one jurisdiction to another. In Ontario, the term ‘vice-principal’ is used to identify a school leader who assists and learns from the principal of a
school while at the same time assuming leadership responsibilities within the school. In the United States, one generally encounters the term ‘assistant principal’ to describe this role. In the United Kingdom and Australia, the term ‘deputy headteacher’ is used to describe a comparable role, while in New Zealand, the term ‘assistant principal’ is used. Because this study was carried out in Ontario, the term ‘vice-principal’ will be used throughout.

Significance and Contribution of the Study

This study is intended to enhance the existing body of knowledge relative to professional learning for school leaders. The study is of significance to educational leaders, policy makers, school leaders, and those who provide professional learning and training to school leaders. It contributes to an area of scholarly literature that has been sadly lacking (Armstrong, 2009; Brien, 2002; Calabrese, 1991). This lack in scholarly literature is relative to the vice-principal - the role and the professional learning and supports provided to them once in the role. The study is situated within a context of leadership development through a provincial focus on education leadership as identified in the Ontario Leadership Strategy and as evidenced in five Ontario school districts.

The findings of this study will be of value to school leaders in understanding how this form of professional learning supports their leadership practice. The results of this study will be illuminating for those who create and deliver professional learning experiences and supports to first-time administrators because the results bring evidence through authentic and current voices ‘from the field’ (Sherman & Webb, 1998 as cited in Merriam, 1998).

Current literature indicates a disconnect between the type of professional learning school administrators receive and how valuable it is in terms of doing their work (Fullan, 2007; Leithwood & Levin, 2005; Zellner et al. 2002; Male and Daresh, 1997; Daresh & Playko, 1994;
Royal Commission on Learning 1994; U.S. National Policy Board on Administrative Preparation 1989). Recognizing that research findings indicate that formal school-leader professional learning makes a significant difference in leadership effectiveness (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Coffin, 1995; Paglis & Green, 2002; McCormick, 2001), it is of value to examine how professional learning experiences may support the building of leadership capacity by influencing the internal states of school leaders (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006). It is the intention of this study to address this disconnect by shedding light on professional learning that newly-appointed vice-principals see is of value to them in their role.

There is evidence of the need for a re-examination of the professional learning supports for school leaders (Zellner et al. 2002; Male and Daresh, 1997; Royal Commission on Learning 1994; U.S. National Policy Board on Administrative Preparation 1989) but insufficient attention has been paid in research circles to these questions (Leithwood et al. 2006). Existing research indicates a need for professional learning that is personalized (Hopkins, 2007; Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006; Creasy & Paterson, 2005), that promotes self-directed learning (Costa & Garmston, 2002; Joyce & Showers, 2002), that focuses on learning-centred professional dialogue (Creasy & Paterson, 2005; Healy, Ehrich, Hansford, & Stewart, 2001), and that is both continuous and daily (Fullan, 2007; Senge, 1992). Indeed, the National Staff Development Council recommends that professional learning programs for school leaders should take place over the long-term rather than being episodic, be job-embedded rather than outside the realm of the school where the leader’s work takes place, and be carefully planned with intention and purpose (Sparks and Hirsch, 2000).

Many factors affect a school leader’s practices. However, the actual effects of these factors are mediated by the inner lives – the thoughts, feelings, values, and dispositions – of
these leaders. For these reasons, the cognitive and affective antecedents of school leaders need to be considered relative to school leader professional learning (Leithwood et al. 2006).

Professional learning experiences make significant differences in school leader effectiveness when they are authentic, cognitively engaging, and foster real-life problem-solving skills (Leithwood et al. 1995). Current research suggests that some forms of professional learning can be of little value if not carefully designed and delivered (Cole, 2004; Fullan, 2007; Elmore, 2004). Formal training experiences are ultimately less powerful than other factors such as the leader’s internal states, existing skills, beliefs, values, and dispositions (Leithwood & Levin, 2007). Recognizing that school-leader professional learning can make a significant difference in leadership effectiveness (Leithwood et al. 1995), it is of value to examine how professional learning experiences can build leadership capacity by influencing the knowledge base, skill base, and internal states of newly-appointed school leaders.

This study augments the existing literature and fills a gap by providing data that detail the influence of one specific form of support for these administrators. In this case, the support mechanism is unique in that it is personalized, learning-focused, promotes self-direction, stimulates reflection, and is context-specific. For newly-appointed school leaders, system leaders, and policy makers this research is of value because it sheds light on the influence of one form of professional learning support that has been mandated by the Ministry of Education effective September 2008 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a).

Overview of Chapters

The chapters that follow this one include Chapter Two which serves as a literature review. Chapter Two presents a context for this study as well as current literature relative to vice-principals. In addition, the chapter presents different theoretical concepts of professional
learning, forms of coaching for educational leaders, and the key elements of coaching. Chapter Three outlines the conceptual framework of the study. Chapter Four explains the details of the methodology used in the study. The Chapter includes the data required, sample selection, instruments, procedures, ethical considerations, and the treatment of the data. Chapter Five presents the results of the study. Chapter Six provides an analysis and discussion of the data collected in the study. Chapter Seven provides a summary of the complete study including the significance of the findings, recommendations, and potential areas for future research and practice.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review situates the phenomenon of coaching within the context of the role of vice-principal in public education. This is followed by an examination of the literature relative to the professional learning supports for building leadership capacity that are available to school administrators. For the purposes of this study, coaching will be examined from the perspective of what it is, its link to school leadership, and how coaching is situated within the broader continuum of school leadership mentoring. The overall purposes and the key elements of a coaching program are examined as they are presented in current research, policy, and professional literature. In order to address the research questions, the following topics are considered relevant to an understanding of the scholarly research relative to coaching: the role of the vice-principal, professional learning for school leaders, and coaching with its key elements.

Introduction

The Ontario provincial education context has changed over the last decade to focus increasingly on improving student achievement. This accountability context has shaped the education agenda in Ontario and globally. School improvement has become the expectation of all schools across many western countries (Harris, 2002) and school leaders are being held accountable for how well teachers teach and how well students learn (Leithwood and Riehl, 2003). Fullan (2003) explained that leaders are faced with sustaining learning under conditions described as complex, rapid change. According to Daresh and Capasso (2002), educators are “increasingly avoiding careers in administration because they were fearful of taking on responsibilities that are filled with demands for accountability but with little support. One can
only wonder why anyone would actively pursue a job with high stress and demands for effective performance with little organizational promise of assistance” (pp. 512-513). The role of school leader has become decreasingly popular as a potential career for many current educators (Cunat & Daresh, 2007; Browne-Ferrigno, 2003). This assertion is supported by a province-wide survey published by the Ontario College of Teachers in the September 2005 edition of Professionally Speaking. In the survey, 64% of teacher respondents indicated that they were not interested in pursuing a career as a school administrator while only 17% indicated an interest. The remaining 19% were undecided or uncertain.

To respond to this environment, in 2005 the Ontario Ministry of Education created the Ontario Leadership Strategy. In turn, local school districts acknowledged the importance of the principal and vice-principal roles in leading publicly funded education through the development of leadership development policies and procedures. The Ministry of Education and local school districts are using recent research (Leithwood et al. 1999; Marzano et al. 2005; Fullan 2005, 2006) to reinforce the importance of developing school leadership and to inform the development of local school district level support structures.

At a presentation to the delegates of the Ministry’s Institute for Education Leadership on December 12, 2006, Professor Andy Hargreaves (Boston University) addressed the issue of leadership development as a key component in a school district’s leadership strategy. According to Hargreaves, effective leadership development addresses the need for the recruitment, training, and on-going support of all school administrators. It ensures that first-time school administrators have adequate time to prepare for administrative roles, that the training support is linked to clearly defined leadership standards and competencies (Daresh 2001; Normore 2004; Ontario Ministry of Education 2007), and that strong professional communities are built that deepen the
pools of leadership talent.

The Role of the Vice-principal

In the context of leadership development (Hargreaves et al. 2003), the vice-principal holds a critical position in school districts because they create the pool from which future school principals are drawn, yet the nature of their role often distances them from the curriculum and instructional experiences that they need to be successful as principals (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Research and professional literature on the role of first-time school administrators - vice-principals - is scarce. Over the past twenty-five years, there have been few research studies that have examined this role (Brien, 2002) or discussed it specifically in the literature of educational administration (Weller & Weller, 2002; Marshall & Hooley, 2006). In fact, vice-principals have been described as the neglected leadership element in school systems (Calabrese, 1991) with the role being ill-defined and at the whim of the principal (Armstrong, 2009). Kaplan and Owings (1999) found that vice-principals have received minimal attention in professional literature, with only 1% of a selection of school leadership articles published between 1993 and 1999 focusing on their role. Similarly, other researchers (Brien, 2002; Mertz & McNeely, 1999; Garrett & McGeachie, 1999; Scoggins & Bishop, 1993; Marshall & Hooley, 2006) have determined that while the principal role is frequently researched, the vice-principal role is understudied in research literature. Indeed, research findings have highlighted the lack of a robust definition of, and a lack of clarity about, the vice-principal role (Garrett & McGeachie, 1999; Scoggins & Bishop, 1993; Maher, 1999; Nanavati & McCulloch, 2003; Hartle 2005; Marshall & Hooley, 2006). In the United Kingdom, the National Standards for Headteachers (DfES, 2004) produced by the Department for Education and Skills, does not make a single mention of deputy or assistant headteachers. Of significant interest is an article that appeared as recently as the
autumn of 2009 in the National Association of Elementary School Principals’ publication, *Principal*. The author, Tamera Moore, concluded her article with the statement, “I would like to know exactly what is expected of me as an assistant principal.” (p. 66, NAESP, 2009)

In Ontario, the Education Act makes scant reference to vice-principals in terms of the role. The Act states simply, “A vice-principal shall perform such duties as are assigned to the vice-principal by the principal” (Education Act, *O. Reg. 613/00*). As recently as the 1994 Royal Commission on Learning’s *For the Love of Learning*, the majority of references to school administrators identified the principal. There is minimal reference to vice-principals in the Commission’s report even though the report itself identified that there existed a sizable cohort of vice-principals. At the time of the report’s publication, it stated that there were approximately 4,800 principals and some 3,300 vice-principals (Royal Commission on Learning, 1994).

In light of this lack of professional literature, research findings, or government policy relative to the role, how do vice-principals determine what their work is and what it is that they actually do? Common within the existing literature about vice-principals is that their work is assigned by their principal (Scoggins & Bishop, 1993; Mertz & McNeely, 1999; Brien, 2002; Marshall & Hooley, 2006) and seems to be determined by the principal’s preferences (Maher, 1999; Garrett & McGeachie, 1999; Kwan 2008), disinterest in certain aspects of school leadership work (Marshall, 1992; Marshall & Hooley, 2006), or based on what vice-principals have traditionally done in a particular school (Nanavati & McCulloch, 2003). This lack of clarity of the role of vice-principals has often made it difficult to bridge the gap between the rhetoric of a meaningful role and the actual practice of the role of school leader (Garrett & McGeachie, 1999; Marshall & Hooley, 2006). The role is often seen by vice-principals as
underappreciated but a necessary step on a career path to the role of principal (Marshall & Hooley, 2006).

Even with the role being ill-defined (Kwan, 2008; Scoggins & Bishop, 1993), vice-principals engage in a wide variety of tasks (Marshall, 1992; Calabrese, 1991; Maher, 1999). Existing research literature sheds light on these. Scoggins and Bishop (1993) identified twenty common duties of vice-principals. The most prominent of these duties were student discipline and attendance (Kwan, 2008; Maher, 1999; Scoggins & Bishop, 1993). Kaplan and Owings (1999) state that assistant principals typically maintain the norms and rules of the school culture by accepting major responsibilities for student safety as chief disciplinarians, student conflict mediators, and hall patrollers. Maintaining safe and orderly learning environments (Brien, 2002) and ensuring organizational stability are identified as the primary focus of their daily activity (Marshall, 1992; Maher, 1999; Marshall & Hooley, 2006). One large-scale British study found that most vice-principals (deputy headteachers) thought of their role in mainly operational terms (Nanavati & McCulloch, 2003) with very few able to develop a more strategic perspective (Garrett & McGeachie, 1999; Hayes, 2005). Vice-principals have a great deal of responsibility within a school yet they frequently have little discretion in their role and are under scrutiny by more senior leaders when engaged in their work (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). In a 2005 research study, a number of factors were found to affect the role of the vice-principal. These included: vice-principals are defined by their duties; principals control their work lives and their futures; they have little autonomy or decision-making power; and, being successful means being loyal and agreeing with the principal’s way of doing things (Mertz, 2005 – cited in Marshall & Hooley, 2006).
Only in recent years has policy literature begun to address the role of the vice-principal. In the United Kingdom, The National College of School Leadership’s Summary Report, *Shaping up to the Future* (Hartle, 2005) identified a need to more clearly define the role of the Deputy Head (vice-principal). The report differentiates the various leadership roles of a school and specifies the primary actions, or accountabilities, for deputy heads to include managing teaching and learning, managing people, and managing policy and planning. Each of these is far removed from the previously-defined role of the vice-principal as chiefly responsible for student discipline and attendance (Kwan, 2008; Maher, 1999; Scoggins & Bishop, 1993).

In the province of Ontario, the Ontario Leadership Strategy included a *Leadership Framework for Principals and Vice-Principals* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). The *Framework* identifies that principals and vice-principals play essential roles as school leaders. The *Framework* identifies the actions, behaviours, attitudes, practices, skills, and knowledge that describe good leadership and is clear about the breadth of leadership from managerial through to instructional (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Of particular interest is the fact that the *Framework* does not differentiate the roles of the principal and vice-principal. In fact, it is specified that the *Framework* is to be used to describe good leadership for both roles as individuals move through various career stages (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).

Professional Learning for School Leaders

*Professional Learning: What it is*

In a time when school leadership is seen as second only to classroom instruction as having impact on student learning (Marzano et al. 2005), attention has increasingly focused on the role of school leaders. The importance of the professional learning, or ‘capacity building’, of
school leaders – once in the role - is only one aspect of this increased attention. The practices of
school leaders as articulated in competency standards (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007; NCSL, 2004; Ministry of Education – New Zealand, 2008) – and the learning, or capacity
building, required to deliver on these practices - is being researched and written about
extensively both in academic and school system literature. The prevalence of educational
journals, books, websites, and conferences attest to this focus on leadership (Fullan, 2005;
Marzano et al. 2005; Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennet 2004).

Questions are being raised about the effectiveness of existing professional development
processes for educators (Cole, 2004; Fullan, 2007). Indeed, in some circles current models of
‘professional development’ are actually seen as an impediment to the professional learning
required for educators to improve their practice (Cole, 2004; Fullan 2007).

Professional learning for school administrators generally takes an approach where -
through professional development programs - school leaders are expected to develop a set of
skills and knowledge that ‘experts’ have decided they should have (Zellner et al. 2002). Once
the learning sessions are completed, school leaders are sent back into schools to apply what they
have learned (Zellner et al. 2002). Professional learning can take the form of workshops,
seminars, conferences, courses, and related activities. Even professional learning that meets the
highest standards of adult learning can be ineffective if it is not designed to engage participants
in on-going, sustained learning in the setting where the actual work takes place (Fullan, 2007;
Elmore, 2004).

Relative literature informs us that neither a purely academic nor a purely practical form
of professional learning is adequate to support school leaders in their roles (Leithwood &
Steinbach, 1992; Royal Commission on Learning 1994; National Policy Board on Administrative
Preparation, 1989). Current literature proposes a very different form of professional learning for school leaders in the current context. Professional learning is seen as a network of supports ranging from peer support through to professional learning experiences offered through a wide range of formats and by a broad range of providers (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a).

This network of supports is intended to provide school leaders with professional learning that is personalized (Hopkins, 2007; Fullan et al. 2006; Creasy & Paterson, 2005), that promotes self-directed learning (Costa & Garmston, 1994; Joyce & Showers, 2002), that focuses on professional dialogue that is learning-centred (Creasy & Paterson, 2005; Healy et al. 2001), and that is both continuous and daily (Fullan, 2007; Senge, 1992). Indeed, the National Staff Development Council recommended that professional learning programs for school leaders should take place over the long-term rather than being episodic, be job-embedded rather than outside the realm of the school where the leader’s work takes place, and be carefully planned with intention and purpose (Sparks and Hirsch, 2000).

Joyce and Showers (1996) claimed that regular and on-going support for school leaders is needed after professional learning takes place in order for there to be a greater transfer of the new learning into practice. Professional learning sessions can provide opportunities to gather new knowledge or skills but to transfer this learning into practice requires immediate and sustained practice within the workplace (Hopkins & Levin, 2000). This transfer of new learning into practice occurs through an approach where knowledge is constructed based on an individual’s unique and personal experiences (Brown, Stroh, Fouts, & Baker, 2005; Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). Professional learning then becomes an ongoing process of “resolving existing knowledge and new experiences through which each person generates his or her own mental models” (p. 20, Brown et al. 2005). This process can be stimulated and moderated by reflective
thought which can be defined as active and careful consideration both while engaged in a task as well as when looking back on a completed task (Reeves, 2006; Schon, 1987; Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990).

Based on actual experiences within the workplace (Leithwood et al. 1995) these reflective thinking processes are best situated within a context where the learning is not done in isolation but through social participation with the assistance of others (Hobson, 2003; Senge, 1990). Professional conversations that are well-led can serve as effective professional learning processes that stimulate reflective conversations for the construction of new knowledge (Healy et al. 2001) based on daily (Fullan, 2007), authentic experiences (Leithwood et al. 1995) within the workplace (Elmore, 2004).

Many factors – educational policies, on-the-job leadership activities, mentoring experiences, and professional learning experiences, for example - affect a school leader’s actual practices. However, the actual effects of these external experiences are mediated by the inner lives – the thoughts, feelings, values, and dispositions – of these leaders. For these reasons, the cognitive and affective antecedents of school leader behaviours need to be considered relative to school leader professional learning (Leithwood et al. 2006).

Formal professional learning experiences are just one of many influences on school leader practice. These learning experiences make significant differences in school leader effectiveness when they are authentic, cognitively engaging, and foster real-life problem-solving skills (Leithwood et al. 1995). However, formal training experiences are ultimately less powerful than other factors such as the leader’s internal states, existing skills, beliefs, values, and dispositions. As stated by Leithwood & Levin (2007),

“Internal states constitute the perceptual filters and meaning-making ‘tools’
through which all other potential influences must pass if they are to change leaders’ behaviours. In order to change leaders’ behaviours, other types of influences must actually change some aspect of a leader’s internal states” (p.14).

Put in simpler terms, what leaders do depends on what they think and how they feel (Leithwood et al. 2006; Leithwood & Levin, 2005). For this reason, and recognizing that research findings indicate that formal school-leader professional learning makes a significant difference in leadership effectiveness (Leithwood et al. 1995), it is of value to examine how one specific professional learning experience – that is, coaching – builds capacity by impacting on the “internal states” of a school leader.

**Professional Learning: Building Capacity**

Through several research studies and projects conducted over the past ten years, Mitchell and Sackney (2001) have developed a model that frames understanding about the building of capacity within the education sector. The model consists of three pivotal capacities that need to be built to support the capacity building of school leaders. These capacities are: personal capacity, interpersonal capacity, and organizational capacity.

Building personal capacity entails a deep and critical deconstruction and reconstruction of one's own professional knowledge and experiences. Interpersonal capacity addresses the development of collegial relations and collective practices whereby ongoing professional learning becomes a highly-valued norm within a professional group. Organizational capacity means building organizational structures and systems that support and value personal learning as well as facilitating and encouraging collective learning (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001).

Building personal capacity requires an individual to address the factors that impact on
their professional practice. This is a necessary process because new knowledge is built on a foundation of existing knowledge and belief systems. Deconstructing one’s own professional knowledge and practice allows for the possibility of constructing new knowledge. Thus deconstruction is a necessary reflective process that leads naturally to the active phase of reconstruction (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). The process of coaching engages individuals in reflective process for developing and utilizing cognitive processes, internal resources, and states of mind (consciousness, craftsmanship, efficacy, flexibility, interdependence) as a means of building capacity to achieve goals and enhance self-directed learning (Costa & Garmston, 1994).

The building of interpersonal capacity is connected to a leader’s need to build interpersonal relationships (Leithwood et al. 1999) within the work setting. Interpersonal capacity requires that leaders attend to others within the school, purposefully build relationships (Leithwood et al. 1999), and model collegiality, collective reflection, and collaboration (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001).

Organizational capacity addresses the need for educational organizations to be structured in such a way as to allow for the building of personal and interpersonal capacities. Structural arrangements need to bring individual educators into close professional contact with one another (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001) in order for professional learning to take place. Organizational capacity, then, is an enabling and flexible structure within which professional learning can readily occur.

Coaching

*What it is*

The terms ‘mentoring’ and ‘coaching’ are frequently used interchangeably and can mean different things to different people (Patterson, 2010; Daresh, 2004; Spiro et al. 2007; Hobson,
The word mentor originally came from Greek mythology referring to the character Mentor who served as the guardian of Telemachus. Over time, the word has evolved to refer to a parent-like individual who guides, supports, sponsors, and helps a younger person to develop. In current scholarly literature, mentoring refers to a more formally established professional relationship where a generally older, more experienced, and knowledgeable person provides personal and professional support to a younger, less-experienced person within a professional context (Hegstad & Wentling, 2004; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Daresh & Playko, 1992; Hopkins-Thompson, 2000). Within the field of education, ‘mentoring’ is generally used to refer to a professional relationship between a knowledgeable and experienced individual who supports and assists a less experienced colleague (Daresh, 2004; Kram, 1983; Hobson, 2003).

Business literature has used the term ‘coaching’ for many years. In recent years, the practice of coaching has become increasingly popular in the field of education as well. Extensive literature exists that addresses a range of processes and purposes of coaching within both business and education. One sees blended coaching (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005), coaching for educators (Reiss, 2007), coaching leadership (Robertson, 2005), coaching for leadership (Goldsmith & Lyons, 2006), culturally proficient coaching (Lindsey, Martinez, & Lindsey, 2007), learning-centred coaching (Zachary, 2000, 2005), co-active coaching (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, K., Kimsey-House, H., & Sandahl, 2007), and cognitive coaching (Costa & Garmston, 1994), among many others. Each author has written extensively about the benefits to be gained from coaching. Strategies, processes, and step-by-step approaches are explicitly outlined in the writings. Each of the approaches above is supported by extensive referencing from the research and professional literature addressing coaching as a valuable form of professional learning for both educators and businesspeople. There is no shortage of literature
in the ‘how to’ field legitimized, chapter by chapter, by citations from research literature.

Internationally, researchers have engaged in research into mentoring within the education sector (Ehrich et al. 2004; Brown et al. 2005; Gray, Fry & O’Neill, 2007; Suggett, 2006; Bolam, McMahon, Pocklington, & Weindling, 1995; Hobson, 2003; Luck, 2003). In Australia, mentoring is provided as a range of professional supports for first-time school administrators (Healy et al. 2001; Ehrich & Hansford, 1999). New Zealand provides mentoring to newly appointed school leaders through the ‘First Time Principals Program’. Similarly, in Singapore, ‘mentoring’ is provided to first-time school leaders as described in the research work of Low, Chong, and Walker (1994). In the United States, the majority of literature refers to mentoring as the supports provided to newly-appointed school administrators (Daresh, 2004; Barnett, 1995; Kram, 1983; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Cunat & Daresh, 2007; Hartzer & Galvin, 2003). Hopkins-Thompson (2000) uses the term mentoring to describe the broad supports provided to newly appointed leaders and includes coaching as a specific and focused aspect of mentoring. In addition, the Wallace Foundation’s 2007 report, Getting Principal Mentoring Right (Spiro et al. 2007), describes mentoring as the support processes for “preparing new school leaders to drive improvements in teaching and learning” (p.3). Internationally, there appears to be a general consensus that mentoring is a broad series of supports provided to newly-appointed school leaders to support the preparation and transition into their new role.

However, not all researchers refer only to mentoring as a continuum of support. The 2005 research report, Learning to Change (Brown et al. 2005) refers to ‘coaching’ as “a number of related strategies for improving performance” (p.4) – much as the authors above described mentoring. Furthermore, the authors state, “A common way to think about coaching is a process for developing the present and future capacities of employees. Typically, coaching is at least
somewhat developmental in nature and involves specific practices such as observations, conferencing, professional dialogue, and collaboration” (p. 5, Brown et al. 2005). Within the field of research, there is not consistency among definitions (Patterson, 2010). According to Patterson (2010), the terms coach and mentor are often used to mean the same thing.

In recent years, specificity within the education sector has been provided by the National Council for School Leaders (U.K.) and the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE) in their 2005 National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching. This document defines mentoring as a “structured, sustained process for supporting professional learners through significant career transitions” (p.3). Mentoring, then, is seen as an important series of supports for the induction of newly-appointed school leaders (Daresh & Playko, 1992; Spiro et al. 2007; Hopkins-Thompson, 2000; NCSL, 2005). Embedded within the breadth of mentoring is coaching which is defined as a “structured, sustained process for enabling the development of a specific aspect of a professional learner’s practice” (National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching, p.3). Similarly, in the United States, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) outlines the role of the mentor as one who’s responsibilities include all of the elements of induction processes along with “coaching for skills development” (p. 83) as just one of many support mechanisms for newly-appointed school leaders (SREB, 2007).

Within the province of Ontario, the School Board Guideline for Implementation of Mentoring for Newly Appointed School Leaders (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a), articulates the relationship between mentoring and coaching in a virtually identical manner. Mentoring is defined as including coaching. While mentoring is a more broad-based series of supports both for induction and within the first years of a new school leader’s tenure (Luck, 2003; Hobson, 2003; Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe & Meyerson, 2005; Hopkins-
coaching is described as a process for the in-depth development of specific knowledge, skills, and strategies (Creasy & Paterson, 2005; NCSL, 2005; Hopkins-Thompson, 2000). Mentoring, then, can be seen as including coaching within its full range of support processes for protégés in that it provides both career support as well as psychosocial support (Kram, 1983).

The National Framework for Coaching and Mentoring (NCSL, 2005) articulates the principles of mentoring and coaching, the core concepts, and the necessary skills for coaches and mentors to use while in a mentoring or coaching relationship with a protégé. These principles state that effective mentoring or coaching involves:

- a learning conversation that enables reflection based on the protégé’s professional practice
- a thoughtful relationship that is based on trust
- a learning agreement that establishes confidentiality and sets the ground rules for the learning relationship
- combining support from specialists when specific knowledge or skill are required
- growing self direction with a focus on building independence
- setting challenging and personal goals for both professional and personal learning
- understanding why different approaches work so that practice is grounded in theory
- acknowledging the benefits to the mentor or coach and protégé in the relationship
- experimenting and observing that supports risk-taking and the seeking of evidence from practice
- using resources effectively to ensure that time is used well for the purposes of learning, action, and reflection

In addition, the National Framework for Coaching and Mentoring (NCSL, 2005)
specifies the skills mentors or coaches need to use when they engage in learning conversations with protégés. These skills include: engaging in active listening, using open questions, providing information and feedback, modelling expertise, relating sensitively, and building the protégé’s control over their own learning, among a number of other skills.

The Ontario Ministry of Education has chosen to use the term ‘mentoring’ (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008b) to describe “a long-term, sustained relationship between an experienced school leader (mentor) and a newly appointed school leader (mentee). It is focused on multiple aspects of the leadership role based on learning goals outlined in the mentee learning plan” (p. 12, Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a).

Drawing on local and international research, the Ontario Ministry of Education created the School Board Guideline for Implementation of Mentoring for Newly Appointed School Leaders (2008a). The Guideline defines mentoring as a powerful form of professional learning that takes place through a collaborative, reciprocal learning relationship between an experienced school leader – the mentor – and a newly appointed school leader – the mentee. The focus of the mentoring relationship is on essential aspects of the school leadership role. The Guideline identifies coaching as a specific and integral aspect within the broader support processes of mentoring. Coaching is presented as a more focused and intentional support process within mentoring. This terminology aligns precisely with that used in the NCSL’s National Framework for Coaching and Mentoring (2005). Each school district in Ontario is now required (School Board Guideline for Implementation of Mentoring for Newly Appointed School Leaders, Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a) to provide mentoring to newly-appointed school leaders.

Coaching and Leadership – The Link

Coaching and mentoring programs were first introduced in the field of business during
the 1970s. In recent years in the United States, more than one third of large corporations had coaching programs in place (Hegstad & Wentling, 2004). According to Belasco (2000), coaching now occupies a place of honour on the management stage and is destined to be the leadership approach of the twenty-first century (Belasco, 2000). In education, coaching was first introduced to support teaching and instructional practice at the classroom level and has expanded in recent years to be seen as a valuable support for professional learning in the form of coaching for leaders (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a, 2008b; NCSL 2003, 2005; Hegstad & Wentling, 2004; Nanavati, 2006; Tomlinson, 1995; Hobson, 2003).

In the context of what has come to be known as a ‘leadership crunch’ in education (McIntyre, 1999) there is surprisingly little literature that addresses the issue of on-going professional learning supports such as coaching for first-time administrators once in their roles (Brien, 2002; Weller & Weller, 2002). A review of what does exist in research and theoretical literature on the topic emphasizes the nature of the role more than the professional learning needed for the role (Calabrese, 1991; Armstrong, 2009). Yet, research findings indicate that formal professional learning for school leaders makes a significant difference in leadership effectiveness (Leithwood et al. 1995). Current literature stresses the need for school administrators to function more as instructional leaders than as managers (Leithwood et al. 1999; Marzano et al. 2005; Fullan 2005, 2006). Instructional leadership – as defined in the *Ontario Leadership Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007) – does not explicitly state that principals serve as mentors or coaches. However, in their role as instructional leaders, they may be seen to serve in this role through their responsibilities to build relationships and develop people. On the other hand, managerial leadership focuses on efficiently and effectively maintaining current organizational arrangements (Cuban, 1988; Castle & Mitchell, 2001).
Managerial leadership can be seen as the efficient completion of clearly specified tasks by leaders (Leithwood et al. 1999). According to Kotter (1990), management is concerned with producing consistency and order in the workplace.

On the other hand, school leadership in an international age of accountability concerns itself with generating constructive change and has “…five core mind-action sets – moral purpose, understanding change processes, relationship building, knowledge building, and coherence building…” (p.xii, Fullan, 2005). It is leadership that is transformational in that it sets direction, develops people, redesigns the organization, and manages the instructional program (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Leithwood et al, 1999). This concept is augmented by the work of Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) whose meta-analysis of research literature articulated twenty-one leader responsibilities, or behaviours, that highlight the instructional leadership aspects of the school leader role over that of the managerial. These research studies are less focused on ‘clearly specified tasks’ and emphasize less the work of a manager than an instructional leader focused on improving student learning.

Knowing what it is that effective school leaders do is helpful in determining the type of professional learning – or leadership development – that is of value (Leithwood et al. 2006). The ‘core competencies’ of effective school leadership include four broad categories of practices (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005; Leithwood et al. 2004). These categories are:

- Setting directions;
- Developing people;
- Redesigning the organization; and
- Managing the instructional program
Each of these categories is further subdivided into fourteen specific leadership behaviours. Current available research indicates that these categories of practice form a significant part of successful school leadership practice regardless of level (primary or secondary school), school district, or even the country in which a school is located (Leithwood et al. 2006). Similarly, the meta-analysis conducted by Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) determined twenty-one leader responsibilities which contribute to student achievement. Seventeen of the twenty-one leader ‘responsibilities’ align with the four categories of practice outlined above (Leithwood et al. 2006).

With increasing clarity about the role of school administrators in the twenty-first century, the internship and induction of first-time school administrators becomes an issue of leadership development for school districts (Hargreaves et al. 2003). It is in the preparation and on-going supports of first-time administrators where one needs to see the development of the necessary skills for school leadership in this century (Fullan, 2005; Leithwood et al., 1999; Marzano et al. 2005) so that they are reflective of the instructional leadership being called for in educational jurisdictions worldwide.

In Ontario’s current educational context, the Ontario Leadership Strategy (OLS) calls for a shift from purely managerial leadership to instructional leadership (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). Indeed, the work of many of the authors cited above has informed the articulation of the various elements of the OLS. The Ontario Ministry of Education provides supports to school districts to ensure that they in turn can provide direction and support to school administrators to ensure that they learn and can implement this twenty-first century image of school leadership. Among the range of supports provided to newly appointed school leaders is mentoring and coaching as was announced in the fall of 2008 (Ontario Ministry of Education,
The literature specific to the purposes of coaching in an educational context identifies two common and interconnected purposes. The first purpose focuses on the provision of direct and purposeful supports a newly-appointed school leader needs in order to transition successfully into the new role (Bolam et al. 1995; Spiro et al. 2007; Brown et al. 2005; Luck, 2003; Hobson, 2003; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a). The second purpose focuses on the processes of learning, growth, and change that take place through professional coaching discussions (Healy et al. 2001; Cunat & Daresh, 2007). The learning that takes place through coaching is personalized, promotes further self-directed learning, and provides a process for learning-centred professional dialogue (Creasy & Paterson, 2005).

The interconnectedness of the purposes provides direction to the professional learning of educational administrators (Daresh, 1995) to ensure that newly-appointed school leaders learn new knowledge and skills and then transfer their learning into their practice as more effective leaders (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Cunat & Daresh, 2007; Brown et al. 2005; Kirkham, 1995). Thus, coaching provides both career development as well as psychosocial support (Kram, 1983; Kram, 1985 – as cited in Hegstad & Wentling, 2004) in the transition to the new role.

