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**TRANSCENDING WE/THEY: A QUALITATIVE FORMATIVE EVALUATION  
OF THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF AN IN-DISTRICT  
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM**

by

Jennifer Anne Sharp

A Dissertation

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Services & Leadership  
College of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirement

For the degree of  
Doctor of Education

at

Rowan University

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Dissertation Chair: Ane Turner Johnson, Ph.D.

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## **Dedications**

I would like to dedicate this work to those individuals who supported me or my work in any way along this three-year journey. First I would have to mention Edward and Elizabeth Haggerty, my parents, who have been supportive of my educational endeavors since day one. I would also like to dedicate it to my husband, Gregory Sharp, the love of my life, whose devotion to me and willingness to help has enabled me to take the time read, reflect, and write for the thousands of hours required to complete a doctoral program. Finally, and most importantly, I would also like to dedicate this work to our two daughters, Alexis Marie and Jacqueline Rose Sharp, so that they will know that nothing is beyond their reach.

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I must express my deeply felt appreciation for the all of the efforts made on my behalf by several individuals without whom, this work simply would not have been possible. Firstly, I wish to acknowledge my dissertation chair, and methodologist, Dr. Ane Turner Johnson, whose genuine belief in me and in my work empowered me to reach higher than I ever knew I could. I must also express my heartfelt gratitude to my committee members, Dr. Mark J. Raivetz, and Dr. Jeff Graber, who generously gave of their time to provide me with supportive feedback that helped me to reflect carefully on my work as it progressed, and whose encouragement and enthusiasm gave me the courage to keep going.

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## **Abstract**

Jennifer Anne Sharp

### **TRANSCENDING WE/THEY: A QUALITATIVE FORMATIVE EVALUATION OF THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF AN IN-DISTRICT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM**

2015-2016

Ane Turner Johnson, Ph.D.

Doctor of Education

This qualitative formative evaluation study revealed how teacher participation in an in-district leadership academy in a New Jersey school district engaged participants in preparing for future leadership roles. A program evaluation using qualitative methods can provide feedback so that informed decisions can be made about program improvements (Patton, 2002b; Powell, 2006). Using focus group discussions and interviews to gather such feedback, the study has informed decisions about the program's evolving structure. Themes that emerged from the data provided by 13 participants were viewed through a constructivist framework, and using Mezirow's theory of transformative learning as an interpretive lens, culminating in four findings: aspiring administrators experience a shift in perspective on educational issues that can be disorienting; belonging to a cohort offers validation; the use of authentic activities provides aspiring administrators with confidence about moving into formal leadership; the presence of an in-district leadership program is mutually beneficial, allowing a district to prepare for succession, while empowering teacher leaders to embrace their newly redefined role—as translators—between the administration and the teaching staff. The study's fifth finding contends that researcher positionality can differ from that of an "insider" or an "outsider" to what is defined herein as an "alongsider" due to the nature of program evaluation combined with using a researcher practitioner's workplace as the research context.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

There is a leadership crisis looming on the educational horizon. At this time of international reflection on and reforms to educational practice, 27% of all public school principals in the United States are at or above retirement age and more than half are over age 50 and soon will be (Clifford, 2010; Goldring & Taie, 2014; Reames, Kochan, & Zhu, 2014). With 20% of those eligible to retire actually choosing to do so in a given year, schools are losing experienced leaders at a rapid pace that is likely to continue in the near future (Goldring & Taie, 2014; Reames et al., 2014). Principals are also choosing to leave education for reasons other than their eligibility for retirement. Some accept other positions, but some are just opting to resign. Nearly seven percent of all principals who left in the 2012-2013 school year left K-12 education altogether (Goldring & Taie, 2014). Today's school leaders practice their craft in an era of unprecedented external accountability (Fullan, 2011; Harris, 2011; Oleszewski, Shoho, & Barnett, 2012). The resultant pressures to perform according to new standards results in more frequent turnover in school leadership positions (Fink & Brayman, 2004). The looming crisis is an outcome of schools losing seasoned school leaders-and struggling to replace them with highly qualified candidates-concurrent with an era of great educational change.

This trend is not unique to the United States, as leadership shortages are appearing around the globe (Rhodes, Brundrett, & Nevill, 2008). Governmental and special interest group incursions into the educational realm have expanded considerably in the past decades as a reaction to and arguably an impetus for calls for continuing whole-system educational reforms (Harris, 2011). This educational reform movement has prompted

calls to tie administrator preparation and performance to pre-determined common standards, as well as to teacher and student performance outcomes (Harris, 2011; Walker, Bryant, & Lee, 2013). These external pressures on districts to meet performance goals, or surpass last year's achievement bar have exacted an immeasurable toll on the profession internationally, as many of the most talented exit each year out of disenchantment and frustration or, at a minimum, report feeling burnt-out (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Fink & Brayman, 2004). As school leaders resign or retire, they exit within a few months of providing notice to their districts, taking with them years of accumulated skills, as well as vital chapters of the institutional memory of the organization. Their departure often disrupts many aspects of the schools they leave behind. Disturbingly, this rapid turnover rate in school leadership has been shown to negatively impact student achievement levels as well as teacher attitudes toward change and overall morale (Fink & Brayman, 2004; Hargreaves, Moore, Fink, Brayman, & White, 2003; Zepeda, Bengston, & Parlo, 2012).

The importance of the building principal to multiple aspects of education has been well established (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Doyle & Locke, 2014; Hargreaves et al., 2003; Walker et al., 2013). The impact of their departure is felt throughout all levels of the organization, but often most keenly by students.

“Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Principal retirements and resignations, especially those not managed proactively, can actually lead to a decline in student performance, at least while the new principal acclimates to the position (Zepeda, et al, 2012). Since any decline in student



performance is unacceptable under new accountability standards, a solution must be sought out and implemented.

With the United States and much of the world engaged in a comprehensive reform of education, and given the demographic realities of an aging leadership cohort, it follows then that there is an increased demand for a new generation of talented, visionary leaders who are capable of transforming professional development experiences into leadership capacity building opportunities, while cultivating followers' dedication to a common purpose. Unfortunately many voices can be heard claiming that we have a shortage of these high quality candidates lining up for the grueling job (Boerema, 2011; Davis et al., 2005; Doyle & Locke, 2014; Zepeda, et al., 2012).

While in some areas there may actually be a sufficient number of certificate holders to cover the number of vacancies, these individuals are not necessarily prepared for the increasingly complicated position of school principal. Feeling the added pressure for student growth, high performing districts often find that the applicant pool too diluted. Urban districts find the pool too shallow, as many highly qualified applicants seek employment elsewhere (Doyle & Locke, 2014; Myung, Loeb, & Horng, 2011). This may be because accruing credits beyond the bachelors' degree often results in a lateral movement on the salary guide but as Meyer and Feistritzer (2003) noted, certification is no guarantee of either the requisite skillset or the desire to take on the additional responsibilities of leadership. This may also be because many of those who hold proper credentials are not interested in the job (Fink, 2011). Fink (2011) further warns that if school districts are hoping to

recruit, select and develop leaders of learning who possess the knowledge, experience and skills to contribute to the preparation of young people for successful participation in a knowledge society,... then all those responsible for leadership succession have a real challenge in front of them (p. 674).

The field of educational leadership is facing a supply and demand problem of a unique sort that individual school districts must deal with immediately or they run the risk of being unprepared for the inevitable turnover in leadership positions (Fink, 2011).

Educational reform policies internationally and in the United States may have played a role precipitating the crisis.

### **Expanding Governmental Role in Education**

Since the 1950's, the federal role in the governance and funding of public schools has been expanding (Epstein, 2004; Conley, 2003; Kirst, 2004). While the early federal initiatives focused on national security, job training, equity, and civil rights issues, increasingly since the 1983 publication of *A Nation At Risk* report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, the emphasis of federal involvement—and the priority of federal dollars—has been on reforms that increase accountability of educators for student performance outcomes (Cohen-Vogel & Herrington, 2005; Conley, 2003).

Since the 1980's, state-level financial support for schools has been expanding. This additional taxpayer investment in education contributed to calls for reform and control, to make evident the “connections between funding and performance” (Conley, 2003, p. 41). Notably in 1989, for the first time in history, all of the nation's governors met with the president to set national educational goals which “opened the door to a much more activist federal role” (Conley, 2003, p. 24). Some argued at the time that the key to

improving schools was not through government mandates, but in developing the professionals within the schools (DuFour, 1991) but mandates continued.

The 2001 reauthorization of the 1960's era federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) stands alone in its scope of policy and financial implications for states and for schools (Conley, 2003, p. 28), its passage made politically feasible by actions of the states in the 1990's. Inspired to action by calls for reform in education, states too expanded their control over schools through adopting state-wide curricula, increasing graduation requirements, and implementing extensive student proficiency assessment systems (Conley, 2003; Ryan, 2004). The results of these assessments—such as the online test developed by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) in New Jersey—and aligned to the national curriculum—the Common Core State Standards—are now being used to rate teacher, principal, and school performance in many states as a condition of accepting federal Race to the Top Funds (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). As Conley (2003) asserts, “States, local districts, and schools are receiving their ‘marching orders’ increasingly from the federal level” (p. 37).

Principals in the K-12 public school system in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are expected to march to ever expanding, overlapping, and sometimes-contradictory orders. They are responsible for implementing federal and state initiatives related to what is taught, when it is taught, how it is taught, how to measure if what was taught was actually learned, and finally, what to do with teachers whose students fail to show growth. Finn and Petrilli (2013) liken the current approach to school governance as a “Rube-Goldberg-esque construct, sometimes compared to a marble cake” with all its layers (p. 21). These layers

of reform legislation, Finn and Petrilli (2013) posit, constrain what most principals can accomplish working alone in the schools. Moreover, as Weick (1976) points out, varied elements within educational organizations have long been loosely coupled; meaning they are “responsive” [to one another while maintaining their] “physical or logical separateness” (p.3). This feature of schools allows for flexibility educators use to make small adaptations in response to unique changes in local needs, but also deviates from tighter, centralized control and diffusion systems more familiar to stakeholders, many of whom have learned how to function in a bureaucratic organization (Weick, 1976, 1982). Schools’ tendency toward these looser controls and related flexibility, however, is being challenged on many fronts by standardization, “the antithesis of localized adaptation” (Weick, 1976, p. 7).

The extensive history of local control over these and other governance issues has been eroded and dismantled by decades of increased encroachment by Washington, D.C., and state Departments of Education (Conley, 2003; Cohen-Vogel & Herrington, 2005). Government actions have coincided with advocacy efforts of several well-funded conservative special interest groups, such as the Center for Education Reform, and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute (formerly the Educational Excellence Network). There is a concerning disconnect between the remotely located policy makers and any personal accountability for actual outcomes of their policies at the student, teacher, and school levels. Epstein (2004) notes a “growing gap between those who make policy and those responsible for the results” and explains that it is not governors or presidents who are publicly criticized or risk losing their jobs if student test scores do not meet preset benchmarks (p. 3). The teachers and principals however might find themselves without a

job if student performance falls short; recent legislation in New Jersey – the TEACHNJ Act – is but one example of personal educator accountability emanating from an external and remote source.

### **The “Impossible” Principalship**

#### **Expanded Role with Diminishing Returns**

The scope of a principal’s role is vast and continues to expand with added government mandates and calls for reform. Principals are frequently viewed as the key instructional leaders of the school and are increasingly called upon to implement in each classroom, the reforms enacted in courtrooms and acted out on political stages (Conley 2003). Indeed the actions—or inactions—of principals have been shown to dramatically impact student achievement, teacher performance, educational equity, and reform efforts (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Marzano, Waters, & Mc Nulty, 2005; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Reeves, 2006; Zepeda et al., 2012). Working as a change agent to implement externally mandated reforms, the effective building principal encourages risk taking and moves others beyond their comfort zone (Marzano, et al., 2005; Fullan, 2007). As Burke (2011) points out, leading significant change across an entire organization is hard work that is rarely fully successful. Fullan (2007) reminds us however, that leading change is only one of the items on the typical principal’s to-do list (p. 155).

For many reasons, the principalship is becoming more challenging, overwhelming, and quite possibly, impossible for any one person to handle alone (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Fullan, 2007; Winter, Rinehart, & Munoz, 2001). In a recent survey of principals in the United Kingdom, the demands of the principalship were described as having to be “[a]ll things to all men! Or bloody near impossible, take your

pick” (Lumby & English, 2010, p. 102-103). Additionally, the assistant principalship has been found to present similar challenges. In yet another UK study, participants described their extensive roles and responsibilities as assistant principals as “ridiculous, mind-boggling, impossible, and frustrating” (Oleszewski et al., 2012, p. 273). Factors found to prove challenging for both principals and assistant principals include increased accountability for student achievement, expanded span of responsibilities, budget cuts, long hours, limited autonomy, and low pay (Doyle & Locke, 2014; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Winter et al., 2001). Notably, Finn & Northern, in their introduction to a report by Doyle and Locke (2014), suggest that the costs for some may just outweigh the benefits:

The average salary difference in 2011-12 between what veteran high-school teachers (11-20 years) and their principals get paid was roughly \$40,000. That’s not much, considering the extent to which the accountability burdens laid on principals have grown heavier [while] at the same time many principals jobs have gown shakier as their continued employment in more districts hinges, at least to some extent, on their school’s performance. (p. 2)

Given the relatively limited monetary benefit received in exchange for the added levels of stress involved it is no surprise that there is considerable turnover in the ranks of those who dare to sit in the principal’s chair. This problem is even worse in districts perceived by applicants as less desirable, as prospective principals have become selective in where they choose to apply (Davis et al., 2005; Myung et al., 2011; Zepeda et al., 2012).

### **Turnover and Shortages of Quality Candidates**

Despite the fact that stability and continuity of leadership have been found to have positive impacts on student outcomes, excessive principal turnover has become an issue

in many districts. On average, less than 50% of principals stay longer than three years at the same school (Doyle & Locke, 2014; Ni, Sun, & Rorrer, 2014). This is also not surprising, given the increased demands of the role and the complex political climate of school governance in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As discussed above, another factor contributing to leadership turnover is an aging demographic (Rhodes et al., 2008). Clifford (2010) found that the average age of school principals was over 50, and that the majority of principals retire by age 55. Survey data from several studies indicate that a majority of current principals are likely to retire in the next few years (Oleszewski et al., 2012). According to the most recent U.S. Department of Education's Center for Education Statistics, these retirements are occurring at an annual rate of more than 20% of those eligible (Goldring & Taie, 2014).

Turnover at the top requires schools and districts to regularly contend with a period of leadership "upheaval and uncertainty" which contributes to a "loss of institutional memory and inconsistencies in school goals, policy and culture...decreased teacher commitment...increased teacher turnover, and potential disruptions in a faculty's collective efficacy" (Ni et al., 2014, pp.1-3). Critical momentum within school improvement programs can be lost due to untimely loss of key personnel (Lambert, 1998). In an era of unrelenting calls for accountability for performance, sustaining this momentum is crucial. While it might make sense that as principals retire, assistant principals would easily move up; indeed they might appear to be standing and waiting in the wings, ready to take the helm. However Oleszewski et al. (2012) found that since the tasks involved in the two jobs are often quite different, time spent in one position did not adequately prepare individuals for the other. Consequently, districts need to do more than

rely on the practice of shifting school leaders from one office to another and acting as if assistant principals and principals are interchangeable parts in an educational machine; they must plan for succession.

### **Succession Planning**

While retirements and resignations are a natural and recurring event in every organization, school districts are particularly vulnerable to the impact of these realities. School districts are legally responsible to provide a thorough and efficient education to each one of America's children regardless of who is sitting in the leader's chair. These students cannot afford to wait for their educational services while the district finds a suitable replacement for an outgoing principal. School districts, like all organizations must find ways to proactively plan for leadership succession events by adopting measures that build capacity within the organization as well as connect with quality external candidates (Rothwell, 2010). As Fink (2011) explains, districts need to turn from a "hire and hope" replacement plan to a "grow your own" succession plan (p. 675) to protect students, teachers, and schools from lapses in leadership.

Succession planning and management, as described by Rothwell (2010) is "a deliberate and systematic effort by an organization to ensure leadership continuity in key positions, retain and develop intellectual and knowledge capital for the future, and encourage individual advancement" (p. 6). Hargreaves et al. (2003) discuss that effective leadership succession planning includes efforts undertaken by each successor principal, to honor what has come before, to sustain positive improvements, and to make corrections where needed. This is done all while preparing the organization for the time when the new principal will ultimately depart (Hargreaves et al., 2003). Fink and



Brayman (2004) explain that exemplary succession planning policies ought to include mechanisms that are attuned to the needs of local school leadership teams and also provide sufficient lead-time for the transition process (p. 444-446). Districts that wish to screen, recruit, hire, induct, and retain high quality professional leaders, whose demonstrated skills fit the needs of an increasing array of vacancies, face a daunting challenge that can be met through effective succession planning and management (Fink & Brayman, 2004; Hargreaves et al., 2003).

Winter et al. (2001) explain that school districts generally lack experience with succession planning and management and therefore face challenges in the area. Hargreaves et al., (2003) add that, despite the urgent need, school districts often also lack the financial and human resources needed to design and implement a long-term, continuous, embedded and aligned approach (p. 29). Districts without a clear succession plan in place often find themselves pressured by a short time frame to simply find a replacement. “When succession is sudden and unplanned a school can find itself in a state of organizational crisis” (Hargreaves et al., 2003, p. 17). In these situations, and to resolve the short-term predicament, a candidate may be hastily selected whose skills are not an ideal match for school, which can lead to dissatisfaction and more frequent turnover (Barrett, 2011; Clifford, 2010).

Fortunately, some school districts around the globe have begun to engage in a variety of proactive recruitment and internal capacity building measures in order to increase the likelihood that their supply of leaders more closely resembles their demand (Albion & Gutke, 2010; Barrett, 2011; Reynolds, White, & Brayman, 2005; Walker et al., 2013). Such measures are needed in the face of ever-expanding external pressures to

continually improve, and exceed the latest benchmark. Some argue that without those external pressures, these needed changes might not have occurred (Reynolds et al., 2005).

### **Leadership Preparation Programs**

**Program examples, internationally.** A variety of leadership development programs are being put into place in districts around the globe, and have met with mixed and incomplete reviews. As Wilson and Xue (2013) explain, in China, principals designated as “effective” by the Ministry of Education are selected to meet with those entering the profession, and host site visits. These programs offer new leaders peer networking opportunities, but have been criticized for their top-down prescriptive approach that emphasizes awareness of laws but omits other areas of importance, such as strategic thinking and problem solving skills (p. 803). Moreover, these programs are not universally available, and their outcomes have not been widely studied to determine if they are effective in preparing and supporting new leaders (Wilson & Xue, 2013).

In Australia, aspiring school leaders can participate in a variety of loosely connected programs sponsored by professional organizations, such as the Australian Council for Educational Leaders as well as government and university programs (Anderson, Kleinhenz, Mulford & Gurr, 2008). In 2006, one research-based, government-sponsored leadership development and support program, *Learning to Lead Effective Schools* was launched that specifically supports women and Aboriginal leadership candidates, and coordinates leave time with schools to permit aspiring leaders a chance to participate (Anderson et al., 2008). This and other programs studied in Australia, feature job shadowing and internship experiences, extended seminars focusing on curriculum, finance, policy, technology, and instructional leadership, have generally been perceived

as valuable by participants but their effectiveness and any actual benefit of individual components have not been evaluated (Anderson et al., 2008, p. 447).

**Program examples in the United States.** In the United States, many examples and iterations of district leadership preparation programs can be found. The Wallace Foundation released a report in 2010 that profiles and reviews eight different programs, which the Foundation helped to fund (Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010). All of these districts had experienced a shortage of quality leadership candidates to fill vacancies and fell into three different categories in their approach to solving this problem (Orr et al., 2010). Some became “discerning customers” of local university programs, establishing standards for what new leaders in their districts should be able to do thereby creating pressure on colleges and universities to enhance their leadership programs to meet the demand of these large local school districts. (Orr, King, and LaPointe, 2010). Other districts signed contracts with universities to become “collaborators” on content and preparation program requirements that yielded more customized programs at the university level (Orr et al., 2010).

Districts in this study that actually formed their own program became “competitors” with college and university programs, with two even acquiring certification accreditation from the state (Orr et al., 2010). For example, one highly selective and costly program, *Aspiring Leaders*, was offered in the Fort Wayne Community School District, home to 31,000 students in 41 schools. This program offers year-long, paid internships and accompanying workshops focused on essential skills that align with the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISSLC) standards. Participants are required to attend reflection sessions and to produce a comprehensive

portfolio at the end. This option provides local discretion over the content and approach to leadership preparation but has been found to be the most expensive in terms of human and financial resources, and therefore vulnerable to changes in district priorities (Orr et al., 2010, p. 5).

While Orr et al.(2010) admit that “more research is needed to determine the impact of...leader preparation [programs] on school leader retention, stability and performance” (p. 12) but emphasize preliminary indicators that the existence of such programs increases the number of qualified candidates who were ready, willing, and able to fill leadership vacancies. Other benefits to districts were noted in this study as well, such as clarifying expectations for leaders, gaining an understanding of the pressures on new leaders, and expanding the appreciation for the centrality of the principal’s role in school improvements (Orr et al., 2010, p. 12). Their overall findings support the notion that public school districts can benefit if they are able to leverage their position as the consumer of university or alternate route leadership preparation programs. If districts are able to forge university partnerships or other similar alliances, these are more likely to produce graduates with customized skills needed to lead their schools more effectively.

School districts’ efforts in designing their own leadership development program can benefit from lessons learned in other school districts, from scholarly research, as well as the more future-focused private sector (Doyle & Locke, 2014; Hargreaves et al., 2003). Such a program, informed by all of the above, would take a long-term view, aligning aspects of the program with stated organizational goals and strategic plans (Hargreaves et al., 2003). Research suggests that exemplary leadership preparation programs feature identification of high-potential participants and instructors through a

rigorous process, adoption of leadership standards, organization of content in a coherent sequence aligned to those standards, instruction using authentic problem-based inquiry, connections made to explicitly join theory to practice, cultivation of a professional learning community, formation of peer networks, continuation of mentoring, formation of links to colleges and university programs, and inspiration to participate through flexibility in scheduling of classes around work requirements (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Hallinger, 2003; Hargreaves et al., 2003; Orr et al., 2010; Zepeda et al., 2012 ). It must be noted that many of the in-district programs already studied by researchers are vast urban or county-wide districts that serve tens of thousands of students and are the recipients of funding and sponsorship by government, university, special interest, or other sources. Absent such financial incentives, or a similar economy of scale, the challenge is for each district to find a way to invest in leadership development to an extent that it can provide quality programs in house that are effective, yet affordable (Anderson et al., 2008).

### **Educational Leadership in a Local Context**

Similar challenges of leadership development are currently faced by the Freehold Regional High School District (FRHSD). The district regularly receives regional, state, and national accolades. Four of its six high schools ranked in *Newsweek's* Top 500 high schools in the nation in 2014 (Newsweek, 2014). All six ranked in *New Jersey Monthly's* Top High Schools the same year (Schlager, 2014). The district has been named to the Advanced Placement Honor Roll for four of the past five years, largely a direct result of efforts to remove barriers and increase student access to advanced placement coursework in a supportive academic environment (College Board, 2014).

In many ways, the district is unique, but like other districts, FRHSD is facing the threat posed by leadership succession events. The district is aware of the imminent retirement of three of its six principals and at least one assistant principal in the next year, with the possibility of more to come in the near future. Nearly 18% of the building administrators at FRHSD will reach retirement age in the next five years. These leadership changes bring real potential for disruption to program continuity, threaten the exemplary academic performance record of the district, and put considerable pressure on its leadership to prepare. FRHSD has its own looming crisis.

### **Strategic Planning**

However, FRHSD has a strategic plan, written by more than 100 steering committee members in 2011-2012 and known locally as “Compass” which calls for, among many other things, the proactive preparation for succession events through capacity building programs. Under this plan the district is required to “develop, implement, and evaluate a structure for recognizing and training aspiring administrators. The Aspiring Administrator Academy will align to the strategic plan and will address current educational leadership literature in its design and ongoing operation” (FRHSD, 2012). The Aspiring Administrator Academy (AAA) uses research-based activities. These activities include the use of inquiry-based learning through realistic scenarios and the use of professional discourse to build ethical decision-making skills. These activities have occurred over a series of reflective discussions and group activities focused on topics related to leadership, organizational change, ethics, law, finance, and career transitions.

The activities are intended to not only be meaningful and relevant to participants, but also to reflect the latest research related to exactly what principals and other school leaders need to know how to do. These areas of focus align with many of the core competencies and leadership functions highlighted by the Council of Chief State School Officers in the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards. (CCSSO, 2008). Since the CCSO (2008) advocates the utilization of the standards in the creation of higher education programs for the next generation of school leaders such a connection with the AAA was a logical extension. This in-district leadership academy was launched during the 2014-2015 school year, and holds the potential to help cultivate the next generation of district leadership and remove barriers to advancement that are an outmoded cultural artifact at FRHSD.

### **Problem Statement**

Educational leadership globally is in a state of crisis created by increased and enhanced demand at a time of diminished and outdated supply. The confluence of an aging demographic among school leaders with a new wave of demanding external educational reform initiatives presents a unique challenge for school districts looking to meet the increasing demands of constituents (Fink & Brayman, 2004). The timing of the post-World War II baby boom era retirements and extensive educational change have collided in classrooms across many countries where leadership vacancies are occurring more rapidly than suitable replacements can be found (Barrett, 2011, p. 29). Public school systems, unlike the private sector, are not accustomed to taking such a proactive and coordinated stance to filling vacancies as is required in the current policy environment, and are therefore often left with few quality choices among applicants.

Highly capable leaders are needed to meet these challenges. Meaningful change and quality reforms in instructional practice are more likely to move forward when led by highly skilled and experienced leaders (Reames et al., 2014, p. 43-44). Sustaining these changes and reforms over time requires a school-wide capacity for leadership and self-renewal (Jacobson, 2010). The presence of the most effective principals in a school raise student achievement levels while the presence of ineffective ones have been shown to depress it (Doyle & Locke, 2014). Student performance, program continuity, and the public's perception of its schools hang in the balance while districts attempt to meet this challenge.

Although there has been a considerable amount of research around the globe about the features and effectiveness of leadership preparation programs sponsored by governments and those offered through higher education, (Borema, 2011; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Fink, 2011; Harris, 2011; Orr, 2011; Pounder, 2011; Walker et al., 2013) the role school districts themselves can play in planning for succession events through internal capacity building programs has not been widely studied (Ng, 2013; Rhodes et al., 2008; Zepeda et al., 2012). Existing research suggests that succession planning and management programs that do exist in schools and other organizations lack a strategic focus and formal process for identifying and developing viable leadership candidates and likely overlook many high-potentials (Clifford, 2010; Doyle & Locke, 2014; Fink, 2011; Myung et al., 2011; Rothwell, 2010).

In the United States, government-led accountability, standards-based reform, and other external pressures have placed tremendous responsibility on each public school principal to close the achievement gaps that exist between subgroups and to build



continuously on student achievement and teacher performance levels. Such arduous working conditions arguably do little to inspire the next generation of leaders to step forward. In the state of New Jersey, recent legislative action has taken effect that has considerably amplified the amount of pressure on educators, who stand to lose their jobs within three years if these performance levels fall short (TEACHNJ, 2012).

The Teacher Effectiveness and Accountability for the Children of New Jersey (TEACHNJ) Act, 2012, c. 26 went into effect on August 6, 2012. TEACHNJ ties the acquisition and retention of tenure for teachers and principals to a revamped evaluation system that quantifies goal attainment, educator practice, and value-added growth in student performance on the state assessment. These computer-based tests are prepared by the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and their content aligns with the Common Core State Standards (PARCC, 2015). It is in this complex state-level policy environment that school districts in the Garden State must find a way to encourage and prepare aspiring leaders if they are to fulfill their mandate and mission to provide each student with a thorough and efficient 21<sup>st</sup> Century education that creates college and career ready, future-focused graduates.

What can local New Jersey school districts do, in addition to, or as a change in current practice to prepare, recruit, hire, and retain quality leaders? All educational stakeholders would benefit from further exploration in this area, given the urgent need for capable leaders and the lack of research in the area of leadership succession and management through internal district preparation programs in schools (Hargreaves et al., 2003; Ng ,2013; Rhodes et al., 2008; Zepeda et al., 2012)). Research into the potential role of such programs to transform aspiring leaders is needed to supplement the literature

and to offer guidance to other districts looking to plan and execute relevant experiences for their own future leadership candidates, or high-potentials.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this program evaluation was to explore and evaluate how teacher participation in the Aspiring Administrators Academy at a New Jersey school district engages participants in the process of preparing for future leadership roles. A program evaluation using qualitative methods can provide personalized feedback on initiatives so that informed decisions can be made about how to adjust and improve the program to more closely approach its stated goals (Patton, 2002b; Powell, 2006). As such, this approach was appropriate to the goals of the study and all decision makers within the selected site are included in its intended audiences (Krathwohl & Smith, 2005).

Participants in this study were purposefully selected (Creswell, 2014; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Patton, 2002b) from the first cohort of in-district teachers, who have volunteered to participate in the Aspiring Administrators Academy. This study involved the use of a series of interviews and focus group discussions, as well as document analysis to examine the material culture related to the program being evaluated.

The specific intent of this study was two-fold. Through participant insights and reflection on the implementation process and content of the Aspiring Administrators Academy, formative feedback may be elicited that could inform and improve the evolving structure of the program itself, thus assuring the district a healthy pipeline of high quality leaders, while simultaneously providing enhanced access to leadership positions for its teaching staff members. Further, this study extends the research around best practices for in-district programs aimed at preparing future leaders in the context of

New Jersey's comprehensive educational reform agenda in an era of unprecedented levels of accountability. As my superintendent has indicated in his blog, "Aspirations must trump mandates....We need to ignite the innate capacity of all of our faculty and staff" (Sampson, 2013). This was the original intent of the stakeholders who designed the program as a part of the district's comprehensive strategic plan (FRHSD, 2012).

### **Research Questions**

This study sought to answer these research questions:

1. How do participants describe an in-district leadership program as contributing to their professional growth and transformation?
2. How are different features of the program—such as the cohort structure, meeting format, topics addressed, materials selected, and activities offered—experienced by participants?
3. How do program activities align with stated program goals and objectives?
4. In what ways can this program address the ongoing succession planning and management needs of the organization?
5. What did my participation in a workplace program evaluation reveal about the nature of researcher practitioner positionality?

### **Definition of Key Terms**

The following terms are interpreted to clarify their use in this study:

**Succession planning and management.** For the purposes of this study, discussions of "succession planning and management" derived from the work of Rothwell (2010), which is based on the foundational work of Henri Fayol in the area of organizational management. Rothwell (2010) argues that the two concepts of succession

planning and succession management are inextricably linked. He defines this composite process as “any effort designed to ensure the continued effective performance of an organization, division, department, or work group by providing for the development, replacement, and strategic application of key people over time” (p. 6). Applied to the educational context for this study, succession planning and management has been interpreted as a coordinated effort to support the vision and mission of a school and district through the cultivation of a pool of highly qualified and capable leaders through a planned expansion of internal leadership capacity.

**Leadership capacity.** For the purposes of this study, references to “leadership capacity” aligned with Lambert’s (1998) use of the term. She explains that leadership extends beyond the principalship to other participants engaged in “broad-based skillful involvement in the work of leadership” (p. 4). Leadership capacity has been understood as the ability of teachers within a school to contribute in a meaningful and ongoing fashion, to the goals of the school and district. Lambert (1998) explains that teachers who develop their individual leadership capacity are able to step forward, confident in their abilities to engage in leadership behaviors. The scope of these behaviors expands as teachers undergo a role shift and “no longer see themselves as responsible only for their classroom, but for the school as well” (Lambert, 1998, p. 20).

**Distributed Leadership.** This term has been conceptualized as a collaborative sharing of responsibility for taking actions that align to the districts’ mission, vision, and goals. Distributed learning theorists posit that the tasks of leadership are not performed by one charismatic or heroic leader, but instead are spread out over the network of leaders and followers who form an organization (Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond, 2004;

Spillane, 2005). Spillane, et al. (2004) advance the notion that leadership practice emerges from the interactions among leaders and followers in each particular situation. Drago-Severson, Asghar, Blum-DeStefano, and Welch (2011) extend this idea with their observation that “the interaction between experienced and aspiring leaders...offer[s] an important socialization opportunity to consider multiple perspectives from diverse contexts...[which helps aspiring leaders] better address the complexities of leadership” (p. 110). Guided by administrators, but not dominated by them, aspiring leaders take part in distributed leadership activities, build upon their own leadership capacity through these interactions, and are often transformed by them.

**Aspiring Administrator.** For the context of the study, this term has been interpreted as an individual, currently working as a teacher in a school district, whose professional goals, in either the short-term or the long-term, include moving into a position in building-level administration such as a principal, assistant principal, or supervisor. Acting upon these goals, “aspiring administrators” seek out opportunities that contribute to their own professional growth.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theory of transformative learning informed this study. Mezirow (1994) explains that this theory features a constructivist orientation and hence emphasizes that adult learning occurs as the individual makes sense of new experiences and uses this newly formed frame of reference to make choices (p. 222-223). Mezirow (1994) clarifies:

[t]ransformative learning is central to what adult education is all about. Adult development means the progressive realization of an adult’s capacity to fully and freely participate in rational dialogue, to achieve a broader, more discriminating,

permeable and integrative understanding of his/her experience as a guide to action. (p. 226)

It is through this lens that the lived experiences reported by participants in the Aspiring Administrators Academy were viewed. In part, this study sought to explore and evaluate the extent to which the program facilitated transformative experiences for its first cohort of participants, in order to improve the program. “From the perspective of transformation theory, there are ideal conditions for the full realization of adult learning; these conditions can serve as standards for judging both the quality of adult education and the sociopolitical conditions that facilitate or impede learning (Mezirow, 1997, p. 11). Given the broad nature of the goals originally identified for the program in the district’s strategic plan, this theory provides a useful and appropriate set of standards that can be used to evaluate it.

### **Significance of the Study**

The role of a school principal has been widely shown as a critical one in terms of impact on student growth and staff development (Davis et al., 2005; Marzano et al, 2005; Orr, 2010). As discussed, the responsibilities of a building principal have expanded exponentially in this era of federal and state accountability. This policy environment has had a negative impact on districts’ abilities to recruit top candidates to leadership positions. In order for districts to equitably fill vacancies with the best possible candidates, this process cannot be left to chance or to simply rely on the age-old practice of tapping the star teacher in each building as needed. In light of this context, this study has relevance for research, policy, and practice.

## **Research**

The steps that public school districts can take to prepare and manage the succession of principals and other leadership positions through an in-district leadership academy as well as how aspiring administrators experience the process have not been widely studied (Ng ,2013; Rhodes et al., 2008; Zepeda et al., 2012). It is in this area that the study contributes to the scholarly literature through its research questions. This study can be used to extend the conceptualization of leadership development experiences for adult learners outside the university setting. Additionally, this study may lead to further research into how universities or other formal leadership credentialing agencies and school districts can be mutually supportive, and align their practices so that the graduates of formal principal preparation programs are well-equipped, professionally socialized, and are appropriately supported as they transition into the role of a school leader in this increasingly complicated era. Further study into the role individual school districts can play in supporting leadership capacity development may contribute to the ongoing refinement of entrance requirements to the profession as well as more nuanced and focused professional development standards for teachers that include the cultivation of leadership skills and knowledge.

## **Policy**

As Davis and Darling-Hammond (2012) explain, “national policy initiatives, such as No Child Left Behind and in particular, Race to the Top (RTT) underscore the centrality of school leadership to improved teaching and learning in schools” (p. 26). This attention to school leadership at the national level has spurred actions at the state level in the areas of administrative licensure and evaluation standards (Davis & Darling-

Hammond, 2012). Preparing professionals rigorously in college and university licensure programs to move into the principal's chair, and holding them to high standards once they are in the position, are certainly critical steps to supporting national as well as state and local initiatives. However, it is also important to adequately prepare the organization for their transition into the position. Current employment practices are not responsive to that need.