In addition to the commonality of purposes for coaching, the variations among the purposes are worthy of note. Aside from the two common purposes identified above, the NCSL National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching (2005) articulated one additional and unique purpose. This is the focus on the understanding of the theory that underpins new practice. In the United States, the research of Cunat and Daresh (2007) aligned with the common purposes identified above but added the dimension of linking the coaching to the specific needs of the
school. The purposes for coaching identified by Costa and Garmston (1994) align with the common purposes identified here but vary from the others through the addition of becoming an effective member of a team as an additional specific purpose of coaching.

The National Council of School Leaders’ (NCSL) *National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching* (2005) serves as the foundation for coaching in the United Kingdom. The Framework articulates eight principles of mentoring and coaching. The following principles are useful to illustrate the purposes of coaching:

1. engage in structured, professional dialogue, rooted in evidence from the professional learner’s practice, which articulates existing beliefs and practices to enable reflection on them
2. develop a thoughtful, trusting relationship that attends respectfully and with sensitivity to the powerful emotions involved in deep professional learning
3. collaborate with colleagues to sustain commitment to learning and relate new approaches to everyday practice; seeking out specialist expertise to extend skills and knowledge
4. develop self direction through an evolving process in which the learner takes increasing responsibility for their professional development as skills, knowledge, and self-awareness increase
5. set challenging and personal goals that build on what learners know and can do already, but could not yet achieve alone
6. develop understanding of the theory that underpins new practice so it can be interpreted and adapted for different contexts
7. experiment and observe in order to create a learning environment that supports risk-taking and innovation and encourages professional learners to seek out direct evidence
from practice

8. use resources effectively to protect and sustain learning, action, and reflection on a day to day basis

Cunat and Daresh (2007) identify three specific purposes for the mentoring and coaching of first-time school administrators. These purposes are: the provision of direct and purposeful support to help new principals perform at high levels and make progress toward becoming transformational leaders, aligning the professional learning efforts to the specific needs of the school, and meeting the professional needs of the protégé. This is done through coaching that provides targeted, appropriate, and timely professional learning opportunities.

Within the literature relative to coaching in educational contexts, few are more specific than Arthur Costa and Robert Garmston who identify one primary goal and seven purposes in their 1994 book, *Cognitive Coaching: A Foundation for Renaissance Schools*. Costa and Garmston (1994) identify that the primary goal of coaching is to support “people in becoming self-directed autonomous agents and self-directed members of a group. Toward this end, Cognitive Coaches regard all interactions as learning opportunities focused on self-directedness.” (p. 22, Costa & Garmston, 1994). The seven purposes identified by Costa and Garmston (1994) are: the provision of support that is both needed and wanted, enhancing intellectual capacities, supporting educational innovations to achieve full impact, providing feedback as an energy source of self-renewal, supporting beginning educators during their first years in their roles, supporting individuals in becoming effective members of a team, and developing positive interpersonal relationships that are the energy sources for adaptive school cultures and productive organizations.
Competency standards for school leadership are also addressed in the literature about coaching and its purposes. In the United Kingdom, coaching is seen as one of the professional learning methods to support newly-appointed school leaders in acquiring the knowledge and skills outlined in the leadership competencies for school leaders (NCSL, 2001; Kirkham, 1995). In Ontario the *Ontario Leadership Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007) is identified as an essential support document to identify the learning needs of the person being coached and to guide the work of developing the core leadership practices and competencies (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a) set out in the *Framework*. Similarly, in the United States – Chicago public schools in this case - coaches are expected to engage coachees in proactive conversation where the five principal competencies serve as the foundation for professional learning discussions (Cunat & Daresh, 2007).

**Key Elements**

Three key elements of coaching are evident in the literature. These elements are: the coach, the coaching processes, and the relational aspects of the coaching. Each of these elements is addressed in the following sections.

*The Coach*

Central to the process of coaching is the coach. According to Patterson (2010), the role of the coach is to focus on the coachee’s potential to grow. Literature relative to coaching describes coaches in terms of their personal attributes and the skills they have to do this coaching. The literature emphasizes training for coaches as it is seen as essential to successfully fulfill such a role.

The personal attributes of coaches are seen as significant to the effective delivery of
coaching. Drawing on a range of research studies a number of important common attributes were articulated for coaches. Not surprisingly, the research literature identifies the following – in descending order of frequency - as desirable attributes in a coach: trustworthiness and confidentiality, openness to the views of others, being non-judgmental, respect, being positive, compatibility, compassion, being non-directive, and honesty. The research referenced relative to the coach includes, a large-scale, long-term mixed-methods study conducted over an 18-month period in the United Kingdom (Bolam at al. 1995), case studies conducted in the United States (Brown et al. 2005; Spiro et al. 2007), and small-scale qualitative studies conducted in Australia (Ehrich et al. 2001), the United Kingdom (Luck, 2003; NCSL, 2005) and the United States (Cunat & Daresh, 2007).

In addition to the personal attributes seen as necessary for coaches, this same body of research identified a number of common skills seen as necessary for effective coaching. These skills – again listed in descending order of frequency - are identified as: using open questions to stimulate thinking and reflection, listening actively, tailoring learning to the needs of the coachee, facilitating access to research, facilitating growing independence, cultivating an environment focused on professional learning, relating sensitively, providing information, and modelling expertise.

Throughout the literature on coaching a strong recommendation is made for the training of coaches in order for them to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to support newly-appointed school leaders (Spiro et al. 2007; NCSL, 2005; Brown et al. 2005; Cunat & Daresh, 2007). It is recommended that all coaches receive significant training in order to provide high-quality learning experiences for the coachees (Gray, Fry, O’Neill, 2007; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a; Kirkham, 1995; Monsour, 1998; Suggett, 2006). Training is recommended in
such areas as active listening and the skills of coaching conversations that stimulate thinking and reflection (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a). Hobson (2003) emphasizes the need for such training to ensure that the coaching experience is focused on learning for the coachee and does not lead to the reinforcement of traditional leadership roles or a dependency on the coach. Inadequate training can lead to the creation of a mere ‘buddy system’ that may seem helpful and supportive but ultimately does not contribute to the new leader’s learning or professional growth (S. Vilani, 2006 – cited in Spiro et al. 2007). Indeed, Creasy and Paterson (2005) state that, “Expert coaches are not manufactured simply by attending a number of dedicated training days. Becoming an expert coach is an ongoing career-long commitment to one’s own and others’ professional learning” (p. 16).

Of additional interest but limited reference in the literature is the recommendation that coaches for newly-appointed school leaders be well-experienced and exemplary school leaders themselves (Monsour, 1998; Kirkham, 1995). Hobson (2003) cites K. L. Grover (1994) in noting that the gender and ethnicity of mentors and coaches appeared to have little or no impact on the coaching experience (Bolam et al. 1995).

The Coaching Processes

Within international research literature the two structural elements that are most frequently identified as essential for effective coaching are the need for focused training for coaches and the importance of ensuring that the coaching is a learning-focused process (Bolam et al. 1995; Barnett, 1995; Spiro, Mattis, & Mitgang, 2007; Ehrich et al. 2004). In many coaching programs, the training of coaches – if training is even provided or required – does not deal effectively with the essential skills required to coach effectively (Spiro et al. 2007; Ehrich & Hansford, 1999). Fewer than half of existing coaching programs in the United States specifically
train coaches in the skills that facilitate reflection, promote adult learning, or engage coachees in focused cognitive activity (Gray, Fry, & O’Neill, 2007). Because of this lack of intentional training, coaching programs run the risk of being ‘buddy systems’ (Luck, 2003; ) where the coach simply passes along information, shares ‘war stories’, and does not serve to support the newly-appointed school leader to become more independent (Spiro et al. 2007; Ehrich & Hansford, 1999). The coaching process needs to be learning-focused relative to established purposes so that coaches engage in proactive instructional processes designed to guide the development of individual school leaders in their professional growth (Cunat & Daresh, 2007; Gray, Fry, & O’Neill, 2007; NCSL, 2005).

Another of the most frequently identified structural elements of a coaching program is the existence of an intentional matching process that will establish a coach-coachee relationship that can be sustained for a minimum of one year (Monsour, 1998). Special attention needs to be paid to the matching of coaches to coachees (Brown et al. 2005) to ensure that an effective learning relationship based on trust, mutual respect, confidentiality, and compatibility can be established (Bolam et al. 1995; Hegstad & Wentling, 2004).

Three additional common elements emerge within coaching literature. These are: the use of well-experienced principals who have demonstrated effective school leadership (Gray, Fry, & O’Neill, 2007; Bolam et al. 1995; Spiro et al. 2007), a clearly articulated theoretical model aligned with procedural policies for the coaching program (Brown et al. 2005; Daresh & Playko, 1992), and a strong evaluation component within the program (Daresh & Playko, 1992; Hegstad & Wentling, 2004; Spiro, Mattis, & Mitgang, 2007; Ehrich & Hansford, 1999) that can determine if the provision of coaching is indeed supporting the coachees.

Not common in the research literature on coaching but still worthy of note is the need for
the coaching to focus on purposeful professional learning relative to articulated competencies of leadership as established by the specific school district (Gray, Fry, & O’Neill, 2007; Cunat & Daresh, 2007; Spiro et al. 2007; NCSL, 2001). Aligned with this structural element is the identified need for a ‘loose contract’ or agreement that helps to focus the intentionality of the learning. Research literature informs that it is also important to deal with logistical issues. These would include such things as ensuring that coaching sessions are held regularly and not on an ad hoc basis (Bolam et al. 1995; Ehrich & Hansford, 1999).

The Relational Aspects

The relational aspects of the coaching relationship are evident throughout the research on coaching. Indeed, virtually all research and professional literature that deals with coaching addresses the significance of the relationship between the coach and the coachee (Bolam et al. 1995; Brown et al. 2005; Spiro et al. 2007; Ehrich et al. 2001; Luck, 2003; NCSL, 2005; Cunat & Daresh, 2007). The coach-coachee relationship is defined as a complex, dynamic (Ehrich et al. 2004) and developmental relationship (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Spiro, Mattis, & Mitgang, 2007; Daresh, 1995) that is intensive and enduring over time (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990).

In 1978 Shapiro, Haseltine, and Rowe developed a five-step continuum for an advisory relationship designed to be supportive of aspiring and beginning leaders. The continuum ranges from ‘peer pal’ – a relationship based on mutual support for mutual benefit - through ‘guide’ to ‘sponsor’, ‘patron’ and eventually to the highest level ‘mentor’ which they defined as an intensive relationship in which the mentor assumes the role of both teacher and advocate. Inasmuch as this continuum tends to be business-oriented (Daresh, 2004), it is indicative of the significance of the relational elements within any professional mentoring or coaching relationship.
Kram’s 1983 research identified four phases of a mentoring/coaching relationship. She saw the mentor-mentee (or coach-coachee) relationship as moving through the phases of initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition (Kram, 1983). In addition, she identified the relationship as both developmental and dynamic and detailed how the balance between career and psychosocial support elements shift as the participants move through the various phases of the relationship (Kram, 1983).

Summary of the Chapter

In the context of leadership challenges (Hargreaves et al. 2003), vice-principals hold a critical position in school districts because they create the pool from which future school principals are drawn (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Researchers have determined that while the principal role is frequently researched, the vice-principal role is understudied in research literature (Brien, 2002; Mertz & McNeely, 1999; Garrett & McGeachie, 1999; Scoggins & Bishop, 1993; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Kaplan and Owings, 1999). Research conclusions from Marshall and Hooley (2006) and Armstrong (2009) are relevant to this study: the vice-principal role is ill-defined and often at the whim of the principal, thus vice-principal experiences of the role – and understanding of the role - may vary greatly depending on the school districts where vice-principals work or the principals with whom they work.

The internship, induction, and professional learning of first-time school administrators are issues of leadership development for school districts (Hargreaves et al. 2003). However, questions are being raised about the effectiveness of existing professional learning processes for educators (Cole, 2004; Fullan, 2007). Current literature proposes a form of professional learning that is personalized (Hopkins, 2007; Fullan et al. 2006; Creasy & Paterson, 2005), in that it promotes self-directed learning (Costa & Garmston, 1994; Joyce & Showers, 2002), it focuses on
professional dialogue that is learning-centred (Creasy & Paterson, 2005; Healy et al. 2001), and it is both continuous and daily (Fullan, 2007; Senge, 1992) so that the learning is long-term rather than being episodic, job-embedded rather than outside the realm of the school where the leader’s work takes place, and is carefully planned with intention and purpose (Sparks and Hirsch, 2000). Attention to the personalized nature of professional learning will be helpful in the interpretation of the data from the research in this thesis.

There is not a rich tradition of research in the area of coaching of vice-principals (Patterson, 2010; Daresh & Playko, 1994; Daresh, 1995). Much of the research that has been done about coaching has focused on gauging satisfaction levels, not on how this form of professional learning supports school leaders (Patterson, 2010; Spiro et al. 2007). Indeed, Clutterbuck (2008) argues that there is a need for more research relative to coaching. Research focusing on the cognitive (Daresh, 2004) and affective (Leithwood et al. 2006) development of school leaders is considered a legitimate area of scholarly pursuit (Leithwood & Levin, 2005) and as such is relevant to this study. Attending to these elements is of value in interpreting the data from the research presented in this thesis.
CHAPTER THREE: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

This chapter provides an explanation of the conceptual framework that was developed for this study as well as the conceptual perspective upon which the study was conducted. The conceptual framework serves several purposes. First, it provides an understanding of the key concepts relevant to the study found within research and policy literature. Secondly, it synthesizes the concepts in the study and their relationships as gleaned from the existing literature. The conceptual framework does not serve as a theory. Thirdly, it serves to focus the research by aligning the research questions, current literature, and the central concepts of the study. Lastly, it provides a potential organizing structure for analyzing the data that were collected without limiting the possibilities of the range of findings within the data.

The theoretical perspective of this study is constructivist. Constructivism is a theory of learning and knowing that is based on a belief that people have a fundamental desire to make meaning from their experiences (Walker & Lambert, 1995; Costa & Garmston, 1994). Constructivism is drawn from the fields of psychology, philosophy, and science (Walker & Lambert, 1995). The process of ‘knowing’ includes the deconstruction and reconstruction of one’s personal experiences (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). The process of ‘coming to know’ is a process of inquiry into these experiences and it includes reflection, mediated thinking, and social interaction (Walker & Lambert, 1995; Costa & Garmston, 1994).

Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of a conceptual framework that is helpful for this study in that it presents the phenomenon of the coaching experience as the central concept. The conceptual framework is based on the literature reviewed as related to the phenomenon of coaching for newly-appointed school leaders.
Figure 1  The Coaching Experience
This conceptual framework contains three key concepts: the role of vice-principal, the coaching experience, and professional learning. Dynamic relationships exist among these concepts.

The first concept is the role of vice-principal. This concept reflects the perceptions of those appointed to the vice-principal role of what they believe the role, and its associated work, to be. Policy literature – in the form of the *Ontario Leadership Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a) - describes the practices and competencies of the vice-principal role as being the same as those of the principal. The *Framework* defines these roles in terms of: Setting Directions, Developing the Organization, Leading the Instructional Program, Securing Accountability, and Building Relationships & Developing People. On the other hand, research literature has described the vice-principal role as the neglected leadership element in school systems (Calabrese, 1991) with the role being ill-defined and at the whim of the principal (Armstrong, 2009). Research findings have highlighted the lack of a robust definition of, and a lack of clarity about, the vice-principal role (Garrett & McGeachie, 1999; Scoggins & Bishop, 1993; Maher, 1999; Nanavati & McCulloch, 2003; Hartle 2005).

The second concept of the conceptual framework is the coaching experience. This concept is influenced by a number of factors including the coach, the design aspects of the coaching, the relational aspects, and the challenges related to these factors. The skill sets of coaches are seen as significant to the effective delivery of coaching (Bolam et al, 1995; Brown et al. 2005; Spiro et al. 2007; Ehrich et al. 2001; Luck, 2003; Cunat & Daresh, 2007). Throughout the literature related to coaching, effective coaches were those who received significant training so that they could provide high-quality learning experiences for their coachees (Spiro et al, 2007, Mattis, & Mitgang, 2007; Gray, Fry, O’Neill, 2007; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a;
Kirkham, 1995; Monsour, 1998; Suggett, 2006). In addition, coaches for newly-appointed school leaders are seen to be well-experienced and exemplary school leaders themselves (Monsour, 1998; Kirkham, 1995).

The design aspects that create the coaching experience are key factors in this conceptual framework. Existing research literature indicates that effective coaching is designed in a purposeful and structured way (Healy et al. 2001; Cunat & Daresh, 2007; Creasy & Paterson, 2005; Kram, 1983), follows a distinct form, or style of coaching (Brown et al. 2005; Daresh & Playko, 1992), is learning-focused (Bolam et al, 1995; Barnett, 1995; Spiro et al, 2007; Ehrich et al. 2004), ensures that both coach and coachee are trained or prepared for the experience (Spiro et al. 2007; Ehrich & Hansford, 1999), and provides a matching and exit process (Monsour, 1998; Brown et al. 2005).

Significant to the coaching experience are the relational aspects. Because coaching is either a one-to-one or small-group endeavour, it involves interactions among two or more people at any time. Thus, relational aspects need to be acknowledged (Bolam et al, 1995; Hegstad & Wentling, 2004). Commonly identified within the majority of coaching literature (Bolam et al. 1995; Brown et al. 2005; Spiro et al. 2007; Ehrich et al. 2001; Luck, 2003; NCSL, 2005; Cunat & Daresh, 2007) are what might be seen as typical elements of an effective personal relationship – honesty, mutual respect, trust, confidentiality, collaboration, openness, and non-judgmentalism. The coach-coachee relationship is defined as a complex, dynamic (Ehrich et al. 2004) and developmental relationship (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Spiro, Mattis, & Mitgang, 2007; Daresh, 1995) that is intensive and enduring over time (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990).

The third element in this framework, professional learning, contains a number of interconnected elements. These elements focus on capacity building (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001;
Hopkins & Levin, 2000; Brown et al. 2005). The literature informs us that neither a purely academic nor a purely practical form of professional learning is adequate to support school leaders in their roles (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1992; Royal Commission on Learning 1994; National Policy Board on Administrative Preparation, 1989). Current literature proposes a form of professional learning for school leaders that can be seen as a network of supports ranging from peer support through to professional learning experiences offered through a wide range of formats and by a broad range of providers (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a). Coaching is one element of this network of supports.

A broad range of learning supports is intended to provide school leaders with professional learning that is personalized (Hopkins, 2007; Fullan et al. 2006; Creasy & Paterson, 2005), that promotes self-directed learning (Costa & Garmston, 1994; Joyce & Showers, 2002), that focuses on learning-centred professional dialogue (Creasy & Paterson, 2005; Healy et al. 2001), and that is both continuous and daily (Fullan, 2007; Senge, 1992). Indeed, the National Staff Development Council recommends that professional learning programs for school leaders should take place over the long-term rather than being episodic, be job-embedded rather than outside the realm of the school where the leader’s work takes place, and be carefully planned with intention and purpose (Sparks and Hirsch, 2000).

Formal professional learning experiences that build capacity make significant differences in school leader effectiveness when they are authentic, cognitively engaging, and foster real-life problem-solving skills (Leithwood et al. 1995). However, formal training experiences are ultimately less powerful than other factors such as the leader’s internal states, existing skills, beliefs, values, and dispositions (Leithwood & Levin, 2007).

Purposefully designed reflective thinking processes (Reeves, 2006; Schon, 1987;
Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990) support school leaders in the deconstruction and reconstruction of their experiences and their knowledge in the interest of building capacity (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). Based on actual experiences within the workplace (Leithwood et al. 1995) these reflective thinking processes are best situated within a context where the learning is not done in isolation but through social participation with the assistance of others (Hobson, 2003; Senge, 1990). Professional conversations that are well-led can serve as an effective professional learning structure that stimulates reflective conversations for capacity building (Healy et al. 2001) based on daily (Fullan, 2007), authentic experiences (Leithwood et al. 1995) within the workplace (Elmore, 2004).

The building of capacity occurs when individuals develop their abilities to engage in dialogue (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). Dialogue can be defined as a free and creative exploration of ideas and issues, focused listening to each other, and a suspending of one’s own views. It is the flow of meaning between the individuals engaged in the dialogue that allows them to access and create a greater pool of meaning (Senge, 1990). Dialogue teaches people how to think and through dialogue, people become observers of their own thinking (Senge, 1990). Thus dialogue mediates thinking through reflective thought.

In summary, the framework has been designed to capture the complexity of the concepts of this study and to highlight the dynamic relationships among the three concepts. The role of vice-principal provides vice-principals with an understanding of what their work is and what they need to learn in order to fulfill their duties. This understanding is used by vice-principals to help them determine their learning needs within their coaching sessions, or, in other words, ‘the coaching experience’. Through the coaching experience, the vice-principals engage in professional learning and build capacity through acquiring new knowledge and skills. With this
new capacity, the vice-principals return to their schools to put their new learning into practice. In this way, there is a reciprocal relationship among the three concepts. Stated simply, from understandings of their role, vice-principals determine what they need to learn when they enter their coaching experiences. Within the coaching experience, they engage in professional learning and build new capacity for their role. This new capacity is put into practice in their day-to-day work. With further work in their role, the vice-principals restart this cycle of determining learning needs and then engaging in the professional learning they need through coaching. This conceptual framework is a useful organizer and framework for this study. However, it is important to note that it is not a theory and it is not intended to be explanatory.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This research study is intended to gain insight into the experiences of newly-appointed elementary vice-principals and how the coaching they participate in supports their professional learning. In this study a qualitative research approach was used. It included personal interviews about the coaching experience with fourteen first-time elementary vice-principals in five school districts in Ontario.

Qualitative research by its nature can offer insights into the views, ideas, and opinions of the participants. It gathers data based on broad, general questions and then analyzes these data to provide an understanding of the coaching experience (Creswell, 2005; Merriam, 1998). This was an appropriate research strategy to use because the intent of the research was to understand, from individual leaders, their thoughts and beliefs relative to this specific learning experience. A qualitative research approach was selected because it was important to gain an insight and understanding from each of the participants through discussion and exploration of their experiences within the authentic world of newly-appointed school leaders. Qualitative research provides a direct connection with experience as it is ‘lived’ or ‘felt’ (Sherman & Webb, 1998 as cited in Merriam, 1998). Qualitative research aligns with constructivist analysis because the philosophical belief upon which all forms of such research are based is the perspective that reality is constructed by individuals within their social worlds (Merriam, 1998). This approach sacrifices large sample size in favour of understanding the phenomenon in depth through data that are richly descriptive (Merriam, 1998).

It is important to note that the essential manner in which to gain insight into the phenomenon of leadership coaching is to understand the perspectives of the participants. This is an inductive form of research, thus it builds on concepts and ideas from the analysis of the data
(Merriam, 1998). During this process, no theory was tested. Out of this qualitative research process come descriptive data that provide depth and breadth of insight and understanding into the experiences of fourteen vice-principals who participate in coaching and who took part in this study.

This chapter provides a detailed outline of the research design and the methodology used in this study. Sample selection, instruments, procedures, and the approach to data analysis for the study are described. Ethical considerations relative to the data are also outlined in this chapter.

Sample and Sampling

This research study collected data from fourteen first-time elementary (Kindergarten through grade 8) vice-principals who had completed at least one year of coaching in school districts that have coaching programs in place. Each school district in Ontario is now required to provide coaching/mentoring to newly-appointed school leaders and to have a ‘Lead’ who is responsible for the implementation of the mentoring/coaching program (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a). The researcher contacted the Leads in a number of different school districts in order to determine whether a coaching program was indeed established within their district. The school districts were selected for this study based on three criteria: coaching programs were established in accordance with Ministry of Education guidelines (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a); school districts varied in both size and populations (urban/suburban/rural); and accessibility by the researcher to potential participants in the districts. Five school districts were selected in order to provide the possibility of a broader range of findings.

The next step was to select potential participants. The criteria for potential vice-principal participants included the following: each potential participant would be considered ‘newly-
appointed’ meaning that they were within their first two years in the role (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a); each potential participant had taken part in coaching for at least one year, and each potential participant had not been in the role sufficiently long to have completed their participation in the coaching support provided by their school district. The target sample size was twelve vice-principals. Fourteen vice-principals expressed interest in participating and all of them were included. No volunteers were turned away. It is important to note that the researcher’s own school district was not included in the study.

**Instruments**

The research instrument to collect data in this study was a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix A) used in personal, one-to-one interviews with the researcher (Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 2005). The interview guide (Appendix A) consisted of eighteen questions. The interview guide questions (Appendix A) had additional prompts to guide and probe the respondents without directing their responses. The interview questions (Appendix A) supported and aligned with the primary research question and the sub-questions described in Chapter One. The relationship between the research questions and the interview questions may be viewed as providing content validity to the instrument in that the questions related directly to all of the possible responses to the research questions. Table One, titled *The Relationship between the Research Questions and the Interview Guide Questions*, provides a table that illustrates these relationships.
Table 1

*Relationship between Research Questions and the Interview Guide Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Interview Guide Questions (Appendix A)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subquestion 1:</strong> How do first-time school administrators experience their role?</td>
<td>• Experiences of the role</td>
<td>Interview Guide Questions: 8, 11, 12, 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subquestion 2:</strong> What perceptions do first-time school administrators have of their coaching experience in terms of the key elements of coaching: the coach, the processes, and the relational aspects?</td>
<td>• Coaching experiences</td>
<td>Interview Guide Questions: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o The coach</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Processes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Relational aspects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subquestion 3:</strong> To what extent do first-time school administrators feel that the coaching experience provides a positive support for them in their new role?</td>
<td>• Perception of role</td>
<td>Interview Guide Questions: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Coaching experiences</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o The coach</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Processes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Relational aspects</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Professional learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subquestion 4:</strong> What challenges do first-time school administrators encounter in their coaching experience?</td>
<td>• Perception of role</td>
<td>Interview Guide Questions: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Coaching experiences</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o The coach</td>
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<td>o Processes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Relational aspects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Professional learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Procedures

In order to recruit participants for the study, the researcher contacted the Ontario Principals’ Council (OPC) and the Catholic Principals’ Council of Ontario (CPCO) to seek permission to invite their newly-appointed vice-principal members to participate in the study. Permission was granted by the provincial Assistant Secretary-Treasurer of the Board of Directors of OPC and the Provincial Executive Director of CPCO to approach the local executives of OPC and CPCO within each of the five local school districts.

The researcher asked the local executive members of OPC and CPCO (Appendix B) to distribute a letter of invitation (Appendix C), via email, to all of their vice-principal members in each of the school districts selected. The letter outlined the nature and purpose of the study as well as the criteria – as outlined above - for potential participants. Invitations to participate were emailed by the local executives to all vice-principals in all of the school districts selected. Vice-principals who wished to participate were invited to respond directly to the researcher. Potential participants volunteered by responding to the email if they met the established criteria and if they wished to take part. Using this approach, a sample of fourteen participants from five school districts volunteered to participate.

Once volunteers came forward, the researcher provided each potential participant with a Letter of Informed Consent (Appendix D) to obtain agreement to participate in the research. The participants were asked for their preference for the time and location of the interview. All requests for the date, time and location of the interviews were honoured by the researcher. Prior to starting the interview, the researcher reviewed with the participant that he/she could withdraw from the process at any time. The researcher strove to establish positive rapport with each participant in order to maintain a comfortable interviewing experience where interruptions would
be minimized. This was successfully accomplished because each participant selected their preferred location for the interview. The researcher informed each participant that they were free not to respond to questions if they preferred not to.

Prior to the interview beginning, each participant was provided with a copy of the interview guide questions (Appendix A) and was informed that they were free not to respond to questions if they wished not to. The interviews ranged in length from 60 to 90 minutes. The prompts were only used if the interview participants appeared to be unsure, to hesitate, to repeat themselves, to have some difficulty in responding, or to follow up on further details or explanations of responses. Fortunately, all participants presented as eager and interested in the interview process and each spoke willingly, with ease, and at length about their experiences. There were no difficulties encountered during the sessions. Each interview ended by asking if there were any questions the participants wanted to ask the researcher. The participants did not ask questions and generally stated that they felt they had said everything that they wished to say. All of the interviews ended on a very positive note.

Participants were provided with verbatim transcripts of their interviews to confirm the contents and to revise the transcripts if they wished. None of the participants requested any changes to the transcript of their interview.

Treatment of the Data

The data in this study were collected and analyzed according to currently accepted processes for analyzing and interpreting qualitative data (Creswell, 2002; Merriam, 1998). Initially, the interview responses were transcribed into individual text documents in order to have full transcripts of each of the interviews held. The participants were each provided with a verbatim transcript of their interview in order to confirm the contents or to revise if they so
wished. None of the participants made any revisions to the contents of their transcript.

Software was not used to analyze the data. Rather, the ‘constant comparative’ method of data analysis was used in this study because it is a recognized form of analysis (Creswell, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), it is compatible with inductive research, and it can be used without building grounded theory (Merriam, 1998). This method of data analysis served well the purpose of the study which was to provide understanding of the coaching experiences of the newly-appointed elementary vice-principal participants. It is important to note that the purpose of this study is not to make generalizations as the findings are unique to the participants at the time of the research. Generalizability is neither required nor desired in qualitative research. Qualitative research has value by providing rich and revealing data about a particular phenomenon (Merriam, 1998).

The conceptual framework introduced in Figure 1 was used as a guide for the initial examination and organization of the data that were collected (Creswell, 2005). The conceptual framework was not imposed on the data. It was supportive in that it sustained a focus relative to the research questions and established parameters to ensure that the data analysis process also remained related to the research questions. The data analysis was not limited by the framework because the researcher was open to new categories emerging from the data, thus the conceptual framework did not restrict or limit the analysis.

The data in the transcripts were reviewed repeatedly in order to determine the particulars of the detailed responses and to gain a deep understanding of the experiences and perceptions of the participants. The data were reviewed numerous times to cluster and group them according to similar or dissimilar responses or ideas (Creswell, 2005). By engaging in this process, the researcher was able to build initial categories of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through
continual reviewing of the data, categories and sub-categories of findings emerged that cut across all of the data sets (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). This process of data analysis revealed four categories of findings. Within each of these four categories, a number of sub-categories emerged from the data sets.

Further analysis of the data was used to determine key themes. The researcher examined the categories and sub-categories of the findings in order to understand the relationships among them and then to aggregate those that were similar (Creswell, 2005). Through this process, the categories and sub-categories were combined to establish major ideas, or themes, among the findings (Creswell, 2005). Four themes were initially determined and were later confirmed by establishing that the themes cut across and aligned with the data in the categories and sub-categories of findings. The four themes also responded to the research questions.

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted with absolute diligence following the guidelines, practices, and policies of the University of Toronto. Participation was voluntary and there was no coercion or penalty for non-participation. There were no foreseen risks to participants by taking part in the study greater than those encountered in their day-to-day jobs. Furthermore, there were no foreseen risks that mental, physiological, or social harm might result from this research. No aspect of the study was expected to cause physical harm to the participants’ health such as physical exertion. The study did not infringe on the rights of participants. The research did not involve a topic that would cause the participants emotional stress and participants were informed that they did not have to answer questions they did not feel comfortable answering. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time during the study. All participants were assured that they would be provided access to results upon completion of the study. In addition,
participants were assured that there would be no evaluation of participant performance or of
them as individuals. Data and documents are stored securely on a password-protected computer
owned by the researcher and will be destroyed on the date specified in the Letter of Informed
Consent. Data collection procedures ensured confidentiality. No identifying data are being
stored with the interview data. No aspect of the research put an individual in a potential conflict
of interest. The data were not viewed by anyone other than the researcher and his supervisor.
Names of individuals and school districts were changed to pseudonyms in this report to ensure
complete anonymity, privacy and confidentiality.
CHAPTER FIVE: RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is to present the results of the data gathered for the study. The chapter opens with a brief introduction to the school districts and the participants included in the study. The chapter also provides a thorough description of the findings that emerged from the interviews. The results are organized in accordance with the conceptual framework outlined in Chapter Three. Findings are presented in five main categories: experiences of the role of vice-principal, coaching processes, experiences of the coaching process, relational aspects, and professional learning. Each of these broad categories of findings has a number of sub-categories of findings. It should be noted that these findings are specific to the fourteen participants in the study at the time of the research. It is not intended for these findings to be generalized to a broader population.

The School Districts

The participants in the study work in five different school districts in Ontario. Pseudonyms are used for each of the districts in the study. The districts included are: Danbury District School Board, Southlake District School Board, Taunton District School Board, Yarmouth District School Board, and Upton District School Board. The school districts vary in size as well as demographic makeup. The districts include urban, suburban, and rural populations. The names of the school districts were changed to pseudonyms to ensure anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality.

According to the Ontario Ministry of Education, school districts are required to provide mentoring/coaching to their newly-appointed principals and vice-principals (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a). Certain minimum expectations are set out for school districts in the School Board Guideline for Implementation of Mentoring for Newly Appointed School Leaders.
(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a). However, within these guidelines, school districts have some autonomy concerning the specifics of how they implement mentoring/coaching.

The Participants

Fourteen elementary vice-principals in five school districts participated in the study. All participants who responded with interest were included in the study (see Table 2). All of the volunteer participants were Caucasian. The following table (Table 2) introduces the vice-principal participants. Each vice-principal is presented using a pseudonym for the purposes of anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality. These pseudonyms are used throughout this report. Information about the participants includes their gender, approximate age, school district, and information – provided by the participants - about the schools in which they work.