Currently, public school employees are required to provide anywhere from 14 to 90 days' notice prior to retirement or resignation. When a principal decides to leave, school districts may only have a short time to find a replacement, and transition the new leader into the organization. When hiring someone from outside the organization, it is often necessary to wait up to 90 days for the newly hired principal to be released from their other district. When hiring from inside the district, there is a domino effect, requiring subsequent searches for a replacement for the internal candidate. The effects of these employment practices include disruptions to the system, and provide a minimal opportunity for the two principals—the incoming and the outgoing—to spend time together to plan for program continuity and preserve institutional memory.

A change in employment and notice requirements could effectively address this issue. Since the study explored the experiences of aspiring leaders participating in a capacity building program, and shed light on their perceived needs as they envision themselves transitioning into a formal leadership position, it has policy implications in this area. The study's findings can be used, therefore, to inform policies related to induction and mentoring requirements for new principals, as well as retirement and resignation notification requirements for all public school administrators.



If all school administrators were required or at least incentivized by law to provide a longer notice prior to retirement, six months to a year, for example, the critical transition period could be easily extended. Internal candidates, such as participants in the Aspiring Administrator Academy could be interviewed and hired well in advance of their actual start date. They would therefore be able to be transferred to the school they will eventually lead, and work there as a teacher or assistant principal under the guidance of the outgoing administrator in an extended transitional induction and mentoring experience. Such an experience could help preserve aspects of the programs and legacy of the outgoing principal, while providing socialization and support for the incoming leader. Most importantly, such policy changes would support teachers and students, who would then have a suitable amount of time to adjust to the change in leadership and likely experience less overall disruption in their respective educational programs and academic performance.

### **Practice**

This study has implications for the profession and its practice. A comprehensive recruitment and succession planning and management protocol can be embedded into the structure of strategic plans in each school district. Such a plan could include the identification and removal of barriers as well as the selection and development of internal candidates from the pool of capable teacher leaders. Ongoing proactive measures could be taken in coordination with the lead human resources administrator in each public school district to discern the unique skills for each position in order to match prospective candidates to open positions (Rothwell, 2010). This study contributes to the professional discourse related to actions school districts can reasonably take to solve their own

problems of leadership succession planning and management, even in the absence of government or grant funding.

School districts looking to ensure an adequate pipeline of internal leaders, not merely to fill vacancies, but also to support goal attainment and continuity of the programs while minimizing disruption, would benefit from building leadership capacity among their teaching staff (Lambert, 1998). Lambert (1998) highlights—and this study considered—specific essential actions or practices that schools can adopt that build internal leadership capacity. Such actions begin with altering hiring practices to rigorously select teaching staff member candidates with dispositions for leadership. Having these teacher leaders on staff already makes filling the pool of principal candidates flow more smoothly. In order to do this, Lambert (1998) suggests that districts need to include demonstration lessons, simulations, and case study responses in their initial screening of candidates in order to hire those with the ability to lead schools in the future (p. 71). Additional practices that build leadership capacity include fostering a culture of collaborative inquiry and creating structures within the school that provide staff with opportunities to engage in leadership praxis (Lambert, 1998). The study explored and evaluated the efforts of one district to do just that and therefore the findings hold implications for future practice within the district as well as in other districts looking to build a similar program.

### **Delimitations**

Conducting research in the district of employment often referred to as “backyard research” presents issues of trustworthiness that must be acknowledged (Creswell, 2014). Working on a project within my own district permitted me a great level of access to data

and willing participants, but this study would be of little scholarly value if I failed to take steps to protect the participants, the data, and by extension, the integrity of the research itself. As Creswell (2014) indicates,

If studying the backyard is essential, researchers hold the responsibility for showing how the data will not be compromised and how such information will not place the participants (or the researchers) at risk. In addition, multiple strategies for validation are necessary to demonstrate the accuracy of the information. (p. 188)

This study was, by its very nature and site selection, delimited to the extent that employees of the school district were willing to openly discuss a program, including its weaknesses, with a researcher who is also a central office administrator. Since all of the participants in the study were self-identified as being interested in moving up to administrative positions themselves, it is possible that their career aspirations or concerns about how their comments may impact them may in some way had an effect on the forthright nature of their responses, thereby impacting the findings of the study. This delimitation was offset by written and verbal assurances regarding the nature, scope, and purpose of the study. Among other strategies intended to sustain the trustworthiness of the study, data was collected using multiple techniques and from multiple sources.

This study was also delimited by the nature of qualitative inquiry in its ability to yield results that are generalizable to other settings (Powell, 2006). As Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) explain, issues of transferability or external validity must be considered by qualitative researchers. Freehold Regional High School District is a unique organization with an unusual grade-level configuration. Most school districts do not share

its high-school only structure or its multi-town suburban constituency. The ability of this study to generalize to other types of school districts of different sizes and settings, which serve different grade levels, is limited. However, since all school districts have a stake in sustaining leadership continuity as explored by this study readers are likely to find its discussion and conclusions applicable to other sites. Additionally, readers may be able to replicate or adapt the program evaluated in the study in their own context. In order to support this effort, and encourage broader application in both similar and dissimilar settings, the discussion of findings is presented with thick description from the participants (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 314). Also, given the brief period permitted for data collection, it is not possible within the scope of this study to measure the impact, if any, of participation in the Aspiring Administrators Academy on participants' success as school leaders in the future. This delimitation invites future, perhaps longitudinal research into this or similar programs.

The conceptual framework and my role as a researcher is informed by my own lived experiences as an educator. This framework delimits the study due to the nature of my role as the researcher. Maxwell (2005) explains that as the “instrument of the research” (p. 38), qualitative researchers need to examine and acknowledge these experiences to appreciate how they shape perspective on the topic selected. Given my own journey transitioning out of the classroom into a leadership position, after participating in an informal internship and other quasi-leadership opportunities in my former district, I cannot help but believe in the potential of other teachers to do the same and eschew all unnecessary barriers to their success.

Although I did not realize it at the time, I was most likely the beneficiary of my former district's efforts to expand its own leadership capacity. That district, where I worked as a teacher, assistant principal, principal, and director, was created out of a legal dissolution of another regional school district into its multiple constituent districts. To try to cope with this unusual situation, district leaders set up, intentionally or not, internal structures that reflected a belief in the leadership potential of its teachers, and provided real career opportunities to a select few. Even before my first day at that job, I was given an opportunity to serve as a team leader. Prior to and continuing after my commencement of employment in that district, I participated in regular collaborative decision-making and planning sessions with the principal, assistant superintendent, and superintendent. To me, this is the norm. Within a year I was approached by the Assistant Superintendent and my Principal who urged me to learn how to build the middle school's master schedule and to manage all progress report and report card grade collection, verification, and distribution procedures. I was encouraged by these leaders to pursue advanced study that led to the completion of my master's degree and certification as a principal and school administrator. I know that I would never have pursued such study, nor sought out an administrative role, had it not been for the genuine encouragement, coupled with real opportunities that were offered to me. It escaped my attention at the time that others were not offered the same options.

Therefore, I view with a critical eye the organizational structure and culture that evolved in my current district that created procedural barriers to teachers' upward mobility. Given my experiences, this paradigm seemed counterproductive to internal capacity building. Procedures existed, until very recently within my current district, that

required anyone applying for principal or assistant principal positions to already have a minimum of three years of administrative or supervisory experience. Evolving out of an era in the district characterized by an autocratic, top-down management style of leadership, this paradigm historically kept teaching staff members from reaching their professional potential, since they had to wait until a supervisory position became available or go elsewhere to in order to gain the three years of required experience. This became even more of a barrier in recent years when district budget cuts limited the number of supervisors being replaced. Without changes in practice and paradigm, teachers had minimal opportunity to qualify for administrative positions within the district. Removing these barriers is a process that has begun, and that the AAA will hopefully support. Given my strong feelings and assumptions about this topic, it is important that as the researcher I engage in bracketing, or “setting aside, suspending, or holding in abeyance presuppositions” about it in order to minimize its impact on my perception of the data and presentation of findings (Gearing, 2004, p. 1433).

The study is further delimited to the extent that it seeks to explore and evaluate a program with the purpose to improve or enhance the program itself. Evaluating an in-district program means that the audience of the study is extended beyond the scholarly audience to include the decision makers in the district that are directly involved with it. Since progress toward and achievement of the goals of the strategic plan, including the implementation of this program are used to evaluate the Superintendent of Schools, the audience must also include the local Board of Education. As Krathwohl and Smith (2005) explain, each of these audiences then has a stake in the outcome of the study, as well as the ways in which district actions are portrayed in it. Such considerations must guide my

approach to the extent that negative feedback is presented in proper context.

Recommendations that are an outcome of this study are intended for advisement purposes to those stakeholders, who must place them within a greater sociopolitical context when deciding whether or not to follow their guidance.

### **Organization of the Study**

This dissertation will be arranged into six chapters. This introductory chapter has served to situate the study in the context of current educational realities and present the research questions that drive the study. In the second chapter, I present an abridged literature review, which will include a synthesis and discussion of major themes found in the body of literature relating to the importance of and best practices in administrative succession planning and leadership capacity building within successful school districts. The third chapter will include a detailed plan for data collection, analysis and interpretation, as well as a careful reflection on ethical considerations, limitations, and efforts at trustworthiness. The fourth chapter presents the overall findings from the research. The final two chapters are presented in the form of manuscripts, each one featuring differing aspects of the findings and methodology, to be submitted for publication in separate peer-reviewed journals.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review and Setting of the Study**

This abridged literature review or concise summary of relevant literature on the selected topic is intended to create a justification for the research that will follow (Hart, 1998). Throughout this literature review I have synthesized recent research into how school districts build internal capacity and prepare for leadership succession. This review explores existing trends in how districts identify and cultivate aspiring administrators to support the work of principals, along with the corresponding movement toward professional learning communities and shared leadership practices. The transformative potential of an in-district leadership academy at the Freehold Regional High School District was explored by examining the literature through the lens of Mezirow's transformation theory, prior to gathering data from participants. Later this theoretical framework was used to interpret data, evaluate the program under consideration, situate findings in their proper context, and suggest related local and wider research, policy, and practice implications of those findings.

This study's focus on one local school district's efforts to cultivate the leadership capacity of its aspiring administrators and the related need for effective professional development and proactive succession planning addresses gaps in scholarly research, related to the role of aspiring administrators, as identified by Ng (2013), Rhodes et al. (2008) and Zepeda et al. (2012). This study explored and evaluated a program that was locally developed, and funded—its presenters comprised entirely from inside the organization—a phenomenon notably absent from the literature. As Davis et al. (2005) explain, few districts offer such a program to prepare teachers for the principalship (p. 16). The role of aspiring administrators, the transformation of their leadership identity,



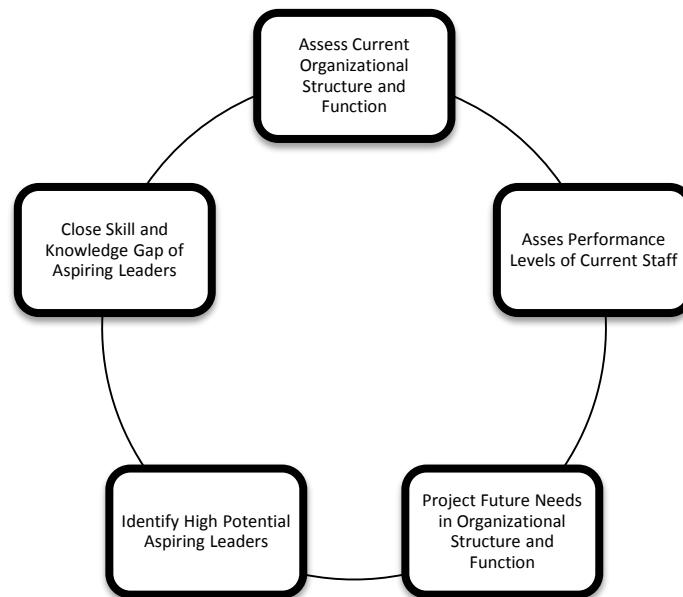
and the potential of school districts to cultivate leadership capacity through in-district academies have not been the focus of extensive research. This study addressed that gap and illuminates the potential of such programs to support aspiring school administrators as they transform their perceptions of self, form their leadership identity, and are empowered to move beyond culturally imposed limits on their potential for social agency. In sum, this literature review serves to synthesize existing literature related to the research problem to ultimately clarify the study's overall context, situate the specific problem being studied, and explore and evaluate varied perspectives on the problem (Hart, 1998).

### **Succession Planning**

Although the practice of succession planning originated in the private sector of business and industry and has been widely studied in the healthcare professions, its tenets can be applied to the world of public education (Rothwell, 2010; Zepeda et al., 2011). Given that public sector attrition rates exceed those of the private sector, schools would benefit from devising and implementing effective succession planning and management procedures to anticipate changes in leadership (Zepeda et al, 2011). A change in leadership that occurs when one principal leaves a school and another one is hired, is a common, inevitable occurrence, but one that can be disruptive to the school without appropriate preparation and planning (Hart, 1991; Ni et al., 2014; Rothwell, 2010; Zepeda et al., 2011). Indeed there are times when a turnover in leadership may actually be desirable, in terms of long-term gains for a district, such as when a principal is incompetent or ineffective (Doyle & Locke, 2014). Regardless of the reason for change in leadership, the process of accommodating it needs to be a planned carefully (Doyle &

Locke, 2014; Fink, 2011; Rothwell, 2010). In order to minimize any turmoil during the transition period between leaders, preserve invaluable institutional memory, and minimize the common dip in performance that follows a loss of a leader, effective and proactive succession planning is needed (Rothwell, 2010).

As defined in chapter one, succession planning is more than finding replacements. Succession planning, when fully implemented involves not only effective recruiting and hiring practices, but proactive preparation that ensures that future leaders within the organization are identified and cultivated well in advance of any change in leadership (Fink, 2011; Rhodes et al., 2008). This proactive cultivation of internal candidates is critical so that the right people can be carefully and equitably selected to match the needs of the organization (Clifford, 2010; Cole & Harbour, 2015; Fink, 2011; Myung et al.,



*Figure 1. Succession Planning Process Phases*

Adapted from Rothwell, 2010

2011; Rhodes et al., 2008). School districts benefit from taking systematic steps, as displayed in Figure 1 above, to adequately prepare for retirements, resignations, and promotions of principals and other leaders in order to minimize these disruptions (Rhodes et al., 2008).

School districts need to assess the employment status of current employees to gauge need for replacements and simultaneously equitably identify exemplary candidates so that they can be recruited or prepared for the succession event (Odden & Kelly, 2008; Rhodes et al., 2008). Unfortunately, many organizations, including school districts do not engage in proactive steps, fail to prepare, and lose—through resignations—highly skilled employees they did not realize they already had (Rothwell, 2010). Odden and Kelly (2008) charge that the training and recruitment systems [in schools are] broken, as few districts actively recruited talent...but simply hired, unfortunately at the end of the summer, the talent—often in short supply—that had applied and kept their application active through the spring and summer (p.4).

This reactive approach of staffing by convenience is symptomatic of a dysfunctional human capital management system and is common in many urban districts (Odden & Kelly, 2008). By not engaging in proactive succession planning, school districts risk losing talent to other districts or even other fields, where the salaries are typically higher than in education (Doyle & Locke, 2014; Myung et al., 2011; Winter et al., 2001).

Lack of preparation for leadership succession is not isolated to public school districts. Cole and Harbour (2015) found that the same trend in public health agencies; the only true succession planning happening was found to be in the larger public entities.

Inconsistencies in funding availability, coupled with an aging public health workforce, have interfered with the viability of any real succession planning process, and kept it as a low priority in many departments of public health (Cole & Harbor, 2015, p. 162). Similarly in education, succession planning is often a low priority and suffers from scarce funding.

### **Tapping the Pipeline Equitably**

Since leadership skills are diffused throughout the rank and file in every organization, one goal of a proactive succession planning and management program is to match current skills of both internal candidates and outside applicants to the future needs of the organization (Rothwell, 2010, p. 9). Notably, U.S. public schools are subject to the terms of the many employment laws that prohibit discrimination in hiring and promotion practices. Under these laws, anyone who applies for a job and is otherwise qualified for the position must be fairly considered for it regardless of race, age, sex, pregnancy, disability, genetic profile, religious background, sexual orientation, native language, or national origin (EEOC, 2009). Districts then must proceed carefully with informal recruiting or “tapping the pipeline” of aspiring administrators to ensure equal access protections are maintained and the impact of favoritism is minimized to the greatest extent possible.

In private industry a chief executive may choose to publicly name and openly groom successors. In public schools, recruiting successors proceeds somewhat differently, but with the potential for strikingly similar results. Although in Hong Kong, principals and other school leaders are traditionally chosen according to seniority (Ng, 2013), such a formal line of succession is not permitted in the United States. Groves

(2007) advises organizations to avoid appointing an “heir apparent” and instead “investing the time and effort in identifying multiple high potentials [adopting] a very flexible and fluid approach to succession planning [resulting in a] diverse range of candidates” (p. 248). In the United States, school districts have an affirmative responsibility to seek this “diverse range” of leaders for their schools, given the history of protected groups’ marginalization coupled with the increasing diversity of their students’ demographic profile (EEOC, 2009).

**Reality of sponsored mobility.** As Myung et al.(2011) posit, every properly certified applicant should, theoretically, have the same chance to move into a leadership role based on merit and equal opportunities; in reality many successful candidates benefit from “sponsored mobility” (p. 697-698). These sponsorships can take the form of leader-teacher exchange, featuring a trusting, emotionally supportive relationship and mentorships, featuring increased but protected exposure to authentic tasks (Wayne, Liden, Kraimer, & Graf, 1999, p. 592). Those candidates who are “tapped” are often the beneficiaries of such a sponsorship by sitting principals or other district leaders who may show favoritism and are likely to vary in their ability to select the best leaders for today’s schools and who may be looking—perhaps subconsciously—for a clone of themselves (Myung et al., 2011; Rothwell, 2010).