Of the fourteen participants in the study, eleven were female and three were male. They work in five different school districts. Participation levels varied by school district ranging from a maximum of five participants in Danbury District School Board to just one participant from Yarmouth District School Board. Ages of the participants ranged from middle thirties to early fifties. The majority of the participants were in their thirties or forties with only two participants in their fifties. All of the participants worked in medium to large elementary schools. Student populations in the schools ranged from a minimum of 400 students to a maximum of 900 students. In general, the participants’ schools are racially diverse with lower to middle socio-economic status. Only four of the schools have student populations in middle to upper middle class socio-economic status.
# Table 2

**The Vice-principal Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>School District</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>School profile – as described by participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Marni  | Female | Danbury District School Board | Early 40s | 460 students  
• Low to upper middle-class SES  
• Some racial diversity                                                                  |
| Linda  | Female | Danbury District School Board | Mid 40s | 420 students  
• Low to middle-class SES  
• Minimal diversity                                                                   |
| Elisa  | Female | Danbury District School Board | Late 30s | 625 students  
• Low SES  
• High transience  
• Large Aboriginal population                                                            |
| Diane  | Female | Danbury District School Board | Early 40s | 430 students  
• SES range from low through to upper middle  
• Some gifted classes in school                                                                 |
| Laurie | Female | Danbury District School Board | Mid 40s | 450 students  
• Culturally diverse  
• SES: middle and upper-middle class                                                        |
| Mark   | Male   | Southlake District School Board | Late 40s | 500 students  
• SES: middle class  
• Minimal racial diversity                                                               |
| Judy   | Female | Taunton District School Board | Mid 30s | 900 students  
• Predominantly recent immigrants  
• Low SES                                                                 |
| Ona    | Female | Taunton District School Board | Mid 30s | 900 students  
• Predominantly recent immigrants  
• Low SES                                                                 |
| Daniel | Male   | Taunton District School Board | Mid 30s | 900 students  
• High racial diversity  
• SES: middle to upper-middle class                                                     |
| Sati   | Female | Taunton District School Board | Early 50s | 520 students  
• SES: middle to upper-middle class  
• Some racial diversity  
• Some gifted classes in school                                                            |
| Jackie | Female | Yarmouth Catholic District School Board | Early 50s | 700 students  
• SES: middle and upper middle class  
• Limited racial diversity                                                               |
| Mitch  | Male   | Upton District School Board   | Early 40s | 500 students  
• SES: low to middle class  
• Very diverse by culture & ELL                                                            |
| Tori   | Female | Upton District School Board   | Mid 30s | 400 students  
• Dual track: FI and regular program  
• High number of students with special needs  
• Minimal racial diversity  
• SES: low to middle-class                                                                  |
| Tanya  | Female | Upton District School Board   | Mid 30s | 400 gr7/8 students  
• Dual track: French Immersion (FI) and regular program  
• FI students: higher SES  
• English track students: lower SES                                                      |
Introduction to the Results

The fourteen participants in this study each took part in an interview of approximately one hour. All of the data gathered are found within the transcribed texts of the interviews. The results include supportive quotations taken from these transcripts. The results that follow are presented in accordance with the conceptual framework and appear in the following four categories: Experiences of the Role of Vice-principal, Coaching Processes, Experiences of the Coaching Process, and Relational Aspects. Within each of these categories, sub-categories emerged which are based on participant responses to the interview questions (Appendix A).

Experiences of the Role of Vice-principal

Research and professional literature on the role of first-time school administrators - vice-principals in this case - is scarce (Kaplan & Owings, 1999). Common within the existing literature about vice-principals is that their work is assigned by their principal (Scoggins & Bishop, 1993; Mertz & McNeely, 1994; Brien, 2002) and seems to be determined by the principal’s preferences (Maher, 1999; Garrett & McGeachie, 1999; Kwan 2008). Nevertheless, Scoggins and Bishop (1993) identified twenty common duties of vice-principals. The most prominent of these duties were student discipline and attendance.

The results in this section are based on participant responses to the interview questions (Appendix A) and are divided into the following three sub-categories: the vice-principal role is determined by the principal, there is an expectation that vice-principals follow the decisions their principals make, and the vice-principal role is a preparatory time for the role of principal.
Role Determined by Principal

Although no explicit question was asked about their experiences of the vice-principal role, all fourteen of the participants in this study spoke about these experiences in response to various interview questions (Appendix A). Many of the participants described how their role is determined by their principal and how their work is defined for them by their principal.

In this sub-category, findings include: the principal determines the needs of the school and then assigns tasks to the vice-principal, the vice-principal takes direction from the principal because the principal is seen as the boss, the vice-principal is expected to follow the working style of the principal, the principal/vice-principal relationship is hierarchical, the nature of the vice-principal role can change depending on who is in the principal role, the principal sets the vision for the school regardless of the vice-principal’s vision, the vice-principal role is simply that of helper for the principal, and the principal conducts the performance appraisal of the vice-principal.

Mitch spoke about how he takes direction from his principal. He explained that his principal determines the needs in the school and then delegates tasks and duties to him. In this case, Mitch describes a situation involving student discipline.

My support that I get from my principal tends to be really direct and extremely focused. The support I get from my principal is, OK, we have a student who has had this thing happen. How do you think you should handle that? I’ll ask some questions. I’ll respond. Then we’ll discuss different approaches. Because it’s in the school here and there is a workload to get done, the principal will say, why don’t you take care of this? More of a direct, in-charge, delegating to me what needs to get done or what she sees needs to get done.
Mitch

Another of the participants, Tanya, explained that her role is determined by her principal in that she takes direction from him in her work. Tanya stated that she takes this direction because she sees the principal/vice-principal relationship as hierarchical. Tanya described how she was directed to assume responsibility for the character education initiative within the school. She also identified that she feels fortunate that her leadership style meshes well with that of her principal.

I really know where he stands on issues. I’m definitely going to take my direction from him because he’s the boss. I’m really lucky that our styles mesh. … I really focus on the character education piece. We’re really trying to build that in as a school board. Here, I’ve really headed it up on our end with our intermediates. We’re really working hard to model to them what it is to be a solid citizen. We’re focusing on character traits.

Tanya

Sati voiced frustration with the fact that her role was determined by her principal. She described how they have different working styles and that she felt she needed to follow the principal’s direction even if it involved working very long hours which impacted on her time with her family.

The principal … was disorganized, demanded that you work very, very long hours. He expected that. You’d be here until 8:00 at night and then you’d go for a glass of wine and have your admin meeting then. That was very difficult for me. I have a family.

Sati
Another of the participants, Mark, described how his role is determined by his principal. He explained that his principal created a hierarchical environment where he was made to feel that he works for her. The tone of Mark’s comments was indicative of his frustration with this working relationship and the nature of the work that was assigned to him.

…you always feel that you’re working for them. And the principal I have right now is very clear about that relationship. It is her school. I am her vice-principal. I work for her. … A lot of what I have to do is the behaviour. I deal with all the behaviour. I deal with all the bussing. I deal with the newsletter. That stuff. Those are roles a vice-principal has. … I’m thinking, you’re paying me how much an hour to figure out who runs on which bus? Hello! I also do the newsletter. I type maybe 20 words a minute and the secretary types 90 words a minute. Why am I doing this stupid newsletter?

Mark

Similar sentiments were expressed by Laurie. In her short time as a vice-principal, Laurie had worked with two different principals due to administrative moves within her school district. Laurie described the significant differences in the principal / vice-principal relationship depending on the particular principal with whom she worked. Laurie’s comments about her second principal and how her role was determined for her by the principal are powerful because of how succinctly she described her experience. Laurie had worked with one principal who included her as an administrative partner. She described her second principal as a person who simply told her what she needed to do and then to do it.
My first principal was very collaborative and involved me in everything. That was great. My second principal … In her mind, there was a role for the P and a role for the VP. She told me what the VP’s role was. Get on with it!

Laurie

Laurie went on to describe her vice-principal experience as one where the principal is the leader of the school and sets the vision for the school. Out of this, her role is to take direction by following the vision of the principal even if the views of the principal and the vice-principal do not align. Laurie did not feel that her vision as a leader was valued or even welcomed.

As a vice-principal talking to your principal, even when they invite you to give information about how you might want to see changes in the school, there is a certain barrier there. You’re working with that person and even if you would do things differently if it were your school, that’s not where the conversation would generally go. … inside the school, when it’s your principal, I found I’m limited in what I talked about. A little more guarded. You’re very careful because as a VP you’re working with the principal’s vision. I have my own vision of school and I try to mesh that with the vision of the principal. But the bottom line is, it’s the principal of the school who is running the school and they can either accept the pieces of the vision you have or not. … She had a clear vision of what the school should be like and in no uncertain terms, I had to fit within her vision.

Laurie

Judy described a similar experience. She explained that her role is determined by
her principal because the principal has already determined the vision and direction of the school. Judy sees her role as vice-principal as one where she is simply helping the principal by carrying out the principal’s vision of the school and not exercising her own leadership in the school.

But with the principal it’s a very different relationship. The principal is more like…me supporting what’s happening here and ensuring her vision is fulfilled and helping her. The vision’s already there. I just kind of help.

Judy

Elisa spoke about the nature of the principal / vice-principal relationship less as a hierarchical relationship but rather one where there is a supervisory aspect. Elisa identified that she had a very good relationship with her principal but that she was aware that her principal is her supervisor and is the person who appraises her, thus her role is determined by the principal due to the supervisory nature of the relationship.

…even though I have a great relationship with my principal, I’m still very cognizant of the fact that this is the person who is going to be appraising me, the person who’s my boss.

Elisa

Each of the participants quoted above provided experiences that were unique to their own circumstances yet there is little doubt from their comments that each one believed that their role - and their work - as vice-principal were determined by the principal. Even though the range of experiences was broad, the commonality among the participants illustrates the variety of ways in which their principals determined their roles.
Expectation to Follow the Principal’s Decisions

Several of the vice-principal participants described their principals as the decision-makers in the school. The vice-principals believed that they were then expected to follow decisions made by the principal and to support them even if they did not necessarily agree with what the principal had decided. In this sub-category, findings include the need to maintain a united front with the principal by supporting the principal’s decisions, the need to keep quiet as a vice-principal even when beliefs are different, and discomfort about the use of power in an administrative role. The following three quotations are samples from the interviews that illustrate this perspective.

Marni spoke about her struggle with both following her principal’s decisions and what she felt was the need to show a united public front. Marni explained that she felt she could not approach her principal about such differences of opinion because it would be seen as confrontational.

…the principal makes the decision and I have to follow it, support it. We’re a united front but I may not agree with it. A couple of times in the last couple of weeks I have called up my mentor and said I want to fire something off you. I’m not going to tell you which side I take. I say, here’s the situation. Here’s one side of the coin. Here’s the other side of the coin. Give me your perspective. I could never have that conversation with my admin partner. Not because it’s unprofessional, just because it would challenge the decisions that he or she makes and the decisions I’ve made. I think the relationship you have with your mentor outside of your admin partner is really different. Even professionally, we never want to be seen in light of our admin partners not having the answers.
Marni

Diane elaborated on this thinking in her comments. She stated that she believed she needed to follow her principal’s decisions and to show a united front even if the principal’s decision did not align with her own beliefs. Diane described how she struggled with situations where there was a difference in fundamental beliefs. Diane explained that she felt she needed to keep quiet about issues when she did not agree with her principal even if this was in conflict with what she believed in.

You don’t choose your principal. You don’t choose your school. You are placed there. Not to diminish that relationship. You make the most of the relationship. That is there because it has to be there. Regardless of what conflict you may have or disagreements you might have with the principal in terms of what’s happening in the school, you always show a united front with your staff, your students, and your parents…. Sometimes as a vice-principal, you have to do what the principal believes, not what you believe. So you need to be professionally courteous of the fact that the principal is above you and you may not fully agree with whatever decision is being made by the principal but you have to go along with it because they are the principal. So sometimes I struggle with keeping my mouth shut. It’s very real.

Diane

One other vice-principal, Ona, described significant discomfort at the direction she was given by her principal and how she was expected to follow his decisions. Ona described how she was instructed by her principal to approach different people in different ways. She explained
that this behaviour made her uncomfortable because she felt it was an inappropriate use of power and, as such, is an inappropriate behaviour for a principal or a vice-principal.

He told us what to do and how to approach people. I didn’t feel comfortable with that, so that was a challenge. If there were people on staff that he didn’t like for one reason or another,.....sometimes as an administrator, one can make their life difficult in different ways, maybe to get them to move on to a different school. Walking into a school brand new and seeing that take place, and not knowing the teacher and seeing that teacher relating with the kids, or the teacher’s involvement in the school, walking into a school where there are negative attitudes toward certain staff members. I didn’t necessarily get to see that perspective yet. Being told to approach them in a certain way was very difficult. I struggled with that the whole year. Sometimes, when in a position of power, power goes to people’s heads. I’ve seen that happen and that is not the purpose of the role. That’s not what being in a principal’s chair is all about or being in a vice-principal’s chair. … it was a very uncomfortable chair to be in and an uncomfortable position to be in because that’s not my style. That was a huge challenge - that whole year.

Ona

A number of the participants in the study described their principals as the decision-makers in the school. These vice-principals explained that they felt they were expected to follow decisions made by the principal and to support these decisions even if they did not necessarily agree with what the principal had decided.
Preparation for the Role of Principal

During the course of the interviews, most participants commented on how they perceived their vice-principal experiences as preparatory in anticipation of the role of principal. The vice-principals described the time in their vice-principal role as a period to learn what is necessary for the principalship. In this sub-category, findings include: the principal sees the vice-principal role as preparatory for the principal role, vice-principals see the role as preparatory for the principal role, the vice-principal role provides opportunity for learning about specific aspects of the principal role, and, how all experiences in the vice-principal role can be growth experiences for the principal role.

Daniel described how his principal sees the vice-principal role as preparatory for the principalship. He described how his principal supported the perspective that the vice-principal role is a time when there are opportunities to have preparatory learning experiences. Daniel’s principal would actively seek out opportunities for him to learn. Daniel described learning about operational aspects of school leadership as helping him to prepare for the principalship.

My principal will look for learning opportunities and experiences… that aren’t necessarily part of my portfolio or even something that would have come across my desk as a learning experience. … I mean, if I have a question about a particular computer program or if there is a form that needs to be filled in…. I’ve worked with the Remembrance Day group. There’s Parents’ Night, organization for the upcoming literacy test……

Daniel

Linda described how, as a vice-principal, she sees the vice-principal role as a preparatory time for the role of principal. She stated that the vice-principal role for her is a time when she
needs to prepare herself for the future role of principal in part by clarifying her own philosophy of education, in part by considering how she might handle different situations, and in part how she would need to adjust her thinking about situations in dealing with different people who have different perspectives on situations.

I think in the vice-principal role you’re trying to prepare yourself for the principal role… so you’re trying to establish those lines, those boundaries. Your whole educational philosophy is coming into play. Each time you come up with a situation you have to think, how would I handle it? So you think, maybe it’s not the right way. Maybe I need to shift thinking and be open – those kinds of things. I would have done it this way and then to have that other person say, nope, I agree with that person, or I agree with you, or you know, you could do it either way and neither way is wrong. It’s time to grow and develop as an educator.

Linda

Another participant, Judy, described her time in the vice-principal role as an opportunity to learn about specific areas of school administration that she would need to know as a principal. She identified learning in the area of special education that she had done as a vice-principal as being of value to her future role. She described herself as excited by this learning because she believed she would be a better principal thanks to these experiences. Judy stated, “… my spec ed portfolio tripled…. I’ve learned a lot about spec ed and I’m excited about that because I’ll be a better principal for it.”

One other participant, Jackie, explained that she saw her vice-principal experiences – good or bad – as growth opportunities that would support her in her future principal role. Jackie identified the value of working as a vice-principal with different principals in order to gain a
It would be nice if you could choose your leader but it’s also worthwhile for me, as a future principal, to be given opportunities to work with a lot of different leaders so that I have a lot of experiences under my belt. Even if it’s coping with someone who is abrasive and hard to work with. … As a principal you’re going to deal with people who are abrasive and hard to work with, so it gives you the experience of that to become a better leader.

Jackie

Most of the participants in the study commented on how they believed that their vice-principal experiences were preparatory for them in anticipation of the role of principal. The vice-principals described the time in their role as a period to learn what is necessary for the principalship.

The *Ontario Leadership Framework* describes what good school leadership looks like in terms of the roles of principal and vice-principal (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). The Framework presents the practices and competencies of the roles as being the same. The vice-principal participants in this study did not speak about their experiences of the role as an opportunity to exercise the practices and competencies presented in the OLF. Rather, they described their experiences as having their role and their work determined by their principal, the expectation to follow decisions made by the principal whether they agreed with the decisions or not, and their experiences in the role as preparatory for their next role – that of principal. The vice-principals explained how they used their experiences as learning opportunities to build
capacity for the principalship. These experiences of the role, whether good or bad, shape the understanding these vice-principals have of their role and, as a result, shape their understanding of what they need to learn through their coaching. It is interesting to note that none of the participants presented themselves as career vice-principals. Each of them saw themselves as moving to the principal role at some point in the future.

Coaching Processes

The terms ‘mentoring’ and ‘coaching’ are frequently used interchangeably and can mean different things to different people (Daresh, 2004; Spiro et al. 2007; Hobson, 2003). Within the field of education, mentoring is generally used to refer to a professional relationship between a knowledgeable and experienced individual who supports and assists a less experienced colleague (Daresh, 2004; Kram, 1983; Hobson, 2003) while coaching refers to a structured process for enabling the development of a specific aspect of an individual’s practice (National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching, 2005). Each of the fourteen vice-principal participants in this study spoke about various aspects of the coaching experience as they experienced them. However, they did indeed use the two terms interchangeably. In fact, in one case, one of the participants used the two terms in a single sentence. Regardless of the intended use of these terms in research, professional, or policy literature, the participants in this study did not use these two terms to mean two different processes or experiences. Given the responses of the participants, there was no clear distinction made between coaching and mentoring.

The results in this section are based on participant responses to the interview questions (Appendix A) and are presented within five sub-categories. The first sub-category addresses the
establishment of coaching for all newly-appointed vice-principals by the school district. The second sub-category presents results concerning the variety of formats of the coaching. The third sub-category presents findings about the coach. The fourth sub-category addresses the process used to match coachees with coaches. The fifth sub-category concerns an exit process in the event the coaching is not working well for the coachee.

Established by the School District

In the province of Ontario, the *School Board Guideline for Implementation of Mentoring for Newly Appointed School Leaders* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a) requires school districts to provide mentoring/coaching to all newly-appointed vice-principals and principals. According to the Ministry, newly-appointed is defined as the first two years of each of these roles. Participants from each of the five school districts in the study spoke about the coaching processes that were established in their districts. The findings from the participants in the study indicate that even with a Ministry of Education Guideline that articulated provincial expectations for coaching within each school district (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a), different districts introduced and implemented coaching in different ways.

Ona, one of four participants in the study from the same school district, explained some of the steps her school district took in establishing the coaching program for newly-appointed school leaders. She explained how the coach-coachee relationships were created, some of the professional learning that was provided to the new leaders, and how the conversations were supported through both guiding questions and the provision of time for more personalized learning.
They set the stage for the mentor/mentee relationship. There’s a committee that has set this up for us. They did the matching up. They provided four different sessions to date. Those are sessions for all the mentors and mentees to all get together. They have PD at those sessions. One day they had safe schools. They chose themes that would be applicable to all administrators. After that they gave us time to branch off with our mentors for about an hour. Sometimes it was guided with questions on areas that we could discuss and share. Other times it was much more open and we were able to talk about things that were on our mind at that point, often stemming from the PD but not always finishing there. They always embedded time for personal stuff.

Ona

In another school district, Mark described briefly some of the steps his school district took in establishing coaching. Mark’s description of his school district’s approach to establishing coaching for newly-appointed vice-principals suggested that it was neither well-planned nor well-executed. Mark stated that he believed his school district needed to be specific in its vision of how it approached coaching and then to be specific in its delivery.

They did have us come together for large-group sessions. Mentors and mentees – we would come together and we would do the leadership continuum or have a speaker, or something. As part of the roll-out there was the large-group, small group, and then we’d meet individually. … The other group of principals who had arranged the workshops, they had a vision of what they were doing but I wouldn’t say it was planned well in advance. This is what they had done before. One of those principals is working on her SO papers so I don’t know if we were her
practicum project or not – being the cynical jaded person that I am. I don’t think as a Board they had a real structure for us. … They gave us lots of print resources like books and stuff. We received a lot of OPC… There’s a series of books by OPC that were purchased for us. … I think they need to articulate a vision of it in terms of specifically what it is that they are trying to encourage or build in us as we go through this. And then be more systematic in how they approach that.

Mark

Jackie was the sole participant in the study from her school district. Even though she spoke glowingly about her own coaching experience, she had difficulty describing how coaching was established in her school district.

The way it was set up with the Board, it was the best they could do. Because, as I said, the time constrictions are just so difficult. … And we did meet at the Board office too. It was part of a program. There were meetings at the Board office but usually they were structured around a lecture of describing the kind of things you could do, or giving ideas, and so on. There was a little time to talk but not a lot. … They just called it mentoring. I don’t think they gave it a specific kind of name. They left it up to us how we wanted to approach it, how we wanted to use it. I did feel a little like they didn’t know any more than I did what to do with this.

Jackie

In one of the other school districts included in this study, two of the participants described the first two steps in establishing coaching in their school district. Tori described the first step when all newly-appointed school leaders were invited to a social event as an
orientation. She spoke about how the coaching process was introduced to them and then was initiated by the introduction of the goal-setting templates they would use to guide the coaching sessions.

I was sent an email and somebody called me as well. They said that every new principal and vice-principal who is new to the role is invited to have a mentor who can help them along and connect them and answer questions. Why don’t you come to this evening – an orientation - and you can find out more information. I went to this orientation evening. It was a really lovely wine and cheese and the Superintendent was there and the people in charge of the mentor/mentee program. They talked a little bit about what it was and what it looks like. We were given templates for our goal-setting. I think we had picked our mentors at that point and if we had, we sat with them. They gave us a question so we could discuss it with our mentor.

Tori

Another vice-principal, Tanya, in the same school district provided additional information about the second step of introducing and establishing coaching in the school district. She described how the second step of the introduction was a special-event day presented by the Ministry of Education which she attended with her mentor/coach. They were introduced to the documents that would support the learning that could occur during the coaching sessions. Tanya also spoke about the flexibility that the school district encouraged in implementing the individual coaching relationships.

We met as a group in the Fall 2008 we went to Toronto and we had a mentor-mentee day. It was put on through the Ministry. That was our kick-off into
everything. At that time I didn’t have my mentor but after that day we made plans. It was a great day. We went over a document. It had all the sections we are to look for. It’s going to be a performance appraisal for us in the future. We had an opportunity to talk about that. I know that was the direction in terms of setting goals. … That’s how we started. From there, it was outlined for us, you’re going to meet, you’re going to coordinate monthly meetings. They really left it up to us how we wanted to take it. There’s opportunities to go to conferences too. It’s not that we are only just supposed to meet and chat formally about things. We can go and do some professional development together.

Tanya

Even though all of the participants cited here participated in coaching provided by their school district, that is the only real commonality of experience. Based on the comments from the participants, they all took part in coaching yet it was introduced and implemented in different ways in different school districts.

A Variety of Formats

Even though the Ministry of Education distributed the School Board Guideline for Implementation of Mentoring for Newly Appointed School Leaders (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a) to all school districts in Ontario, the intent of the Guideline was to provide a framework for implementation of mentoring/coaching. It is not a prescriptive document. Thus, the delivery of mentoring/coaching in each school district could be done in different ways, using different formats, depending on the local needs and contexts of the school district. The participants cited below shed light on the variety of formats of coaching in which they
participated. These formats included one-to-one coaching, small-group coaching, or a combination of the two.

Tori spoke about her experience in a small group coaching format where participants met monthly. She described the sessions as varying from month to month based on the needs of the participants. In addition, she described the format as one where all participants, including the coach, were equal participants in a co-learning environment.

Last year we actually had a mentoring group. We would meet as a group at least once a month and it could look different every time. One time we would all come with some kind of hot topic or issue that was bothering us and we’d brainstorm and help each other. She [the coach] really fostered that kind of environment not where I’m up here and you’re all down there. We’re together and we’re a team and we can all learn from each other regardless of where we are on our learning journey.

Later in her interview, Tori described how her school district made some changes in the coaching program and wanted each coachee to participate only in one-on-one coaching sessions. Tori enjoyed both the small group coaching and the one-on-one coaching with her coach. She liked the small-group coaching because she felt it provided her with good learning. However, her school district gave direction that all coaching needed to be one-to-one. She expressed disappointment that her group coaching was not to continue as she believed that the coaching needed to be designed in such a way as to meet the needs of the participants.

I don’t like that they said we are limited to the one-on-one mentoring because mentoring needs to be what works for you not what they say is going to work for
you. I see a lot of value in my one-on-one relationship with Charmaine, but we were all hurt and upset when they took away our group mentoring. We were learning a lot off of each other. We would talk about the collective is so much better than a person on their own. Sometimes somebody else in the room would have something to offer on that particular topic or issue that I could fit into my context.

Tori

Sati explained the coaching sessions in which she participated in her school district. She described that all coaches and coachees were brought together as a large group session with guest speakers and a pre-determined learning agenda. Once the guest speakers completed their presentations, individual coachees would meet with their coaches to engage in one-to-one conversations. These conversations might relate to the learning of the day or could be directly related to school-specific or personal issues raised by the coachee. A different format about which she spoke was the individually-arranged coaching sessions where the coachee could meet with her coach – and possibly other coachees. One of the other participants, Mark, who works in a different school district, described a virtually identical range of formats for his coaching.

It’s divided into two types of sessions. Usually we meet for a half day – sometimes a full day. Usually we have a breakfast session at a big conference centre close by. All the mentors and mentees attend. Then there will be a keynote speaker, for example, on various topics. Sometimes there will be a couple of keynotes speakers. The last ones we had were around OFIP and the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. That was very helpful. We’ve had Safe Schools people in to talk about changes in legislation and what that looks like for
the Board, the VP, etc. After that we usually have a time block for however many of the mentees who were able to show, we’ll sit down and meet with our mentor and talk about any issues that were raised in the presentation and then drift away into school-based issues and any personal/professional things that are related to our leadership framework goals. We talk about that and when we’re going to get together again next time. … That would be one type of session. The other type of session would be going out and meeting either one-on-one with the mentor over lunch or in the group with the mentor.

Sati

Linda was a participant in yet another school district. She spoke about the variety of formats for coaching used in her school district. The first type she described was formally scheduled professional learning sessions at the school district central office along with her coach. These were less coaching sessions and more general professional learning sessions in which coaches and coachees participated together. The first type of coaching she described was ‘on-site’ sessions where she and her coach scheduled time to visit each other’s schools and to have the coaching conversations in their own schools. The second type she described was a format which can best be described as informal. These sessions were not formally scheduled and took place on an as-needs basis. Linda spoke about these sessions as much more personal and related to her emotional growth.

We have ones that are scheduled here at the Board office. The Board gives us time to meet on a regular basis – probably about four or five times a year. We participate in those where there is a structured setting. Another type of coaching we participate in is on-site – an opportunity for my mentor to come to my school.
We walk around the school and meet in my office. We walk around and see things that are happening and I’ll ask for suggestions about things that are happening. And opportunities for me to go to her school and see what is happening there – on-site things. And we’ve had other opportunities just to kind of meet socially where we’ve gone out for lunch and just had that casual – not anywhere near a school setting to meet and just talk. Just talk about, How’s it going? Anything you want to talk about? Anything you want to discuss? Those kinds of things. There’s that formalized professional learning here at the Board office. There’s the on-site sharing of information and professional growth there. And then there’s just those casual kinds of conversations and times to meet where we’ll just meet for coffee or for lunch and we’ll have that sharing more on a personal level. … The ones at the Board office and the ones we have between our schools are more scheduled. And the other ones are on an as-needs basis. The other form of communication we have quite regularly is through email and phone calls. … When we pick those site visits or the ones here at the Board office, there’s purpose. The ones where we meet informally for lunch, it’s more of a, How’s it going? kind of thing. It’s not so much professional learning but that emotional growth kind of thing.

Linda

Another participant in the study, Elisa, came from the same school district as Linda. She described additional variations in the format of coaching. She described formal, pre-determined professional learning sessions provided for all coaches and coachees by the school district at the central offices. She stated that these sessions were created out of the needs identified by the
vice-principal coachees. In addition, she identified informal coaching sessions that she had with her coach. The informal coaching sessions were supplemented by electronic communications with her coach so that they could stay in close and easy contact.

A lot of it is up here at the Board. We meet in very formalized sessions. We’ve had meetings of mentors and mentees and we bring up hot topics that we want to discuss, like appraisals, or whatever it is. We give those hot topics to Bruce, or Jane Heppler last year, and they have experts come in and we hear that. That’s only part of the mentoring process. It’s also picking up the berry [Blackberry] and emailing. I got an email recently from Maria asking, How’s it going? Did you have a good March Break? So it’s just a lot of informal too. So if there are any questions that I have, I have a go-to person if I need to that’s safe. It’s a safe, non-judgmental person I can seek advice from. So there’s the two parts. There’s the informal and there’s the formal.

Elisa

Even though the Ministry of Education provided a non-prescriptive School Board Guideline for Implementation of Mentoring for Newly Appointed School Leaders (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a), the participants in the study described a variety of formats for the coaching. This variety ranged from large-group professional development sessions with all coaches and coachees through to small-group coaching and one-to-one coaching. Most of the participants expressed a preference for one of these formats of coaching without any one being preferred by a majority of the participants.
A Skilled and Trained Coach

All of the participants in the study commented on their coaches as being skilled leaders. Research literature on the topic is limited but that which does exist, recommends that coaches for newly-appointed school leaders be well-experienced and exemplary school leaders themselves (Monsour, 1998; Kirkham, 1995). Current literature recommends that potential coaches be trained in the appropriate skills prior to assuming the coaching role (Spiro et al. 2007; NCSL, 2005).

Common to the comments made by the participants about their coaches was that they were skilled leaders with a breadth of leadership experiences from whom the coachees could learn. The vice-principals in the study described their coaches as being skilled in managerial responsibilities, instructional leadership, dealing calmly with difficult situations, motivating staff members, handling issues in a thorough manner, and providing effective leadership in running a school.

Linda described her coach as a person who was very skilled in organization. Linda recognized the managerial responsibilities of her role and the need to manage the time demands of these responsibilities so that she could focus more on her instructional leadership. Linda admired her coach’s skills in organization and the ‘great ideas’ she provided. Linda admired both the managerial and instructional leadership skills of her coach.

The management, although it’s not the focus, it’s a huge part of the job and if you have the good management skills – in terms of time and organization – it allows you more time to be that instructional leader within the school. I think my mentor has really helped me in terms of that management part. She’s very organized and has so many great ideas for handling so many different things. Being able to see
all those different types of things that she does has helped me further refine my practice to allow me to have more time to do those other kinds of things. It’s helped me to develop as a manager.

Linda

Daniel did not meet very often with the coach provided for him by his school district. However, his own principal was a trained coach and provided him with most of his coaching. Daniel expressed admiration for his principal’s ability to deal with difficult situations in a calm and collected way. He also admired the principal’s ability to motivate a very large staff.

I see the principal as being an exceptional coach as well. … how they deal with the million little incidents or the tiny crises that come up during a day. Seeing someone - how they deal with it – the calm, cool, collected way they do it. … I’ve seen their ability to motivate a hundred staff members toward a common purpose.

Daniel

Mark described his coach, James, as a knowledgeable individual who was skilled in handling issues within a school. Mark provided an example of an accident that happened at his school and how James handled it when both Mark and his principal were away from the school. Mark expressed admiration for the clinical response taken by James and described his own response as likely being more focused on attending to the personal and emotional needs of the injured child and less so on the ‘risk management’ issues. Mark also described James as a person who was willing to share his leadership experiences with his coachees.

Quite knowledgeable in the role. …… James is very good at managing issues in the school. … A nice guy – more than willing to share his experience. … James is
very good at managing issues in schools and thinking like a principal. He was over – he covered when both the principal and I were out – he covered for a half day – and a child tripped on the yard, or whatever, and he went very clinical. He went, show me your shoes, where were you walking? Just that very clinical triage, whereas I would go, Are you OK? Can I get you anything? He did that risk management part. He did that, that leadership piece, and he’s good at that part.

Mark

Tanya’s coach was the principal of her school prior to her placement at that school. She described that she knew him prior to their coaching relationship. She explained that she and her coach shared a common vision and a common approach to leadership. She admired how he had run the school prior to her appointment there. Tanya also stated that her admiration for him was so great that she aspired to be a leader like him.

We knew each other previously. We share a similar vision and we’re common in our approach so that drew me to him, probably, and why I asked him. I think he’s great. I think how he lead our school and how he leads, I would like to aspire towards that. That’s certainly why I wanted to work with him.

Tanya

Diane expressed similar respect and admiration for the skills of her coach. Diane commented specifically on her coach’s accomplishments as a leader. Much as with Tanya, Diane explained that she wanted to guide her career as she saw her coach’s career because of the respect she had for her.
It’s just that I trust her and I respect her and I see what she has done as a professional and it’s almost, as I’m talking to you, I’m striving to guide my career as I see hers because I really respect what she’s done. It’s not that I want to be exactly like her but I want to emulate some of the skills and qualities that she has demonstrated as a leader. That’s what I’m looking for. I hope that when I’m two years from retirement, I can look back and see that I have made the change in somebody else the way she has made a change in me. You want to strive to be them – but your own person. There’s always the quality of the person that you really respect and she has that quality.

Diane

Throughout the literature on coaching there is an identified need for the training of coaches in order for them to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to support newly-appointed school leaders (Spiro et al. 2007). Coaches need to receive training in order to provide high-quality learning experiences for their coachees (Gray, Fry, O’Neill, 2007; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a; Kirkham, 1995; Monsour, 1998; Suggett, 2006). Several of the participants in the study recognized that their coaches had been trained in coaching. Only Marni was able to identify her coach as using specific coaching skills in their coaching conversations.

Marni spoke in detail about the processes her coach used in their coaching sessions. Her comments provided evidence of the training her coach received because it reflected the recommended processes outlined in the Ontario Ministry of Education’s School Board Guideline for Implementation of Mentoring for Newly Appointed School Leaders (2008a).

He would ask me to complete the template and we would use the Leadership Framework that the Ministry put out. He would ask me to identify a skill or a
competency. Where was I on the continuum and where did I want to get to? And then ask me to facilitate how I saw myself getting there. That was all done and prepped ahead of time. Then when we met, he would allow me the opportunity to talk about it. And then, rather than just saying, that’s great, or whatever, he would use guiding questions.

Marni

In many cases the participants were aware of the training their coach had received to prepare them for their role. However, most of the participants made only brief comments or references to this training. The following quotations illustrate some of this commentary. Mitch stated, “Part of the training he got in the training for the mentor program is, he’ll ask questions.” Linda commented in a similar way about her coach in saying, “I know that part of the training because my mentor shared with me some of the training.” Tori made a passing reference to the training coaches received when she said, “They had to do some training to be a mentor.”

Without exception, the vice-principal participants described their coaches as skilled and knowledgeable both as leaders and as coaches. Some of the participants were aware of the training their coaches had and described it briefly. Even though two of the participants in the study had poor matches initially, once each was settled into a coaching relationship, they all spoke with great respect about the knowledge and skills of their coaches.

Matching Process

One of the most frequently identified elements of an effective coaching program is the existence of an intentional matching process that will establish a coach-coachee relationship that
can be sustained (Monsour, 1998). Special attention needs to be paid to the matching of coaches and coachees (Brown et al. 2005) to ensure that an effective learning relationship based on trust, mutual respect, confidentiality, and compatibility can be established (Bolam et al. 1995; Hegstad & Wentling, 2004).

All of the participants in this study spoke about the matching process they participated in to be connected with a coach. The experiences of these participants did not align exactly with the research and the professional literature. The range of participant responses included being able to ask any principal in the school district to serve as coach, the match being made centrally by the school district, coachees drawing the name of a coach from a hat, and the coachee needing to initiate contact with a potential coach.

Mitch described how he had an opportunity to select a coach from any principal in his school district. His initial request for a particular match was turned down because the person had not been in the principal role long enough. Mitch selected a second person and that match was approved. Even though the matching process he took part in did not appear to be purposefully or intentionally designed, he found the match to be successful for his needs.

Our Board took on the whole mentorship idea and asked who you would like to pick as a mentor. You had some time to think and to select who your mentor was going to be. My initial mentor contact, the person I picked, hadn’t been in the principal role long enough that they weren’t allowed to take on the role of being a mentor. I was a little disappointed because I think they had the skills and it was a good match. Then I selected my mentor and he agreed to take on that role. Then he went through some training to be in that role. I think it was a good match.

Mitch
Sati spoke about her school district’s process of making matches centrally through the school district’s central office. She believed that regardless of the nature of the matching process, the coach-coachee relationship could still prove to be successful as a learning relationship even if there was not a close personal relationship.

Even if you’ve been matched with someone you didn’t know from before, which was my case, you’re still going to learn from that person. It may or may not be someone you’re going to develop a close relationship with but you’re still going to learn from that person. And that person is still going to be there to guide you. … They can recognize things in you that maybe need that push forward or more development.

Sati

Diane described how she was arbitrarily matched with her coach. She did not know her coach nor the other colleagues who became part of a coaching group in which she participated. It is interesting to note that Diane was one of those who spoke most glowingly about her coaching experiences during the research interview.

I threw my name into a bag of administrators wanting to be coaches and then we were put together as a group. I was put together with a group of colleagues that I didn’t know. I knew their faces. I sort of knew roughly the areas and schools they belonged to but I hadn’t really connected with them. I was put with two coaches at that time who I didn’t really know anything about.

Diane

Tori described how she initiated the match with her coach. She explained that she was new both to the school district as well as the vice-principal role. In coming to a new school
district, she knew very few people. Through the advice of a vice-principal friend, she initiated a call to her friend’s coach. This coach agreed to work with her as well as the original vice-principal coachee. Tori described the process as simply a case of getting the name of a coach who was well-respected and then calling her to ask her to serve as her coach. In this way, the match was made. However, in the event that this approach didn’t work, Tori explained that the school district leader for coaching would support her in finding another suitable coach.

I did have a friend who came to the Board a year before me so when I said that I was going to need a mentor, it couldn’t be her because she was also new but she suggested her mentor. I called her and she said she would be happy to be my mentor. This lady is such an exceptional member of the Board that a number of people had asked her to be a mentor. … I chose her. I called her. The person in charge of the mentor/mentee program, if you just talked to them and said that you were a candidate and you’re interested and you need a match, they had the list of mentors. They had a list of questions and they would find out a little bit about you – even some of your goals and your learning needs. I think they tried to make a good match that way. You were given the option first to make your own match. I think I’m unique in my situation. Not a lot of people would come brand new to the Board and make a call to someone and have a match.

Tori

As part of the interview, all of the participants in the study were asked about the matching process they participated in to be connected with a coach. There was a great range of experiences which included being able to ask any principal in the school district to serve as coach, the match being made centrally by the school district, coachees drawing the name of a
coach from a hat, and the coachee needing to initiate contact with a potential coach. The participants did not describe any consistency in practice relative to being matched with a coach.

Exit Process

Current literature does not address the issue of an exit process in coaching relationships. An exit process refers to a clearly-articulated process for either a coachee or coach to use in the event that the coaching relationship is not proving to be effective. Professional literature rarely makes reference to an exit process. The School Board Guideline for Implementation of Mentoring for Newly Appointed School Leaders (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a) is one of the only documents that articulates the need for such a process to be in place. The majority of the participants in the study expressed positive feelings about their coaching experiences. It is possible that few participants referred to an exit process because they had not needed to consider the need to change their coach. The participants who did speak about an exit process described knowing that it was possible to change coaches, an awareness of an exit process, and speculation about the idea of an exit process.

One of the participants, Elisa, described herself as being fortunate in the match with her coach. She did, however, identify that she knew that she could change her coach if the match was not a good one for her.

They’ve [the school district] done a good job with this whole mentoring thing. I’ve been fortunate. I’ve had a great match. I think that’s really key. I would have needed to change if my match had not been made well.

Elisa
Tori, perhaps without being aware that she was referring to an exit process, presented an awareness of the need for the coachee to benefit from the coaching process. Through her comments, she explained that if a coach-coachee relationship was not working well for the coachee, the coachee should be able to make an arrangement to get a new coach.

It’s not something that should be done to you. It’s something you have to be a part of. It’s only going to be as good as the sum of the parts. You can have a mentor that doesn’t work for you. You could have personality issues and people would have to re-jig and get a new mentor. I’ve been lucky. I haven’t had that problem.

Tori

Mitch is another participant in the same school district as Tori. Just as with Tori, Mitch did not speak directly about an exit process. Mitch was unclear about the process in his school district to change his coach. However, he did speak about changing his coach in terms of his own professional learning. During the interview, Mitch speculated by wondering out loud about the idea of having a coach for a specific learning purpose and then changing his coach as his learning needs changed.

I wonder sometimes a little bit about the process in that once you’re connected with a mentor, I’m not sure how long that relationship will stay in place. It seems to me to be a good idea to consider reviewing it, relooking at it so that if, after one year, you thought you learned everything that that principal had to offer – and I recognize now that I’ve been in the role a little bit longer – I’d really like to have another person as a coach. They have some really good skills, so switching that up possibly.
Mitch

One of the participants in another school district, Jackie, did not describe an intentional exit process in her board, yet she did change her coach – not once, but twice - because she felt the first two were not meeting her needs. Jackie knew what she wanted from her coaching experience and so she made arrangements to change coaches. Without demonstrating awareness of an exit process, Jackie did indeed participate in one.

My problem with it was – and even the second time, although the leader I went to was a good person and I admired the way he ran his school – was, the way it was set up was that you had one, maybe two, meetings with the person and you kind of picked their brain. To me that’s not coaching. … It needs to be on ongoing experience. I think a mentor is somebody who walks with you for a year, or longer.

Jackie

Daniel was another participant who changed his coach. Again, during the course of the interview, he did not explicitly describe an exit process. However, he readily described how he did not pursue the relationship with his board-assigned coach and adopted his own principal as his coach.

I have a formal mentor assigned to me who is not in this school. … Not much of a relationship. We’ve chatted on the phone a couple of times. We agreed that if I were to have a concern, I could get together with them. It’s a very friendly relationship.

Daniel
Few of the participants referred to a coaching exit process. This may be the case because the majority of the coachees were happy with their coaches and had not needed to consider the need to make a change. The participants who did speak about an exit process described knowing that it was possible to change coaches or an awareness of an exit process. This being said, it is of interest to note, that two of the participants changed their coach. They used an exit process without describing it as such.

Direction for coaching programs was provided to all school districts in Ontario through the *School Board Guideline for Implementation of Mentoring for Newly Appointed School Leaders* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a). The *Guideline* articulated provincial expectations for coaching within each school district while allowing for some variation relative to the contexts of the districts. The commentary of the participants in this study indicated that there was a range of experiences relative to how the coaching program was established, the coaching formats in which the participants were involved, the nature of the matching process, and the existence of an exit process. In contrast with this range of experiences, there was consistency among virtually all participants relative to their coaches. The participants viewed their coaches as skilled and knowledgeable both as leaders and as coaches.

Experiences of the Coaching Process

Experiences of the coaching process are the second category in this section of the results. Within this category there are six sub-categories. The first sub-category presents results addressing the feelings participants had toward their coaching. The second sub-category presents the range of preferences the participants had for the format of their coaching. The third sub-category includes results relative to participant preferences for the scheduling of coaching
sessions. The fourth sub-category concerns the focus on personalized learning. The fifth sub-category includes the results relative to the focus on leader practice. The six sub-category concerns opportunities for reflection.

*Feelings about Coaching*

Every one of the fourteen participants in the study spoke highly of their coaching experiences. However, the participants spoke highly about their coaching for different reasons. Participants identified the following as reasons why they enjoyed their coaching experiences: the opportunity for professional learning, support, the ability to access information needed in carrying out daily work, easy access to the coach, and that the coach would not evaluate performance.

One of the participants, Tori, spoke exuberantly and enthusiastically about the coaching experience and expressed the wish that it could be equally successful in all school districts. Tori felt that she gained a lot from the experience.

I love the coaching experience. I wish it was something that every Board had in full force and that it was working as well as it’s working for me personally. …

You can tell that I am absolutely thrilled with it and I’m getting a lot out of it.

Tori

Mitch described how he sometimes dreaded his coaching sessions because he felt burdened by his workload at the school. However, he explained that once he had his coaching session he realized that he could step out of his school for a period of time to engage in this form of professional learning. Furthermore, he felt pleased that he had taken part, that he had benefitted from it, and that he could still manage his day-to-day workload even though he had left his school for the duration of the session.
When I have an appointment booked with him for mentor time set aside with him I will look at it in my day book and I go, ahh, and not be overly enthusiastic about it because I look at it and I think, I’ve got this to do, and this to do, and this to do,….. because your workload is always there. If you take time away from that workload nobody is coming in to pick it up for you and I think, do I have time to do this? Every single time I come back I feel refreshed, motivated, positive. At the beginning of my vice-principalship all I could see was the work that needed to get done. Now, I’ve been in it long enough to recognize that I can break away from that and I can go and spend some time that is really personal and professional learning for myself and come back and feel good about it. I never arrive back at the school regretting it. I always feel positive and I find time to get the work done. I think it’s really important to find the time because it does motivate for sure. … The open conversation, the social benefits, and the chance to leave the workload here and then just to open my mind up. I find that beneficial. Overall, I enjoy it and find it helpful.

Mitch

Another participant, Diane, expressed satisfaction with the coaching program set up by her school district. Even though she did not go into detail about the circumstances, she stated that she believed she had moved forward in her role, even in the face of some negative experiences, thanks to the support she received from her coaching.

I would probably say right off the bat that I’ve been very satisfied with it, specially how the Danbury Board has set up coaching for me as a new vice-
principal. … I would never have been able to move forward with as much positive experiences – even when there have been negative times – in a positive manner.

Diane

Laura, as a vice-principal with a little over one year’s experience, described her feelings about coaching as very positive. She appreciated the fact that the support of coaching was available to her as soon as she was appointed vice-principal. Laura identified how she felt her coach was a help to her in getting information she needed in order to deal with some of the daily work demands of her job.

I think it has been a very positive experience. I have been in the role of vice-principal now for a year and about 4 months. I was able to participate in the program right when I started. Right off the bat, the Board connected me with somebody. They gave me the opportunity to pick somebody that I might like to have as my mentor. I gave in the names of a few different people that I could learn from. It’s just been a very positive experience in terms of helping me grow professionally, just learn some practicalities about the role, some of the nuts and bolts of being a vice-principal, and bouncing ideas and situations off that person. So when you encounter something in the school you can go to the person and say, What would you do here? Just that second voice to be a sounding board – when you’re feeling a bit stressed in school or a bit overwhelmed, you can say, how’s it going? How’s your day going? Or, I’ve had such a bad day. And share the good things too. I found the relationship worked on so many different levels. We’ve established a personal friendship. There’s also the professional learning and then
there’s the practicalities, the nuts and bolts kinds of things. It’s very helpful. It’s been a very positive experience.

Linda

Daniel expressed similar positive feelings about his coaching experience. However, he spoke not about the coaching he received from the coach provided to him by the school district, but rather the ‘on-the-job’ coaching he received from his own principal – a trained coach. David spoke about many of the operational aspects of his vice-principal role. He explained that he believed the coaching from his principal was very positive because he could easily access his principal in a timely manner within the school on a day-to-day basis.

Coaching plays an important role. The most valuable aspect of it is the on-the-job coaching that comes from the day-to-day problem-solving. I think you have to have an effective team that you’re working with to get the best sort of mentoring. I’m very lucky here. I have a very supportive principal and vice-principal. There is great coaching here. … I have found that taking me out of the building is often a less effective use of my time rather than having me here dealing with situations here, learning on the job. … I see the principal as being an exceptional coach as well. … My experience is that the principal takes very much a coaching role. That may be unique to my principal. I don’t know if all are like that but I find him to be very supportive and very coaching right from the beginning. … if I have a question about a particular computer program or if there is a form that needs to be filled in or a hypothetical situation, I mean, yeah, they are learning experiences. Because the mentor themselves is not in the school the application of that learning is a little bit more difficult to place because they might not have the
full context, whereas if I ask the principal next to me, they may know where the event happened, the other parties involved, and they may be able to give me a better sense of how to deal with the situation.

Daniel

Ona works in the same school district as Daniel yet expressed somewhat different feelings about her coach. Whereas Daniel liked being coached by his own principal in an ‘on-the-job’ style, Ona stated that she was very comfortable with her coach and enjoyed her coaching, in part, because the coach was not her own principal, thus not a person who would evaluate her performance and yet would still be available to her to answer her questions.

…we were assigned a mentor – an experienced principal who was in another family of schools. They really encouraged a relationship being built. They offered funds for meals together, that sort of thing – that bonding time in order to get to know one another, be comfortable with one another and be able to ask our mentor questions and develop a relationship. That began the spring of last year and it’s been wonderful. It’s been really nice having that person I can call if I have any questions without it being an evaluative kind of role. It’s very comfortable to know that there is someone there who is also is committed to being a mentor and to having a mentee so I’ve really enjoyed that. … It’s been very, very helpful for me. It couldn’t have come soon enough. It’s kind of nice having it outside the family of schools. … As a vice-principal, being able to have a mentor, it’s a blessing.

Ona
All of the participants in the study spoke highly of their coaching experiences but for different reasons. The participants described the opportunity for professional learning, support, the ability to access information needed in carrying out daily work, the ease of access to the coach, and the non-evaluative nature of the relationship as reasons for their positive feelings.

*Format Preferences*

The participants in this study participated in three different types of groupings for coaching: one-to-one coaching, group coaching, or a combination of the two. According to the *National Framework for Coaching and Mentoring* (NCSL, 2005) and the *School Board Guideline for Implementation of Mentoring for Newly Appointed School Leaders* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a), neither group coaching nor one-to-one coaching is identified as a preferred or more effective process. Participants identified the following range of preferences in their groupings: one-to-one coaching, one-to-one coaching rather than group coaching, one-to-one coaching with a coach who knows the coachee intimately, increased confidential time with the coach during large-group sessions, group coaching, coaching that is organized based on the expressed needs of the coachees, and group coaching with a gender blend of coachees.

Ona, who participated in both group and one-to-one coaching, expressed a strong preference for one-to-one coaching.

What’s worked really well is that one-on-one time. … Most typically, it’s one-on-one. It’s the one-on-one time that I find most valuable. Once again, it’s not a mentor in my own school. It’s a mentor in a different school, in a different family. Just being outside one’s own family [family of schools], there is a
comfort level there. … When it’s one-on-one, it’s fabulous. … I think our preference is to meet one-on-one.

Ona

Judy spoke about her experiences with one-to-one and group coaching. She stated that she did not enjoy the group coaching as much because she felt that too much of the content related to the other coachees and as a result she did not benefit as much from the learning. Judy emphasized that she benefitted more from the one-on-one coaching and felt that it was the best process for her in terms of benefitting her practice.

I find that what happens is, I get together with my coach and two other mentees – we call them mentees – and we end up chatting about a variety of things. It becomes a swapping of stories, of war stories, and yes I learn from those and I gather new information from those, and that’s very helpful. However, it’s not what I would refer to as fulfilling coaching. Is it a good use of my time? Sometimes, if I learn something new. But sometimes I don’t want to sit and listen to another vice-principal and her issues and her school. That doesn’t benefit my practice in any way. … I like the one-to-one coaching. I’m getting so much from that. …

Judy

Jackie was in a unique situation in that her sister was a school principal and a trained coach. Jackie was matched with a coach in her school district but she also drew on her sister’s coaching skills. In talking about the experience of being coached by her sister, Jackie expressed sentiments that stressed her preference for one-to-one coaching with a coach who knows her
intimately. For Jackie, the most effective coaching is based on a strong one-to-one personal relationship. Sadly, Jackie’s sister recently passed away.

I would say, my sister’s coaching did. … She knows me forever so she could say, you know, this is the kind of person you are so you have to think about that side of it too. … You can’t disconnect who you are from yourself as a leader. I have a sense of humour so I’m going to bring that into my leadership. I’m tender-hearted so sometimes I’m going to cry. It’s part of myself as a person and I can’t disconnect that. And she helped me to say, when I was talking about or upset about a situation or frustrated, yeah, but Jackie, think about it. This is your approach to life. And she could bring up examples of me as a person outside of school and me as a person would react to a situation. So, therefore, as a leader, I’m going to react to situations the same way. And give me suggestions as to how to overcome it if it’s kind of a negative thing and be honest about that. That was very helpful for me. I know I’m not going to get that in most of my coaches and my bosses because they don’t know me as well as she did. I was in a really nice, situation there.

Jackie

Even though she participated in both group and one-to-one coaching, Elisa expressed a desire for more confidential one-to-one time to be built into large-group sessions. Elisa identified a desire to have some private time with her coach in order to address private matters within the confidentiality of the relationship she had with her coach. She did not feel she could discuss some issues within the larger group setting.
The one thing I would change on the Board process is, I have something that’s pretty confidential but we’re all in a room. It would be great if we were given maybe 5 or 10 minutes when we could discuss private matters without being obvious. Sometimes we’re in a smaller room with a lot of people and you don’t have the opportunity for confidentiality. If I had to make a change it would be to provide an opportunity for break-out with your mentor or a bigger room where you can have that discrete conversation. You need the opportunity. Would I always take advantage of it? No, because I don’t always need to take advantage of it. You need the opportunity. I may not need it this time but maybe this person needs it, or this person.

Elisa

In his school district, Mark participated in both one-to-one and group coaching experiences. Mark liked the group coaching sessions which involved two coachees with one coach. He felt that these sessions were directed by the needs of the coachees. Mark also described how the coachees did some study between coaching sessions and then used the time together to share the new knowledge gained from the study.

We also had coaching sessions where there were two mentees and one mentor and we got together and talked about issues related to us and how things were going – job-embedded kind of thing. That was very useful and productive because we got to direct that. … We did a little study, came back, shared the knowledge, and that was useful. … Because my mentor had two mentees – we decided to get together as three. It just worked.

Mark
Tori took part in group coaching in her first year in the role. She explained that she enjoyed it very much and felt that she learned a lot while in the group setting. Tori described how each session was handled in somewhat different ways. She stated that she believed each member of the group could each learn from the others regardless of where they were in their vice-principal career.

Last year we actually had a mentoring group. We would meet as a group at least once a month and it could look different every time. One time we would all come with some kind of hot topic or issue that was bothering us and we’d brainstorm and help each other. She really fostered that kind of environment – not where I’m up here and you’re all down there. We’re together and we’re a team and we can all learn from each other regardless of where we are on our learning journey. I got a lot out of that.

Tori

In her second year in the role as vice-principal, Tori’s school district informed the coachees and coaches that all sessions needed to be one-to-one. Tori expressed her disappointment over this because she felt that the coaching needed to be organized in a way that worked best for the expressed needs of the coachees. In her case, Tori preferred group coaching because she believed that the openness and trust that had developed within her coaching group best supported her learning.

I don’t like that they said we are limited to the one-on-one mentoring because mentoring needs to be what works for you not what they say is going to work for you. I see a lot of value in my one-on-one relationship with Cheryl, but we were all hurt and upset when they took away our group mentoring. We were learning a
lot off of each other. We would talk about the collective is so much better than a person on their own. Sometimes somebody else in the room would have something to offer on that particular topic or issue that I could fit into my context maybe even more than what Cheryl said….not to take away from her in any way because she is absolutely brilliant. The relationships we had and the openness within the whole group, and the trust, I thought was really valuable.

Tori

Diane participated in both one-to-one and group coaching. She expressed positive sentiments about her group coaching experiences, especially when there were men in her group. Diane explained that, for her, the men in the group coaching sessions saw things in a different way than she and her women colleagues. She felt that this added to her coaching experience. She expressed a preference for mixed-gender groupings when the coaching groups were put together. The following are the only gender-related comments among the 14 participants in the study.

The one thing I will say is, my first group had men involved or men were part of the grouping. The second group didn’t have any men. I sort of missed having the male influence in the coaching session. Sometimes when it’s all women and you get together you have the same kind of mindset and mindframe. I always had been impressed with the men I had been working with because they really did see things differently than I did. That’s the one piece I thought was missing from the second group. I wish that when they were looking at the groupings and putting them together, they had mixed genders within the group. Whereas the first time I
was already connected with males I really liked working with so they were there.

The second group didn’t have any males involved at all. I missed that.

Diane

The participants in the study participated in three different types of groupings for coaching. These included: one-to-one coaching, group coaching, or a combination of the two. Most of the participants expressed a preference for one of these types of groupings based on their perceived value of the grouping for their personal needs. One of the individuals expressed disappointment because she was not able to use the grouping of choice.

**Scheduling Preferences**

Neither research literature nor professional literature related to the coaching of school leaders addresses the issue of the scheduling of coach-coachee meetings. However, many of the participants in this study identified preferences. Participants identified the following preferences for the scheduling of their coaching: regular contact, regularly-scheduled meetings, setting regular meeting times to reduce the possibility of cancelling sessions, a more formalized approach to scheduling, increasing funding for release time to ensure coaches and coachees could establish regularly-scheduled meeting times, limited financial resources could limit access to coaching, and coaching not organized and scheduled at the school district level early enough in the school year.

Sati explained that she believed it was important to have regular contact with her coach. During the course of her interview, she informed the researcher that her coach was “…very, very, very busy – so it’s hard to stay in touch…”. It may be because of this that Sati identified a preference for regularly-scheduled contact with her coach. In her interview, she stated, “I think
in the first year particularly, it’s really important to have regular contact. ... Regular contact is really important. ...

Much as with Sati, Mitch identified a desire for regularly-scheduled meeting times with his coach. He referenced the regular principal/vice-principal meetings he attended and presented the routine frequency of these meetings as something that he would like to have for his coaching sessions.

It’s not like our family of school meetings that we have with principals and vice-principals on a regularly-scheduled basis. This is not as regular. ... I’d like to have maybe a bit more structure in a mentorship time. ... I’d like to see the meetings that we have take on more structure.

Mitch

Linda expressed similar thoughts about scheduling. She had ‘school-based meetings’ with her coach but she described how these could easily be cancelled if something came up at her school or her coach’s school which necessitated cancelling their time together. Linda described that she felt it would be wise to set regular meeting times at the beginning of the school year to ensure the coaching time would be honoured and less subject to cancellation.

Our school-based meetings I would change to make them more regular. We kind of do them on an as-needs basis when things come up. But something will come up at my school or something will come up at her school. We had a meeting planned but we’ll postpone it. Something’s always going to come up. In the school, there will always be a busy time. What I would change is that I would have our school-based meetings, at the beginning of the school year mapped out as regular meeting times. I’m going to go to your school. You’re going to come
over to my school. Maybe we’ll go to another school where we’ll hook up with another. You know, set up some regular meeting times where we’re both going to honour those times and meet regularly to keep that going because we both find that so valuable and we get so much out of it but at times we both feel overwhelmed by the daily things that occur in the job. It’s the easy thing to go because it’s a meeting; it’s not a ‘have to’. Not something that has to get done.

Linda

In one of the other school districts in the study, Judy expressed very similar sentiments about the scheduling of coaching sessions. She said that she felt the current scheduling arrangement was too loose and that it needed to be more formalized. Judy spoke about the district-provided professional development sessions that occurred but expressed concern about the direct connection with her mentor. Judy explained that if she were the coach, she would make more direct efforts to get together with her coachee.

It’s a little too loose right now. I think it should be a little more formal and I think we should have more regular meetings. We’ve had 3 formal PDs and one informal breakfast – that to me is not enough. If I was a mentor, I’d be throwing it out there – come to my school and let’s talk. We’re going to talk about this or this. It has to be a little more formal because you get busy. No disrespect to my mentor. She’s a busy person. She’s running a school. You need a little more than that especially if this were my first year.

Judy

Marni addressed the issue of regularly-scheduled coaching times from a different perspective. She explained the cost attached to these sessions. Costs were incurred for coaching
sessions in her school district because vice-principals also teach and in order for them to meet with their coaches; they needed to have an occasional teacher assume their teaching responsibilities. Marni expressed a desire for increased funding in order to cover the release time of the coachees and to ensure that regularly-scheduled sessions could be established.

Having more money to meet with your mentors would always be great because we have a significant number of VPs who are teaching VPs so to get out of the system to go and meet with your mentor is very difficult because we teach every day, all week. It requires us juggling things to get out of the school to go visit someone else or paying back preps now that we can’t use supply teachers. If there was more money that was designated to go out and visit and if it were structured twice a term or three times a term or if there were days set aside where you had to go, I think that would be beneficial because I think we all find it too easy to say I’m too busy and I can’t make it. But we need to make it because it’s a support system for all of us.

Marni

Mark had a similar challenge in his school district. Vice-principal coachees needed to be released from their teaching duties in order to meet with their coaches. Releasing coachees from their school duties generally meant that an occasional teacher needed to be brought in to cover any teaching duties the vice-principal had. This release time is costly. Mark expressed a concern about financial constraints because he felt limited financial resources could potentially restrict access to coaching.

There’s not always a cost but sometimes there’s a cost in terms of releasing us because the majority of vice-principals here are teaching vice-principals. So to
release us for a day or a half day, there’s a cost associated with that in terms of back-filling for supplies. I think they’ve lost a lot of momentum because of that.

Mark

Mark also bemoaned the loss of coaching time. During his interview, he described how much he enjoyed the learning in his coaching sessions. However, in the current year, he expressed disappointment that the coaching sessions had not been organized and scheduled at the school district level, yet at the time of the interview, it was the mid-point of the school year.

The other disappointment is that we haven’t started again this year. We’re now in February and it hasn’t come back. We have a memo out saying that it’s going to start again. They had the introductory little meeting and there’s been nothing else since. I haven’t heard of anything. I ran into John again at the regional vice-principals’ meeting and I asked him, what’s up? It’s now February and we haven’t met again.

Mark

The participants in the study identified preferences for the scheduling of their coaching. Overwhelmingly, they expressed preferences for coaching sessions to be regularly-scheduled in order to ensure that the coaching opportunities would not be lost in the busy schedules of the coachees and coaches. According to a few of the participants, a more formalized approach to scheduling would be helpful in ensuring that the coaching sessions would happen on a regular basis.

Focus on Personalized Learning

Findings in this study indicated that the personalized learning of coaching was important
for the participants. Within the literature on coaching, one of the elements addressed is the need to ensure that the coachee’s learning needs are addressed. Cunat and Daresh (2007) identified that the coaching experience must meet the individual learning needs of the coachee through coaching conversations. Thus, the learning that takes place within coaching needs to be personalized (Hopkins, 2007; Fullan et al. 2006; Creasy & Paterson, 2005).

All of the participants in the study identified value in their coaching experiences. In addition, the participants all expressed an interest in learning through coaching. This was true especially when it focused on personalized learning. Threaded throughout the interviews with the fourteen vice-principals in this study was the issue of their individual learning needs and whether the coaching focused, or not, on these needs. Some of the participants were pleased that their coaches supported the individualization of their learning by responding to immediate, personal issues of concern. Others expressed disappointment at the lack of focus on the needs that they had identified or a lack of focus on personalizing learning when in small-group coaching sessions. Participants in the study spoke about the following areas relative to personalized learning in their coaching: taking time to determine the individual learning needs, a desire to maintain focus on the identified learning needs, continuing to learn new things, an overriding learning focus as opposed to addressing urgent issues, the identification of topics of need within the coaching conversation, individual learning needs guiding the coaching session due to a lack of knowledge for the role, small-group coaching not being sufficiently individualized, and gathering information from the coach.

Mitch described how, at his introduction to coaching, he was informed that he needed to determine a focus that would personalize his learning. He took time to consider what his
learning needs were. He did indeed determine his needs and interests. These then became his learning goals for coaching.

At the beginning of the process, our Board wanted us to find a learning focus. They created a template and said, What is it you want to focus on during your mentorship? I went away and thought about things I’d like to learn about developing to support teacher-leadership and improve technology skills, improve communication skills, work on student engagement initiatives. Those were the goals and the things that I wanted to get out of the mentorship.

Mitch

Even though Mitch had set his learning goals for his coaching, he found that his coach did not always keep the focus on the learning that Mitch had identified. During the interview, Mitch said that he enjoyed his coaching very much and felt he benefitted from the learning. However, he expressed a desire to maintain the focus on his individual learning needs by having more specific focus in the coaching session.

But sometimes he can get off-topic too much and if there is something that I want to work on or I want to deal with, sometimes it won’t get dealt with as specifically as I’d like. … I’d like to have maybe a bit more structure in a mentorship time where I go and we say, let’s cover this, this, and this on the budget today and next time you come back we’ll go through this section.

Mitch

Tori explained that she felt confident in her role as a newly-appointed vice-principal and that she had made positive contributions to the school. Even though she spoke glowingly in her interview about her coaching experience, Tori stated that she was interested in continuing to
participate as long as she was learning new things that would be of benefit to her and that she had some ownership of the learning. She stated that she wanted the learning to be individualized in that she did not want to focus on something that she believed she already knew.

We have to talk about what goals we have at the beginning of the year. I know I’m only in my second year in the role but I feel fairly confident and I think I’ve made a difference in this school already. I love my job. I love coming to work every day. I wanted to make sure I was going to get something out of it. I didn’t want to talk about something that I already knew and that I had some ownership.

Tori

Linda described that there was an overriding learning focus for her coaching sessions. However, she stated that she found many other school-related urgent issues surfaced during the coaching time. School leaders often refer to these as ‘hot topics’ – issues that cannot necessarily be anticipated but which come up suddenly and necessitate new learning. Linda explained how she had a central learning focus for her coaching but also used the coaching time to individualize the focus and engage in learning about the ‘hot topics’ as they emerged for her.

We have the overriding learning focus but each time we meet there’s usually something else that we’re talking about along the way. Whether it be professional learning communities, union concerns, bullying issues, and things like the Ministry’s new safe schools initiative. How are you rolling that out in your school? What have you done with your staff? Did you do a powerpoint presentation, group activities…..you know, just that constant sharing of information as things come up on the horizon. There’s usually a focus that we’re meeting about but that often takes you in so many other directions too.
Another participant, Ona, described how each of her coaching sessions started off casually and through the initial part of the conversations, topics of interest or need emerged. These topics then became the personalized focus of her learning conversations with her coach. Ona explained that the coaching process and the learning within it were based on her identified needs.

Usually it just starts casually – how are things going? Some conversations, some sharing and then as conversation picks up and develops we talk about topics of interest or concern or things that we’re working on in our learning. There is a lot of sharing back and forth. I find that even my mentor gains from the experience of our conversations. It starts casually and it’s led by me, I guess, led by my needs which is really, really nice.

Laurie also stated that she felt her personal learning needs guided the coaching sessions she had. She spoke about times with her coach when they were talking in a more informal way and she could ask many of the questions she had and which she felt she needed to have answered for her work. Laurie described the experience of being a newly-appointed vice-principal as a time when her existing knowledge for the role was limited and the informal conversations were very helpful for her in gaining knowledge as well as helping her to solidify her own values.

When I was an early VP, in the first couple of years, [coaching was] an absolutely useful experience. … [It was when we] didn’t do formal, sit down, mentoring sessions, but more chatting. It’s all those questions that you need to have answered that aren’t in books, that aren’t in policies and procedures. You’ve
never experienced something. It’s all the silly questions. Those dumb questions that you feel you need to ask somebody. That was the most important piece. Listening to how the person mentoring me solved problems and watching how they worked, enabled me to solidify my own thoughts and values.