Myung et al. (2011) explain that, in alignment with social reproduction theory, these leaders might be predicted to seek out, tap, and sponsor those aspirants who most closely resemble their own demographic, historically “leaving non-Whites and women with the challenge of developing ties across ethnic and gender lines” (p. 698). Interestingly, Myung et al. (2011) found that neither a teacher’s race nor experience level

appeared to play a significant role in selection for tapping. Gender, however did play a role; male teachers were almost twice as likely to be tapped to pursue the principalship as females. Similarly, Reynolds et al. (2005) question that despite repeated claims from administrators across Canada, the United States, Australia, Britain, and New Zealand that gender does not play an issue leadership succession, male principals continue to be disproportionately overrepresented at the secondary level (p.19-20).

Reynolds et al. (2005) posit that patterns of discrimination persist in educational settings when it comes to succession planning. They explain that “race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation are factors that often interact with gender to contribute to patterns of discrimination and the need for ‘extra efforts’ for certain individuals to be found acceptable as leaders in school settings” (p. 19). This leaves many qualified candidates at an unfair disadvantage in the quest for a principalship. Leaders, particularly immediate supervisors have been shown to play a key role in the encouragement and motivation of aspiring leaders, and wield considerable ability to facilitate their growth (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Rhodes et al., 2008; Wayne et al., 1999). Districts can leverage that connection to support their succession planning and management needs in an ethical manner that minimizes bias and its impact on the selection of school leaders.

**Embracing transparency.** To minimize the impact of bias or similar trend it is critical that succession planning and management processes generally—and access to the in-district leadership programs in particular—be based on transparent standards and not dependent solely on any one leader or supervisor’s recommendations. Succession management cannot be a “function of favoritism” but must be about finding the right person for the job, period. (Rothwell, 2010, p. 60). Or, as Fink (2011) puts it, “placing the

right person, in the right place at the right time *for the right reasons*” (p. 673) [Emphasis mine].

### **Distributing Power and Building Internal Capacity for Teacher Leadership**

**Sharing leadership.** While a principal is empowered with positional authority to administer a building and implement board of education policies and central office directives, not every task requires the principal’s direct oversight and involvement (Barth, 2001). There are aspects of running schools that can be—and arguably should be—delegated to or shared with others. As the scope of leadership expands, sharing power, responsibility, and specific tasks with identified professional teacher leaders—especially those who may aspire to the principalship—is likely to relieve stress, enhance overall school effectiveness, and recast the role of principal as more manageable (Barth, 2001; Lambert, 1998; Winter et al., 2001). Teacher leadership can be empowering for the teacher as well. “The teacher who leads . . . gets to sit at the table with grown-ups as a first-class citizen in the school house rather than remain the subordinate in a world full of superordinates” (Barth, 2001, p. 445).

Leadership tasks and responsibilities exceed what any one person can do, and are often are shared among “an interactive web of people and situations” (Spillane, 2005, p. 144). Spillane et al. (2004) define distributed educational leadership practice as the interaction between leaders and followers in the context of the school (p. 10). Ng (2013) notes that this form of “collective leadership” builds the capacity of teachers as they collaborate (p. 274). Sharing power, authority, and leadership with followers, is needed if demands for school performance are to be met (Lambert, 1998). Barth (2001) noted that “effective principals don’t work harder than less effective principals; they work smarter.

Principals who encourage and enlist teachers' leadership leverage their own" (p. 445). Moreover, by working interactively with principals, the leadership capacity of followers is extended, preparing them for their own principalship while still in their current role (Lambert, 1998; Spillane et al., 2004). This "vertical loading" of additional responsibility challenges the teachers to gradually engage in new, more challenging tasks that further tap their true potential (Rothwell, 2010, p. 38).

**Expanding capacity through authentic inquiry.** The teacher leaders who aspire to school leadership need to be equitably identified, and cultivated using authentic inquiry methods to build upon their existing knowledge and hone skills needed for the new position (Myung et al., 2011; Rothwell, 2010). Programs that feature the discussion and dissection of authentic scenarios that connect theory to practice have been found to equip aspiring leaders with critical job skills, such as ethical decision making (Perez, Uline, Johnson, Jr., James-Ward, & Basom, 2011). Armstrong (2009) found programs of value often include activities such as "field practice, collaborative inquiry, case study analysis, self-study, individual and group dialogue, feedback on performance, and action plans" (p. 129). Bataginnis (2011) found that engaging aspiring principals in simulated action research projects facilitated their ability to work collectively to solve problems, as well as their ability to see themselves as taking on the mantle of leadership (p. 1322-1323).

Conversely, Perez et al. (2011) argue that such simulations do not give aspiring leaders the "opportunity to wrestle with the same urgency, sense of responsibility, and discomfort experienced by principals in today's highly charged reform environment" (p. 218). Additionally, Davis et al (2005) point out that much of the evidence of program



effectiveness is based on participant perception, rather than on empirical data that could tie specific program attributes to administrator performance outcomes (p. 8). But despite their caveat, Davis et al. (2005) go on to admit the proven value of both authentic inquiry and reflection for the development of aspiring administrators' self-concept as future leaders (p. 10-11). A common thread running through the literature is the critical need future practitioners have for exposure to, interaction with, and reflection upon the reality of what school leaders actually do on a daily basis.

Nor is this need unique to education. Raju and Sankar (1999) found that engineering students "perceived that the case studies were very useful in understanding real-world problems and suggesting possible solutions" (p. 506). Nor is this a new idea in education. Harvard Business School professor Charles Gregg exclaimed that "[e]ducation in the professions should prepare students for action" rather than simply studying theories (Hallinger & Lu, 2013, p. 437). Although many preparation programs offered through higher education or alternate route programs offer exposure to various leadership theories and practical field opportunities, many programs fall short in adequately preparing aspiring leaders to meet the expanding demands of daily leadership tasks (Davis et al., 2005; Drago-Severson et al., 2011; Ng, 2013; Pounder, 2011). Therefore not every aspiring administrator with a certificate is equally prepared to step into a leadership position. Participation in a quality internship has been shown to prepare aspiring administrators for the realities of the position.

Davis et al. (2005), Perez et al. (2011), and Stevenson and Cooner (2011) found field internships especially valuable in transforming future administrators' understandings of, and appreciations for the complexities of daily issues that school

leaders face. Orr (2011) found that a quality internship experience “influences the likelihood that graduates will become leaders who put this learning into practice” (p. 154). Winter et al. (2001) support the notion that school districts need to regularly measure aspirant’s capabilities against the skills needed for the principalship even prior to their entry into a position of leadership (p. 16-17). Deficits might then be addressed through in-district professional development or further coursework. Working closely with principals and other school district leaders on data-driven and authentic tasks aimed at school improvement can provide invaluable opportunities for districts to evaluate internal candidates on an equitable standard (Winter et al. 2001).

**Expanding capacity using PLCs and the ScIP.** Professional learning communities (PLCs) have been touted as the key to sustained school improvement and have emerged as a deliberate response to calls for educational reform (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Putnam, Gunnings-Moton, & Sharp, 2009). PLCs can be defined as an organization or group with shared values that relentlessly pursues growth and improvement through iterative, results-oriented, cycles of action, experimentation, and reflection (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). These learning communities take the form of teachers working in collaborative groups to share ideas and solve problems related to their educational practice. This experience holds promise for developing the skills of aspiring leaders. In New Jersey, each school is required to implement PLCs and arrange teachers into these groups in order to provide a collaborative setting for professional development experiences (Putnam et al., 2009). The law does not guarantee that the teachers who are arranged into these groups will find any value in them.

Professional learning communities plan and engage in experiences for teachers that are designed to increase the capacity of the group as a whole (DuFour and Eaker, 1998). While participation in high-level professional development is likely to result in a higher level of job satisfaction, teacher confidence, and marketability in other districts, Wayne et al. (1999) did not find a positive relationship between training and promotion within a district (p. 590). Therefore while PLCs are designed to be helpful to teachers in the development of skills needed for leadership, additional experiences are needed to prepare for promotion into a formal leadership role.

### **Transitions and Transformations**

**Perspective transformation.** There is a personal and professional journey or transformation that takes place as teachers transition from one role into another. As teachers become teacher leaders, and as teacher leaders become aspiring administrators, there is a momentum that builds and a fog that lifts. After pursuing advanced degrees and participating in activities like the ones described above, aspiring administrators, often experience a shift in their identity, or perception of self, as they start to see themselves as capable of performing in a new role (Bataginnis, 2011). Bataginnis (2011) found that graduate students developed an emerging leadership identity as they engaged in planning an action research project for their coursework. These projects gave them the opportunity to imagine themselves in the role. Bataginnis (2011) found their perspective of self was shifted from teacher to aspiring administrator by the experiences (p. 1324) “it was this leadership identity that would inform their creative leadership decisions and capacity for problem solving. The more distinctly defined that identity was, the more insightful the potential leadership would be” (Bataginnis p. 1306). Moorosi (2014) found leadership

development to be more of a social event, involving others, such as followers in the formation and reinforcement of the leadership identity. “Leadership development is best understood as a process through which leadership identity is co-constructed through transformative practices of (amongst others) mentoring, networking and shared learning Moorosi, 2014, p. 796).

Similarly, Orr (2010) found that leadership preparation programs that help aspiring administrators develop confidence in their own capacity as leaders improve the likelihood that these professionals actually pursue administrative positions (p. 122). Bandura’s (1993) self-efficacy theory sheds light on Orr’s (2010) findings. He explained that high levels of self-confidence-or self-efficacy-allows people to envision themselves being successful at challenging future endeavors—such as applying to an administrative position—and therefore allows them to persist in pursuing their goals. Completing the transformation from teacher to administrator requires more than accepting a job and actually functioning in the role of an administrator, it involves a change in perspective about oneself. This transformation is complete when the individual is freed from prior societal or cultural role expectations and embraces the role of choice—in this case that of the school leader (Mezirow, 1981). Mezirow (1981) explained that:

Perspective transformation is the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings. It is the learning process by which

adults come to recognize their culturally induced dependency roles and relationships and the reasons for them and take action to overcome them (p. 6-7).

Mezirow (1981) clarified that this process, which he posited is normal as humans develop into adults, actually takes place along a predictable dynamic but can be gradual or sudden in nature, depending on the nature of the precipitating event (p. 7). This event, or “disorienting dilemma” in the case being considered would be whatever occurred to the participants of the AAA that made them want to aspire to be administrators in the first place. As Mezirow (1981) explains this event would be followed by a period of critical self-reflection, and consideration of what other options might be pursued before making preparations to put an action plan into place (p. 7). It follows that an effective leadership development program might play an important role in the emancipation of participants’ self-perceived potential as future school leaders as well as help them along the journey toward the development of their leadership identity as Moorosi (2014) described.

**Transitions into formal leadership.** Greenfield, as cited in Oleszewski et al. (2012) found that this journey continues after being hired into administrative positions, with newly hired Assistant Principals finally losing their teacher identity and developing their administrator identity through the socialization process that takes place after they are hired into administration (p. 271). These shifts and transformations bring with them inevitable “reality shock” and an emerging awareness of their newly acquired, vast responsibilities (Spillane & Lee, 2014, p. 442). Interestingly, Spillane and Lee (2014) found that those who were internally promoted into the principalship experienced a lower level and shorter duration of this feeling of shock since they were more familiar with the culture of the building than any outsider would be.

The themes that emerged from the literature review clearly indicate the effects of leadership on student and teacher performance and the related need for school districts to anticipate and plan for the transitions associated with leadership succession. The role of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century principal is too complex, and the stakes too high for students, for districts not to have a comprehensive approach to leadership succession planning and management. The literature review revealed that transition periods between principals often feature a dip in student performance, the potential loss of institutional memory, an interruption of program continuity and possibly a shock to school culture. Districts may be able to effectively address these concerns through the cultivation of leadership capacity among internal candidates, equitably chosen. This cultivation may take the form of a formal or informal leadership development program, and urban exemplars abound that enjoy the support of external funding and university partnerships. Most school districts, however do not receive financial support for this purpose. This study evaluates one such district's efforts to plan for its future leadership needs, in the context of unprecedented external accountability, with the goals of enhancing that effort and providing a guide for those who might wish to replicate it.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

The purpose of this study was to conduct a formative program evaluation of an in-district leadership academy in a suburban regional high school district in New Jersey, in order to explore and evaluate how teacher participation engages participants in the process of preparing for future leadership roles. Program evaluation has been alternately defined as “the application of qualitative research methods to questions of practice” (Anastas, 2004) and as “the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs to make judgments about the program, improve program effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future programming” (Patton, 2002a, p. 10). Distinct from summative evaluation or quality assurance, formative evaluations focus on program improvement (Patton (2002a). Qualitative methods are useful in program evaluations, in order to “tell the program’s story” and discover instrumental uses for findings (Patton, 2001; Patton, 2002a, p. 10). Anastas (2004) asserts that, additionally, qualitative evaluation methods are “often used to examine the organizational, political, and historical contexts within which service delivery takes place” (p. 57). This study sought to elucidate that narrative from a specific organizational context, interpret it through the lens of Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning, and use those findings to further the development of aspiring administrators and contribute to the overall mission of the school district.

This study sought to answer these evaluative research questions:

1. How do participants describe an in-district leadership program as contributing to their professional growth and transformation?

2. How are different features of the program—such as the cohort structure, meeting format, topics addressed, materials selected, and activities offered—experienced by participants?
3. How do program activities align with stated program goals and objectives?
4. In what ways can this program address the ongoing succession planning and management needs of the organization?
5. What did my participation in a workplace program evaluation reveal about the nature of researcher practitioner positionality?

### **Assumptions of and Rationale for Qualitative Methodology**

Qualitative research is defined as “an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). Although qualitative research has a structure to follow, qualitative research is not, by its nature, a linear or step-by-step process that can be precisely predicted and planned in advance with absolute accuracy, but rather, a recursive one that evolves and unfolds as the study proceeds (Maxwell, 2005). Qualitative researchers seek to authentically elucidate data from participants in the field, and then interpret that data using an inductive process in order to uncover themes that ultimately lead to findings that hold local, policy, and research implications (Creswell, 2014).

Although this chapter outlines a structure in an attempt to make explicit methodological choices within this formative program evaluation, I acknowledge that adjustments were expected to be made in the field due to the emergent nature of qualitative inquiry. As Maxwell (2005) explains, each component of a qualitative research design is interconnected and adjustments to one may require changes to another.



“Design in qualitative research is an ongoing process that involves ‘tacking’ back and forth between the different components of the design, assessing the implications of goals, theories, research questions, methods and validity threats for one another” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 3). This iterative and integrated process provides the researcher with a level of flexibility that is needed when working in the field with a diverse group of participants. In order to capture all the relevant data that will facilitate the inductive generation of themes and findings, fully address the research questions, and achieve the goals of the study, it was important to be able to make decisions related to the research design that aligned to the particular needs of the study at the time. Since these needs emerge while the study is in progress, a qualitative design is appropriately flexible. Moreover, this inherent feature of qualitative inquiry aligns with my worldview as a social constructivist.

### **Philosophical Worldview**

My philosophical worldview, or fundamental understanding of the world and my place in it relative to others, reflects a social constructivist perspective (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). This perspective has been described by Guba and Lincoln (1994) as a stance featuring a particular combination of ontological and epistemological understandings that emphasize the socially constructed and experience-based nature of reality (p 109-111). Specifically, I believe that each person has a unique, subjective view of a phenomenon, and that each view of it is worthy of equal esteem.

As a constructivist, I feel a dedication to forming and ensuring a respectful relationship with participants, based in shared interests. Thus the emphasis on engaging participants in prolonged discussions; it is through these that their viewpoint can emerge. As Creswell (2014) explains, social science research conducted from this philosophical

stance seeks to capture, as faithfully as possible, each person's unique experiences. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) remind us that qualitative data feature rich, thick descriptions that can reveal the complexity of each person's perceptions and is "well suited for locating the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives and for connecting these *meanings* to the *social world* around them (p. 11; emphasis in original). I sought to reveal and respect each person's voice in the research. I recognized the importance of making every effort to elucidate candid, open-ended responses to research questions in order to capture each person's unique perspective. I accepted that extended time must be spent building trust with participants in order to make them feel comfortable enough to lend their voice and disclose how they actually experienced the program under consideration.

The constructivist philosophical view supports the research focus on discovering participants' experiences. It is through their comments and reflections that I was able to inductively develop a more informed understanding of the program and its meaning and worth from their perspective (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln, 2001). I also recognize that I have my own unique perspective on each phenomenon I encounter as well, and that as a researcher I must reflect on my own experiences as well as my role in the implementation of the program in order to ensure that my perspective does not dominate those of the participants (Lincoln, 2001). This information, viewed through the lens of transformative learning theory, will be used in order to evaluate the program, with the goal of augmenting it for future cohorts of participants.

## **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative methodology with formative program evaluation as its research design. I followed Patton's (2002a) methodological approach to formative program evaluation. Patton (2002a) described qualitative methods as "particularly useful" in evaluation (p. 161). I studied a new program for aspiring administrators in the context of a public school district that is offering it for the first time as part of its strategic plan. Using a qualitative approach allows me to explore this phenomenon through prolonged interaction with those who share lived experiences with the process of initial program implementation. Patton (2002a) explains "the experience of process typically varies for different people so their experiences need to be captured in their own words [and that] participants perceptions are a key process consideration (p. 159). It is for these reasons that I have selected this approach, since it has been shown to be appropriate to the particular phenomenon and is reflective of and consistent with my social constructivist worldview. Maxwell (2005) encourages an interactive approach to research design, where the "components work harmoniously together" (p.2) to ensure a study that is structurally sound and philosophically consistent.

In order to support the trustworthiness of the study, I triangulated the data collection using varied methods and multiple participants. This practice, as Toma (2006) describes is often used to enhance rigor in qualitative research, "given the inherent imprecision of data-gathering tools such as interviews" (p. 412). Once I had interacted with a number of participants and started to see and hear the same things from multiple voices, it was clear that I had successfully triangulated my data, and enhanced its trustworthiness (Creswell 2014; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Participant data was solicited

through the use of extended semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. Other data was collected from the site in which the study is being conducted and from my own reflections in a researcher journal. As discussed above, and consistent with qualitative research design, the methods used and specific protocols needed to be somewhat emergent, since the data gathered in one phase was likely to reveal unanticipated avenues to be explored in the next (Creswell, 2014).

### **Context of Research**

The choice to engage in backyard research within the district where I am currently employed as the Director of Personnel was driven by the critical nature of the changes taking place in the deep levels of culture within this organization. As Hansen (2007) explains, every organization's history has a role in shaping its culture and identity and to understand the culture, the historical narrative must be examined (p. 926, 949). Therefore, in order to make clear the reasons for the site selection, a brief examination of organizational history is appropriate.

The district has recently emerged from a scandal that was highly publicized. The scandal involved a former superintendent and two former assistant superintendents, who were found in 2007 to have acquired "doctoral degrees" from an unaccredited online college at taxpayer expense. After years of heated controversy at Board of Education meetings, live discussions on a major radio station, NJ101.5, and a continued barrage of critical comments posted on various social media outlets, all three administrators involved were unceremoniously stripped of their "Dr." titles by the Commissioner of Higher Education. The college was exposed as a so called "diploma mill" and has since ceased operations in the United States.

Following this scandal and others like it, several members of the New Jersey State Legislature proposed, and on May 6, 2010 Governor Chris Christie signed, P.L. 2010, Chapter 13 or “The Diploma Mill Law” which effectively closed the loophole that gave rise to this practice. This law requires that any tuition reimbursement, and any raises based on degree completion be granted only for coursework completed at a “duly authorized institution of higher education” (P.L.2010, c.13). This scandal was considerably disruptive to the operation of the district. In June of 2010, when the superintendent retired, FRHSD was poised for a turnaround. Schein (2010) observes “scandals...are a disconfirming force that cannot be denied and that start some public self-assessment and change program” (p. 292). In addition to the widely publicized scandal that affected the central office of the district, local hiring procedures created barriers for aspiring administrators among the teaching staff. Specifically, all recruitment postings for administrative positions—either principal or assistant principal—dating back more than a decade required a minimum of six years of experience, including prior administrative or supervisory experience. Teachers were not hired out of the classroom into administrative positions. This prerequisite meant that teachers who wanted to become administrators had to either wait their turn for a supervisory position to open up within the organization, or they had to leave the district to procure the experience. In 2010 there was a severe budgetary cutback coupled with a defeat of the school budget. This meant that supervisory positions were being cut, further limiting teachers’ access to leadership positions. Such moments require leaders of organizations to self-reflect, compare espoused tenets and theories of action with actual theories-in-use and face any incongruity with integrity and resolve (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

That is what FRHSD, under the leadership of its current superintendent was able to do, and this is a major reason why I selected this site. After the selection of a new superintendent in early 2011, the district, engaged in goal-setting activities that included the construction of a new mission statement coupled with the convening of a 30 member strategic planning committee. This committee would, over the next year, engage in a large scale, community-wide collaborative strategic planning project, which captured the voices of nearly 1000 stakeholders in its development. This document, entitled *Compass*, has since been adopted by the Board of Education as a guidepost for the district's goal-related efforts at a district turnaround. As Schein (2010) explains,

Turnarounds usually require the involvement of all organization members, so that the dysfunctional elements of the present culture become clearly visible to everyone. The process of developing new assumptions involves defining new values and goals through teaching, coaching, changing the structure and processes where necessary; consistently paying attention to and rewarding evidence of learning the new ways; creating new slogans, stories, myths, and rituals; and in other ways *coercing* people into adopting new behaviors (p. 293).

The selection of the Freehold Regional High School District as the context for this program evaluation was conscious and deliberate. The district is a unique case, worthy of study for many reasons. In the context of the current need for developing, recruiting, hiring, and retaining the best leaders, this organization stands poised to challenge long-held underlying assumptions and cultural beliefs about access to leadership positions and ready to support the implementation and growth of a research-based, in-district leadership

academy, to meet challenges of leadership succession and management and individual capacity building that confront schools today (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Schein, 2010).

### **Sampling: Participant Selection**

Since I conducted a qualitative inquiry I purposefully selected participants in order to gather data that could speak most directly and with the greatest detail to my research questions. Patton (2002b) clarifies that

Purposeful sampling is one of the core distinguishing elements of qualitative inquiry....The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling. (p. 272-273)

Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña (2014) explain that qualitative samples are typically small; researchers are strategic and purposive in their selection. Patton (2002a) asserts that when individual participants are selected in this way it will “permit inquiry into and understanding of a phenomenon *in depth*” (p. 46; emphasis in original). Patton (2002a) explains that while working with a single or small number of participants may limit the ability to generalize findings to a larger population, such research can yield tremendous insight into the phenomenon of interest as well as areas for additional research.

Although quantitative research findings that use statistically sound random sampling can often be generalized, Patton (2002a) offers that “qualitative methods permit inquiry into selected issues in great depth with careful attention to detail, context, and nuance” (p. 227). It is these latter methods that the study employed in order to identify those participants who could provide the most detailed, and diverse viewpoints and experiences with the program. “Studying information-rich cases yield insights and in-

depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations” (p. 230). If this study yields such “insights” and “understandings” about the experiences participants have in the AAA, the district will be able to enhance the program for this and for subsequent cohorts and reap the benefit in the form of improved leadership skills among its staff, and enhanced program continuity through succession events.

The universe of possible participants included 32 volunteers, who were employed as teachers in the district at the time of the study. In order to be included in the program, these teachers submitted a resume and a letter of interest to the Director of Personnel and Superintendent in the spring of 2014. Some, but not all of those interested received endorsements from their building principals. Some already applied and interviewed unsuccessfully for supervisory and administrative positions in the district. Some have been through that process multiple times. Admitting all voluntary participants was a decision made by the Superintendent, who has often commented about the need to increase access and remove barriers to opportunity where they are found. This inclusive stance likely resulted in a more diverse internal pool of applicants, including those who seek both immediate and delayed entry into administrative positions (Walker et al., 2013). Walker et al. (2013) found that a “wide degree of openness to participation of qualified candidates may impact healthily on a system’s leadership language and networks for those who wish to build their leadership without aspiring to the principalship immediately” (p. 420).

From among this group, I selected focus group participants using maximum variation, or heterogeneous sampling methodology. Patton (2002b) explicates that this approach is useful in order to elucidate themes that cut across the varied spectrum of



participants. Patton (2002b) explains that “common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon” (p. 235). By first creating a matrix showing varied criteria and characteristics of participants, such as gender, age, level of education, content area taught, years in teaching, years in district, certificates held, number of times interviewed for administrative positions in the district, principal’s approval status, number of AAA meetings attended, and level of participation in meetings attended, I was able to purposefully select participants who hold contrasting and varied perspectives and experiences with the AAA. The common patterns and themes that emerge from such a diverse, heterogeneous group “take on added importance precisely because they emerge from great variation” (Patton, 2002a, p. 235). The themes that emerged despite the unique qualities of the participants were powerful and authentic tools through which to explore and evaluate aspects of the program.

When selecting participants for interviews, as a subset of focus group members, I used intensity sampling, as described by Patton (2002a). The rationale for this methodological choice was to identify and include those participants who, given the codes, categories, and themes that emerge from the focus group data, appeared to be able to contribute a wealth of diverse information, and therefore be the most worthy of study. As Patton (2002a) explains the use of intensity sampling connects the researcher to those participants who have the greatest potential to provide richly detailed data. This level of detail in the data is critical to a qualitative formative program evaluation seeking to use detailed feedback to take corrective action. Its use also provides other districts and researchers enough information if replication is to be attempted. Qualitative research

methods include the use of information-rich cases as this increases the authenticity and credibility of the findings (Patton, 2002a).

### **Data Collection**

I used multiple data sources as well as varied methods of data collection in this multi-phase study in order to address the five research questions outlined at the beginning of this chapter. Denzin and Lincoln, as cited in Anastas (2004) explain that, “qualitative research is multi-method in focus... [and] involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials” (p. 58). As will be discussed, the use of multiple data sources to address the research questions contributes to the trustworthiness of the research findings. Data sources used include analysis of program-related documents, focus group transcripts, interview transcripts, and analysis of a researcher journal. The data collection methods planned as well as their alignment to the research questions are depicted in Table 1 below.

Table 1

#### *Multi-Phase Data Collection Methods' Alignment to Research Questions*

Component	Data Source 1	Data Source 2	Data Source 3	Data Source 4
	Document Analysis	Focus Groups	Individual Interviews	Researcher Journal
Research Question	4	1-5	1-5	1-5
Phase of Data Collection	1	2	3	1-3

## **Document Analysis**

Since I conducted the study in order to formatively evaluate a particular program in one school district I needed to initially gather data through a careful examination of documents related to the program. Such organizational documents are part of the material culture of the district. Hodder (1994) refers to these as “mute evidence” that provide enduring and valuable insight to the history of an organization but require a researcher to interpret their meaning in context (p. 393). Rubin and Rubin (2012) remind us that typically, documents “should not be treated as literal renditions of the facts but rather as people’s interpretations” at the time (p. 27). It is important to explore the context in which the program is being offered in order to fully comprehend the lived experiences of the participants. All documents used by presenters or distributed to participants were collected for analysis, using a scan of all district email exchanges related to the program. When used in combination with interviews, document analysis can provide needed background in order to properly frame questions, and extend conversations (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

## **Focus Groups**

In order to explore how participants experience this program—what is working for them, what they believe should be abandoned going forward, and what they feel can be improved—I collected data by interacting directly with participants. In order to answer the research questions, a large number of extensive interactions took place. The specific methods of data collection I employed with participants were, multiple focus groups followed by in-depth semi-structured interviews. I conducted them in that order, after I

had completed the document analysis in a multi-phase qualitative project as depicted in Table 1 above.

Focus groups, as used in qualitative research are a kind of group interview in which participants interact with one another while considering topics that the researcher/focus group moderator provides (Morgan, 1996; 1997). Morgan (1997) explains that the use of focus groups can add to the data gathered, with multiple methods combining “in a true partnership” (p. 3). When using focus groups in coordination with interviews a researcher serves as the moderator and is able to observe participants interacting with one another. I assembled diversified focus groups to encourage a deep level of reflection among the group about topics related to the research questions and that engage the participants in discussions about their transformation into administrators. Morgan (1997) observes that “group discussions provide direct evidence about similarities and differences in the participants’ opinions and experiences as opposed to reaching such conclusions from post hoc analyses of separate statements from each interviewee” (p. 10). The use of focus groups facilitated a depth of conversation among participants who, although they attended the same events, carried with them diverse memories of those experiences. “The hallmark of focus groups is their explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group” (Morgan, 1997, p. 2). By facilitating these groups, I was able to elucidate richly detailed and widely focused topics related the program. The inclusion of focus groups permitted me to more fully address the research questions and give participants a venue through which to freely express their own experiences as an aspiring administrator in the program.

The focus groups represented the second phase of data collection. The structure and number of focus groups was an emergent decision made in the field, although instruments were prepared in advance. As Rubin and Rubin (2012) explain, researchers often convene multiple focus group sessions with different participants responding to the same, open-ended questions; this is how I structured the focus groups. I included both interviews and focus groups as a strategy to test early findings. As Morgan (1997) explains, these methods can be combined so that preliminary conclusions and implications—in this case drawn from my document analysis data—could be put up for discussion in the focus groups, thus serving to confirm, enrich, or even to reject them (p. 22-23). See Appendix A for the focus group protocol.

## **Interviews**

The use of in-depth interviewing is common tool used by qualitative researchers in order to explore participants' experiences and points of view with regard to the particular phenomena being investigated (Creswell, 2014; Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). "We interview to find out what is in and on someone else's mind, to gather their stories (Patton, 2002a, p. 341). I used the responsive interviewing model which is strongly advocated by Rubin and Rubin (2012). This model is appropriate to my research design and aligns with my constructivist worldview (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln, 2001). "Responsive interviewing is a specific variety of qualitative interviewing...[that] emphasizes flexibility of design and expects the interviewer to change questions in response to what he or she is learning...and adjusts to the personality of both conversational partners" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p.7) In order to gather data about the AAA, I used a responsive semi-structured interview format. Rubin and Rubin (2012)

explain that responsive semi-structured interviews consist of an extended, responsive conversation between the researcher and the participant in a style that relies on the establishment of a mutual relationship that leads to more openness and sharing on the part of the participant. Semi-structured interviews are those in which the researcher uses a flexible protocol consisting of a limited number of questions that leaves room and time for unique follow-up questions that respond to the answers and expertise of each participant (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). As Rubin and Rubin (2012) emphasize, responsive semi-structured interviewers work ethically and respectfully with each participant to gently approach topics, which was an especially appropriate method to include in the study as a way to help ensure that all participants feel comfortable participating at all times, especially in light of my formal line of authority in the district. Similarly, several of the interviews were conducted over the telephone in an effort to access the benefit of modern technology while simultaneously ensuring that participants did not feel uncomfortable discussing sensitive, job-related topics (Trier-Bieniek, 2012). Trier-Bieniek (2012) indicated that she “found that researching sensitive subjects via a telephone interview can benefit the participant because they are being interviewed in familiar, comfortable settings and can dictate the course and direction of the interview” (p. 642). The use of this interview technique aligned with the goal of protecting the participants, since I was engaging in backyard research.

All of these methods mentioned above are aligned to and in harmony with the epistemological perspective guiding this study. As a social constructivist, I ascribe to the idea that each person assigns meaning to experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln, 2001). As an interpretivist, I believe that in order to understand a phenomenon a

researcher has to engage participants personally in order to elicit from them sufficient depth and detail that will allow themes to emerge inductively (Creswell, 2014; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Therefore, given my worldview, a qualitative strategy of inquiry is appropriate. As Maxwell (2005) describes, as a qualitative researcher I must acknowledge that personal experiences and suppositions will inform my approach to my topic. It is vital therefore that I reflect often on my own perspective throughout the study, as this will contribute to its authenticity and trustworthiness. These reflections were captured for reflection and data analysis and interpretation in a researcher journal.

### **Researcher Journal**

Omnipresent throughout the research process is the researcher journal. This tool is a critical partner for qualitative researchers. Janesick (1999) explains that a keeping a researcher journal is a powerful, well-established qualitative research technique that can yield a tremendous amount of data related to the researcher's thinking about the research and the role of the researcher. Keeping a journal, as Janesick (1999) points out, is an excellent way to precisely track all of the decisions that are made along the journey that is qualitative research. My researcher journal served as a source of data itself, a facilitator or researcher reflexivity, as well as a place to begin to analyze the data from the participants as it was being gathered in the field.

### **Instrumentation**

The creation of both the focus group and interview protocol was driven by a careful review and focus on each of the research questions, the nature of qualitative program evaluation research, as well as a consideration of the tenets of Mezirow's transformation theory. These instruments were developed in advance, since the goal of

the research is known. Miles et al. (2014) posit that prior instrumentation is appropriate in evaluation studies, and explain that “if you know what you are after, there is no reason not to plan in advance how to collect the information” (p. 39). Prior instrumentation permits researchers to ensure that research questions are fully addressed (Miles, et al., 2014). Informed consent was procured in advance of focus group and interview sessions, but was reiterated at the outset of each focus group and interview session. The complete focus group and the interview protocols can be found in the Appendix section.

### **Focus Group Protocol**

The focus groups included teachers who were voluntary members of the first cohort who shared, to some extent, in the experience of the initial implementation of the AAA program. Since they work in the same district, but not in the same building, and since they may not have all attended the same program events, the protocol focuses at the outset, on ensuring their mutual acquaintance. In addition to setting the stage for the group discussion, their answers to these first two questions assisted in the purposeful selection, through the use of intensity sampling of interview participants (Patton 2002b). The remainder of the focus group protocol consists of six content-related questions that were designed to engage the group in a lively, interactive discussion that leads to reflection and insights of an evaluative nature that might not have been reached using other methods (Morgan, 1997). Questions three, six, seven, and eight align with the research questions, while questions four and five intersect with the study’s theoretical lens and sought to elucidate discussion around their perspective transformation experiences as they prepare for a possible transition out of the classroom.



## **Interview Protocol**

A combination of individual, face-to-face and telephone conversations were conducted, using an identical semi-structured interview protocol that consisted of 11 questions. The duration of the interviews varied since each interview was conducted using responsive interviewing techniques that allowed for adjustments in follow up questions according to the individual needs of each conversational partner (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The first and last questions intersect with the study's theoretical lens and sought to elicit participant reflection on their own motivations for volunteering to participate in the program, and how that participation ultimately shaped their views of the district and their perception or self-concept as a leader. The nine questions remaining align with the research questions, and focus on evaluating program content, process, and product, finding out what worked and what did not, and identifying any experienced barriers to leadership opportunity within the district.

## **Data Analysis**

All interactions with participants were recorded on digital audiotape, transcribed using a professional transcription service, and, along with other data sources, hand-coded for patterns, categories, and themes using the approaches suggested by Miles et al. (2014) and Saldaña (2013). The focus group sessions were also videotaped to ensure that each response was ascribed to the correct participant.

Extensive data reduction was needed given the vast quantity of data this study yielded. Two cycles of coding were completed using coding methods appropriate to the study. The selected first cycle coding methods were descriptive coding, In Vivo coding, and evaluation coding. These particular coding methods were selected to allow me to construct a solid foundational understanding of the scope of topics addressed within the

data and to capture the participants' perspective and evaluation of the program's implementation process as closely as possible (Saldaña, 2013). I was also looking to track participants' use of the terms "we" and "they" or any related reference to their roles in education in order to gauge their current perceptions of self. The selected second cycle coding method, pattern coding, was selected in order to support the generation of themes from the data (Saldaña, 2013). Miles et al. (2014) describe the phenomenon of theme generation as a moment during the cyclical process of searching for recurring "gestalts that pull together many separate pieces of data [when] something jumps out at you and suddenly makes sense" (p. 277). These constructs were then interpreted thematically. I used the lens of Mezirow's (1981; 1985; 1994; 1997) theory of transformative learning to evaluate the program's capacity to support the transformation of participants' view of self from teacher to administrator. This theory served as the conceptual framework from which recommendations for programmatic enhancements were made.