Laurie

Not all of the participants had such positive experiences with coaches being able to personalize the learning. Two of the participants in the study, Judy and Janet, described their concerns. Judy spoke about both her one-to-one and small-group coaching experiences. She stated that she had a positive experience with her one-to-one coaching. However, she did not feel that the small-group coaching was sufficiently personalized because she believed too much time was given to exchanging of stories and not enough time given to individualizing the learning so that it would be of benefit to her.

I’ve had a positive experience with the [one-to-one] coaching this past year and a half. That’s when we were formally given coaches through the Ministry of Education. I can’t say it’s [small-group coaching] been very useful. I’ve learned little things but I’d like to learn more. I find that what happens is, I get together with my coach and two other mentees – we call them mentees – and we end up chatting about a variety of things. It becomes a swapping of stories, of war stories, and yes I learn from those and I gather new information from those, and that’s very helpful. However, it’s not what I would refer to as fulfilling coaching. Is it a good use of my time? Sometimes, if I learn something new. But sometimes I don’t want to sit and listen to another vice-principal and her issues and her school.
Judy

Jackie, as well, did not have such positive learning experiences with her first two coaching experiences. She felt that the coaching she had within her school district – prior to being coached by her sister - was more about simply trying to gather information from the coach rather than focusing on the personalized learning she desired. Janet explained that she believed the coaching relationship needed to be long-term – a year or more - where she could discuss and work through personal issues or concerns related to her work.

My problem with it was – and even the second time, although the leader I went to was a good person and I admired the way he ran his school – was, the way it was set up was that you had one, maybe two, meetings with the person and you kind of picked their brain. To me that’s not coaching. To me, coaching is … where you go, Now how should I handle that? or, How should I have handled that? And you sit, and you talk about things that are challenging you, things that you’re not sure of, things that you don’t understand, or you think maybe you did wrong and you want them to give you some input on that. It needs to be on ongoing experience. I think a mentor is somebody who walks with you for a year, or longer.

Jackie

All of the participants in the study expressed an interest in learning through coaching especially when it focused on their personal learning needs. All of the participants addressed the issue of how their coach personalized the learning during the coaching sessions. Many of the participants were pleased that their coaches supported the individualization of their learning by responding to immediate or personal learning issues. However, a few individuals expressed
disappointment about a lack of personalization in group coaching situations or in situations where the coach sometimes got off-topic.

Focus on Leader Practice

Coaching is defined as a “structured, sustained process for enabling the development of a specific aspect of a professional learner’s practice” (p.3, National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching, 2005). In Ontario, the School Board Guideline for Implementation of Mentoring for Newly Appointed School Leaders (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a) states that one of the primary purposes of coaching is to support newly-appointed school leaders in developing the leader practices and competencies outlined in the Ontario Leadership Framework (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).

The range of responses about leader practice from the participants in the study was as varied as the participants themselves. In terms of a focus on leader practice, each participant responded with different thoughts. Participants in the study spoke about the following areas of the focus on leader practice in their coaching: practice based more on intuition than conscious decision-making, the opportunity to examine one’s own practice, the challenge of a coach showcasing practice, the balance of instructional and managerial leadership, focusing on the longer-term and ‘big picture’ of school leadership, and understanding oneself as a leader.

Diane explained that she believed her leadership prior to coaching was based more on intuition than on conscious decision-making. She believed that through coaching she became a leader who knew why she acted as she did. She stated emphatically that it was the learning from her coaching experience that helped her to become ‘consciously skilled’.

I think the basis for this is, it’s taken me from what I would do intuitively to actually putting reason behind it. Before, when I would just do things based on
intuition, now I have been able to hone that intuition and I know why now. Coaching has done that. … I very consciously know why I am doing things now. I’m not just reacting any more. Even if the reaction was good, now I know why. … As a leader, I have grown and it only would have happened through coaching. If I took out all the coaching opportunities, I don’t know how I would have gotten here on my own. I don’t think I would have.

Diane

Elisa described her experience with coaching as an opportunity to examine her own leadership practice through the coaching conversations. She stated that she did not gain the same perspectives in her thinking from her vice-principal colleagues. She claimed that she believed she was a better vice-principal thanks to the coaching process in which she engaged because it supported her in focusing on leader practice by presenting a variety of perspectives to her and by stimulating thinking that caused her to see her practice in a different way.

I have friends also out there in VP-land but we’re friends. We all have the same lens. Sometimes it’s great to seek advice from my mentor who might have a different perspective than my friends who have that tinted lens in one direction. My mentor will say, Have you thought about this? Her role is not to be my friend and to agree with me but to reflect on my practice. That’s the best thing I can say about it. It makes me a better VP…because I’m prompted to delve into my practice and to look at things from a variety of perspectives and to make me look ahead rather than just the ground under my feet. To look ahead and see a wider view, a different view than perhaps I would have done independently or seeking the advice of my friends who are also new in the role. …
Elisa

Jackie had a very different experience with one potential coach. She was keen to focus the coaching conversations on her leadership practice but she found that the first coach she was matched with did not engage her in that level of learning. She wanted to examine leader practice and to deconstruct and reconstruct situations. Rather than this occurring in the initial coaching sessions, she found that her coach showcased his practice rather than engaging her in the type of conversations she was hoping for. Needless to say, Jackie did not continue to work with this coach.

The way it was set up, to me what happened was there were sessions where they just sort of talked about what they do as a principal, how they run their school,….

It was showcasing more than coaching, I thought. What I think it should be is,…Here’s a situation. How would you deal with it? Or, Here’s how I dealt with it. What do you think about that? To me, that’s what coaching should be. You can get lots of ideas from lots of different people, and that’s great. It’s good to share. But that’s a sharing session, not so much a coaching session. The sessions that I had, it was just….I went into their school, they walked me around, they talked about how their school runs, they gave me some ideas about some shortcuts or tricks in the trade.

Jackie

Laura highlighted another aspect of leader practice – the managerial. She stated that she recognized the need for her to serve as an instructional leader but she also recognized the managerial aspects of her role. Laura appreciated the focus her coach provided on this aspect of her leadership practice. Laura identified that one of the benefits of good management skills as a school leader was that it would provide her with more time to work as an instructional leader.
Beyond the philosophical growth as a leader through defining myself my roles and my practice, what my coach and I talk about are also the practical things too. There’s been lots of growth there too. As the vice-principal, you’re the instructional leader and you’re the manager – all those kinds of things. The management, although it’s not the focus, it’s a huge part of the job and if you have the good management skills – in terms of time and organization – it allows you more time to be that instructional leader within the school. I think my mentor has really helped me in terms of that management part. She’s very organized and has so many great ideas for handling so many different things. Being able to see all those different types of things that she does has helped me further refine my practice to allow me to have more time to do those other kinds of things. It’s helped me to develop as a manager.

Laura

Tanya provided an additional insight into leader practice. For her, the focus on leader practice in coaching was related to how it supported her in looking longer-term and attending to the ‘big picture’ of school leadership. Tanya explained that as a teacher she did not see these aspects of leadership. In her comments, Tanya described how the coaching focused on her leadership practice so that she began to understand better how her actions as a leader impacted on others.

It has made me look longer-term and the big picture and how everything is really connected. It’s funny what you see in the role that you don’t see when you are a teacher – it’s just all the politics involved and the proper channels about how you’re supposed to go about things and how you are supposed to deal with things
who you are supposed to inform and all those sorts of things. It’s opened me up to that. As I’m leading others in the school and taking all of those sorts of things into consideration. I think more about the requests and how they are going to impact on everybody.

Tanya

Laurie explained that within the coaching experience, the focus on her leadership practice came from conversations with her coach, not her principal. She spoke about leader practice in the sense of coming to understand herself as a leader. Laurie described how this focus on leader practice engaged her in reflecting on her own practice. As a result of the new thinking, Laurie believed that her practice changes, or ‘morphs’, over time.

If I think about the mentoring piece and my leadership practice, again, I would look at the mentors outside of my principal because they can challenge me in ways where I would react in a far more negative ways if the principal challenged me. I’ve had mentors who can ask really tough questions about my leadership. They’ll give me an inquiry and they’ll send me off to sit and think about it. They’ll ask one of those deep and meaningful questions and leave it with me. Whereas, I find that that has not happened with a principal. That has only happened with a mentor outside of the school. And that shaped my leadership. What do you think about your leadership style? Those kinds of questions. What is your approach to things? The bigger questions that mentors outside the school tend to ask. And to decide who you are as a leader. One of the things I came into the VP-ship thinking was that leaders were a certain way and that in order to lead, one must be an excellent problem-solver and now I realize that leadership comes
in so many different forms. It’s really an amoeba. It morphs and changes and
moves. It’s very much based on my personal reflections, who I am, and how I
relate to others, as opposed to how others relate to me. I’ve only made those
shifts because of the questions I’ve been asked by people I consider mentors…

Laurie

All of the participants spoke about a focus on leader practice in their coaching
sessions. The range of responses about leader practice varied greatly and appeared to
reflect the personal interests or needs of the individual participants. The participants
spoke about leadership practice based more on intuition than conscious decision-making,
examining their own practice, the balance between instructional and managerial
leadership, focusing on the ‘big picture’ of school leadership, and understanding
themselves as leaders.

Opportunities for Reflection

Self-reflection is a core feature of human agency (Bandura, 2001). People are not only
agents of their actions; they are also agents of their thoughts as they self-examine through
reflection on the soundness of their thoughts, actions, and motivation and then make adjustments
as necessary (Bandura, 2004). This is the essence of the self-regulatory aspect embedded in
coaching. The coaching process engages individuals in becoming self-directed autonomous
agents and self-directed learners through opportunities to reflect on their actions (Costa &
Garmston, 1994). Reflective thinking processes are best situated within a context where actual
experiences in the workplace (Leithwood et al. 1995) are used and where the learning is not done
in isolation but through social participation with the assistance of others (Hobson, 2003).
All participants in this study commented on the opportunities they had to engage in reflective thinking with their coach. Participants in the study spoke about the following experiences related to reflection: deconstructing and reconstructing meaning from actions, the use of supporting print materials, the use of questions posed to examine thinking, the use of questions to see issues from a variety of perspectives, having thinking challenged about potential courses of action, the importance of engaging in reflective thought, the challenge to find time for reflection, and engaging in reflective coaching through electronic means.

Tanya expressed her thoughts about reflective thinking in the most thorough manner of all the participants. She described how busy life can be as a newly-appointed vice-principal and how quick decisions must be made. She also described how she debriefed her day with her principal but she did not deconstruct and reconstruct meaning (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001) from her actions until she spent time with her coach. Tanya stated that she did not believe she could grow as a leader unless she reflected on her work.

It gives me that opportunity to really reflect on things. I find that day-to-day when you hit the ground running when the kids come in you make decisions, you go with it, you do things but you’re not really thinking about things while you’re doing them. You are, but not really. I find that with the mentoring piece – I do this too with my principal at the end of the day. We kind of debrief about the day. But with my mentor I find that I talk about some situations that are happening and actually have time to go through it again and then sort of break it down that way. He’ll more listen, which is great. I find while I’m talking about it, I answer some of my own questions. It gives you that opportunity to think about it. I find that if you’re not in a position where you sit and you’re almost forced to reflect, you
don’t necessarily do it. Then you’re not really growing. I find that it’s easy to get caught up in that go, go, go and not really think. It’s good to sit down, take a breath, and think about what you’ve done.

Tanya

Diane described her coach’s use of supporting print materials to guide reflective thought about her practice. She explained that her coach provided print materials that served to stimulate reflective thought during the coaching conversations.

Each one of our sessions together would have a focus, a reading, a journal entry, or articles that we would read to guide our thoughts and sort of force us – in a positive way – to reflect on our own practices.

Diane

Linda explained that she was aware of her coach’s intentional approach to pose questions that would have her examine her own thinking about issues that came forward. Linda appreciated the questions her coach asked because she felt the discussions supported her professional learning.

…it makes you question when you’re working with that person. I know that part of the training – because my mentor shared with me some of the training. Their role is not to give me answers because their answers might be answers that are for them. Their role is to help make me question. I might call her and ask her what to do and she’ll say, What would you do in this situation? or What would you do if this changes slightly? Those professional discussions and all the questioning she does makes me grow and develop as a leader. … Sometimes I try something and it doesn’t work for me and we have a whole discussion about, Why did that
work for me and not for you? The discussion just leads to further learning. She’ll say, I don’t know. What do you think? And in the end, we’ll come up with an answer.

Linda

Elisa expressed similar sentiments about intentional questioning in the coaching conversations. However, Elisa viewed this from a slightly different perspective. She explained that she felt the questions helped her to see issues from a broader variety of perspectives and to help her to look beyond just the issues at hand. Elisa said that she did not feel that this was thinking she would engage in on her own or through interactions with her fellow vice-principals.

My mentor will say, have you thought about this? Her role is not to be my friend and to agree with me but to reflect on my practice. That’s the best thing I can say about it. It makes me a better VP…because I’m prompted to delve into my practice and to look at things from a variety of perspectives and to make me look ahead rather than just the ground under my feet. To look ahead and see a wider view, a different view than perhaps I would have done independently or seeking the advice of my friends who are also new in the role.

Elisa

Marni spoke glowingly about how her coach stimulated reflective thought relative to the issues they were discussing. Marni’s enthusiasm is evident in her comments. She clearly enjoyed the way in which her coach challenged her thinking about potential courses of action and the potential outcomes of those actions.

My particular coach, he would never answer for me. He would say, well, what are you going to do? It was always that reflective thinking – all the time. … Tons
of reflection. Never the answers. Always, I have a question. Tell me what you’re thinking of doing. What is your thinking about this? For what purpose do you think this is the right way to go? And then he would support my decision or offer an alternative reflective piece – I want you to think about what might happen if you tried it this way. Would the result change? Would it be a better result for your staff? Or is this the best route for you to go? The reflection was huge. … The coaching has increased the reflective practice. Huge. I think everything that we do, I’m always going over it, thinking was that the best way to do it?

Marni

Mitch did not speak so glowingly about the experience of having his thinking challenged in a reflective way. However, Mitch did speak about the importance for him of engaging in self-reflective thought. In his comments, Mitch questioned the value and purpose of engaging in tasks at his school without having the insights he could gain from his own reflective thought. Mitch bemoaned the fact that he did not have enough time or did not create the time to engage in this thinking. Mitch had learned that reflecting on his vision, his challenges, indeed his leadership, was greatly valuable for him but a challenge in terms of finding the time to do the reflecting.

Reflection. It’s reflection. What’s really grown is my understanding of the importance of reflecting, of stopping and going, what is it I’m trying to do? What is my vision? Where do I see myself? What are my challenges? A lot of the questions you’ve asked in the interview, I’ve probably asked myself because of the mentorship program. In an ideal world, I would be able to find a certain amount of time where I could sit down and go, what is my vision? What am I
doing? I’m coming to school every day and knocking off a bunch of tasks that need to get done, or is it more self-directed because I think this is what’s really important and move student achievement, student satisfaction, public confidence, all those things. I would like to have time or take time to do that.

Mitch

Ona echoed Mitch’s sentiments about not having the time to engage in reflective thought. She explained that she felt she benefitted from engaging in reflection with her coach but that it was a challenge to fit time for reflection into a busy day at school with a family waiting for her at home.

It’s been fabulous being challenged with certain questions by a mentor. There are many strong, guiding questions that are recommended to ask at different sessions. Sometimes going through that process of answering them and coming up with your own rationale solidifies it. … Often we go through our day to day experiences but that time for reflection doesn’t come easily because after a full day you’re exhausted – and I go home to kids – it’s amazing to dedicate that time to really asking oneself those questions and going through the process with a mentor and talking about it and rationalizing it all.

Ona

Sati identified herself as a person who engages in reflective thought by nature. She stated that her coach provided opportunities for reflection. This is one of the reasons their match was such a good one. One of the unique ways in which Sati engaged in some of her reflective thinking within coaching was through email once she was at home in the evening. Even though she is in the role of a vice-principal, Sati referred to herself as a teacher in the interview.
A lot of what I do is thinking about it in the evening and reflecting about, Did that workshop go really well? Did the teachers accept that? What can I do to help the teachers see that what they do makes a difference in terms of helping kids deal with an issue of harassment? Or, how can I bring my teachers on board? Or with Betty [her coach], I’ll send her an email and we’ll have a little chat. I do a lot of reflection because I think as teachers we do. That’s what we do all the time. As a teacher you should be thinking about what you can do better all the time. I don’t necessarily write it down – more talking.

Sati

Even though no specific question was about reflective thinking during the interviews, all of the participants in the study commented on it and how much they valued it. The participants described how valuable it was for them to deconstruct and reconstruct meaning from their actions, having their coaches use questions to help them examine their own thinking, having their coaches use questions to see issues from a variety of perspectives, and having their thinking challenged about potential courses of action. The participants expressed an understanding of the importance of engaging in reflective thought. However, some participants claimed that it was a challenge to find time for it.

All of the participants in the study spoke highly of their coaching experiences for reasons that included the learning and support gained from the experience, the ability to access information as needed in carrying out daily work, ease of access to their coach, and that the coaching relationship was non-evaluative. Preferences were expressed by the participants for the types of groupings they had for their coaching. These included one-to-one coaching, group
coaching, or a combination of the two. Further preferences within these groupings were also expressed which shed light on the participants’ sense of how personalized the coaching relationship could be. The participants also expressed preferences for regularly-scheduled coaching sessions with financial support for ‘release time’ in districts where such was needed in order for the participants to be able to engage in coaching. All of the participants identified value in their coaching experiences, in part, because the coaching focused on both personalizing their learning as well as focusing on their leader practice. A number of the participants described how they valued the coaching conversations when the focus of the conversations was more personalized. Complementing the focus on individualized learning was the focus on leader practice within the coaching sessions. The participants spoke about their learning relative to the ‘big picture’ of school leadership or seeing themselves as leaders. All of the participants in this study commented on the opportunities they had to engage in reflective thinking with their coach and the value this had for them in mediating their thinking about themselves as leaders and their leadership.

Relational Aspects

The coach-coachee relationship is defined as a complex, dynamic (Ehrich et al. 2004) and developmental relationship (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Spiro, Mattis, & Mitgang, 2007; Daresh, 1995) that is intensive and enduring over time (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990). During the first years of their tenure, beginning school leaders need to be provided with learning and support in a safe and trusting environment (Hargreaves et al. 2003). Both the National Framework for Coaching and Mentoring (NCSL, 2005) and the School Board Guideline for Implementation of Mentoring for Newly Appointed School Leaders (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a) specify that coaching needs to occur only in relationships where coachees feel that their conversations
are confidential and where they can trust their coaches.

As in all human relations, there is a myriad of perceptions about, and reactions to, each relationship. The vice-principals in this study were no different when discussing the relationships with their coaches. The results in this section are based on participant responses to the interview questions (Appendix A) and are divided into six categories: the coaching relationship as confidential and trusting, the relationship as non-judgmental and non-evaluative, the development of a social connection with the coach, a co-learning relationship, a supportive relationship, and the coaching relationship as motivating.

Confidential and Trusting

Research and policy literature relative to coaching identifies confidentiality and trust as essential elements of a coaching relationship (Bolam et al. 1995; Spiro et al. 2007; NCSL, 2005; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). In one way or another, every one of the participants in the study spoke about the importance of confidentiality and trust in the relationship with their coaches.

Marni spoke candidly about the relationship with her coach as having two levels – professional and personal. The professional aspect, for her, was the actual professional learning that occurred within the coaching relationship as she developed herself as a leader. She identified the personal as the aspect of the relationship that allowed her to speak openly and comfortably about her new learning or her struggles. She also stated that she would not have been able to be coached as successfully without the trust and confidentiality because these elements created the conditions she needed for learning.
There are definitely two levels to the relationship. There’s the professional and there’s the personal. Professional, where he is the coach and the guide with those questions that I’m seeking answers for or assistance with fully trying to develop myself as a leader. Then there’s the personal level where you have to be able to connect. You have to be able to talk openly and admit if I’m struggling. I have to be comfortable. If I’m not comfortable with the person I’m with, then I’m probably not going to be mentored as well as I could because I’d be holding things back or be embarrassed that I’m going to be judged, or whatever. We laugh and we talk about things…. So, personal and professional and very supportive.

Marni

Diane described how important the aspect of trust was for her. She described how a trusting relationship allowed her to open herself up to her coach. She stated that this trusting relationship then allowed the coach to provide feedback to her. Diane expressed a desire for clear and specific feedback from her coaching experience. She also expressed such admiration for her coach that she stated she wished to guide her career in a way that was reflective of her coach’s. Diane felt strongly enough about the relationship to describe it as pure and trusting.

I trust her because she sees the most vulnerability in me and I know she is not going to give me lip service for what I want to do because she will tell me when I’m wrong. That trust is there and the fact that I highly respect what she has offered me in the past that I know if she thinks I’m doing something incorrectly or if I’ve missed the boat on something, she’s going to tell me. She’s not going to allow me to continue on something because she’s afraid to tell me. … I’m striving
to guide my career as I see hers because I really respect what she’s done. It’s not that I want to be exactly like her but I want to emulate some of the skills and qualities that she has demonstrated as a leader. That’s what I’m looking for. I hope that when I’m two years from retirement, I can look back and see that I have made the change in somebody else the way she has made a change in me. You want to strive to be them – but your own person. There’s always the quality of the person that you really respect and she has that quality. I don’t know how we stumbled upon each other. … I trust her because she sees the most vulnerability in me and I know she is not going to give me lip service for what I want to do because she will tell me when I’m wrong. That trust is there… It’s always within that relationship that’s pure and trusting.

Diane

Every participant in this study spoke about the importance of the safety that comes from confidentiality in the coach-coachee relationship. Participants identified safety as the freedom to speak openly with the trust that their coach would honour confidentiality by not revealing to others the contents of the coaching conversations. One of the participants, Elisa, spoke often during the interview about her desire for time to have confidential conversations with her coach.

I think I said earlier. That is, consistently being given the opportunity for some private time. Most weeks I may not need that opportunity. But when I need it, I need that opportunity there. When we get together as a big group that we have time to get together with our mentor to meet privately because we’ve had this whole-group thing – which is fantastic – but I need time for confidentiality too. … It would be great if we were given maybe 5 or 10 minutes when we could discuss
private matters without being obvious. Sometimes we’re in a smaller room with a lot of people and you don’t have the opportunity for confidentiality. If I had to make a change it would be to provide an opportunity for break-out with your mentor or a bigger room where you can have that discrete conversation. You need the opportunity. Would I always take advantage of it? No, because I don’t always need to take advantage of it. You need the opportunity.

Elisa

For Tanya, the importance of trust in the coaching relationship came through in her comments about believing that she would receive honest feedback and that her coach would not share her personal information with anyone else. The confidentiality aspect was very important to Tanya.

Our relationship…it’s a good one. I respect him and I value his opinion and I trust him and I can tell him things and I believe he is going to give me honest feedback. He’s going to be honest in his feedback. I don’t feel if I say things to him that it’s going to go anywhere else. I don’t worry that my mentor is going to say things to other people about our conversations.

Tanya

It is interesting to note that one of the participants, Daniel, spoke about confidentiality in a somewhat different way than the other participants. He felt that the confidentiality within the relationship with the coach – his own principal in this case - allowed him to speak freely so as not to feel embarrassed in front of his peers and colleagues. During the interview, Daniel stated, “I can feel free to ask them questions without maybe appearing like I don’t know and feel embarrassed in front of the people you work with.”
All of the participants in the study, in one way or another, spoke about the importance of confidentiality and trust in the relationship with their coaches. They described how confidentiality and trust allowed them to open up and to speak freely both about professional issues and personal issues.

*Non-judgmental / Non-evaluative*

Coaching – in the context of this study - is intended to provide direct, personalized support to newly-appointed school leaders. Such coaching is intended to be non-evaluative (Southworth, 1995; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) and non-judgemental (NCSL, 2005; Bolam et al. 1995; Bush & Coleman, 1995; Southworth, 1995). Many of the participants in the study explained that they felt their coaching was non-judgemental or non-evaluative.

Marni described how important it was for her that she could speak openly about issues with which she struggled and then to be coached about these issues. She stated that she felt she could be better coached when she believed that she would not be judged in these conversations.

You have to be able to talk openly and admit if I’m struggling. I have to be comfortable. If I’m not comfortable with the person I’m with, then I’m probably not going to be mentored as well as I could because I’d be holding things back or be embarrassed that I’m going to be judged or whatever.

Marni

Two of the other participants in the study, Elisa and Diane, provided specific comments about the non-judgmental nature of their coaching relationships. Elisa explained that because her coach was not her ‘boss’ and the person who would be evaluating her, she felt that she could speak more honestly with her coach.
My mentor’s not my boss so I don’t need to feel like I need to say what you want to hear because it’s a non-judgmental environment. Where, even though I have a great relationship with my principal, I’m still very cognizant of the fact that this is the person who is going to be appraising me, the person who’s my boss. It’s safer because I’m not feeling judged.

Elisa

Diane appreciated the opportunity with her coach to speak in a way where she didn’t need to worry about making a mistake, saying something incorrectly, or feeling foolish. For Diane, the non-judgmental nature of the relationship she had with her coach provided a safe forum for discussion.

And what is very important to me – having that opportunity to make mistakes or say something incorrectly and not have someone be judgmental on what your thoughts or processes were but be able to guide you through different ways of thinking that will only improve your skills, not make you feel like an idiot walking out.

Diane

Even though a number of participants referred indirectly to the non-evaluative nature of the coaching relationship, two of the participants spoke specifically to this point. Ona expressed her appreciation for having a coach whom she could ask any questions she had and not feel evaluated by the coach.

It’s been really nice having that person I can call if I have any questions without it being an evaluative kind of role. … As a vice-principal, being able to have a
mentor, it’s a blessing. It’s a friend. It’s not evaluative. It’s a relationship I very much value my mentor for doing and I’m very grateful to them.

Ona

Mark discussed the non-evaluative nature of his coaching relationship. He highlighted the difference between his relationship with his principal whom he saw as evaluative and the relationship with his coach which he explained was very different.

Even with the principal I think that there’s an evaluative component there. You always feel that – you’re not sucking up to them – you always feel that you’re working for them. And the principal I have right now is very clear about that relationship. It is her school. I am her vice-principal. I work for her. So that relationship is very different from the one with the mentor…

Mark

All of the participants in the study explained in different ways that they felt their coaching was non-judgemental or non-evaluative. They described how the coaching relationship provided a safe forum for discussion because there was not a sense of being judged or being evaluated by their coaches. Thanks to this sense of safety, the participants explained that they felt they could speak more honestly, not worry about making a mistake, or saying something that might be embarrassing for them.

Social Connections

When talking about the relationships with their coaches, many participants spoke about the social connection that had developed between themselves and their coaches in addition to their professional relationship. Research, professional, and policy literature identify many
aspects of the coaching relationship. However, social connections were not among these. Several participants in this study described the development of a social relationship with their coach. The following quotations illustrate this aspect of the relational aspect of the coaching relationship:

It’s a relationship in progress. We are getting to know each other more and more. There is a lot more personal sharing going on which is wonderful. I think it’s important to be able to relate to someone so you really need to get to know them. It’s not only professional, it’s personal. We’ve become buddies and more so with time.

Ona

I’m having a wonderful time professionally but also socially with my mentoring. That’s helped me to build a strong relationship and a good friendship. We end up doing things socially. I know it’s a relationship I’ll have for a very, very long time.

Tori

I found the relationship worked on so many different levels. We’ve established a personal friendship. … Most of the things we talk about are professional but as we’ve gotten to know each other more, you know, you develop that personal relationship as well. That’s starting to be built into the relationship too as you get to know each other through the year and a half we’ve been together. It takes on that other aspect as well.

Linda
After being in the program I do recognize that comfort level of that openness. It also has a bit of social aspect to it. We’ll go for lunch and I enjoy that. It’s the relationship thing that happens over lunch. We’ve gone to a conference together. The conference material was good but the train ride and the drive back was probably even better because there were lots of conversations about the workplace and problem-solving. I find it has those benefits. The open conversation, the social benefits, and the chance to leave the workload here and then just to open my mind up.

Mitch

Conversely, Daniel did not have much of a relationship with his district-assigned coach. He explained that he did indeed have a district-assigned coach but he rarely met with this person. When speaking about the coach that was assigned to him through the school district mentoring/coaching program, he simply described the relationship as very friendly. He explained that his own principal was the actual coach he used for his learning.

I have a formal mentor assigned to me who is not in this school. … Not much of a relationship. We’ve chatted on the phone a couple of times. We agreed that if I were to have a concern, I could get together with them. It’s a very friendly relationship. I mean, I think people who sign up for the program have the best intentions to continue to move forward. We’re not friends by any means but it’s a well-intentioned person. That’s about it for the nature of the relationship.

Daniel

In addition to the professional relationship with the coach, several of the participants described a social connection that developed between themselves and their coaches. The
participants explained that they began to see their coaches socially outside of their professional relationship. This is an interesting finding because research, professional, and policy literature do not make reference to such a relationship.

Co-learning

All participants in the study spoke about the coaching relationship as a learning relationship. Several of the participants described the relationship as one where ‘co-learning’ occurred with their coach. The vice-principals, as coachees, saw themselves and their coaches as learning together within the coaching relationship. There is very limited reference in literature to co-learning as an aspect of coaching. Only some policy literature (NCSL, 2005; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) makes reference to the learning benefits that coaches may receive from serving in the role.

Linda spoke about the discussions she had with her coach. She said that sometimes she would try something that did not work and she engaged in discussion about it with her coach. Through this discussion Linda stated that she and her coach together came to new understandings and as a result, both of them learned from the conversation.

Sometimes I try something and it doesn’t work out for me and we have a whole discussion about, Why did that work for me and not for you? The discussion just leads to further learning. She’ll say, I don’t know. What do you think? And in the end, we’ll come up with an answer. It’s not just a one-way street. It’s a two-way street and we’re both learning.

Linda

Tori described how her coach sometimes brought her own issues to the coaching conversations. Tori’s coach asked her about her thoughts on these issues. Tori felt valued by
this discussion and stated that she believed this created a two-way, or co-learning, relationship.

We’re together and we’re a team and we can all learn from each other regardless of where we are on our learning journey. … She had an issue in her school and she was opening up and asking me about it. I really feel valued. It is a two-way kind of learning. I think that makes it stronger – the fact that it’s not just one way.

Tori

Mitch had a somewhat different ‘co-learning’ experience with his coach. Even though Mitch spoke very highly about his coaching experiences, he also expressed some concern about the full extent of the learning he was gaining from it. Mitch described how he learned from his coach but that his coach sometimes got off the topic of interest to Mitch. Mitch recognized that he did indeed benefit from such conversations but he also recognized that his coach did as well. Thus, co-learning did occur but it was not exactly what Mitch was looking for. Mitch was clear that he wanted specific, focused coaching on topics of interest to him.

…sometimes he can get off-topic too much and if there is something that I want to work on or I want to deal with, sometimes it won’t get dealt with as specifically as I’d like. … …it’s more general and more, here are some issues he’s had and how he resolved them. Even though it’s beneficial to me, it’s also beneficial to him as well. Is he bouncing it off me sometimes? Sometimes it’s not he’s the mentor coaching me, sometimes it’s more a mutual relationship. I would like to have more structured coaching. Coach me on this specific thing.

Mitch

All of the participants in the study described the coaching relationship as a learning relationship. However, several of the participants described the relationship as
one where ‘co-learning’ occurred with their coach as they worked through issues together. The participants stated that they believed their coaches also learned through the coaching conversations.

Supportive

By its nature, coaching is intended to serve as a professional support to coachees. Research (Spiro et al. 2007; Hegstad & Wentling, 2004; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Daresh & Playko, 1992), professional (Costa & Garmston, 1994; Bloom et al. 2005; Reiss, 2007; Robertson, 2005), and policy (NCSL, 2005; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) literature describe coaching as a support for individuals in the role of coachee. Virtually all of the participants in the study spoke about their coaching relationships as supportive. Many of the participants spoke glowingly of the support they felt they had received from these relationships.

Judy explained that the relationship with her coach was supportive in that her coach could be contacted at any time if she had questions or concerns because their relationship was not bound by the conventional structure of a monthly meeting.

I feel I could call her right now. I could call her right now with questions or concerns and she would be there. She’s nurturing. I appreciate that. I know I can do that. The relationship doesn’t seem to have been strictly bound by the actual meetings that have been planned.

Judy

Tori’s experience was similar to Judy’s. Tori also felt that the relationship with her coach was supportive and that she could call her coach at any time if she felt she was not doing something correctly or possibly needing an additional level of support in her work. According to Tori, in this respect the supportive nature of the relationship was manifested in the ease of access
to her coach and how personalized the supports were relative to her needs at the moment. If there was a need individually, I could always call my mentor. … Whenever I have a question or think that there is something that I may not be doing correctly, or possibly that I need a little more support on, I get that support. So it allows me to grow and pick up in those areas when I don’t have as much confidence in or that I feel are a relative weakness. … There’s always going to be someone there to support you.

Tori

Diane described the supportive nature of her coaching relationship. She described how she would turn to her coach when she was considering new ideas and how her coach would support her thinking in considering the factors involved in her decision. Diane greatly valued this support and identified her coach as the person she would go to when she wanted to explore new ideas or new thinking.

The basis of it is supportive. … if I had an idea in my head. This is what I want to do. What do I need to be thinking about? She’s always been the person who is very succinct and very specific and can take me through the steps. OK, Diane, this is what you need to think about. You need to think about this, this, this, and this. She’s always been very good at laying things out for me, making resources available, and if I need to go in and talk with her, if I need to go in and sit down, we need to work through a situation or a scenario, she’s the one.