Analytic memos were written periodically as I gathered, analyzed, and interpreted the data in order to record my impressions and reflections for further consideration. As Miles et al. (2014) explain, a descriptive memo can be a helpful device allowing researchers to conceptualize and recognize emerging relationships from the data (p. 95-96). These assorted data reduction techniques, as I used them for each data source, and how these address the research questions are displayed in Table 2 below. Data analysis and interpretation occurred concurrent with and subsequent to data collection, since developments in the field impacted my initial research design and plan.

The product of data analysis and interpretation efforts, after coding all documents and transcripts, noting patterns and overlapping themes, crafting all analytic memos, and

constructing abstract patterns of evidence from the data was the emergence of constructs that were be viewed through the appropriate theoretical lens to generate findings that addressed the research questions and gave meaning to the data. (Miles et al., 2014).

Table 2

*Summary of Data Sources, Analysis, and Interpretation Techniques*

Research Question	Data Source	Analysis Technique	Interpretation Technique
1-4	Participant Interviews	Coding 1 <sup>st</sup> Cycle Descriptive, InVivo, Evaluation 2 <sup>nd</sup> Cycle Pattern Memos	Compare themes to findings in literature Interpretive questioning using theoretical lens
1-4	Focus groups	Coding 1 <sup>st</sup> Cycle Descriptive, InVivo, Evaluation 2 <sup>nd</sup> Cycle Pattern Memos	Compare themes to findings in literature Interpretive questioning using theoretical lens
1-5	Researcher Journal	Coding 1 <sup>st</sup> Cycle Descriptive, InVivo, Evaluation 2 <sup>nd</sup> Cycle Pattern Memos	Compare themes to findings in literature
4	Documents	Document analysis Coding 1 <sup>st</sup> Cycle Descriptive, InVivo, Evaluation 2 <sup>nd</sup> Cycle Pattern Memos	Consult critical friends

## **Rigor and Trustworthiness**

Miles et al. (2014) caution researchers that “[q]ualitative analyses can be evocative, illuminating, masterful—and wrong” (p. 293). In order to increase confidence in the trustworthiness of the findings, I embraced many of the suggestions offered by Miles et al. (2014) and Creswell (2014). These included triangulating data sources and methods to support authentic theme generation, constructing a codebook in order to minimize code drift, keeping a researcher journal to bracket and record research decisions, acknowledging openly all researcher bias, conveying meaning using vivid written descriptions, clarifying participant meaning through member checking, investigating outliers to reconcile alternative explanations, and consulting with critical friends to challenge my assertions.

The keeping of a richly detailed researcher journal can be a tool to support the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Janesick (1999) explains, this practice encourages the researcher to interact with his own inner beliefs about what is happening in the study. “The clarity of writing down one’s thoughts will allow for stepping into one’s inner mind and reaching further into interpretations of the behaviors, beliefs, and words we write” (Janesick, 1999, p. 514). Such reflective practices can contribute to a study’s authenticity.

This reflection is especially important given that I have, simultaneously both an emic and an etic perspective on the AAA. As a current administrator, I am not on the inside of the program, as a voluntary participant would be, but rather on the outside, as an evaluator of the program. However, as one of the presenters of the program, I am also part of what is being evaluated. I believe that this is the area in which the use of a researcher journal will be of tremendous value. As I reflect on the experiences of

participants that relate to my own work with them I will need to bracket against bias that may impact my findings. Gearing (2004) explained that through the use of bracketing techniques “[t]he researcher is able to set aside and hold in abeyance all of his or her ‘natural attitude’ which consists of the researcher’s internal beliefs, ego, experiences, understandings, biases, culture, judgments and assumptions” (p. 1436). This is an important technique that I used, as a qualitative researcher to protect the authenticity of the research. Since I am intricately involved with the program being evaluated, and I have a professional relationship with the participants as well as personal experiences with promotion into administration, it was necessary to take measures to set all of that aside in order to authentically render the experiences of participants in the study’s findings.

Additionally, in the effort to engage in rigorous research, I was able to get feedback from participants through the member checking process. As Miles et al. (2014) explain, “[a]n alert and observant actor in the setting is bound to know more than the researcher will about the realities under investigation” (p. 309). Throughout this feedback process it is important to keep in mind that participants will not always agree with initial findings or with each other, since each person is likely to interpret events from his or her own perspective (Miles et al. 2014). This feedback itself can be considered data that can lead the researcher to examine more closely rival explanations, confront researcher bias, and inform final findings (Miles et al. 2014).

Program evaluation research can present certain challenges for establishing credibility (Patton, 2002b). Anastas (2004) reminds us that participants in evaluation studies need to be protected, through the use of proper consent and boundary-respecting practices (p. 62). A collaborative or participatory approach to program evaluation, where

participants are regarded as co-researchers, provides researchers with the challenge at times, to take steps to ensure that their participation is “genuine and authentic” and not inspired by “differing political or stakeholder agendas” (Patton, 2002b, p 184).

Evaluation researchers must take steps to ensure that the methods are rigorous enough to protect against the effects of “hospitality bias”, wherein participants try to please the researcher or tell the researcher what they think they want to hear rather than offer candid and open responses (Louden, 1975). Additionally, since the evaluation report will ultimately be used to make recommendations to the superintendent and possibly the Board of Education for changes and enhancements to the program, to be seen as credible, the report must ring true and prove persuasive to its audience (Patton, 2002b). Therefore it must be written, to some extent with the audience in mind, so that when they read it, they find it reasonable to the extent that they are willing to explore and interact with its claims (Patton, 2002b). For this study, I chose to address these concerns openly, through the use of the consent form, in which the goals of the study were clearly explicated, as were the role of the researcher and participant. Through this combination of strategic choices, I hope to have infused my research with a professional level of credibility and authenticity, and ultimately to contribute something of real value to the body of scholarly literature on public school succession planning and management through internal programs focused on leadership capacity development

### **Ethical Considerations and Role of the Researcher**

Miles et al. (2014) remind us that as researchers working with human subjects, our first priority is to do no harm and to avoid exploitation of participants in the pursuit of knowledge, regardless of its potential significance. Confidentiality of the participants’

identity must be sacrosanct. Anastas (2004) explains that qualitative research, with its reliance on vivid and detailed description from participants risks their “inferred identification” (p. 60). This was of particular concern given that I am engaging in backyard research, studying a program with a finite universe of participants. Moreover, AAA cohort members’ identities are known to one another, and to their immediate supervisors and principals.

My position within my district adds to the burden of ethical considerations that had to be addressed before, during, and after the study is completed. Since I am a central office administrator, and a direct report to the superintendent, with considerable authority in the hiring, staff evaluation, and disciplinary processes within the organization being studied, it is important for me to protect my participants— who are employees of the same district—with considerably less organizational and statutory authority. This was accomplished through a number of different avenues.

From the outset of data collection, I made full disclosure of my research purpose, goals, procedures, and findings with all participants. Every selected participant was invited to participate, free of pressure or compulsion. I accomplished this by using my university email to contact them throughout the project. Each participant was provided with an informed consent agreement document at the outset. The document made clear the role of the researcher and participant as well as the goals of the study and the research questions being considered. It was made clear that all individual identities are to be kept confidential, and that anyone withdrawing from the study was free to do so at any time, absent any repercussions. This written assurance will also make clear to participants that none of their comments will be shared with any of their supervisors or principals, nor will

anything arising from the study be used for any evaluative or disciplinary purpose. Miles et al. (2014) remind us that absent assurances for anonymity, conclusions can easily be skewed by a narrowing of data, as participants are more likely to omit anything they perceive as potentially damaging or problematic. Additionally, all participants will have the opportunity to review their own interview and focus group transcripts in order to offer clarifications of meaning or collaborate in the effort to ensure that specific quotes I intend to duplicate in any publication be rendered in a format that protects their identity (Anastas, 2004). Preliminary themes and findings will be shared with participants to solicit additional interpretations of their meaning. Digital recordings will safely kept outside of my workplace and will be destroyed after my dissertation has been accepted.

Prior to collecting any of this data, I completed all training required by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI), sought and received permission from the Superintendent of Schools, as required by my local district's Board of Education Policy, and applied to the Institutional Review Board on Human Subjects (IRB) at Rowan University for approval to conduct the study. Once these requirements were met, and all approvals had been secured, I proceeded to the data collection phase of the study as discussed above.

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative study formatively evaluates the implementation of an in-district leadership development program through five research questions. These questions focused primarily on how the first cohort of participants experienced a new in-district leadership development program entitled the Aspiring Administrators Academy. Data was gathered in multiple phases over the course of four months, using several methods in



order to give voice to participants' unique experiences. Prolonged engagement with participants was used in order to and support of the relationship between the researcher and the participants and therefore enhance the authenticity and trustworthiness of my conclusions. Data, themes, and eventually findings from the study were viewed and interpreted through the indicated theoretical lens as well as through my own professional experiences. The literature review revealed the timeliness of this research, given the policy environment in which public education currently exists and the trends in school and district governance in the wake of the current educational reform movement and the need to ensure a constant, high quality pipeline of school leaders. Findings will be used to inform internal decision-making related to the program and will contribute to gaps in the scholarly literature related to internal capacity building programs for aspiring school administrators and extend the scholarly discourse related to researcher positionality.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

This program evaluation sought to inform the scholarly research and educational communities in general, and the Freehold Regional High School District in particular, regarding the reflections of participants in an in-district leadership preparation program known as the Aspiring Administrator Academy. Specifically this study sought to address four research questions related to the program's structure and activities, perceived effectiveness in contributing to participants' growth and transformation, ability to address the organization's goals and succession planning needs. Through a fifth research question, this study also sought to contend with aspects of researcher/practitioner positionality as it relates to workplace research. After conducting two focus groups with 13 total participants and seven individual interviews, and analyzing the data through two iterations of coding, as shown in Table 3 below, several major themes and four findings emerged from the participant data. A fifth finding, related to researcher positionality, is discussed separately.

### **Findings**

#### **Living in Limbo**

The overwhelming majority of participants reported that as aspiring administrators they have experienced or are beginning to notice a shift in their perspective or lens through which they view educational issues and practices. This shift has left them feeling stuck in between a classroom—that can no longer contain them or their passions—and the formal leadership position that they have not yet attained. Hence, they are “living in limbo.” Most participants—notably those who have already completed

their administrative certification programs—reported frustration with this reality, confessed a lack of professional satisfaction derived from teaching, and expressed a profound yearning to do more to impact more students than they could in the role as teacher. This shift has also affected how they view their colleagues. When listening to complaints about how administrators handled a situation, many reporting feeling more sympathetic to the administrative side than the teacher’s side, admitting they likely would have made the same decision in that situation. This perceived shift in identity and self-perception, the level of expressed frustration, as well as the professed newly acquired lens, align with Mezirow’s transformative theory that holds that as adults experience a perspective transformation, they will naturally enter a period of self-examination and engage in a “critical assessment of internalized role assumptions” in order to resolve their state of disorientation (Mezirow, 1981, p. 7). The Aspiring Administrators Academy was universally viewed by participants as supportive of their growth and transformation, expanding participants’ understandings of the diverse administrative roles and responsibilities that await them further along their professional journey.

### **Validation and Reassurance**

The Aspiring Administrators Academy was viewed by participants as offering a refuge from an almost universal experience of alienation from some of their former teaching colleagues. Some participants reported experiencing accusations that pursuing administrative credentials and positions is tantamount to “going over to the dark side” of education. Others knew of this sentiment but did not have personal experiences like that. However, there was universal feedback that the experience of meeting regularly together, with other like-minded peers, and interacting with central office administrators validated

their dual feelings of aspiration and frustration, and reassured them that they were on the right track. Knowing that others have previously, or are currently experiencing what they are experiencing, was a source of great comfort to participants, and reinvigorated their confidence levels. Participation in the program itself was seen as boosting credibility with building level administrators, who vary in their willingness to delegate authority, but who universally need to share responsibilities. Moreover participants' experiences and this finding align to Mezirow's transformative learning theory. As Mezirow (1981) explains, the dynamic process of transformation involves experiencing alienation from "traditional social expectations" and "recognizing that one's experience is shared and not exclusively a private matter" (p 7).

### **Sheltered Authenticity**

Participants universally recommended that the program incorporate more experiences that challenge and expand their problem solving capacity. Noting that the first year was a foundational year that offered the cohort a common universal experience with topics similar to those offered in a university program, participants all made note that more emphasis on authentic, hands-on, or scenario-based activities would further enhance the program in its second year and beyond. Participating in these authentic experiences, while still employed as a teacher in the classroom, was perceived as especially valuable, giving participants the opportunity to learn to avoid costly missteps when in future roles, while still participating at arms-length, from a sheltered and familiar role of teacher. This finding is consistent with Mezirow's transformative theory, which offers that those going through a transformative shift in self-perception will seek to engage in an exploration of new plans of action in order to build competence and

confidence in a new role, and even provisionally try on the new role and solicit feedback on their performance (Mezirow, 1981, p. 7-8).

### **Embracing Emerging Identity**

The participants universally recognize the value of the program to build capacity within the district looking to plan for succession, and to them as emerging school leaders who want to step into that role one day. Noting that not every one of the cohort members will likely find a job within the Freehold Regional High School District, participants see the value of the program extending to supporting the leadership capacity in other districts as well. All participants are already actively involved various activities outside their classrooms, but participants found the AAA in particular holds the potential to redefine their relationships with educational mandates and other district or building initiatives. As they are empowered to pursue additional leadership experiences while still officially in the teacher's role, they find themselves uniquely positioned to act as translators or district emissaries to the faculty. In this new role, participants feel they are the right ones to facilitate the understanding of the myriad of initiatives for their colleagues, who they report, are more likely to receive and internalize the message from peers than from administrators. They reported that administrators are often viewed by the teaching staff as too far removed from today's classroom to relate to the real challenges that today's teachers face. When viewed through the lens of Mezirow's transformative theory, this finding is also in alignment. Participants who are not yet in formal leadership positions are able, thus to resolve their dilemma or identity crisis, while still in limbo, by reintegrating into their school community in a new role, that only they can fulfill. It is this

final finding that is the most compelling and will be most directly addressed in the first manuscript that will follow.

An unexpected outcome of the research relates to challenges inherent to the context of the study. Conducting a qualitative formative evaluation of a program offered in the researcher's own professional backyard offered obvious benefits, such as ready access to willing participants. However, studying one's own place of work also posed challenges. These were related to the interplay of my professional role in the organization, my philosophical worldview as a social constructivist, and my positionality as a researcher, holding simultaneously both an insider and outsider perspective in the program, as well as a stake in its outcome. These challenges caused me to question the nature of my positionality as a researcher and if others had similar experiences.

### **“Alongsider” Researcher Positionality**

After analyzing and interpreting data exclusively from the researcher journal and conducting a separate review of scholarly conversations related to researcher positionality, a fifth finding emerged from the data that will be discussed further in the second manuscript that follows. Specifically I am asserting that a researcher practitioner conducting a formative evaluation on a workplace program can occupy a role that does not conform to, nor fall precisely within, any traditionally considered positionality between the theoretical outsider at one extreme and the theoretical insider at the other extreme. Instead, the position of the researcher may also be found “alongside” the participants. An “alongsider” is interpreted as a researcher who is making an epistemological claim, legitimized through her own lived experiences, to identify with, know, and understand the workplace culture, institutional language, and professional

journey of the participants. An “alongsider” researcher therefore has access to the insider perspective, accompanied by a related stance of teacher-leader policy advocacy, while simultaneously maintaining a professional neutrality appropriate to the public education setting and her formal workplace role. I therefore put forth the argument that the “alongsider” researcher role differs from that of an insider or an outsider due to a unique combination of factors presented by the nature of program evaluation combined with using a researcher practitioner’s workplace as the research context.

### **Conclusion**

The two manuscripts that follow as Chapters Five and Six, sought to contribute to the body of scholarly research as well as to inform educational policy and practice. The first article, which will be submitted for publication in *Educational Leadership*, summarizes the study, features the findings from the program evaluation, and considers the local, as well as the larger, implications of one district’s efforts to proactively contribute to the cultivation of its own internal leadership capacity and plan for leadership succession events in the current educational policy environment. The second article, which will be submitted for publication in *Qualitative Inquiry*, examines the researchers’ reflections upon the challenges and dilemmas that arise when conducting qualitative research in one’s own workplace and seeks to introduce into the academic narrative a new conceptualization of researcher practitioner positionality.

Table 3

*Code Mapping: Three Levels of Analysis and Interpretation*

<b>Research Questions 1-4</b>			
RQ1: Program contributes to professional growth and transformation?	RQ2: Evaluation of program structure, materials, topics, and activities?	RQ3: Program activities align with program goals?	RQ4: Program addresses organizational succession planning needs?
<b>Propositional Statement</b>			
<p>Teacher leaders who aspire to join the administrative ranks find themselves in professional limbo as they increasingly view their daily work lives through a new lens, and experience frustration with the constraints of the classroom. Experiencing alienation from former peers and not yet at home in the role of administrator, these educators find themselves moving beyond a dichotomous view of the teacher/ administrator relationship on a journey toward a new professional identity and self-perception. By providing a leadership development program to a cohort of these educators, the district provides a supportive, collegial environment wherein these professionals can safely continue along their professional transformative journeys. Viewing the program as a solid, if somewhat uniform foundation in its initial year, participants yearn to see the program offer expanded authentic, differentiated opportunities to engage in realistic problem solving. These experiences, in conjunction with already-familiar teacher leadership opportunities, if offered while participants are still working from the familiarity of their own classrooms, are perceived to contribute considerably to the levels of confidence, competence, and empowerment needed to realistically compete for administrative positions either within or outside of the district.</p>			
<b>Second Iteration: Pattern Variables/Themes Emerging from Participant Data</b>			
1A. Blurred Lines	2A. Competence, confidence, & control	3. Legitimacy & validation	4. Empowerment & opportunity
1B. Role Realignment	2B. Solidarity & Reintegration		
<b>First Iteration: Initial Codes/Surface Content Analysis of Participant Data</b>			
1A & B. Shift in perspective	2A. Practical/authentic scenarios valued	Barriers-internal and external	Feeder/grooming program
1A & B. Readiness level/limbo	2A. Quest for meaningful experiences	Recognition	Administrative support/sponsorship
1A & B. Personal & professional change/New lens	2A. Solid Foundation to be expanded upon and differentiated	Struggle with power sharing/boundaries	Translators, Facilitators, & Liaisons
1A. Spilling out of Classroom/ Pulled toward something bigger	2B. Collegiality and Sense of belonging with cohort	Pick me! Why can't I get a job?	Teacher leadership opportunities
1B. Alienation from detractors & humanized admins	2B. I am not alone!	Am I on the right track?	