Diane

At times during his interview, Mitch expressed disappointment with some aspects of his coaching. However, he described the relationship with his coach as supportive. Mitch gave an
example of when this support was evident. He described how his coach would be his first phone call for support when making decisions about what to do if an incident occurred at his school and his own principal was away.

Where the support from the coach does come is when the principal is away – for a day or a week – and some incident will come up and I’ll pick up the phone with this question about how to deal with it. He’s the first call I usually make. Here’s the situation. What do you think I should do? This is what I’m thinking. What do you think? He’s encouraging.

Mitch

By its very nature, coaching is intended to serve as a professional support to coachees. Virtually all of the participants in the study spoke about their coaching relationships as supportive. The participants explained that they felt support from their coaches through the ease with which they could access their coaches and by the way in which the coach served as a person they could turn to for support when exploring new ideas or when trying to solve a problem.

Motivating

Almost every participant in the study spoke about the motivational aspect of their coaching relationship. The participants in the study described their experiences connected to their coaching – the conversations and the relationship – as motivating or inspiring them. Of interest, research, professional, and policy research do not address coaching as a motivational experience. However, a number of participants in this study described their coaching as being motivational.

Laurie described the motivating element of the relationship she had with her coach. Laurie explained that she enjoyed exploring new ideas with her coach. She said that she did not
feel that she could do this with her own principal. Laurie explained that her conversations with her own principal were more directly connected to the specifics of the school, thus more limiting. For Laurie, the conversations with her coach motivated her because together they could explore areas more broadly and more deeply.

    When you’ve got a mentor outside of the school, that’s not your principal, the mentor can motivate and inspire you. They do that by challenging me. Have you thought about this? What would happen if you did this? They can do that with a larger scope in a way that’s a lot less threatening than being challenged within your school. It’s also deeper and long-lasting because sometimes the challenges are over years and not just to specific activities within the school which is more the domain of the principal. … The mentor outside the school says, tell me more and then I can go kind of crazy with my ideas and pick the ones I like. Whereas, if I’m having that conversation with my principal, I’ve already thought about where I want to take it and how I want it to look… and I only bring up the ideas that I’m really connected to and then I take from her responses which ones she is most amenable to and only go with those ones. To me, it’s completely different. Is it motivating? Absolutely, and inspiring. I’m one of those people who likes to brainstorm with others. I don’t like to do it on my own. My ideas get bigger and wilder and crazier the more I’m working with someone. And then reality sets in and you pare down to what’s really possible. I find that really motivating.

    Laurie

Diane described her coaching experience as motivating and inspiring. She believed that her formally-assigned coach as well as other colleagues served as mentors and coaches for her.
Diane was motivated by what she observed in these individuals and as a result expressed a desire to be able to emulate them. Diane described how she would wonder how these individuals might think through and then respond to given situations.

**Does the coaching motivate and inspire you? Absolutely. I’ve wanted to emulate those coaches and mentors I’ve met along the way. It’s very motivational and inspirational. Sometimes, in the back of my head, I will say to myself, what would Marlene do in this situation, or what would Bernice do in this situation? For me, their voices are there – sort of like mom and dad in the back of your head when you’re a teenager. … In terms of the coaching on a more long term basis it’s at a very motivational and inspirational level.**

Diane

Mitch described how he tracked his coaching appointments in his daily agenda. He explained how he would sometimes not look forward to the time with his coach because he saw this time as getting in the way of completing tasks he had at his school. However, once he met with his coach he described himself as motivated because he felt refreshed and positive, and not regretting the time he spent with his coach. Mitch was clear that his coaching relationship provided motivating experiences for him.

**When I have an appointment booked with him for mentor time set aside with him I will look at it in my day book and I go, ahh, and not be overly enthusiastic about it because I look at it and I think, I’ve got this to do, and this to do, and this to do,….. because your workload is always there. If you take time away from that workload nobody is coming in to pick it up for you and I think, do I have time to do this? Every single time I come back I feel refreshed, motivated, positive. … I**
never arrive back at the school regretting it.

Mitch

Daniel did not find his formal coaching relationship to be motivational. Daniel was matched by his school district with a ‘formal’ coach. He rarely worked with this coach and stated that he found the relationship to be only somewhat motivating. He did, however, describe the relationship with his actual coach – his principal – as both motivating and inspiring because the principal sought out new learning opportunities for Daniel.

No. I would say that it doesn’t motivate or inspire me. I guess it’s set up to be more reactive than proactive. If you have a problem, this is someone that you can call. I know you can review annual learning plans with them – sort of, where you want to take your career down the road. That can be kind of motivating. But do I look at the formal mentoring process as motivating? No, I don’t. … I see the principal as being an exceptional coach as well. My principal will look for learning opportunities and experiences… that aren’t necessarily part of my portfolio or even something that would have come across my desk as a learning experience. My experience is that the principal takes very much a coaching role. That may be unique to my principal. I don’t know if all are like that but I find him to be very supportive and very coaching right from the beginning.

Daniel

Almost every participant in the study spoke about the motivational aspect of their coaching relationship. The participants in the study described their coaching conversations and the relationship with the coach as motivating because they provided opportunities to learn and
opportunities to engage in conversations that they may not have felt they could have with their principal. In addition, some of the participants were motivated by the attributes they saw in their coaches. Of interest, research, professional, and policy research do not address coaching as a motivational experience.

The relational aspects of the coaching relationship figured large in the commentary provided by the vice-principals who took part in this study. The participants described the relationships with their coaches as ones where trust was built with their coaches and confidentiality was maintained. The participants described that they felt they were being neither judged nor evaluated by their coaches. In fact, the participants described that they often grew so close to their coaches that they developed social connections and spent social time with their coaches outside of the coaching relationship. Several of the coachees described the learning relationship with the coach as one of ‘co-learning’ where both the coach and coachee benefitted by learning from the coaching conversations. Overwhelmingly, the vice-principal coachees described their coaching as a support for them in their learning and their work. It is interesting to note that a number of participants described their coaching as motivational.

Professional Learning

From research and professional literature, two interconnected purposes of coaching are identified within an educational context. The first purpose focuses on the provision of direct and purposeful supports a newly-appointed school leader needs in order to transition successfully into the new role (Bolam et al. 1995; Spiro et al. 2007; Brown et al. 2005; Luck, 2003; Hobson, 2003; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a). The second purpose focuses on the processes of learning, growth, and change through professional coaching discussions (Healy et al. 2001; Cunat & Daresh, 2007). Professional learning for educational administrators (Daresh, 1995) is
intended to ensure that newly-appointed school leaders learn new knowledge and skills and then transfer their learning into their practice as more effective leaders (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Cunat & Daresh, 2007; Brown et al. 2005; Kirkham, 1995). Coaching provides both career development as well as psychosocial support (Kram, 1983; Kram, 1985 – as cited in Hegstad & Wentling, 2004) in the transition to the new role.

During the interviews, all participants spoke about their professional learning through the coaching process. In response to the interview questions (Appendix A), the participants discussed seven different aspects of this learning. These aspects included: building confidence, gaining knowledge about managerial responsibilities, how learning with the coach is different than the learning with their principal, learning through mediated thinking and reflection, learning about leadership, learning about oneself, and learning about the need for leader well-being.

Half of the participants in this study spoke specifically about an increase in confidence that came about thanks to their coaching experiences. Tanya stated very clearly and simply that she believed her confidence had grown as a result of her coaching and that her work was making a difference in her school. Specifically, she stated that she felt more confident in her decision-making.

That confidence piece. Because of my mentoring sessions with my coach, I feel more confident in my decisions. Yes, what I’m doing is making a difference. A lot of the ways that I approach things seem to be effective. The confidence piece, for sure.

Tanya

Elisa stated that she felt her coaching had supported the growth of her confidence as a school leader. She believed that she was a better and more self-confident leader. During the
interview, Elisa stated, “It’s made me a more confident leader… It has made me a better leader, a more self-confident leader. … It’s given me confidence.”

Mitch also stated that his confidence grew as a result of his coaching experience but he elaborated more on what this meant for him and his career. He stated that he believed with his growth in confidence he felt ready to assume a principalship. Prior to these experiences, he felt he could possibly assume the principalship of a small, rural school. However, with his growth in confidence, he stated that he now saw himself as sufficiently skilled and confident to take on a larger school with a vice-principal.

He built my confidence up. … I guess I feel I could go to a small school, a rural school and be a principal and I don’t think it would be out of my skill area but going to a bigger school with a vice-principal, in the past, I would have thought, no, I’m not sure that I’m confident enough or have the skills. But through working with a mentor I feel, no I could do that. The mentorship has helped me see that I have more potential than I thought.

Mitch

The managerial aspect of leadership focuses on efficiently and effectively maintaining organizational arrangements (Cuban, 1988; Castle & Mitchell, 2001). Managerial leadership can be seen as the efficient completion of clearly specified tasks by leaders (Leithwood et al. 1999). According to Kotter (1990), management is concerned with producing consistency and order in the workplace.

The Ontario Leadership Strategy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005) presents school leadership as having both instructional and managerial responsibilities. Many of the participants
in the study referred to some of the managerial responsibilities which they believed they needed to learn for their role.

Linda spoke about going to her coach’s school to try to learn how she organized herself in order to deal with the management tasks that came with the vice-principal role.

I went to her school just to find out her organizational structure. For example, what do you do about the massive amounts of paperwork that come through? Supply teachers? Setting up your professional learning communities? Do you use binders, file folders? All those kinds of things. So I just went into her setting and saw what she was doing and tried to mesh that with what I was doing. She came to my school and I shared some of things I was doing. My purpose was, we wanted to talk about data walls. What are you doing with yours? Can you take a look at mine and see what you think? We had professional growth and discussion about the data wall – and that was our main purpose for meeting…

Linda

Laurie spoke about somewhat similar interests related to the managerial responsibilities of her role. However, even though she used terms like ‘silly’ and ‘dumb’ when referring to her own questions about management in a school, she linked the learning about managerial responsibilities with larger questions of solving problems within the context of her own values.

It’s all those questions that you need to have answered that aren’t in books, that aren’t in policies and procedures. You’ve never experienced something. It’s all the silly questions, those dumb questions that you feel you need to ask somebody. That was the most important piece. Listening to how the person mentoring me
solved problems and watching how they worked, enabled me to solidify my own thoughts and values.

Laurie

Tanya commented specifically about the need to learn how to do a school budget. The budget process is an example of one of the managerial responsibilities of a school leader. She described how her coach invited her to the school so that they could look at the budget process step by step. It is interesting to note that Tanya stated that she could not learn the budget process by taking a course. She saw her time with her coach as the opportunity to learn this particular skill.

One of the things I wanted to find out more about was budget because I don’t know anything about that. I went over to his school one time and he went through his budget which was very similar. We’re all very similar in how our budgets work. Just going over what it looks like, how you would take funds from one area to another. Different things that you’re going to have to deal with in regard to paying in, paying out, money in, money out and how to move it all around. I found it really helpful because it’s not one of those things that you necessarily learn. You can’t take a course on it.

Tanya

Linda discussed the relationship between the managerial responsibilities of the vice-principal role and the responsibility to be an instructional leader in her school. She described how her coach supported her learning relative to her managerial responsibilities and as a result, she felt she had more time to serve in the role of instructional leader.
…what my mentor and I talk about are also the practical things too. There’s been lots of growth there too. As the vice-principal, you’re the instructional leader and you’re the manager – all those kinds of things. The management, although it’s not the focus, it’s a huge part of the job and if you have the good management skills – in terms of time and organization – it allows you more time to be that instructional leader within the school. I think my mentor has really helped me in terms of that management part. She’s very organized and has so many great ideas for handling so many different things. Being able to see all those different types of things that she does has helped me further refine my practice to allow me to have more time to do those other kinds of things. It’s helped me to develop as a manager.

Linda

Research and professional literature address a range of aspects of coaching in an educational context. Existing literature discusses the processes of coaching but it rarely addresses specifically who should do the coaching. The literature refers to the coach as a knowledgeable and experienced individual (Daresh, 2004; Kram, 1983; Hobson, 2003). Currently, the only literature on the topic of whether a principal should coach his or her vice-principal comes from the Ontario Ministry of Education’s School Board Guideline for Implementation of Mentoring for Newly Appointed School Leaders (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a). This document states clearly that the coach must not be a person who is in a supervisory role to the coachee. Ensuring that the coach is not in a supervisory relationship can support the professional learning that takes place in the coaching sessions. Many of the
participants described how the learning relationship with their principal was different than the learning relationship with their coach.

Diane talked about how the learning with her principal was specific to the day-to-day events of the school. In contrast, she explained that the learning with her coach was specific to what she wanted to accomplish.

I see the support from my principal as day-to-day – whatever is happening in the school, whatever’s happening within your life on a day-to-day, week to week, term by term basis. [It] is just a supportive relationship you have with a colleague you are working with. … That’s supportive more on a daily, informal basis. It’s more of a working relationship, not so much a coaching or mentoring relationship. … It’s more about the day-to-day and the here and now. Whereas the coach is more specific and guided in terms of accomplishing something that I personally want to accomplish and what are the things that need to happen in order for that to be successful.

Diane

Judy highlighted the learning with her coach as a time when she could explore new ideas and possibilities that she felt were important to her learning. She found the coaching environment to be conducive to this type of learning, in part because time is made to engage in these discussions. Judy did not find this type of learning environment with her principal. In fact, she described her work with her principal to be more of a role where she helped the principal to realize her vision of the school.

With the principal it’s a very different relationship. The principal is more like…me supporting what’s happening here and ensuring her vision is fulfilled
and helping her. The vision’s already there. I just kind of help. Whereas with the
coach, this is where Judy gets to say what Judy thinks and how Judy feels. And
it’s a chance to ask crazy questions about things that I am curious about. … But
in the day-to-day, there’s not a lot of time to sit around to talk about things. …
Whereas with my coach we have the time to do that. There are no distractions.
There are no buzzing phones or pagers and people wanting things.

Judy

Laurie compared the learning from her principal with the learning from her coach. She
described the learning from her principal as being specific to the people, events, and activities of
the school. On the other hand, she described the learning from her coach as addressing broader,
longer-range, and more global issues that were less specific to the events of the school. In
addition, she described the learning from her coach as that which required inquiry and reflective
thinking.

That differed somewhat from the mentoring with the principal because the
principal was specific to events and activities within the school. Whereas, if you
have a mentor who is not within your school, I think the issues you discuss are
usually of a broader nature. For instance, I wouldn’t ask the mentor who is
outside about specific things to do with children in my school. That wouldn’t be
appropriate. Neither would they be able to help me with that because they don’t
know the players involved. The issues would be broader, larger and less specific
to the environment that you’re in. Longer range, too. People I talk to outside the
school tend to think long-term, more globally as opposed to the principal that
you’re talking to, dealing with the issues of today with specific families and
specific children. … They’ll give me an inquiry and they’ll send me off to sit and think about it. They’ll ask one of those deep and meaningful questions and leave it with me. Whereas, I find that that has not happened with a principal. That has only happened with a mentor outside of the school.

Laurie

Ona explained that the hour-to-hour work of the school day kept the administrative team so busy that she and her principal were unable to find time for learning much beyond the answering of questions. She described the nature of the school day as so busy that it lent itself more to a focus on the immediate demands of the school rather than the type of learning she could gain through coaching.

My own principal – she’s always willing to answer questions. I’m always able to go to her and ask questions, but the nature of our day here in this school… It’s an incredibly busy place. From the moment we walk in until the moment we leave, we don’t stop. It’s just the nature of our school… There doesn’t seem to be time for those mentoring kinds of conversations, or time is not made for those.

… My principal. She is very, very busy. We’ve very business-like here so we’re very, very busy all the time. It’s very, very rare.

Ona

All of participants in the study spoke about how their coaching experiences mediated their thinking by stimulating reflective thought. Reflective thought can be defined as active and careful consideration both while engaged in a task as well as when looking back on a completed task (Reeves, 2006; Schon, 1987; Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990). Self-reflection is a core feature of human agency (Bandura, 2001). The cognitive processes involved engage individuals in
becoming self-directed learners (Costa & Garmston, 1994) who build their sense of self-efficacy through self-reflection. Some participants spoke at length about this experience. Others were more brief or indirect in their responses. Nonetheless, all participants found that they engaged in reflective thinking thanks to the discussions with their coaches. The following quotations illustrate the range of reflective thought found within this cohort of research participants.

Three of the participants in the study, Linda, Tori, and Marni, spoke about the learning that came from the way in which their coaches stimulated reflective thinking through the posing of questions (Costa & Garmston, 1994). They stated that their coaches did not provide them with answers but rather posed questions to stimulate thinking that supported the vice-principals in determining their own answers to the issues in question.

Their role is not to give me answers because their answers might be answers that are for them. Their role is to help make me question. I might call her and ask her what to do and she’ll say, What would you do in this situation? … or… What would you do if this changes slightly? Those professional discussions and all the questioning she does makes me grow and develop as a leader. … Sometimes I try something and it doesn’t work for me and we have a whole discussion about, Why did that work for me and not for you? The discussion just leads to further learning. She’ll say, I don’t know. What do you think? And in the end, we’ll come up with an answer.

Linda

She has some counseling background so she’s really good at questioning. One of her strengths is not to give you the answers when you’re asking her about
something. She’ll ask questions and make you think things through to get the answers yourself.

Tori

Tons of reflection. Never the answers. Always, I have a question. Tell me what you’re thinking of doing. What is your thinking about this? For what purpose do you think this is the right way to go? And then he would support my decision or offer an alternative reflective piece – I want you to think about what might happen if you tried it this way. Would the result change? Would it be a better result for your staff? Or is this the best route for you to go? The reflection was huge.

Marni

Tanya described the time she spent with her coach as an opportunity to take time to look back on her actions in order to reflect on and deconstruct her work. Deconstruction is a reflective process that leads naturally to the active phase of reconstruction of new knowledge (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). Tanya stated that this deconstruction and reconstruction was possible because the coach provided both the time and the forum for this level of reflection on her leadership.

It gives me that opportunity to really reflect on things. I find that day-to-day when you hit the ground running when the kids come in you make decisions, you go with it, you do things but you’re not really thinking about things while you’re doing them. You are, but not really. I find that with the mentoring piece – I do this too with my principal at the end of the day. We kind of debrief about the day. But with my mentor I find that I talk about some situations that are happening and
Tanya

Elisa spoke about the time with her coach as an opportunity to learn by reflecting on her own practice and being prompted to consider a variety of other perspectives. Elisa explained that she believed her vice-principal friends did not yet have the necessary experience to support her in viewing situations from different perspectives. She stated that the coach accomplished this by mediating her thinking through the introduction of a variety of perspectives to consider. Elisa said that she believed she learned from these experiences and was a better vice-principal thanks to this learning.

My mentor will say, have you thought about this? Her role is not to be my friend and to agree with me but to reflect on my practice. That’s the best thing I can say about it. It makes me a better VP…because I’m prompted to delve into my practice and to look at things from a variety of perspectives and to make me look ahead rather than just the ground under my feet. To look ahead and see a wider view, a different view than perhaps I would have done independently or seeking the advice of my friends who are also new in the role. … It’s a huge learning opportunity for me. I believe it has made me a better school leader because it has
made me be reflective of my own practice. It has made me view things from a
different viewpoint than perhaps I would have should I have ventured forth
without some mentoring advice.

Elisa

Mitch presented his learning through coaching as a process of reflecting in a variety of
areas. He spoke about reflecting on his work, reflecting on what he was trying to accomplish in
his work, reflecting on what his vision was, and reflecting on what his challenges were. Based
on this reflection, Mitch explained that he returned to the Ontario Leadership Framework
(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007) in order to determine his future learning.

Because of the mentorship and through the coaching process, I’ve gone back and
looked at the leadership framework and said, what do I do well? What do I need
to work on? What are my own personal goals? What do I want to improve on?
… Reflection. It’s reflection. What’s really grown is my understanding of the
importance of reflecting, of stopping and going, what is it I’m trying to do? What
is my vision? Where do I see myself? What are my challenges?

Mitch

Diane raised a different perspective relative to her professional learning through
reflective thought. She explained that she believed, as a new vice-principal, much of her
leadership was intuitive – at an unconscious level. She spoke about the benefit of engaging in
reflective conversations in order to know – at a conscious level – why she led in the way that she
did. The process of coaching engages individuals in reflective thinking in order to develop and
utilize cognitive processes, internal resources, and states of mind – such as consciousness - as a
means of building capacity to achieve goals and enhance self-directed learning (Costa &
Diane believed that this reflective thinking lead her to tap into her values and vision so that she could lead with a higher degree of consciousness and skill.

A lot of us as administrators or educators do things intuitively. We’re not always conscious why we’re doing things. What has made us a good administrator or a good educator comes very inherent. We don’t allow ourselves the opportunity to reflect and ask ourselves, well why was that the right thing? Why did it work? As opposed to saying, I don’t know why it worked. I’m just going to do it again. That really doesn’t promote personal growth. It just allows you to continue to do things and you don’t know why but I want to be better than that. As a person who tends to do things rather intuitively, it’s allowing me the opportunity to really dig deep into what my value system is as a leader and what I cherish as an educator and what my vision is as a school administrator. So my coaching sessions have taken me through those hiccups along the way because they sort of forced the ‘why’ question. Why did you do this? Did you think about this? And what is very important to me – having that opportunity to make mistakes or say something incorrectly and not have someone be judgmental on what your thoughts or processes were but be able to guide you through different ways of thinking that will only improve your skills.

Diane

Professional learning for first-time school administrators is an issue of leadership development (Hargreaves et al. 2003). It is in both the preparation and on-going supports for first-time administrators where one needs to see the development of the instructional and managerial skills for school leadership in the 21st century (Fullan, 2005; Leithwood et al., 1999;
Marzano et al. 2005). The current educational context in Ontario, as outlined in the Ontario Leadership Strategy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005), calls for a shift from purely managerial leadership to instructional leadership. Many of the participants in the study spoke about how coaching supported their learning relative to this larger concept of ‘leadership’. The participants in the study were generally all quite clear about the differences between learning about operational tasks and learning about leadership and themselves as leaders.

Tanya explained that the learning that came from her coaching experiences supported her process of learning to see connections and how leadership includes long-term and ‘big-picture’ perspectives. Tanya also commented on how her perspective, in the role of vice-principal, had changed from that of being a teacher.

It has made me look longer-term and the big picture and how everything is really connected. It’s funny what you see in the role that you don’t see when you are a teacher …my mentor is kind of like big-picture, long-term and he’s looking at me as a future principal in the Board.

Tanya

Linda identified learning that came from her coaching experience as supporting her process of learning to be a leader and how she defined herself as a leader. She felt that her coaching stimulated her thinking about her leadership and encouraged her to think about her actions, how she might respond in different ways to future events, and how this new learning linked to her own philosophy of education.

I think the coaching has helped me to…it kind of refers back to what I said earlier…it has helped me to define myself as a leader. Because it’s the questioning that is involved in it, the self-reflection. It’s opportunities to discuss
and think about – if I had this situation again, would I handle it the same way next time? We have those discussions. It’s the whole growth and development of learning to be a leader. Learning what my boundaries are. Testing my own educational philosophy. I make each decision and then reflect back with my mentor and I say, would I do it that way again? Or, was I happy with the outcome? How could it have changed? So each time you do that – that self-reflection piece – I further define myself as a leader and what I believe in.

Linda

Diane – who commented above about moving from intuitive to conscious leadership - spoke further about how coaching supported her learning as a leader. She drew connections between her skills as a leader and her own mission, vision, values, and beliefs. She saw these connections as a focus on leadership and a focus that supported her becoming an effective leader.

It’s about leadership. Everything that I’ve done in coaching and mentoring has gone back to leadership. Looking at your skills as a leader and looking at your mission, your vision, your values and your beliefs. It’s zeroing in on what exactly it is that makes me a leader. Not only what makes me a leader but what makes me an effective leader within the school system to benefit student learning.

Diane

Marni identified that her coaching sessions did not focus on the day-to-day events of the school but rather on issues of leadership. She saw all of her learning in the coaching relationship as being focused on questions of leadership. One particular area she described was her learning as a leader relative to engaging and motivating staff.
Our sessions were never based on issues like how to get parents out of the bus loop or how to do budget. They were more leadership questions. How do I engage staff who have chosen to opt out of PLCs [Professional Learning Communities]? How do I engage my staff who have been there for 20 years and think that life is so terrible at my system school when they don’t know any better? How do I continue to motivate them? Our questions were more leadership questions than they ever were about operations, or what I would call level 1 questions. They were much deeper than that.

Marni

During the interview, Linda explained that she had an interest in learning about leadership as it relates to the development of a school plan. This was learning that she wished to engage in right from her appointment to the vice-principal role in the previous year. Linda maintained an interest in this learning with her coach up to and including the time this research was being conducted.

Last year when I started my role in January, our school plan was already implemented so this year when we said, where do we want to go? I said, I’m really interested in how to develop a school plan so that was one of our overall things that she was helping me to work on. For example, here’s what I’m doing at my school, some samples, and here are the people you connect with. She helped me grow professionally in that area and we still continue to talk about it.

Linda

In a review of published empirical research relative to leadership, self, and identity, Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, De Cremer, and Hogg (2004) presented ‘self-concept’ which
they defined as “the knowledge a person has about him- or her- self” (p. 827). The authors stated that the way leaders perceived themselves had profound effects on how they felt, thought, and behaved. Approximately half of the participants in this study commented on how they learned about themselves through the coaching experience.

Ona described that through coaching she learned about her own way of thinking. She described this learning as building her understanding of how she comes to decisions and how she rationalizes her decisions.

It’s been very eye-opening. It’s given me a chance to better understand my own leadership style and better understand my way of coming up with decisions, my rationale for them and get a better picture of how I would do things. It solidifies it. … It makes you more aware of your own leadership style and your reasons for doing things.

Ona

Laurie described in detail what she learned about herself. She revealed that she learned that her leadership style was one where she tended to inform, or ‘tell’ people rather than ask or invite participation. Laurie explained that because of this, some of her initial efforts as a leader were unsuccessful. In addition she stated that she learned that she needed to inspire people if she wished to be successful in her leadership and accomplishing important goals.

In my early career as a VP, I didn’t understand how I would come up with a brilliant idea or a brilliant solution to a problem and not understand why somebody else was not dancing on the spot and all eager to implement it or to try it. Now I’m learning about what the difference is. To be a leader, you have to be inspiring. You don’t inspire people by giving them the answer. You inspire
people by helping people to find the answer themselves. The difference in that philosophy, I find amazing. I find a lot of the challenges I experienced when I was early in my administrative career, and even now when I experience challenges – that didn’t go so well, what happened? - it’s because I was in the telling mode, not the asking mode. … When you reflect on it, when it went nowhere, what happened? Ninety-nine percent of the time it’s because you were the only one dancing at the front. You didn’t realize the people behind you weren’t committed or inspired to that vision.

Laurie

One of the other participants in the study, Jackie, was very succinct in her comments relative to what she learned about herself. She described how the learning from her coaching experience supported her understanding of her personal need to be more open-minded, to view things from more than one perspective, and to emotionally distance herself from issues so that she could be more open-minded in her work. In the course of the interview, Jackie stated, “She inspired me to be more open-minded, to approach things, to look at things from more than one angle, and try to emotionally disconnect myself so I can be more open-minded.”

Tori described her learning as a growth in her awareness that leadership issues can be complex, not ‘black and white’, and that she needed to be open to this complexity and more flexible. She stated that she realized that she did not need to do everything on her own and that there were others who would be able to help her in her work.

It’s taught me to be more open to different types of scenarios and to be a little more flexible because everything is not always black and white. … My awareness as a leader…..it’s made me realize you don’t have to be perfect and you don’t
have to do everything on your own. There’s always going to be someone there to support you.

Tori

Diane described how her coaching experience supported her learning about herself. This was in terms of how her behaviours as a leader impacted and affected people. She spoke candidly about her sense of humour as ‘flippant’ and ‘sarcastic’ and that she had not been aware previously that such behaviour could hurt others. She stated that she found her coaching experiences helpful when she was provided with feedback about how she communicated with others and how it affected them.

I think coaching has afforded me an opportunity to see how you affect people. Really looking at when you make a decision, or when you don’t make a decision, how does that affect your staff? I hadn’t really thought about that as an early vice-principal. I hadn’t really seen how my decision-making or how I conducted myself on a daily basis really affected my leadership. … It really makes me aware because I can be really flippant. I can be very sarcastic. It’s what I’ve grown up with. It’s my sense of humour. People who have known me for a very long time don’t react to it. It doesn’t bother them in the least. However, I never really knew how that part of my personality could really damage people, or could be damaging, or could be misconstrued in a negative way. Having mentors and coaches that would say, That was very sarcastic, or That was very flippant. You should think about things, not so much more politically correct but you need to be a little more tactful or you need to be a little more diplomatic in terms of how you are saying things.
In an international comparative study of newly-appointed school administrators, Male and Daresh (1997) addressed the ‘culture shock of the transition’ into administration. They stated that all newly-appointed school leaders, once in the role, reported stress levels that exceeded their expectations. Several of the participants in this study spoke about the stresses of the vice-principal role. These participants explained how they found the coaching to be supportive of their learning about their own well-being because it provided an opportunity to process their thinking about these stresses, to find support in their coaching relationship, or simply to have a trusted colleague with whom they could share their feelings when frustrated.

Diane spoke at length about issues of stress and well-being. She identified the vice-principal role as stressful and demanding and expressed concern about the number of years younger vice-principals could potentially be in administrative roles. She explained that the coaching experience supported her in being able to deal with the day-to-day stresses of her work while managing a demanding home life.

Initially the coaching was more about emotional well-being. How you just get through the day when your learning curve is just so steep in terms of the things you have to learn. … For the most part, I think coaching is a very necessary piece for addressing the stress and the emotional part to a very difficult job. So, not only is it helping you with the very day to day specifics of building your leadership and helping you through a job but……… It’s very taxing. You need to be able to go home and shut off and be a mother at the end of the day, and be a sister and a daughter. Coaching has afforded me to do that because that’s the support system I need to have in place to carry on with the other parts of my life.
that are very busy. That’s the outlet as administrators that we need. … So being in a very stressful job for a very long period of time is something that has to be weathered. For me, the only way I see that happening is through coaching. You need that network to help you flush out the mental health issues you’re going to have along the way. We’re coming in as a very young generation. So what does that mean to most of the baby-boomers who were only administrators for a few years relative to my generation? We’re coming in and we’re going to be administrators for twenty years. We need this. … If you don’t have those things down, you’re going to have mental health issues. You’re going to be stressed. You’re going to have all of these pieces of your life fall apart. You need to be able to set the basis early so that you can continue in a stressful job for a long time in a healthy manner.

Diane

Linda described that the time demands of the vice-principal role could be overwhelming for her. She described the coaching experience as helpful in understanding issues of time management. In addition, she described how she benefitted from the support of a coach who, at a late hour in the day, encouraged her to wrap up her tasks at the school and to return to her home.

One of the challenges I face that I think anyone who goes into administration faces is time management. The job can overwhelm you. I would be there on weekends doing work. I’d arrive there at 7:30 and leave at 7:30 kind of thing. A challenge for me would just be balancing your personal life with your professional life……all of those kinds of demands. The job’s going to be there
when I get there the next day. The mentoring relationship has been very good for that – sometimes getting those emails from my mentor that say, Are you still there? Go home.

   Linda

At times, Mark felt frustrated by experiences in his vice-principal role. He described that he learned how his coaching could be supportive of his need to address his own well-being. He explained that he found the coach supportive of him in that he felt he could freely express his frustrations with work-related issues as he needed.

   Another part of that relationship was that that was someone I could talk to about stuff, like, This is driving me crazy here! So that was good just in terms of having someone I could talk to in terms of a peer. So that was good. We both were able to exchange on that level.

   Mark

Questions are being raised about the effectiveness of existing models of professional learning for school leaders (Fullan, 2005; Cole, 2004). Personalized learning (Hopkins, 2007, Fullan et al. 2006; Creasy & Paterson, 2005) within the context of daily (Fullan, 2007), job-embedded learning has garnered increased attention in recent years. Coupled with this focus is the recognition that the cognitive and affective antecedents of school leader behaviours need to be considered relative to school leader professional learning (Leithwood et al. 2006). Coaching is one form of this type of learning. The participants in this study spoke about the personalization of their professional learning – through coaching - in their commentary about how their confidence was built, how they gained knowledge about managerial responsibilities, how their thinking was mediated so that they were more reflective, how they learned about
leadership, themselves, and their own well-being. Furthermore, the participants described how the learning with their coaches was different than the learning with their principals.

Chapter Summary

This chapter began with a brief introduction to the fourteen vice-principal participants in this study and the five school districts in which they work. The data were presented in three main categories. These included: experiences of the vice-principal role, coaching process experiences, and professional learning. Each of these categories contained a number of subcategories that were based on participant responses to the interview questions (Appendix A).

The participants spoke about their experiences of the vice-principal role. They described how their role is determined by their principal. They spoke about the need to follow the decisions made by their principals even if this was problematic for them. In addition, the vice-principals described their roles as preparing them for the principalship.