*Note.* Adapted from "Qualitative analysis on the stage: Making the process more public," by V.A. Anfara and K.M. Brown, 2001, April, Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, Washington. Copyright 2001 by the American Educational Research Assn.



## Chapter 5

### **Inspiring Aspiring Administrators: Building their Capacity and Leveraging their Leadership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools**

#### **Abstract**

Even the best principal will one day need to retire, leaving the school district searching for the best possible replacement. Some, though not all of these replacements, may be found within the district's existing talent pool—especially if this internal leadership capacity is proactively cultivated through a meaningful in-district leadership development program. A qualitative formative evaluation was conducted in one central New Jersey School District reflecting on the achievements, and shortcomings of the pilot year of one such program. The goals of the *Aspiring Administrators Academy*, as envisioned by the district's strategic planning team, were to encourage leadership continuity, and empower internal aspiring administrators to expand their professional capacity, in preparation for leadership succession events. The formative program evaluation sought feedback from participants, all of whom were teachers within the district, through multiple focus groups and responsive interviews conducted by the district's Director of Personnel. This study resulted in four findings, which are:

1. that aspiring administrators have experienced a shift in their perspective on many educational issues, and as such are living in limbo between the classroom and positions of formal leadership;
2. that the program offered by the district provided validation and refuge for them through its cohort model, which allowed them to meet regularly with like-minded peers and escape, even temporarily, their feelings of alienation from teachers;

3. that the program would benefit from expanding its emphasis on authentic, scenario-based activities in order to thoroughly prepare participants for the real day-to-day work of school leadership; and
4. that the presence of an in-district leadership development program is mutually beneficial, allowing the district to prepare for succession events, empowering teacher leaders/aspiring administrators, to embrace their newly redefined role—as translators—between the administration and the teaching staff.

Particular emphasis is given here to implications of the final finding; that those who are waiting for their turn in administrative roles, are in a unique position to act as a liaison between teachers and instructional leaders, translating the latest initiatives and mandates into a language that classroom teachers can more readily understand and accept. Implications of both building and leveraging this leadership capacity are considered in the context of increased external performance accountability standards and the related need for principals to share the expansive burden of leading a 21<sup>st</sup> Century schoolhouse.

As the outgoing principal approaches the end of her career, and prepares to transition the leadership of her school to her successor, she knows that a great deal is riding on the quality of their relationship and interaction. If they work collaboratively and plan carefully it is likely things will go smoothly and the transition will be largely seamless. However, if both individuals are focused inwardly, concentrating only on her own performance, or worse yet, if little or no time and attention is given to preparing for the succession, the results of the event might prove disappointing for all stakeholders.

Ensuring leadership continuity must be a priority if schools are to meet the demands placed on them for raising the bar and filling in the gaps in student achievement.

### **Leadership Succession**

Public school districts that fail to proactively plan for leadership succession risk placing that school, its teachers, and its students at considerable and unacceptable risk. Leadership succession, the complex process that involves the “passing of the baton” from one principal to another is defined more broadly by Rothwell (2010) as a “deliberate and systematic effort by an organization to ensure leadership continuity in key positions, retain and develop intellectual and knowledge capital for the future, and encourage individual advancement” (p. 6). Loss of key personnel, as school leaders resign or retire, often results in a relatively quick transition period allowing schools only a few months to prepare. As principals leave their schools, they often take with them years of accumulated skills, as well as vital chapters of institutional memory from the organization. Without the systematic and proactive planning Rothwell (2010) advocates, the baton can drop, and take teacher morale and student performance levels with it.

With 27% of public school principals in the United States at or above retirement age—more than half above age 50, and 20% of those eligible retiring in any given year—the turnover rate for public school principals is alarmingly high (Clifford, 2010; Goldring & Taie, 2014; Reames, Kochan, & Zhu, 2014). Principal departure is currently all too common, due in part to an aging demographic, but also due to expanding accountability pressures. The reality is that today’s school leaders are subjected to unprecedented external demands for performance, resulting in many choosing to leave the profession (Fink & Brayman, 2004; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012). Of greatest concern is the negative

impact this rapid turnover rate has been shown to have on student achievement levels as well as on teacher attitudes and morale (Fink & Brayman, 2004; Hargreaves, Moore, Fink, Brayman, & White, 2003; Zepeda, Bengston, & Parlo, 2012). Sudden, unplanned changes in leadership, for any reason, can leave a school “in a state of organizational crisis” (Hargreaves et al., 2003, p. 17). Failing to plan for the big moment can lead to unfortunate, yet completely foreseeable and avoidable outcomes.

### **Leadership Supply and Demand**

Moreover, while there are many aspiring, credentialed administrators, fewer are adequately prepared for or interested in the expansive demands of today’s principalship (Fink, 2011). Fink (2011) explains that if school districts are hoping to find high quality candidates, who “possess the knowledge, experience, and skills to contribute to the preparation of young people for successful participation in a knowledge society...then those responsible for leadership succession have a real challenge in front of them” (p. 674). Essentially school districts face an acute problem of limited supply and increasing demand for leaders with exceptional capacity. How, then, can school districts address this problem? What is clear is that they cannot continue to fully rely on age-old methods of posting for vacancies in the newspapers or online and hoping a miracle worker will apply. They must plan for succession.

Like any organization, public school districts have the option to hire internally or externally. As Rothwell (2010) explains, hiring from within has advantages in the areas of sustaining staff morale and ensuring that the key moments of transition go smoothly. Hiring a teacher leader into an administrative position within the district, then offers promise, since the new principal is a known entity, with a familiar set of abilities and skill

gaps, and is already acculturated to the organization. Hiring from the outside also offers advantages, such as bringing in a fresh perspective, and offering the district some protections against the perpetuation of internal dysfunctions or engagement in conscious or subconscious social reproduction through administrative sponsored mobility of selected teachers (Myung, Loeb, & Horng, 2011; Rothwell, 2010). School districts need to ensure a mixture of hiring from inside and the outside, to get the benefits of both options. The process of preparing to find replacements must begin long before any actual vacancy becomes known to the district. Succession planning and management requires a school district to engage in a process of first identifying, and then investing in their own teacher leaders, actively cultivating these staff members' overall capacity through engagement in authentic leadership practices while they are still in the classroom (Fink, 2011; Rothwell, 2010).

### **Teacher Leadership**

Not every teacher is a teacher leader; nor do all teachers wish to be. Teacher leaders are those educators who seek to “have an influence that extends beyond their own classroom to others within their school and elsewhere. [Teacher leadership] entails mobilizing and energizing others with the goal of improving the school’s performance...[A]n important characteristic of teacher leadership is engaging others in complex work” (Danielson, 2006, p. 12). Teacher leaders are the go-to people on the staff, the key communicators, the doers, who can be found working both inside and outside their classrooms, typically at all hours of the day, to make a difference for all students and other teachers. They connect what they are doing in their classrooms with

the larger school and district goals, adding to a culture of continuous professional reflection and learning (Dufour and Eaker, 1998).

District and school leaders can facilitate the growth of this culture and continuously assess the leadership capacity of teachers by providing them with opportunities to engage in collaborative, professional development that encourages peer coaching and feedback. As Dufour and Marzano (2011) explain, the performance of individual teachers can be improved through their engagement and interaction with a results-oriented, collaborative school culture. Functional and effective professional learning communities (PLCs) plan and engage in experiences for teachers that are designed to increase the capacity of the group as a whole (Dufour and Eaker, 1998) As Rothwell (2010) explains, key components in planning for succession include assessing the performance levels of current staff members, identifying those with the skills and capacity for leadership and then closing knowledge and skill gaps to match organizational needs. Through the artful use of PLCs, then, school districts can then find ways of tapping into this potential incrementally, through a multi-faceted preparation process that empowers teachers to pursue their professional ambitions toward administration, while meeting the succession needs of a modern school district. This is precisely what the Aspiring Administrators Academy was designed to ultimately accomplish for the Freehold Regional High School District and its talented cadre of teacher leaders.

In New Jersey, under state administrative code 6A:9C-3.3, entitled: Standards for Professional Learning, each school has been required to design and implement learning communities that arrange teachers into collaborative groups for the purpose of results-driven professional development experiences (Putnam, Gunnings-Moton, & Sharp,

2009). Additionally, recent legislation, known as the Teacher Effectiveness and Accountability for the Children of New Jersey (TEACHNJ) Act or P.L.2012, c.26 (C.18A:6- 117 et al. requires the creation of a School Improvement Panel (ScIP) in every school in the Garden State. This panel must consist of representatives from the administration, but significantly, the regulation requires that teachers make up one-third of the team. The ScIP is charged by the TEACHNJ Act with the responsibility for planning and providing leadership in the areas of teacher evaluation, professional development, and new staff mentoring for the entire school. Service as a ScIP team member provides teacher leaders with valuable hands-on experience analyzing data from the school's staff evaluation instrument, synthesizing that with student performance data, and using all of this to plan and implement differentiated professional development for staff members. Empowering teachers to participate in activities previously restricted to administrators, New Jersey has signaled encouragement for distributed leadership in education as well as a supportive policy environment for programs like the Aspiring Administrators Academy.

### **Program Goals, Structure, and Function**

The goals of the Aspiring Administrators Academy, as envisioned by the strategic planning team of the district, were to encourage leadership continuity while empowering internal staff members to expand their professional capacity. The strategic plan approved by the Board of Education in 2012 required the designers of the program to incorporate current scholarly literature into its activities and structure and provided for the iterative solicitation of feedback, annual progress reporting, and informed improvements. Tenets of adult learning theory were researched and used in the development and evaluation of

the program, specifically, Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. Mezirow (1994) explains that "[a]dult development means the progressive realization of an adult's capacity to fully and freely participate in rational dialogue, to achieve a broader, more discerning, permeable and integrative understanding of his/her experience as a guide to action" (p. 226). The goals, structure, and function of the program were designed to foster this growth and transformation among the program participants.

The program was launched during the 2014-2015 school year with 32 teachers admitted into the first cohort. After meeting in the spring of 2014 to elicit topics of interest from the group, this cohort met on five occasions throughout the pilot year featuring the topics of leadership and communication, leadership for change, educational law, ethical decision making and school finance, and transitioning out of the classroom.

All sessions were held after the conclusion of the school day. Four of the five sessions were held at the district's central office building, with one held in one of the district's six high schools. All of the sessions featured a speaker making a presentation of material, followed by opportunities for large group discussion and individual questions. The first two sessions allowed time for small group reflection and interactions based on questions posed by the speaker. Three of the five sessions were led by the Superintendent of Schools. One was led by two members of the central administrative team, and one featured the Board's attorney. Attendance at the program showed a somewhat concerning negative trend over time as noted in Table 4, reflecting the complex schedules faced by today's educators as well as a possible lack of interest in the featured topics, or even that certain workshops failed to resonate with the participants.



Table 4

*Aspiring Administrators Academy Attendance Trends-2014-2015*

Meeting Topic	Preliminary	Leadership & Communication	Change Leadership/ Book Study	School Finance & Ethics	School Law Update	Successful Transition from the Classroom
Percentage in Attendance	84	78	63	50	44	53

**Program Evaluation Methods**

After the final meeting, a formative program evaluation was conducted by the district's Director of Personnel—and coauthor of this article—in an effort to solicit specific feedback about the program in four key areas and make recommendations for enhancements going forward. The evaluation was guided by four key questions:

1. How do participants describe an in-district leadership program as contributing to their professional growth and transformation?
2. How were different features of the program—such as the cohort structure, meeting format, topics addressed, materials selected, and activities offered—experienced by participants?
3. How have program activities aligned with stated program goals and objectives?
4. In what ways can this program address the ongoing succession planning and management needs of the organization?

These larger questions guided the development of detailed protocols used to elicit discussions with program participants. Data were collected using focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Those involved in the study were current teachers in the district.

Thirteen focus group participants were purposefully selected for maximum variation using a criteria matrix to assemble two diverse groups in an effort to bring together those with contrasting or at least varied perspectives. Patton (2002b) explains that the common patterns and themes elucidated from a diverse group “take on added importance precisely because they emerge from great variation” (p. 235). When selecting participants for interviews, as a subset of focus group members, I used intensity sampling, as described by Patton (2002a) in an effort to connect to seven teacher leaders in the program who had the most richly detailed feedback to offer about different aspects of the program and their experiences with it. All of these conversations were scheduled within eight weeks of the conclusion of the program in an effort to capture recent reflections of participants on the multiple goals and outcomes of the Aspiring Administrators Academy before memories could fade over the summer months.

### **Program Evaluation Findings**

#### **Living in Limbo**

The overwhelming majority of participants in the program and its evaluation noted having experienced or were beginning to notice a shift in their perspective or lens through which they view educational issues and practices. This shift has left them feeling stuck in between a classroom, that can no longer contain them nor their professional ambitions and a formal leadership position that they have not yet attained. Hence, they are “living in limbo.” Most participants—notably those who have already completed their Master’s degree and administrative certification programs—reported frustration with this reality, confessed a lack of professional satisfaction derived from teaching, and expressed a profound yearning to do more to impact more students and other staff than they could

presently in the role as a teacher. Samantha, an English teacher with nearly a decade of teaching experience, stated,

I don't know how to 'just teach' anymore. I feel like my brain doesn't work like that anymore. If I see something not necessarily going the best way, I feel like I want to help to make it even better.

Living with this feeling seems to motivate teacher leaders to seek out opportunities to explore ways they can start to redefine their contribution to education and shifts how they view their role in it.

This shift has also affected how they view their colleagues. Laura a social studies and psychology teacher with 17 years in the classroom noted that she often wanders down the hall, listening to lessons from her colleagues and thinks to herself,

What could be done to make that teacher great? That's where you start to see that line blurred. You start to see, not necessarily deficiencies. [The teacher] could be perfectly adequate, but you start to see a better way of doing things.

When listening to fellow teacher complaints about how administrators handled a situation, many reporting feeling more sympathetic to the administrative side than the teacher's side, admitting they likely would have made the same decision in that situation.

Shawna, an art teacher with 12 years' experience, added

A few years ago I was our building's union rep for a few years and in that position you got to see a lot of things and you would just look at people like, 'I don't know what to tell you. You're up a creek without a paddle.'

Finally Sean, a veteran social studies teacher, remarked about his journey toward leadership,

I think you start to see the perspective of the administrators more and more and that starts to sway you a little bit, I think that's when, maybe you're ready to take that lead.

When individuals experiencing such a transformation then, listen to teachers complain about the administration, they cannot help but interpret their various issues through their new lens. They are no longer experiencing these stories with a sympathetic ear. Instead, they find they can see the logic in administrative decision making, while still understanding the teacher's perspective. This is the dilemma of the aspiring administrator living in limbo.

This perceived shift in identity and self-perception, as well as the professed newly acquired lens, align with adult learning principles that suggest when adults experience a perspective transformation, they will naturally enter a period of self-examination and engage in a "critical assessment of internalized role assumptions" in order to resolve their state of disorientation (Mezirow, 1981, p. 7). The Aspiring Administrators Academy was universally viewed by participants as supportive of their growth and transformation, expanding participants' understandings of the diverse administrative roles and responsibilities that await them further along their professional journey. The fact that the district has a large number of talented people living in limbo validates for the stakeholders the need to continue to offer the program. The program can offer those living in limbo another avenue to refine their leadership skills in preparation for future opportunities, and empower them to seek promotion, as was originally intended by the strategic plan.

## **Validation**

The Aspiring Administrators Academy was viewed by participants as offering a refuge from an almost universal experience of alienation from some of their teaching colleagues. Of this, Laura offered candidly, “It was nice to be in a room with people who are like-minded and who aren't calling you a suck-up.” Some participants reported experiencing accusations that pursuing administrative credentials and positions is tantamount to “going over to the dark side” of education. There was universal feedback that the experience of meeting regularly with other like-minded peers and interacting with central office administrators validated their dual feelings of aspiration and reassured them that they were on the right track. Of this, Danielle, an electives area teacher with nine years in the district, stated,

I thought it was a great experience. It definitely made me think that I just wanted to verify that I was on the right track. I do feel that I'm on the right track. It's just waiting for that right opportunity. I'll just keep doing what I'm doing, and adding more experiences in that leadership type of role, and not to be afraid of trying new things.

Knowing that others have previously or are currently experiencing what they are experiencing, was a source of great comfort to participants, reinvigorating their confidence levels. Samantha commented,

I think one of the things I liked the most is that it made me feel less alone. Like there [are] other people going through the same experiences as me...I liked the comradery aspect of it.

Along a similar vein, Mark, an experienced world language teacher with nine years in the district, offered the following reflection on the program:

I got a feeling for the others with interests in the district for stepping up to administration, that I'm not alone, that there are a lot of minds in the district from all the age groups who are interested and wanting to make that next step. That's good. It's a security blanket for me to know that I'm not by myself in starting to get a little lack of complacency in the classroom, wanting to do more.

Participation in the program itself was seen as boosting credibility with building level administrators, who vary in their willingness to delegate authority, but who universally need to share responsibilities. Moreover participants' experiences and this finding align with the process of transformation in adult learning theory, which involves experiencing alienation from "traditional social expectations" and "recognizing that one's experience is shared and not exclusively a private matter" (Mezirow, 1981, p 7). Since the program goals include the promotion of an organizational structure that fostered collaboration, and the incorporation of the use of current literature about administrator development, it is clear that the use of a cohort model should continue to be incorporated into the program going forward.