The category that presented the results relative to the coaching process comprised three sub-categories. These included: the coaching, coaching processes, and the relational aspects. In speaking about the structure of coaching in which they participated, the vice-principals described how coaching was established for them by their respective school districts. The participants described one-to-one coaching, group coaching, and in some cases, a combination of the two. The participants described their coaches as knowledgeable, skilled as leaders, skilled as coaches, and in general, people whom they both admired and respected. Data were also gathered during the interviews that described the variety of matching processes used to bring a vice-principal coachee together with his or her coach. In addition, data were gathered relative to an exit process in the event a coaching match was not working as well as hoped.
When discussing the experiences of their coaching, the participants spoke glowingly. They described their preferences for the type of coaching that best suited their learning. In some cases this was one-to-one coaching. In some cases it was small-group coaching, and in other cases it was a combination of these two. Further to this, the participants expressed their preferences relative to the scheduling of their coaching sessions. Beyond these preferences, the vice-principals described the focus of their coaching. The participants expressed a desire for personalized learning through coaching that was based on their identified needs relative to their leadership practice. One of the key experiences that was threaded throughout the results was that of reflective thinking and how the coaches mediated the thinking of their coachees to support their engagement in reflection on current and past practice.

The relational aspects of the coaching relationship figured strongly in the results. The participants detailed the trusting and confidential nature of the relationships they had with their coaches. The described how this relationship was different from that with their principal because it was non-evaluative. Relative to their learning, the vice-principals described the coaching relationship as one of co-learning where they learned along with their coaches, not just from their coaches. Beyond this, results were presented that detailed the supportive and motivating nature of the coachee-coach relationship. Indeed, in some cases, the vice-principals described how their coaching relationships began as professional and grew to become more personal.

The third main category in this chapter presented results relative to professional learning. In this category, the results detailed how the vice-principals felt that their coaching experiences helped them to build their confidence as school leaders. The participants described how they built their knowledge and skills relative to the managerial responsibilities of their role. The participants described how the learning relationship with their principal was different from the
learning relationship with their coach. They spoke about how their coaches mediated their thinking in order to support them in engaging in reflective thinking about their current and past work. The participants described how through these processes they learned about leadership, they learned about themselves, and they learned about the need to attend to their own well-being.

It is valuable to note that there were no discernible differences noted in the participant commentary in respect to the district school boards in which they worked. Similar experiences among participants were found among the five school districts. Conversely, unique participant experiences were not more common in one school district than any other.

The next chapter, Chapter Six, will focus on an analysis and discussion of the results presented in this chapter.
CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

In Chapter Five, results were presented from the qualitative interviews held with the fourteen newly-appointed vice-principals who participated in the study. The overall goal of this research study was to examine the coaching experiences of the newly-appointed elementary vice-principals who participated in order to provide understanding of these experiences. The data presented provide rich descriptive details that offer insights into the nature of the coaching experiences of these participants. In addition, insights are gained into their experiences of the role of vice-principal as well as the vice-principals’ perceptions of the learning they experienced through coaching. It is important to stress that the key to understanding the coaching experience is to understand the perspective of the fourteen participants. This is an inductive form of research that builds upon the data analysis outlined in Chapter Four. The outcome of this qualitative form of research is richly descriptive (Merriam, 1998) and it emphasizes the importance of the participants’ views (Creswell, 2005). Qualitative studies have value through the provision of rich and detailed data (Creswell, 2005) about a particular phenomenon. Generalizability is neither required nor desired in such research (Merriam, 1998).

As outlined in Chapter Four of this report, analysis of the data beyond the determination of the findings was used to determine key themes. The researcher examined the categories and sub-categories of the findings in order to understand the relationships among them and then to aggregate similar categories (Creswell, 2005). Through this process, the categories and sub-categories were combined to establish major ideas, or themes, among the findings (Creswell, 2005). Four themes were initially determined and were later confirmed by establishing that the themes cut across and highlighted the data in the categories and sub-categories of findings. Furthermore, the themes addressed the research questions.
In the following analysis and discussion key themes are revealed which emerged from the data. The themes are organized in accordance with the conceptual framework of the study but they are neither limited nor bound by it.

The first theme, which relates to the experiences of the role of vice-principal, is that the vice-principals felt they had a lack of autonomy to exercise their leadership. The second theme, which relates to the coaching experience, is the passion all of the participants have for personalized learning. The third theme, relating to professional learning, is the value the participants place on reflective thinking. The fourth theme, again related to professional learning, is that these vice-principals build their capacity as leaders in preparation for the role of principal. These themes are discussed in the following sections.

Vice-principals Perceive a Lack of Autonomy to Exercise their Leadership

In the previous chapter, results were presented relative to the experiences this group of newly-appointed vice-principals have of their role. A key theme that emerged in these results was that they felt that they have a lack of autonomy in exercising their leadership. As identified in the findings of this study, these vice-principals believe that the vice-principal role is determined by the principal when the principal makes decisions for the school and the vice-principals are expected to follow these decisions.

The study reveals that the vice-principal participants believe that their role is determined for them by their principals who delegate tasks to them. As described by the participants, the principal sets the vision for the school and from this vision, the vice-principals take direction. According to the participants, this occurs within the context of a hierarchical and supervisory
relationship. Many of the participants in this study described that their principals set the vision of the school, determine the work that needs to be done, and then assign tasks accordingly. A number of the vice-principals in the study commented on the nature of the work assigned to them. In many cases, it was the less appealing aspects of school leadership. These included tasks such as student discipline, bus schedules, newsletters, school timetables, and other administrative responsibilities. Research literature indicates that vice-principals are assigned such tasks as data management, discipline management, student registration (Armstrong, 2009), holding conferences with parents, responding to crises, student attendance, and counselling students (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). As presented in the results, this role determination by the principal in some cases elicited feelings of annoyance or frustration among some of the participants. These feelings are concisely reflected in comments made by Mark when he spoke about his principal, “You always feel that – you’re not sucking up to them – you always feel that you’re working for them. And the principal I have right now is very clear about that relationship. It is her school. I am her vice-principal. I work for her.”

Research findings have highlighted a lack of clarity about the vice-principal role (Garrett & McGeachie, 1999; Scoggins & Bishop, 1993; Maher, 1999; Nanavati & McCulloch, 2003; Hartle 2005). In Ontario, the Education Act contains only one sentence about vice-principals. The Act states simply, “A vice-principal shall perform such duties as are assigned to the vice-principal by the principal” (Education Act, O. Reg. 613/00). With a limited definition of the role and a lack of clarity in legislation, it is not surprising that individual principals may each determine the role for their vice-principals. While such behaviour on the part of the principal could be interpreted that principals can be authoritative and controlling, it is worth considering how this may have come about. It may be possible to explain such behaviours on the part of the
principal as stemming from the principals’ understanding of the vice-principal role based on their own experiences as vice-principals. These principals themselves may simply be replicating their own experiences with their vice-principals. With lack of clarity about the role, it is possible that principals simply do not see the vice-principal role in any other way. Indeed, they may well believe that they are being supportive of their vice-principals by providing this level of direction.

A further explanation for such behaviour by the principal may be that these principals take their legislative responsibilities seriously and act on them by providing clear direction to their vice-principals. By law, principals have the responsibility to assign duties to their vice-principals. As such, the principal is the decision-maker of the school and because the principal supervises the vice-principal, line authority would suggest that the vice-principal would be required to follow the principal’s decisions.

According to a study by Mertz (2005) cited in Marshall and Hooley (2006), vice-principals have little autonomy or decision-making authority so being successful means being loyal and agreeing with the principal’s way of doing things. Several of the participants in the study described a need to maintain a united front with the principal by supporting the principal’s decisions and keeping quiet even if this was contrary to the beliefs or values of the vice-principal. The following quotation from Marni’s interview illustrates these points.

The more equipped I become in being a P [principal] of my own school one day, the more ingrained my morals and values about how I would run my own school. Of course, I’m not yet in that position so the principal makes the decision and I have to follow it, support it. We’re a united front but I may not agree with it.
Such loyalty requires the presentation of unity before others, thus serving the principal requires helping the principal to realize his or her vision even if the vice-principal does not agree with it (Mertz & McNeely, 1999). From such a perspective, the vice-principal’s position may be seen as less a leadership role unto itself than a role as the person who assists the principal in carrying out his or her priorities and as such, the role could be viewed as an extension of the principal. Armstrong’s (2009) research indicates that vice-principals have described part of their process of being an administrator as a process of conforming within their respective schools or school districts.

The vice-principal role is a formally recognized school leadership position in legislation (Education Act, O. Reg. 613/00) and policy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). However, as it is currently experienced by these fourteen elementary vice-principals, it appears to provide little or no autonomy for those in the role to exercise their leadership. In such circumstances, it may be the case that a vice-principal is seen to be effective or successful in their role when they follow directions dutifully and do not question the decisions of the principal. Thus, the vice-principal role could be seen as more of a role where followership (Swenson, 2009) rather than leadership is key to success.

These findings stand in sharp contrast to the image of the vice-principal role as defined in the Ontario Leadership Framework (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). In the Framework, the competencies and practices of the vice-principal role are described as the same as that of the principal. In other words, according to Ontario provincial policy, the leader behaviours of the vice-principal are the same as those of the principal. If the current cohort of vice-principals constitutes the pool from which future principals are drawn, concerns are raised about how these
vice-principals can gain the breadth and depth of knowledge and skill required for their future leadership roles.

**Passion for Personalized Learning**

The second theme relates to the coaching experience and the passion this group of vice-principals expressed for the personalization of their learning within the coaching experience.

In addressing education for school children, Leadbetter (2002) claimed that personalization comes through ‘putting the learner at the center’. The same can be said about coaching because in coaching the learner is at the center (Zachary, 2000, 2005; Costa & Garmston, 1994; Bloom et al. 2005). From the interviews, the participants revealed that personalization – being put at the center of the learning - came about through the one-to-one and/or small-group coaching format, the focus on their individual learning needs, addressing their issues of the moment, and the opportunities for them to reflect on their own leadership practice. Furthermore, one can see the vice-principals at the center of the learning when they described their coaching as an opportunity to learn in an environment that was non-evaluative, non-judgmental, and that felt safe because it was confidential. The passion for personalized learning that the participants expressed in this study may well be explained by how they felt they were situated at the center of the learning. The following quotation from Ona illustrates how she saw herself at the centre of the learning.

…most typically, it’s one-on-one. It’s the one-on-one time that I find most valuable. Once again, it’s not a mentor in my own school. It’s a mentor in a different school, in a different family. Just being outside one’s own family, there is a comfort level there. … There’s a lot about the life/work balance that comes up in conversations. A lot about the sharing of the administrative role. The sharing
of experiences and challenges together. Being able to go over those little hurdles together and share experiences has been the greatest focus.

I wanted to learn a lot about special education so I have many questions about that and about how my mentor goes about certain things. It’s an opportunity to ask questions in a non-threatening environment and share the way we approach things. It’s been led based on my own needs which is wonderful.

The personalization of learning comes not only through the content and processes for the learning but also through those who lead it. In coaching, it is the coach who facilitates the learning. The content of a coaching session comes from the coachee but it is the coach who creates the processes for the learning and who ensures that the coachee is always at the center. Effective coaches have a range of skills among which the personalization of learning is but one (Bolam et al. 1995; Brown et al. 2005; Spiro et al. 2007; Ehrich et al. 2001; Luck, 2003; NCSL, 2005; Cunat & Daresh, 2007). In the results of this study, the vice-principal participants spoke highly of their coaches and described them as skilled and knowledgeable leaders. In many cases, the participants articulated great respect and admiration for their coaches as individuals, as coaches, and as leaders. According to the participants, a significant part of this respect and admiration came from the fact that the coaches supported personalized learning by addressing the individual learning needs of the participants based on their experiences in the role. Diane provided insights in her interview about how she admired her coach’s skills as well as her ability to personalize the learning.

I’m the person who doesn’t do subtleties very well so having someone who can recognize that and be very direct with me – I appreciate that. She’s not
afraid to say what needs to be said because she saw it as needing to happen in order for me to grow and go where I wanted to go. … It’s just that I trust her and I respect her and I see what she has done as a professional and it’s almost, as I’m talking to you, I’m striving to guide my career as I see hers because I really respect what she’s done.

Personalized professional learning is effective when it is designed to engage participants in on-going, sustained learning in the setting where the actual work takes place (Fullan, 2007; Elmore, 2004). According to the participants, their learning needs were drawn from their actual work and experiences in their schools. This work and these experiences ranged from issues of the moment at their schools through to long-term learning goals that they had established. Virtually without exception, the participants expressed a passion for the way in which their learning was personalized by their coaches as related to their own experiences and goals.

The results of the study indicated that the participants had varied preferences in the format of their coaching experiences. Some of the participants preferred one-to-one coaching. Others preferred small-group coaching and yet others preferred a combination of the two. The participants in the study expressed enthusiasm for their coaching when the format was personalized by tailoring it to their needs and preferences. For some, small-group coaching was sometimes preferred because a range of ideas and experiences from fellow coachees contributed to the discussions and the learning, while for others the preference was always to be in a one-to-one format.

The vice-principal participants in this study described the nature of the discussions they had with their coaches. They described some conversations as opportunities to air emotions in a
confidential and trusting relationship. They also described their conversations as opportunities to learn. The learning they described ranged from answers to basic questions about school operations, to how to balance their work and home lives, through to questions of what effective school leadership looks like and how they can develop themselves as leaders. Regardless of the nature of the conversations, the participants described learning that was specifically focused on their needs at the time of the coaching conversation. Through such a process, the learning that takes place during coaching is personalized and provides a process for learning-centred professional dialogue based on actual experiences within the workplace. The following quotation from one of the participants, Linda, illustrates well these points.

I think the coaching has helped me to…it kind of refers back to what I said earlier…it has helped me to define myself as a leader. Because it’s the questioning that is involved in it, the self-reflection. It’s opportunities to discuss and think about – if I had this situation again, would I handle it the same way next time? We have those discussions. It’s the whole growth and development of learning to be a leader. Learning what my boundaries are. Testing my own educational philosophy. I make each decision and then reflect back with my mentor and I say, would I do it that way again? Or, was I happy with the outcome? How could it have changed? So each time you do that – that self-reflection piece – I further define myself as a leader and what I believe in. … Beyond the philosophical growth as a leader through defining myself my roles and my practice, what my coach and I talk about are also the practical things too. There’s been lots of growth there too. As the vice-principal, you’re the instructional leader and you’re the manager – all those kinds of things. The
management, although it’s not the focus, it’s a huge part of the job and if you have the good management skills – in terms of time and organization – it allows you more time to be that instructional leader within the school. I think my mentor has really helped me in terms of that management part. … So to just have that person to go to, that safe haven, that person you can talk to,… There’s lots of stress in the job and I think it alleviates a certain amount of that stress. I think it’s been great for professional growth.

The participants in the study used their day-to-day experiences as newly-appointed vice-principals as the content for the conversations with their coaches. They described their learning needs – whether they be minor informational needs, personal life balance needs, school operational needs, or perspectives on school leadership – to their coaches. In most cases, these needs became the content of the coaching conversations. These personalized, learning-centred conversations were grounded in the daily and authentic workplace experiences of the fourteen vice-principals who participated in this study. These findings are consistent with the findings of Costa and Garmston (1994) in the United States as well as Suggett (2006) in the United Kingdom.

Reflective Thinking

The third theme is the value this group of vice-principals placed on reflective thinking in their professional learning. Reflective thought can be defined as active and careful consideration both while engaged in a task as well as when looking back on a completed task (Reeves, 2006; Schon, 1987; Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990). According to Mitchell and Sackney (2001), reflection involves the deconstruction and reconstruction of one’s personal experiences. Every vice-
principal participant in this study spoke about reflection as an aspect of their coaching. Marni, one of the participants, spoke explicitly about the nature of the reflective thinking in her coaching sessions.

Then when we met, he would allow me the opportunity to talk about it. And then, rather than just saying, that’s great, or whatever, he would use guiding questions – I see that you’ve chosen to do this. Explain to me why you made those choices. And, it was that reflective piece. Why did I choose that? Why is that the way I would go? He would always add insight at the end of it. OK, this was really great. So let’s go back to where you said this part and I think we need to focus on it so we can elaborate it more so that you have maybe a more global focus. Tons of reflection. Never the answers. Always, I have a question. Tell me what you’re thinking of doing. What is your thinking about this? For what purpose do you think this is the right way to go? And then he would support my decision or offer an alternative reflective piece – I want you to think about what might happen if you tried it this way. Would the result change? Would it be a better result for your staff? Or is this the best route for you to go? The reflection was huge – the whole meta-cognitive piece.

Even though the interview guide (Appendix A) used in the study did not have a specific question about reflection, all of the participants described how they engaged in reflective thinking with their coaches. In their comments, the participants described reflective thinking as a way to look back on actions taken, as a way to consider possible approaches for future actions, as a way to consider a variety of perspectives when facing complex situations, as a way to consider
a range of options prior to taking action, or as a way to think about oneself as a leader and one’s own leadership.

By its very nature, coaching is a reflective process (NCSL, 2005; Costa & Garmston, 1994) based on an individual’s unique and personal experiences (Brown et al. 2005). By engaging in coaching, individuals consider past behaviour, current thinking, and future possibilities within the context of a conversation with a trusted colleague. For the participants in this study, this reflective thought occurred not only during coaching conversations but also afterwards based on questions posed by their coaches. These questions stimulated thinking well after the coaching conversation had ended. The participants highlighted the use of questions to stimulate their reflective thinking. Some of the participants described reflecting on their own practices in the vice-principal role and being prompted by their coach to consider a variety of different perspectives when thinking about situations they faced. At the same time, other participants described how they engaged in reflection by looking back on their actions in order to re-examine, or deconstruct, their work as vice-principals. Deconstruction is a reflective thinking process that leads naturally to the active phase of reconstruction of knowledge (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001).

Reflective thinking processes are best situated within a context where the learning is not done in isolation but through social participation with the assistance of others (Hobson, 2003; Senge, 1990) and based on actual experiences within the workplace (Leithwood et al. 1995). The participants in this study each discussed reflection as a process in which they engaged using their experiences of the vice-principal role. For the most part, reflective thinking was stimulated for the participants through conversations with their coaches. The participants described real experiences from their workplaces and then discussed these experiences with their coaches.
With some of the participants, the conversation was reflective thought in action. For other participants, reflection came through questions that the coaches posed but for which they did not provide an answer. Several of the participants spoke positively about the way in which their coach posed questions for reflection. In this way, the vice-principals could take time to consider, or reflect on, their responses to the questions even after the conversation with the coach had finished. These findings contribute to the literature on understanding the ways in which these newly-appointed school leaders use reflection in their professional learning.

The participants in this study explained that they valued the opportunities for the deconstruction and reconstruction of their experiences and described this process as supporting their learning. A few of the participants bemoaned the lack of time or opportunity to engage in reflective thought. This causes one to consider how valuable an experience reflective thinking is for these vice-principals and how the frequency of these opportunities can be provided for them. This is an area of significance for school leaders and those who create and deliver professional learning for them. If reflective thinking is as valuable as the participants in this study have indicated, then there is value in examining ways in which to build reflective thinking processes into future professional learning for these individuals.

Building Capacity as Leaders in Preparation for the Role of Principal

The fourth theme that emerged is how this group of vice-principals believe they build capacity as leaders in preparation for the role of the principal. This theme relates to professional learning. Two aspects from the research findings contributed to this theme: learning about the managerial responsibilities of the principalship and learning about leadership.
Managerial Responsibilities of the Principalship

The *Ontario Leadership Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007) identifies the actions, behaviours, attitudes, practices, skills, and knowledge that describe good school leadership. The *Framework* details clearly the breadth of school leadership ranging from managerial through instructional. As a provincial policy document, it is intended to be used to describe good leadership for both the vice-principal and principal roles (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Even though no specific question was asked during the course of the interviews about future career intentions, most of the participants explained how they used their vice-principal experiences as learning opportunities to build their capacity as leaders for the principalship. It is interesting to note that none of the participants presented themselves as career vice-principals. Each of them saw themselves as moving to the principal role at some point in the future.

In the previous chapter, results were presented from the participants in the study relative to learning about the managerial responsibilities of a school leader. The participants described learning about how to organize themselves to address the sheer volume of work that a school leader faces, how to problem-solve, how to do managerial tasks such as a school budget, and how to balance the managerial demands with the instructional demands of the role. It is of value to note that none of the participants made any reference to the *Framework*. Based on this, one might assume that the vice-principals believed that they were building capacity as leaders for the principalship based on their personal understanding of the principal role. This understanding of the principal role, if not grounded in the OLF, must then have been based on other sources of information. These may have included learning from the Principal’s Qualification Program courses, what the participants believed the principal role to be, what they saw their own
principals doing in the role, and possibly other inputs from other sources. The participants in the study generally described the principal role as an instructional leader balanced with that of a manager. They described a need to learn about the managerial responsibilities of a principal in order to produce consistency and order in their workplaces. A few of the participants in the study made references to the instructional leadership aspects of the role without specifically naming the *Framework* or the practices and competencies outlined in it. This causes one to question how these newly-appointed school leaders understand the vice-principal and principal roles and how prior experiences, observations, pre-existing practices, training experiences, legislation, policy, or research serve to shape these understandings.

**Leadership**

In a time when school leadership is seen as second only to classroom instruction as having impact on student learning (Leithwood et al. 2006; Marzano et al. 2005), attention has increasingly focused on school leaders. School leaders are being held accountable for how well teachers teach and how well students learn (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). All of the participants in the study saw themselves - and spoke about themselves - as leaders. The range of commentary about leadership from the participants in the study was as varied as the participants themselves. Yet this commentary appears to have been based more on their impressions of their own role and the principal role than an understanding of them from research, policy, or legislation. In speaking about school leadership, the participants in the study made no reference to the *Ontario Leadership Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007) even though it is the Ontario policy document that details the description of both the vice-principal and principal roles. The *Framework* is a foundational document in the Principal’s Qualification Program courses so every participant would have worked with it during their administrative training. As discussed above,
if the participants in the study did not refer to the OLF, one may conclude that other sources of information are used by these vice-principals as the basis for understanding the role to which they aspire. It is worthy of note that virtually all of the participants spoke with an implied assumption that they would one day assume the principal role. None of the participants in the study suggested that they would remain in the vice-principal role.

In terms of building capacity as leaders in preparation for the role of principal, the participants spoke about this in their interviews. Commentary about their needs in terms of capacity building covered a wide variety of topics. Participants spoke about the managerial aspects of school leadership, the need to be able to see the ‘big picture’ within the school, the ability to see things from a variety of perspectives, knowing oneself, personal well-being, confidence building, and the leader practice of self-reflection on one’s own leadership.

In Ontario, the Ministry of Education issued the Ontario Leadership Strategy (2005) to address, among other things, the need for increased learning about school leadership. Included in the strategy was the OLF (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). The Framework identifies the actions, behaviours, attitudes, practices, skills, and knowledge that describe good leadership (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). The vice-principals in this study spoke enthusiastically about their learning and their desire to learn about both the management and, in some cases, the instructional leadership aspects of their school leader roles. They drew on their own experiences – not the OLF - to describe learning that was specific to their needs and the contexts of their schools. They used these experiences to learn about leadership through their coaching conversations. The fourteen vice-principals used their experiences and observations in their schools to understand their own role and that of the principal. A few of the participants used the term ‘instructional leadership’ during the interview to describe their sense of responsibility for
instruction in their schools. However, most did not go into detail about what this term meant for them. It would be fair to ask how well-equipped these leaders will be to handle the growing responsibilities of the principal role in a context where school improvement has become the expectation of all school leaders.

The participants generally articulated their learning needs to build capacity as being relative to the daily events of school life. A few of the participants described learning relative to ‘the big picture’ or ‘leadership’ but with minimal detail. Most of the participants described their learning relative to what they believed they needed to learn to run a school as well as how to problem solve the many issues that arise in a school. These findings appear not to align with current literature. Research literature describes effective school leadership as that which places greater emphasis on instructional leadership than managerial leadership (Leithwood et al. 1999; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Marzano et al. 2005; Fullan 2005, 2006) within the context of a moral purpose (Fullan, 2005). Policy literature in Ontario – as articulated in the Ontario Leadership Framework (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007) – explicitly articulates the practices, competencies, knowledge, skills, and attitudes of effective school leaders. When speaking about their coaching experiences, it is possible that the participants held the practices and competencies in mind without using the language of the research or the policy. However, they did not speak explicitly about them in their interviews.

Additional Findings

There were two additional findings in the study. The first relates to the terminology related to coaching. The second is concerned with the role of the principal in coaching.

During the course of the interviews, all of the participants responded without any hesitation to the interview guide questions (Appendix A) about coaching. The participants used
the terms ‘coach’ and ‘coaching’. Occasionally, the participants used the terms ‘mentor’ or ‘mentoring’. At no time did the participants differentiate in any way between the terms, nor did they question the use of the terms. In fact, two participants used the terms ‘coach’ and ‘mentor’ in a single sentence to mean the same thing. Within the field of research, there is not consistency among definitions (Patterson, 2010). The terms ‘mentoring’ and ‘coaching’ – or ‘mentor’ and ‘coach’ - are frequently used interchangeably (Patterson, 2010; Daresh, 2004; Spiro et al. 2007; Hobson, 2003). In recent years, clarity within the education sector has been provided by the National Council for School Leaders (U.K.) and the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE) in their 2005 *National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching*. Within the province of Ontario, the *School Board Guideline for Implementation of Mentoring for Newly Appointed School Leaders* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a, 2010), articulates the similarities, differences, and the relationship between mentoring and coaching. In light of the lack of consistent definitions for coaching and mentoring coupled with clarity in terminology provided only recently through policy literature, it may not be surprising that the participants in the study used the terms interchangeably. However, based on the definition provided in Chapter One of this study, all of the participants in the study were engaged in coaching. This is a significant finding from this group of participants in that it highlights a lack of common understanding and use of the terminology related to coaching and mentoring in research, policy, and professional literature.

A second additional finding concerns the role of the principal in coaching. Other than one participant who was being coached by his own principal, the participants did not describe the learning with their principals as coaching. The participants described how their principals determined their roles and then assigned them work accordingly. Several of the participants
described that they learned from their principals in an ad hoc manner based on the daily events and routines of the school but they differentiated this learning from that which they received from their coaching. Research in this area is limited (Brien, 2002; Weller & Weller, 2002). That which does exist speaks more to the working relationship between principal and vice-principal than the learning relationship between them (Armstrong, 2009; Marshall & Hooley, 2006). The *Ontario Leadership Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007) articulates the role of the principal. Among the many practices and competencies outlined, the *Framework* does not indicate that the principal’s role includes coaching yet two of the five strands of the *Framework* address ‘developing people’ and ‘developing the organization’. This is a significant finding from this group of vice-principals because current professional literature suggests that principals should have the skills of a coach yet research and policy literature do not actually indicate that such skills are elements of effective leadership.

**Revisiting the Conceptual Framework**

In Chapter Three, the conceptual framework presented three central concepts: the role of vice-principal, the coaching experience, and professional learning. Dynamic relationships were presented as existing among these concepts. In light of the findings from this study, the conceptual framework has been revisited and reconceptualised in order to better reflect the results and analysis. Figure 2 below revises the conceptual framework to situate professional learning as the focal element of the framework.

As explained in Chapter Three, a conceptual framework serves several purposes. First, it provides an understanding of the key elements of a study found within relative literature. Secondly, it synthesizes the elements in the study and their relationships as gleaned from the existing literature without serving as a theory. Thirdly, it serves to focus the research by aligning
the research questions, research literature, and the central concepts of the study. Lastly, it can serve as an organizing structure for analyzing the data that were collected as long as it does so without limiting the possibilities of the range of findings within the data.

The results of the study revealed that professional learning for the building of capacity was truly the focal element. Professional learning exists in a dynamic relationship with two other elements: experiences of the role of the vice-principal and the coaching experience. Based on this group of participants, the experiences of the role of vice-principal reflect the perceptions of individuals in the vice-principal role of what they believe the role to be and what their work actually is. From the results of the study, it was found that this group of vice-principals believes they are in a hierarchical and evaluative relationship with their principals. They see their principals as setting the vision for the school and making the decisions for the school. The vice-principals saw themselves as needing to follow the direction and decisions of their principals. In addition, the vice-principals saw their role as one where they were building their capacity as leaders for the principalship. These experiences of the vice-principal role influenced these vice-principals in determining what they believed they needed to gain from their professional learning experiences.

The second concept of this framework, the coaching experience, illustrates the nature of the coaching experiences that the vice-principals described. They spoke about the coaching processes in which they engaged and the relationships they had with their coaches. The vice-principals described how much they valued the processes of coaching that allowed for them to personalize the format of their own learning. Furthermore, they described the positive, trusting relationships they built with their coaches. As the vice-principals participated in professional learning through coaching, they built new capacity to serve in their roles as vice-principals.
Figure 2 The Coaching Experience (revised)

The Coach
- has a range of personal attributes
- has a range of skills for effective coaching
- requires training
- is a well-experienced leader

Coaching Experience

Relational Aspects
- complex and dynamic
- developmental over time
- challenges may exist
- based on elements of an effective personal relationship:
  - honesty
  - respect
  - trust
  - confidentiality
  - collaboration
  - openness
  - non-judgementalism

Experiences of the Role of Vice-principal

In policy:
- role is defined as same as that of the principal

In practice:
- role is ill-defined
- limited discretion to exercise leadership
- determined by the principal
- student attendance
- student discipline
- timetables
- bussing

Professional Learning for Capacity Building

• Personalized
• Uses reflective thinking
• Managerial responsibilities
• Leadership for a school
• Preparation for principalship

Processes
- small group, one-to-one, or a combination of these
- follow a form of style of coaching based on training
- within a formally established relationship
- principles of practice
- intentional matching and exit processes
- use knowledgeable and skilled coaches
- based on a plan for the coachee

Purposes
- provides support for transition to new role
- is learning-focused

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The third concept of the revised conceptual framework is the dynamic professional learning relationship that exists between the two previous concepts: experiences of the role of the vice-principal and the coaching experience. Experiences in the role of vice-principal served to provide these vice-principals with an understanding of what they need to learn in order to fulfill their role. The experiences of the role influence the professional learning they seek through coaching. Through coaching experiences, these vice-principals reflected on their work and built new capacity which they could then enact in their role. In this way, professional learning for capacity building is central to this conceptual framework because it links the dynamic relationship between the other two concepts.

This revised conceptual framework provides a clearer perspective on the literature reviewed in Chapter Two because it situates professional learning as the central and focal concept of the framework. Professional learning is central because it represents the learning relationship between experiences of the role of vice-principal and the process of the learning – coaching in this case. This revised framework contributes to scholarly literature in that it presents a dynamic professional learning relationship between the experiences of a role and processes for learning. It may be possible to adapt this framework to any of a number of roles as well as any of a number of learning processes.

In summary, this chapter analyzed and discussed four themes emerging from the research data gathered in this study: a lack of autonomy to exercise leadership, a passion for personalized professional learning, value for reflective thinking, and building capacity as leaders in preparation for the role of principal. Based on the results of the study, the conceptual framework was reconceptualised by situating professional learning for capacity building as the central concept. Professional learning exists in a dynamic relationship with the other two central
concepts: experiences of the role of vice-principal and the coaching experience. Each of the concepts of this relationship was grounded in scholarly literature, policy literature, and, in some cases, the literature of practice. Additional findings in the study included a lack of common understanding and use of terminology related to coaching and mentoring as well as principals not serving as coaches within the principal/vice-principal relationship. The revised conceptual framework provides a lens through which to examine the dynamic relationship between the experiences of the role of vice-principal and coaching experiences as a form of professional learning for the building of capacity.
CHAPTER SEVEN: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter provides a summary of the entire study and conclusions to be drawn from it. The chapter outlines the research questions, the methodology, and provides a brief review of the findings in response to the study’s research questions. The chapter presents an overview of the themes that emerged from the study, the contributions made to the field of educational research, and limitations of the study. It also suggests areas that may be considered for future research and practice.

Summary of the Study

This study examined coaching as a form of professional learning for newly-appointed elementary vice-principals in a political climate where school leaders are increasingly held accountable for school improvement and how well students learn (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Professional learning for newly-appointed school leaders is a significant aspect of leadership development in the current educational context (Hargreaves et al. 2003). In order to respond to the demands of school leadership in the twenty-first century, the Ontario Ministry of Education created the Ontario Leadership Strategy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). Within the Ontario Leadership Strategy (OLS), the professional development of school leaders was presented in the form of a variety of activities including the mentoring and coaching of all newly-appointed vice-principals and principals. It was the purpose of this study to understand how coaching serves as a professional learning support for newly-appointed elementary vice-principals.

The primary research question was: How does the coaching experience support the professional learning of first-time school administrators? In order to address this
question, the following four sub-questions were addressed:

1. How do first-time school administrators experience their role?

2. What perceptions do first-time school administrators have of their coaching experience in terms of the key elements of coaching: the coach, the processes, and the relational aspects?

3. To what extent do first-time school administrators feel that the coaching experience provides a positive support for them in their new role?

4. What challenges do first-time school administrators encounter in their coaching experience?

The research design for the study was a qualitative approach which consisted of interviews with fourteen newly-appointed elementary vice-principals from five Southern Ontario school districts. All potential participants who expressed interest in the study were included. During the interviews, the participants were asked to describe their experiences of being coached. The interview guide questions (Appendix A) were aligned with the research questions and the conceptual framework developed for the study. All of the participants took part enthusiastically in the interviews, thus the interviews flowed well within the time frames that had been agreed upon. The interviews provided rich and detailed data. The outcome of the study is qualitative and descriptive. The data provide a deep and broad understanding of the coaching experiences of the fourteen vice-principals. The interview responses provided the following answers to the research questions.
How do first-time elementary school administrators experience their role?

The results of the study indicated that there was notable consistency among the experiences of these vice-principals. In their commentary about their experiences of the role, the participants indicated that their role was determined by their principal, that their principals made the decisions for the school, and that they were expected to follow these decisions even if they did not agree with the decisions. These findings are consistent with existing research about secondary assistant principals and vice-principals (Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Armstrong, 2009). Based on the findings, one can safely conclude that the vice-principals who participated in this study have limited opportunities or autonomy to exercise their own leadership. Indeed, in many ways, they serve simply as helpers to the principal. As such, they can be seen as extensions of their principals and not truly as leaders unto themselves. For these participants, the vice-principal role then can be seen more as one of followership than of leadership.

The participants in the study described many of their experiences as preparatory for the role of principal. They used their experiences for learning about their next level of leadership, that is, the principal role. None of the participants described themselves as career vice-principals. In fact, virtually all of the participants spoke with an implied assumption that they would one day assume the principal role. In light of this, one may conclude that these vice-principals may well accept the followership nature of the their role and as a result, use this time less for exercising actual school leadership and more for learning about the principal role which they assume will one day be theirs.

What perceptions do first-time school administrators have of their coaching experience in terms of the key elements of coaching: the coach, the processes, and the relational aspects?
Without exception, the vice-principals in the study expressed positive feelings about their coaching experiences. The participants spoke with respect and admiration for their coaches. They valued the coaching processes used because they allowed for the coaching experience to address their needs and preferences relative to one-to-one or group coaching, the frequency of meetings, the focus on their personal learning needs, and the opportunity to engage in reflective thinking. For all of the participants, the opportunity to engage in reflective thinking was valued because it provided an opportunity to deconstruct and reconstruct experiences in the interest of building capacity (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). The participants described the relationships with their coaches as professional learning relationships based on trust, confidentiality, and non-judgmentalism. In some cases, the coaching relationship grew into a social relationship.

From the findings with these participants, several conclusions can be drawn. First, coaching is a valued and valuable experience for these newly-appointed vice-principals because it provides them with a safe relationship within which they can learn. Secondly, coaching is effective in supporting the learning of this group of vice-principals when it is tailored to their personal learning needs. According to the participants, when the coaching is not personalized, the effectiveness diminishes. Thirdly, reflective thinking is a highly-valuable process for capacity building for these vice-principals when it is incorporated into coaching conversations. These conversations can take place while engaged in a task as well as when looking back on a completed task.

To what extent do first-time school administrators feel that the coaching experience provides a positive support for them in their new role?
During the interviews, all participants spoke positively about the support they received through the coaching process. The participants in the study spoke about an increase in confidence, motivation, and support that came about thanks to their coaching experiences. Most of the participants in the study referred to learning about school managerial responsibilities which they believed they needed to learn for their role. Many of the participants described how the learning relationship with their principal was different than the learning relationship with their coach. The learning from the principal was described as being specific to the people, events, and activities of the school. Whereas, the learning from the coach was presented as addressing broader, longer-range, and more global issues that were less specific to the events of the school but were linked to the larger concept of ‘leadership’. Approximately half of the participants in this study commented on how they learned about themselves through the coaching experience. Furthermore, several of the participants in the study spoke about the stresses of the vice-principal role. These participants explained how they found the coaching to be supportive of their learning because it provided an opportunity to process their thinking about these stresses, to find support in their coaching relationship, or simply to have a trusted colleague with whom they could share their feelings when frustrated.

Two main conclusions can be drawn from these findings. The first is that coaching for these vice-principals provides a very broad base of learning that goes well beyond the managerial or instructional aspects of the vice-principal role. Indeed, the learning in which the participants engaged addressed the professional responsibilities of school leaders but it went much farther than that. The learning extended to the internal states (Leithwood & Levin, 2007) of the participants as individuals. Professional learning that supports professional practice is valuable
but professional learning that addresses professional practice as well as addressing the affective elements of individuals can be seen as a more holistic support to the learner.

The second conclusion that can be taken from these findings is the value that personalized learning has for this group of vice-principals in their professional lives. When the content and the processes of coaching were personalized to the individuals, the participants felt they benefitted from the experience. When learning is tailored to individuals both in the format of the learning and the nature of the content, it becomes more meaningful and serves more effectively the needs of the learner. This is accomplished by putting the learner at the center (Leadbetter, 2002). While such a concept is generally advocated for children in school, the same can be said of adults – newly-appointed elementary vice-principals who benefit by being at the center of the learning.

What challenges do first-time school administrators encounter in their coaching experience?

As mentioned above, all of the participants in the study spoke positively about coaching and their coaching experiences. This is not to suggest that there were not some challenges. In considering the findings, it becomes apparent that the challenges were less about coaching and the learning experiences that came about from them but rather they were related more to the organizational aspects. For example, some of the participants felt that their school districts did not do as good a job as they might have in implementing coaching because they felt there was a lack of communication about the program, the processes of coaching, and how coach/coachee matches were made. According to Daresh (1995), the majority of issues related to coaching were associated with implementation. Another challenge that surfaced with a few of the
participants was a poor match with a coach. This, however, appeared to be readily managed by the participants in that they described that they could establish new coaching relationships with new coaches that would work better for them. Additionally, a challenge surfaced in the area of the scheduling of coaching times. Several participants expressed a desire for their coaching to be routinely scheduled, not on an irregular basis. In a few cases, participants expressed concern about the need for financial resources to support their release time because they had teaching duties and could only participate in coaching if they were released from these responsibilities. Such financial resources were provided but some concern was expressed about whether these resources would continue to be available. One final challenge identified by two of the participants was the coach getting off-topic. That is, the coach losing the identified learning focus of the coachee and thus removing the coachee from being at the center of the learning.

These challenges are interesting in that they reflect challenges related predominantly to the organization of the coaching and rarely ever the actual experience of the coaching. In other words, the participants in the study did not identify any significant challenges within the coaching experience other than the coach getting off-topic. This is the only challenge that would require more than some basic organizational changes to remedy. In the case of a coach getting off-topic, the coach would need assistance in ensuring that the focus needs to stay on the coachee. It is interesting to note that Daresh’s (2004) findings indicated that one of the challenges of coaching was not sustaining the focus within the coaching relationship but rather, sustaining the coaching focus at the school district level.

Except for one challenge – that of the coach getting off-topic - each of the challenges identified could be readily adjusted by changes in the organization of the coaching, not the actual experience of being coached. From this, one could safely conclude that some basic
organizational changes could correct the challenges faced by the coachees. As previously described, the actual experience of coaching proved to be of value to the participants and did not present challenges that were too great to overcome.

Overview of Themes

Four key themes emerged from the data. The first theme is that this group of vice-principals felt they had a lack of autonomy to exercise their leadership. The second theme is the passion all of the participants have for personalized learning in the coaching experience. The third theme is the value the participants placed on reflective thinking. The fourth theme is that these vice-principals build their capacity as leaders in preparation for the role of principal. Each of these is discussed below. Again, it is important to note that because these themes were derived through a qualitative process of data analysis, generalizability of these themes is neither required nor desired in such research (Merriam, 1998).

The first theme is that the vice-principal participants perceived that they have a lack of autonomy to exercise their leadership. This was evident when the participants expressed the belief that their role is determined by their principals. The participants in the study described how tasks are delegated to them by their principals and that they take direction from their principals. Many of the vice-principal participants in the study described how their principal makes decisions for their schools and they, as the vice-principals, are expected to follow these decisions. They described their vice-principal role as one in which they supported the principal’s decisions even if this necessitated maintaining a united front with the principal even when the principal’s decisions conflicted with their own visions, values, or beliefs, which in turn, made them feel uncomfortable. As such, the vice-principals felt that they had a lack of autonomy in exercising their leadership.
The second theme, which relates to the coaching experience, is the passion all of the participants have for personalized learning. All of the participants expressed enthusiasm for the learning that came about through coaching. Coupled with this passion for personalized learning was the great respect and admiration these vice-principals had for their coaches both as individuals and as leaders. The vice-principals in the study expressed a passion for personalized learning that was guided by coaches for whom they expressed great admiration. The passion for the learning described by the vice-principals stemmed, in part, from how the focus of the learning was on their own learning needs. They described some of their conversations as opportunities to air ideas and emotions in a trusting and confidential relationship. They also described their conversations as opportunities to learn about what they specifically wanted to learn. The learning they described ranged from answers to basic questions about school operations, to how to balance their work and home lives, through to questions about what effective school leadership looks like and how they can develop themselves as leaders. The passion the participants described was based on learning that was personalized by being specifically focused on their needs at the time of the coaching conversation.

The third theme, which relates to professional learning, is the value this group of vice-principals place on reflective thinking. Even without being asked during the interview, every vice-principal participant in this study spoke about reflection as a valued aspect of their coaching. In their comments, the participants described reflective thinking as a way to look back on actions taken, as a way to consider possible approaches for the future, as a way to consider a variety of perspectives when facing a complex situation, as a way to consider a range of options prior to taking action, or as a way to think about oneself as a leader and one’s own leadership. The vice-principals described real experiences from their workplaces and how they
deconstructed and reconstructed meaning through reflective thinking that was stimulated by their coaching conversations. Without exception, the vice-principal participants explained that they value this aspect of their professional learning through coaching.

The fourth theme, relating to professional learning, is that this group of vice-principals build their capacity as leaders in preparation for the role of principal. The vice-principals build their capacity by learning about the managerial responsibilities of the role and by learning about leadership in general. The participants in the study described an understanding of their role as instructional leaders balanced with that of a manager. They described a need to learn about the managerial responsibilities of a principal in order to produce consistency and order in their workplaces while ensuring a focus on the instructional leadership aspects of the role. Based on findings from the participants, the building of capacity as leaders occurs through learning about leadership, managerial responsibilities, the building of confidence, learning about themselves as leaders, and learning about personal well-being. Furthermore, the participants in the study referred to the demands of their roles and the accompanying stresses they felt. From this, they recognized the need to attend to their own well-being. Thus, another aspect of their capacity building as leaders was relative to well-being. The participants described how they initially needed to learn to ‘get through the day’, to balance their work lives with their home lives and families, and to express – or vent – the frustrations they sometimes experienced as a result of their work.

Contributions to the Scholarly Field

This study contributes to the scholarly field in our understanding of the experiences fourteen newly-appointed elementary vice-principals have of their role in the province of Ontario
in Canada. The study found that the vice-principal participants felt they had limited opportunities to exercise their leadership because they work in hierarchical relationships with principals who determine their work, evaluate them, and whose direction they believe they are required to follow. In the past thirty years, there have been few research studies that have examined the vice-principal role (Brien, 2002). In general, vice-principals have been ignored in the literature about educational administration (Weller & Weller, 2002). The few studies that have been conducted have been concerned with secondary assistant principals in the United States (Marshall & Hooley, 2006) or secondary vice-principals in Ontario (Armstrong, 2009). This researcher was able to locate only one study that addressed elementary vice-principals. It dealt with the socialization experiences of newly-appointed Ontario vice-principals (Hamilton, 1996). This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge of the vice-principal experience and is significant because it concerns elementary vice-principals.

Based on the findings for this particular sample of newly-appointed elementary vice-principals, this study makes the following contributions to the scholarly field relative to the coaching experiences of newly-appointed vice-principals.

Overwhelmingly, the coaching experience is valued both as a support to professional learning and to personal well-being. However, insufficient communication about organizational aspects of coaching (e.g. matching process, scheduling, frequency, exit process, release time) can be problematic.

Individual preferences for the format of the coaching can vary in terms of one-to-one or small-group. For this sample, regular scheduling of coaching sessions, and access to coaches on an ‘as needs’ basis, are preferred. The coaches are seen as individuals who are skilled both as
school leaders and as coaches. Coaches are perceived to be trained and use coaching strategies intentionally during coaching sessions.

A key finding is that coaching personalizes professional learning to specific contexts and individual needs. It tends to support learning relative to both the managerial aspects of school leadership and the instructional leadership aspects of the vice-principal role. Furthermore, it supports individuals in seeing themselves as leaders, as well as their sense of confidence and well-being. Learning is further personalized through opportunities for reflective thinking.

For the newly-appointed vice-principals, their relationships with coaches are highly valued. The coach/coachee relationship is perceived to be non-evaluative and non-judgmental, and characterized as being trusting and respectful of confidentiality. The coach/coachee relationship is seen to be personally supportive of participants and motivational for them as leaders. At times, the relationship is seen as one of co-learning where both coaches and coachees participate as learners.

This study builds on the scholarly work relative to the coaching of principals that has been conducted in the United States (Spiro et al. 2007; Daresh, 2004), Australia (Healy et al. 2001), and the United Kingdom (Bolam at al. 1995). The study makes a new and scholarly contribution by exploring not only coaching, but also the coaching experiences of newly-appointed elementary vice-principals. The examination of the coaching experiences of this cohort of newly-appointed elementary vice-principals is significant because it initiates an extension of this field of research to vice-principals.

This study contributes to the scholarly field in the area of mentoring and coaching of school leaders in Ontario through an additional finding. This finding highlights the lack of distinction between the terms ‘mentoring’ and ‘coaching’. The results of the study revealed that
the participants used the two terms interchangeably. Even though the Ministry (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a, 2010) has articulated a difference between these two processes of support for newly-appointed school leaders, these practitioners do not yet use the terms as defined. This study makes a contribution to the scholarly field by revealing a gap in the use of this terminology between Ministry policy and practice in the field.

This research makes a new contribution to the research relative to professional learning because it provides new insights into personalized learning for this cohort of vice-principals. The findings revealed that the vice-principal participants value their professional learning through coaching because it personalized their learning. This personalization came about through: one-to-one or small group coaching; a safe, trusting, and confidential relationship with a coach; a co-learning relationship with the coach; and, learning based on personal needs.

Professional learning for school administrators has generally taken an approach where school leaders are expected to develop a set of skills and knowledge that ‘experts’ have decided they should have (Zellner et al. 2002). However, even professional learning that meets the highest standards of adult learning can be ineffective if it is not designed to engage participants in on-going, sustained learning in the setting where the actual work takes place (Fullan, 2007; Elmore, 2004). There has been some research into personalized learning for school students (Hopkins, 2007; Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006; Creasy & Paterson, 2005) but to date this researcher has been unable to locate research relative to personalized learning for school leaders. Thus, this study is unique in its findings that this group of vice-principals view coaching as a form of personalized learning which is valued for its focus on the learner and how it keeps the learner’s needs at the center of the learning. In this way, the study extends the work of Leadbetter (2002) from students to vice-principals.
In addition, there is little, if any, scholarly literature that examines reflective thinking as a form of professional learning for school leaders. The findings in this study indicated that the participants value highly the opportunity to engage in reflective thinking about professional practice through their coaching. When reflective thinking is addressed in scholarly education research, it is primarily presented as a learning process for building the professional knowledge and action of teachers (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990). Mitchell and Sackney (2001) present reflection as a learning process in which individuals deconstruct their experiences and then reconstruct their knowledge in the interest of capacity building. Based on actual experiences within the workplace (Leithwood et al. 1995) reflective thinking processes are best situated within a context where the learning is not done in isolation but through social participation with the assistance of others (Hobson, 2003; Senge, 1990). This study contributes to the emerging body of knowledge relative to reflective thinking for school leaders by exploring how this group of newly-appointed vice-principals engaged in reflective thinking as professional learning within their coaching experiences.

The revised conceptual framework makes an additional contribution to the scholarly literature because it provides a conceptualization of how professional learning is the focal point within a relationship among three concepts: the experiences of the vice-principal role, professional learning, and the coaching experience. The framework demonstrates the complex inter-connectedness of these concepts rather than suggesting a cause-effect relationship. The revised framework contributes to the literature by presenting a dynamic professional learning relationship among three concepts: the experiences of a role, professional learning, and processes for learning. This is significant in that it may be possible to adapt this framework to any of a number of roles as well as any of a number of learning processes.
Limitations of the Research

Typically in research studies, there are limitations that are important to note. In this study, there are several limitations that need to be acknowledged. One area of limitation is that this study involved fourteen elementary vice-principals in five school districts. Vice-principals in secondary schools were not part of the sample, therefore the sample size was small when viewed provincially and the secondary vice-principal perspective is not represented in the study. Yet the descriptive detail provided by the participants during the interview process is deep and rich and as a result, helpful in understanding the coaching experience.

A further area of concern related to sample size is the aspect of generalizability of the results. Because the sample size was small, the data can be related only to the particular participants in the study and their specific personal experiences. Thus, no generalizations can be made, or are intended to be made, from these results. When reporting the results, there may appear to be an implication that the findings are applicable in general terms. However, the findings must be seen as a specific set of data relative to a specific sample and their specific personal experiences. Generalizability is neither required nor desired in qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative studies have value through the provision of rich and detailed data (Creswell, 2005) about a particular phenomenon.

Another limitation is that the vice-principals self-selected to participate based on a broad invitation to all who were newly-appointed to the role, therefore the participants were drawn only from those who expressly wished to participate and who felt they could provide the time for the interviews. Every effort was made to be respectful of the participants’ time and to minimize any impact on their professional responsibilities. Even with a small sample of self-selected
participants, the data they provided are useful because they are richly descriptive (Merriam, 1998) and emphasize the importance of the participants’ views (Creswell, 2005).

An additional area of potential concern was that participants might have difficulty speaking freely about their experiences, therefore providing a limited understanding of their coaching experiences. This was initially addressed in the communications prior to the interview. Upon meeting for the interview, issues of confidentiality, anonymity, and the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time, were further discussed. Furthermore, the researcher made specific efforts to establish rapport with each of the participants. Of interest to the researcher was the apparent comfort participants had in speaking candidly about their experiences. Few prompts for elaboration were used in the interview because the participants spoke so freely. As follow-up, all participants were provided transcripts of their interviews to add additional information or make changes. None of the participants chose to do so. Providing the transcripts to the participants for confirmation and continued participation in the study supported the accuracy and completeness of the data provided.

A further area of potential limitation is the lack of distinction in the use of the terms ‘mentoring’ and ‘coaching’ which potentially might be problematic if the participants were not clear about the differences between the two processes. Recent policy literature in the United Kingdom (NCSL, 2005) and the province of Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a, 2010), have drawn distinctions between these two support functions. However, in the education field, distinctions between these two terms are rarely made. Indeed, the terms are frequently used synonymously. In the results, the participants often used the terms interchangeably. In two cases, participants used the two terms to mean the same thing in a single sentence. This is a concern to note. Even though each participant volunteered to join the study and they knew that
the discussion centred on the coaching they did with their specific coach, it is not absolutely clear how the participants may have interpreted the interview questions and how these interpretations may have affected the results.

A final area of concern is that of the personal judgment of the researcher. The researcher organized and analyzed the data, thus personal bias can enter into these processes. Purposeful steps were taken to respect the integrity and authenticity of the data and the voices of the participants. These steps included ensuring that the data were secure as described in Chapter Four of this report, that the data were collected and analyzed according to currently accepted processes for analyzing and interpreting qualitative data (Creswell, 2002; Merriam, 1998), and that no prescribed theory was tested in this process (Merriam, 1998). These processes have merit but can also carry an inherent bias and as a result, may limit both the scope and the accuracy of the results.

Implications for Future Research

This study focused exclusively on newly-appointed elementary vice-principals. It would be interesting to explore comparable experiences with newly-appointed secondary vice-principals, newly-appointed elementary principals, and newly-appointed secondary principals because each of these groups participates in coaching. Beyond this, though, is the broader consideration of the experience of leaders and their professional learning. For example, there is a trend in the literature that leaders can be found anywhere in an organization whether their leadership positions are formal or not (Fullan, 2005; NCSL, 2003; Lambert, 2003). It would be very interesting to probe more deeply into the professional learning experiences of other individuals, such as teachers, subject heads, or lead teachers. Are their experiences similar to those of the vice-principals in this study? What forms of learning do they find the most
valuable? The revised conceptual framework used in this study could readily be adapted to any of a number of roles or positions, and its relevance tested for these roles.

This study examined the professional learning experiences of fourteen newly-appointed elementary vice-principals. Within the research findings, it became apparent that these vice-principals believed that their role was determined by the principal, that they were expected to follow the decisions of their principals, and as a result, there was limited autonomy for them to exercise their own leadership. This is an important area for further research. The role of the elementary vice-principal has historically been understudied and it merits much more attention. Is the vice-principal essentially a helper for the principal and someone who helps to bring the principal’s vision to life or is the vice-principal role an actual leadership role unto itself? If it is a leadership role unto itself, how is it so?

Questions are being raised in current literature about the effectiveness of professional learning within education. What forms and processes of professional learning are helpful and supportive? Which ones are not? With the recent implementation of mentoring/coaching as a required form of professional learning for vice-principals and principals, initial survey information is emerging at the Ministry level about how well-received and effective this mode of learning is for school leaders (Ontario Ministry of Education – Leadership Development Branch, 2011). It would be valuable to investigate more broadly and deeply into forms of professional learning for educators. What types of learning do educators find effective in support of their professional practice and what forms are not seen as effective, and why? Findings from the participants in this study indicated that personalized learning was valued and seen as being supportive of the learning needed for their role. Continued investigation into personalized learning for leaders would make further contributions to the scholarly field.
Finally, this study revealed that coaching as a form of professional learning allowed for these participants to engage in reflective thinking in support of their learning. Traditionally, learning for leaders has taken an approach where outside ‘experts’ have determined what professional learning content and processes would be of greatest value to school leaders. In the opinion of the researcher, there is merit in further research into how engagement in reflective thinking is supportive of professional learning for school leaders. How might reflective thinking be of value in supporting school leader learning? What might leadership learning look like in the future if it incorporated processes that stimulate reflective thinking?

Implications for Future Practice

In terms of the implications for professional practice, the following ideas may be worthy of consideration. Findings from this research indicated that these vice-principal participants had limited opportunities to exercise their own leadership because their roles were determined for them by their principals. Such a situation does not align with the intention of the *Ontario Leadership Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007) which describes the practices and competencies of principals and vice-principals as being the same. This is an issue that could be addressed at the school, school district, and Ministry level. Ideally, alignment would exist among these three levels in regard to the intention of the OLF and actual practice such that vice-principals would have opportunities to serve as leaders within their schools.

Findings from the participants in this study indicated that reflective thinking was a valued and valuable learning process because of the way it engaged individuals in their learning. Reflective thought can occur both while engaged in a task as well as when looking back on a completed task (Reeves, 2006; Schon, 1987; Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990). Such tasks are drawn from an individual’s unique, personal, (Brown et al. 2005; Mitchell & Sackney, 2001) and,
authentic experiences (Leithwood et al. 1995) within the workplace (Elmore, 2004). There is value for those who create and deliver professional learning for school leaders – indeed, for educators in general – to consider how professional learning can be designed so that it provides learning structures for participants to engage in reflective thought based on their unique, personal experiences.

In addition, the inclusion of reflective thinking processes in professional learning speaks to the issue of the personalization of learning for school leaders. The results of the study indicated that the participants valued the personalization of their learning and that they valued far less the occasions when their learning was predetermined by others (Zellner et al. 2002). To date, personalized learning has focused exclusively on school children (Hopkins, 2007; Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006; Creasy & Paterson, 2005). It would be prudent for those who are responsible for professional learning for school leaders to consider ways in which professional learning can be personalized both through the nature of the learning processes selected and how the participants in this learning contribute to the content or design of the learning.

Conclusions

Based on the participants in this study, coaching for newly-appointed elementary vice-principals was found to be a valuable experience. The vice-principal participants believe coaching serves as a personalized professional learning support. However, for these vice-principals, the experience of coaching cannot be separated from each individual’s context and experiences of their role. For the fourteen participants, an understanding of their vice-principal role drives a desire, or need, for personalized professional learning that supports each vice-principal in his or her individual situation. With a lack of clarity about the role, the vice-
principal participants in this study developed a perception of their role from their day-to-day experiences. These role perceptions vary from one person to another based on individual context. Because of this potential for variation in understanding, the need for personalized learning becomes increasingly significant. For these vice-principals, professional learning cannot be ‘one size fits all’. Coaching was so well received by the vice-principal participants in this study because it provided a personal focus on each individual’s needs within their individual circumstances.

Lack of clarity exists beyond those in the vice-principal role. It exists as well both in research and practice relative to coaching and mentoring. Recent policy literature has attempted to provide a distinction between these two support functions but common understandings do not yet exist within research, policy, and practice.

Within the context of the changing nature of the school leader role and an increasingly-complex educational context, newly-appointed school leaders will continue to need professional learning. It would be wise to know, understand, and respond to the professional learning needs of these leaders if they are to successfully lead the schools of the twenty-first century.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A:

Interview Guide Questions

1. Please tell me how you feel about your experience with coaching. [Do you find it useful, helpful, enjoyable, a good use of your time,…? Overall, how satisfied are you with the coaching experience?]
2. Please tell me about a typical coaching session.
3. What type of coaching do participate in – individual, small group, or another structure?
4. Is there a learning focus? If so, what is it?
5. How were you prepared to take part in the coaching?
6. How were you matched with your coach?
7. Please describe for me the nature of the relationship you have with your coach.
8. How has the coaching differed from the support you receive from your principal?
9. Do you learn from your coaching experience? If yes, how?
10. Does the coaching motivate or inspire you? If yes, how?
11. What are some of the successes you have had as a leader in this school?
12. What are some of the challenges you have had as a leader in this school?
13. How has coaching shaped your leadership practice?
14. How do you believe coaching has affected your awareness of yourself as a school leader?
15. How do you believe you have grown as a leader through coaching?
16. Is there anything in the coaching you process you would like to have changed? If so, what?
17. Do you have any final thoughts or comments about your experience with coaching?
18. Are there any questions you would like to ask me?
Appendix B:

Email Note to the Local Executive Councils of the Ontario Principals’ Council (OPC) and the Catholic Principals’ Council of Ontario (CPCO) to Request Support in Distribution of Letter of Invitation (Appendix C) to their Members in each of the Five District School Boards

Hello______,

I am a principal in York Region District School Board. I am currently engaged in doctoral studies at OISE/UT and am at the research stage of my program. My field of research is the professional learning of school leaders. In particular, I am looking at the mentoring and coaching of vice-principals.

I am writing to ask, as District Representatives of OPC/CPCO, if you would be willing to forward an email from me to all of your elementary vice-principals. The email is an invitation to participate in my research study. Details of the research and access to additional information from me are in the email so the vice-principals will be able to determine if they wish to participate or not. Briefly, participation would be an interview with me that lasts about one hour.

My research has been approved by the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto. My only request to you is to send the invitation to your elementary vice-principals. Would you be willing to forward the invitation on my behalf?

If you have questions or would like to discuss this further, please let me know.

In advance, thank you for considering my request,

Richard

Richard Williamson
62 Sumner Heights Drive,
Toronto, ON, M2K 1Y4
Richard.williamson@utoronto.ca
Home: 416-222-0541

IMPORTANT: This information is intended only for the use of the individual or entity to which it is addressed and may contain information that is privileged, confidential and exempt from disclosure under the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. If the reader of this message is not the intended recipient or the employee or agent responsible for delivering the message to the intended recipient, you are hereby notified that any dissemination, distribution or copying of this communication is strictly prohibited. If you receive this communication in error, please notify me immediately by telephone.
Appendix C:
Letter of Invitation to Potential Participants to take part in the Research Study
(distributed via email)

Subject Line: Experiences of Vice-principals Research Study: Invitation to participate

Dear Vice-principals,

The following email has been forwarded to you on behalf of Richard Williamson:

This email is an invitation to all vice-principals to participate in a research study. The research study is being conducted by me, Richard Williamson, a principal in York Region District School Board, for my doctoral studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto.

The purpose of the research study is to understand your experiences in the coaching you have received in your board. The research will take place in 4 school boards where coaching is provided in different ways. You are invited to participate but are free not to take part if you prefer not to. Participants are being sought who are in their second year in the vice-principal role and are still participating in coaching.

If you choose to participate you will be asked to take part in a confidential audio-taped interview of approximately 60 minutes with me. I will ask you some questions about your coaching experiences. The interviews will be completely confidential and my final report will not identify any boards, schools, or individuals so you can feel comfortable to speak freely.

If you are interested in participating or simply interested in getting more information, please click on my email address (Richard.williamson@utoronto.ca) to contact me directly.

Thank you for considering this request. There is value in contributing to the growing body of research about the role of the vice-principal and professional learning experiences such as coaching.

Thanks,

Richard

Richard Williamson
62 Sumner Heights Drive
Toronto, ON, M2K 1Y4
Richard.williamson@utoronto.ca
Home: 416-222-0541

IMPORTANT: This information is intended only for the use of the individual or entity to which it is addressed and may contain information that is privileged, confidential and exempt from disclosure under the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. If the reader of this message is not the intended recipient or the employee or agent responsible for delivering the message to the intended recipient, you are hereby notified that any dissemination, distribution or copying of this communication is strictly prohibited. If you receive this communication in error, please notify me immediately by telephone.
Appendix D:
Letter of informed consent

Letter of Informed Consent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Researcher:</th>
<th>Name of Supervisor:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Richard Williamson</td>
<td>Professor Susan Padro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62 Sumner Heights Drive, Toronto, ON, M2K 1Y4</td>
<td>OISE/UT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="mailto:Richard.williamson@utoronto.ca">Richard.williamson@utoronto.ca</a></td>
<td>252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, ON, M5S 1V6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home: 416-222-0541</td>
<td><a href="mailto:Susan.padro@utoronto.ca">Susan.padro@utoronto.ca</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Office: 416-978-1182</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Title of Research Study:
Leadership Supports for First-time Vice-principals: Coaching as a Form of Professional Learning

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned within the form, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

This research study is being carried out in compliance with the requirements for a doctorate of education of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto under the supervision of Professor Susan Padro – Department of Theory and Policy Studies.

Purpose of the study:
This research study is being conducted in order to understand the coaching experiences of first-time school administrators as a form of professional learning.

Why you were invited to participate:
You were invited to participate in this study because you meet the requirements of the parameters of the study. The study is gathering data from vice-principals in their second year in the role and who continue to participate in coaching as a form of professional learning. Research is being conducted in four school boards in Ontario with a total of twelve vice-principals. The boards were selected based on the different types of coaching being provided.

What will you be asked to do?
If you agree to meet with me, you will be asked to participate in an audio-recorded interview session. The interview will take approximately 60 – 90 minutes. I will ask you about your
experiences with mentoring/coaching, including such areas as the process of the mentoring/coaching, if and how you feel it is of value, in what ways it does/does not benefit you, how it supports your professional learning and practice, and other questions of a similar nature.

What type of personal information will be collected?

Although anonymity cannot be guaranteed absolutely, every possible step will be taken to ensure both confidentiality and anonymity. Information provided by the participants will be used in the research study but no personal information will be used in the report.

Your participation is voluntary and confidential. You are free to withdraw at any time during the study and to have any data collected from you destroyed.

The recorded version of the interview will be transcribed verbatim. You will be asked to review the transcript and make revisions that you wish. Details that you identify by name (e.g. individuals, school or school board, etc.) will be replaced by a pseudonym so that these people or places will remain anonymous.

What happens to the information I provide?

The audio recorded information that you provide will be stored on a password-protected computer that I own. The transcript of your interview will be stored electronically on this computer. All interview audio recordings and hard copy data will be destroyed five years from the date of the interview. However, electronic transcripts will be retained by me with appropriate security safeguards. For example, transcripts will be stripped of all identifying data, will be saved in encrypted form, and be password protected as recommended by Ministry and professional association guidelines. Only my supervisor and I will have access to this data.

Segments of the interviews will be incorporated into the report. The segments used will be taken from the coded transcripts in such a way that no individuals or locations can be identified. The information you provide will be kept completely confidential and reported anonymously and will be combined with the responses of the other participants into a summary report. Care will be taken that no identifiable information about participants, schools, or boards will be included in the final report. If the board and its mentoring/coaching program is unique in the province, there is the possibility that the identity may be inferred by knowledgeable people. However, for individuals and schools, no unique characteristics will be identified.

Once completed, I will contact you and offer to provide you with a copy of the dissertation. I may wish to utilize some of the data in the dissertation for future publication in scholarly journals. If I do use these data, your identity will continue to remain confidential.

Are there risks or benefits if I participate?

There are minimal foreseeable risks to you, your school, or to your school board as the information collected will be used only by me and will be stored on a password-protected
computer owned by me. In addition, all the data will be recorded in such a way (see above) so that individuals and places are not identified.

You have the right to withdraw from the research project without consequence, penalty, or judgment. You may refuse to answer any question in the interview and may choose to terminate the interview at any time. Verbal or written requests to withdraw will be respected at any time the request is made.

The benefits to you as a participant in the study are the knowledge that you have contributed to the broader field of research about both the role of the vice-principal as well as the experience of coaching as a form of professional learning. In addition, there is the possibility that you benefit from reflection about your experiences with coaching and/or your role.

Who do I contact if I have further inquiries about my rights as a research participant:

**Thesis Supervisor:** Professor Susan Padro  
OISE/UT  
252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, ON, M5S 1V6  
Susan.padro@utoronto.ca  
Office: 416-978-1182

OR…

The Ethics Review Office, University of Toronto: 416-946-3273 or ethics.review@utoronto.ca.

---

*Your participation in this research work is greatly appreciated. It is my wish to contribute to the broader field of educational research through this study. Your participation in this research will support this work by providing valuable insights into the experience of coaching as a form of professional learning.*

**Signatures (written consent)**

Your signature on this form indicates that you have read this form and,

1) understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research study, and  
2) agree to participate as a research subject and participate in a 60-minute interview, and  
3) agree to have the interview audio-recorded, and  
4) agree to be offered a copy of the results of the study.
In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release me, as the researcher, from legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time and to have any data collected from you destroyed. You should feel free to ask questions for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant’s name: (please print): ______________________________________________

Participant’s signature: _______________________________________________________

Date: _____________________________________________________________________

Researcher’s name: (please print): Richard Williamson

Researcher’s signature: _______________________________________________________

Date: _____________________________________________________________________

A copy of this consent form has been give to you to keep for your records and reference. The researcher has kept a copy of the signed consent form.