### **Sheltered Authentic Practice**

Participants universally recommended that the program incorporate more experiences that challenge and expand their problem-solving capacity. Noting that the first year was a foundational year that offered the cohort one universal experience with topics similar to those offered in a university program, a majority of participants made note that more emphasis on authentic, hands-on, or scenario-based activities would

further enhance the program in its second year and beyond. Mark offered that he “was kind of hoping that there'd be some situations to discuss... I think that was the one missing piece.” Joyce, a mathematics teacher with a decade of classroom experience agreed with Mark, and added,

That's what I felt like, more mock interviews, more mock things. What can I do for my interview? Or, what can I do in situations? That would have been more beneficial.

In a focus group, Kimberly, a social studies teacher and School Improvement Team lead teacher, captured provided her unfettered feedback on the program presentations and activities,

I think that's where all of our brains are. We are sort of beyond, ‘here's a power point presentation.’ We're more in the ‘now it's time to get our hands dirty’ metaphorically and be able to do some of this work or present a dilemma. When it comes to law, when it comes to leadership styles, management, or interviewing, or hiring, or whatever it happens to be, I think we're ready for the ‘What if?’ scenarios. We're ready for the ‘how do you troubleshoot this?’ Because we've read all of the stuff in textbooks. We know that for the most part, but what is it like on the front lines of being a supervisor or being a vice principal or even a principal on a day-to-day?

Participating in these authentic experiences, becoming more intimately acquainted with the day-to-day, while still employed as a teacher in the classroom, was perceived as especially valuable, giving participants the opportunity to learn to avoid costly missteps in future roles, while still participating at arms-length, from a sheltered and familiar role

of teacher. Mark suggested that with this critical addition to the program, participants “can walk away and go, ‘Whew! Wow that’s a lawsuit I will now be able to avoid, good to know.’” Indeed, those going through a transformative shift in self-perception will seek to engage in an exploration of new plans of action in order to build competence and confidence in a new role, and even provisionally try on the new role and solicit feedback on their performance (Mezirow, 1981, p. 7-8). As the program emerges from its foundational year, and incorporates the formative feedback from this study, the design team will reflect upon the findings, reexamine the structure of the workshops and plan activities that closely align with critical aspects of administrator development, as required by the goals of the program.

### **Emergent Leader Identity**

The participants universally recognized the value of the program to build capacity within the district, in order to plan for succession, and also to them as emerging school leaders who want to step into that role one day. While noting that not every one of the cohort members will likely find a job within the Freehold Regional High School District, participants saw the value of the program extending to other districts as well. Mark remarked of this,

I love the fact that our district is taking steps to improve our entire district. We’re making steps towards prepping these teachers to become administrators whether it’s within our district or outside our district. You guys want to see us grow.

Samantha added,



I looked at my leaders as people who wanted to help us and wanted us to grow and wanted us to make changes in the district and wanted us to...maybe eventually move up on the ladder, or if anything make us better teachers.

All participants were already actively involved various leadership activities outside their classrooms, but participants found the Aspiring Administrators Academy in particular holds the potential to help them redefine their relationships with educational mandates and other district or building initiatives. As an in-district leadership development program designed to prepare and offer a meaningful mentorship for emerging leaders while protecting its own continuity of leadership, the program has made significant progress, even in its pilot year, toward this end. While none of the participants has been promoted within the district to date, one participant did secure employment as an assistant principal in another New Jersey public school district in the summer following the program's first year and several of the others have participated in interviews for administrative positions both inside and outside of the district.

### **Policy Translators**

As they were empowered to pursue additional leadership experiences while still officially in the teacher's role, aspiring administrators found themselves uniquely positioned to act as translators or district emissaries and liaisons to the faculty with whom they share the same working conditions. Kimberly, when speaking about New Jersey's recent release of a deluge of state-mandated changes, stated,

When all that new stuff happened, that's when I was like, 'No, there's a better way. There's a better way to do it.' And we became the translators of that because we had to apply it to ourselves.

Similarly, Laura, upon reflecting on the role of the program in helping the district employees adapt to these changes, expressed,

I think something like the Aspiring Administrators Academy is essential to something like that, because all of us who were in that room are seen...like teacher-leaders. We're the go-to between administration and staff. Sometimes we feel like a liaison between the two.

In this new role, participants felt they were the right ones to facilitate the understanding of the myriad of initiatives for their colleagues, who they reported were more likely to receive and internalize the message from peers than from administrators. Administrators were often viewed by the teaching staff as too far removed from today's classroom to relate to the real challenges that teachers face. Sean, referring specifically to the launch of the new state-mandated teacher evaluation process, boldly suggested

I think recently with the unveiling of [the] Marzano [Evaluation System]...as a classroom teacher I think the level of frustration—and this is in no way a slight to the administration—they've been disconnected so long that when they present it they're doing it in a very neutral way instead of being an educator. We can lay it out for them in the language that's easy for educators.

Laura also spoke freely about how she is, in effect, a seasoned teacher leader already acting as a translator between teachers and the administration, and noted,

The biggest thing that I find us doing, is that translation. Okay, the administration says this. Central office said this. Administration said this. We get it. We digest it....and what we're telling the staff is, 'How is this going to impact my day to day teaching? My role, my responsibilities?'...That is what the translation we are

doing is about. Telling teachers. ‘This is what it's going to look like in your classroom. How it will actually function in your room.’ That's what teachers want to know... We're translating it and in that translation also, we're trying to minimize the concerns that they're raising. Because administrators are evaluators, many staff don't feel comfortable going [to an administrator saying], ‘I don't understand this. I feel frustrated with this, or whatever.’

There is a relatively untapped reservoir of potential that the district can leverage, in the short-term, to alleviate the external pressures placed on the principalship, as well as in the long-term, as it plans for the eventual, and inevitable passing of the baton to its next generation of leaders. Participants who are not yet in formal leadership positions were able, thus to resolve their dilemma or identity crisis, while still in limbo, by reintegrating into their school community in a new role, that only they could fill – that of the policy translator. It is this final finding that is most compelling for districts to consider when planning leadership development programs in general, or when reflecting upon their succession planning and management needs in particular. In this manner the program has exceeded its stated goals. Not only does an in-district leadership development program have the potential to build the capacity of the teacher leaders, by leveraging their classroom credibility and related influence with their colleagues to translate mandates and district initiatives, the reach of the program has been extended beyond its original intent.

### **The Potential for Formal Teacher Leadership in the Garden State**

As discussed, there is an untapped potential of aspiring administrators, or teacher leaders, to provide “translation services” and act as liaisons between the administration

and the staff; this is a critical asset for schools looking to meet the expanding demands for school accountability for creating 21<sup>st</sup> Century learners. If public school administrators are able to formally empower teacher leaders, while still awash in the credibility of their classroom experiences, to take on additional responsibilities of school leadership—including those associated with using data to inform decision-making, planning for and differentiating professional development, enhancing instructional practice and supporting performance based, authentic student learning experiences—districts will be able to leverage teacher leadership to assist other staff members internalize new initiatives and mandated change in ways that are non-threatening to them.

The potential for an expansion of the officially recognized and appointed teacher leadership roles has been on the rise in the Garden State. On September 18, 2015 New Jersey's Governor Chris Christie signed a new law, with bipartisan support in the legislature, providing for a teacher leader endorsement to the teaching certificate. This law, known as P.L.2015, c.111 went into effect December 17, 2015. It provides for the extension of real leadership opportunities to those who qualify for this new endorsement. In the near future, some of the responsibilities for running New Jersey's schools previously relegated to the school Principals, will truly and officially be shared responsibilities. For those aspiring to the principalship and caught in professional limbo between the classroom and the main office, this law clears the way for them to meaningfully contribute beyond what they had previously been able to offer others in their role as classroom teachers. This new law offers aspiring administrators avenues to expand and ultimately showcase their leadership capacity, and position themselves to receive the baton.

Any effort undertaken to empower teacher leaders can be firmly rooted in Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. Adult learners have unique needs that must be considered in the design of any leadership development program. The tenets of this theory provide a critical framework for creating an optimal context for that learning. Use of this theory allows designers to anticipate learners' needs and provide a program that is in alignment. Mezirow (1997) advises

Educators must assume responsibility for setting objectives that explicitly include autonomous thinking and recognize that this requires experiences designed to foster reflectivity and experience in discourse. Education that fosters critically reflective thought, imaginative problem posing and discourse is learner centered, participatory, and interactive, and it involves group deliberation and group problem solving. Instructional materials reflect the real-life experiences of the learners and are designed to foster participation in small-group discussion to assess reasons, examine evidence, and arrive at a reflective judgment...Methods that have been found useful include critical incidents, metaphor analysis, concept mapping, consciousness raising, life histories, repertory grids, and participation in social action. (p. 10).

It was this theory and its natural translation into practice that that has served as a useful guide for the design of the Aspiring Administrative Academy. The strategic planning team members who originally proposed this program sought to purposefully design something that was learner-centered while also meeting the succession planning needs of the district. A similar application of this theory may be prove valuable in other contexts as well.

## **Implications for the Future of the Program**

As the Freehold Regional High School District plans to move forward into the second year of the Aspiring Administrators Academy, it is important that its program designers engage in a critical reflection on the feedback provided by its initial cohort of participants. It is also important to contextualize the program in the current policy environment. Clearly given the recent development at the state level with regard to the Teacher Leadership instructional endorsement, it behooves the district to continue to cultivate its staff members to take on teacher leadership roles, and to find ways to empower those currently “living in limbo” between the classroom and formal leadership roles with stipended positions that require this new endorsement.

Since the cohort structure of the program was not only well received, but universally hailed for providing a safe place to interact with like-minded professionals, it is clear that the district must keep the cohort structure intact, and whenever possible, find ways to allow for small group interaction and sharing during all activities. Providing these skilled staff members with simulated real-world experiences within the safety of the cohort will challenge their existing knowledge base about how to handle school-based scenarios and move them beyond their comfort zone, a key activity in adult learning and transformation. Such enhanced authentic experiences will facilitate the continued expansion of their leadership capacity and better prepare them for the day when they will move into administrative positions either within or outside the district, and allow them to do so, confidently.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Insider, Outsider, “Alongsider”: The Roles of a Backyard Qualitative Researcher Practitioner**

#### **Abstract**

This article proposes that a researcher practitioner conducting a formative evaluation on a workplace program can occupy a role that does not conform to, nor fall precisely within, any traditionally considered positionality between the theoretical outsider at one extreme and the theoretical insider at the other extreme. Instead, the position of the researcher may also be found “alongside” the participants. An “alongsider” is interpreted in this article as a researcher who is making an epistemological claim, legitimized through her own lived experiences, to identify with, know, and understand the workplace culture, institutional language, and professional journey of the participants. An alongsider researcher therefore has access to the insider perspective, accompanied by a related stance of teacher-leader policy advocacy, while simultaneously maintaining a professional neutrality appropriate to the public education setting and her formal workplace role. This article puts forth the argument that the alongsider researcher role differs from that of an insider or an outsider due to a unique combination of factors presented by the nature of program evaluation combined with using a researcher practitioner’s workplace as the research context. Benefits and challenges of workplace research and the role of researcher empathy are explored. The use of the researcher journal as a tool for reflexivity and bracketing is discussed. The article seeks to provoke discussion around the unique experiences endemic to educational administrator practitioner research and attempts to push out the boundaries around researcher roles.

Conducting qualitative research in one's place of work is becoming a more frequent occurrence (Brannick & Coghlan 2007; Humphrey, 2012). Spurred by the calls for more expert use of data-informed decision making in this era of accountability, more practitioners are venturing into the research world of academia, and evolving professionally into researcher practitioners (Anderson & Jones, 2000). The practical application of research in the educational setting is seen in the recent proliferation of action research, program evaluation, strategic planning, and professional learning communities. As Moore (2012), explains, it is common for qualitative researchers to be insiders, belonging to the group they are studying. As Darra (2008), and Humphrey (2012) argue it is not unusual for those conducting research inside their own organization, group, or community to face considerable challenges, and even potential conflicts. As Brannick and Coghlan (2007) contend, "[i]nsider researchers are native to the setting and so have insights from the lived experience" (p. 60). Brannick and Coghlan (2007) go on to discuss how we are all "insiders in many systems" echoing a sentiment Merton (1972) made years earlier, "we are all, of course, both Insiders and Outsiders, members of some groups and sometimes, derivatively, not of others; occupants of certain statuses which thereby exclude us from occupying other cognate statuses... [we] confront one another simultaneously as Insiders and Outsiders" (p. 22). If this is an accurate observation about the relationships within the population generally, the depth of the complexities seemed to multiply when you introduce researcher positionality and ethics into the equation. It is this complicated nature of researcher's role in the context of insider research that I contend with in this article.



Specifically, I will explore aspects of my positionality as a researcher practitioner in the context of conducting a study in my own place of work. I will explore aspects of “insiderness” and “outsiderness” as they have been debated in the literature and consider where—or even if—my positionality fits within those established boundaries. A brief synopsis of the program studied and the evaluation findings will be presented, as a way of setting the stage for a deeper discussion of the complicated nature of my positionality in this research project.

Qualitative researchers universally face ethical challenges due to the nature of qualitative inquiry and their role as the instrument of the research (Maxwell, 2005). Mercer (2007) contends that the insider researcher faces more than most. Ethical considerations and efforts at reflexivity and bracketing through the use of a researcher journal will be explored. Conducting research, even an approved study within the workplace, presents unique situational and political dilemmas, which will also be explored, with my approach captured through the lens of reflexive journal entry excerpts. These excerpts are offered to support my claim of having wandered into an unexplored area of researcher positionality and may address a gap in the literature on workplace research indicated by Humphrey (2012). Finally, implications will be discussed in terms of further research, policy, and practice. Before beginning, however, it is necessary to convey my interpretation of some key terms I will be using throughout the article.

### **Key Terms**

**Insider.** The concept of the “insider” refers to the researcher as a person who is a part of the group being studied (Merton, 1972).

**Outsider.** The concept of “outsider” refers to the researcher as a person who is not a part of the group being studied (Merton, 1972).

**Researcher-practitioner.** For the purpose of this article this term will be used to refer to those who conduct research within their place of work, for the exclusive purpose of applying the findings of the research in action with an aim toward improving a particular aspect of the organization. This use is informed by the interpretation of the practical applications of qualitative program evaluation by Anastas (2004) and Patton (2002b).

These definitions bound the work below by providing a framework for the epistemology I assert in my practice as a researcher and in this work. They also permit me to focus my researcher lens closely on the nuances and degrees of “insiderness” and “outsiderness” of researcher-practitioner positionality as it relates to the current educational setting since the insider/outsider debate stretches across many decades as well as many aspects of social science research (Labaree, 2002).

### **The Insider/Outsider Conversation**

#### **Dichotomy**

The discussion, debate, and basis of the conceptualization of researcher positionality in the literature has shifted from one that is naturally—and perhaps more properly—kept separate from the participants, to one that can fall anywhere along a defined insider/outsider continuum, to one where the relationship is in constant flux throughout the research project. The conceptualization of this relationship as a split between the extreme positions can be traced to a natural emergence in the field of anthropology in the early twentieth century (Mercer, 2007). At that point, indigenous

populations were being studied by white outsiders placing cultural space, or research distance between the “stranger” and the “native” with this position being seen as giving the researchers with more objectivity and infusing their data with more reliability and validity (Labaree, 2002; Mercer, 2007). Studying something “strange” or outside our normal experiences is indeed a different researcher experience than studying something with which one has intimate knowledge, and may lead to questions being raised that an insider might simply take for granted, a phenomenon known as insider myopia (Labaree, 2002; Taylor, 2011). On the other hand, “insiders bring potential insights into nuanced cultural signifiers, but their familiarity may lead to the recycling of dominant assumptions; outsiders bring a freshness of perspective, but may impose their worldviews uncritically (Kelly, 2014). These early studies spawned the now familiar terms, *emic* and *etic* to distinguish between the perspective of those being studied—*emic* and those conducting them—*etic* (Patton, 2002). The concept has been debated to a considerable extent in the literature, regarding whether the insider or outsider perspective captures the phenomenon under consideration more faithfully, and inextricably linking researcher positionality with the crucial issues of ethics and data trustworthiness and validity (Hamdan, 2009; Labaree, 2002; Merton, 1972; Patton, 2002).

As social scientists have increasingly turned the research lens toward populations based on language, race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, gender, or other characteristics within their own communities, the divisions between “stranger” and “native” were no longer sufficient to capture the relationship in the field and the conceptualization started to evolve (Mercer, 2007). Gold (1958) offered four possible roles in sociological field observation, divided into two categories within the

dichotomous view of researcher positionality. These range from two insider roles: complete participant doing covert research; participant-as-observer, close proximal research; to two outsider roles: observer-as-participant, marginal research; complete observer, virtually invisible to participants. Gold (1958) framed the dichotomous conceptualization of researcher positionality with his simultaneous warnings to those entering sociological field relationships:

With respect to achieving rapport in a field relationship, ethnocentrism may be considered a logical opposite of ‘going native.’ Ethnocentrism occurs whenever a field worker cannot or will not interact meaningfully with an informant. He then seemingly or actually rejects the informant’s views without ever getting to the point of understanding them. At the other extreme, a field worker who ‘goes native’ passes the point of field rapport by literally accepting his informant’s views as his own. (p. 222)

This conceptualization was offered differently by Merton (1972), who describes this dichotomy as a matter of access to knowledge (Labaree, 2002). The concept of the “insider doctrine” and the “outsider doctrine” embraced separately by Karl Marx and Nathan Hare, holds that some have “monopolistic” or “privileged access” to knowledge about the group and some are incapable of comprehending or at least excluded from it (Merton, 1972). A similar line of argument was drawn by early feminist and minority scholars, such as Oakley, DeVault, and Zinn who argued that through a shared lens, a more complete account of their groups’ experiences might be rendered (Labaree, 2002).

Merton (1972) rejected the conceptualization of insider and outsider dichotomy as it relates to knowledge access and instead defined insiders and outsiders in structural

terms according to group membership. He then goes on to argue that, given this definition, we all occupy myriad layers of insider and outsider status vis-à-vis one another, simultaneously. There are uniting and dividing statuses, and indeed shifting ones. “Sociologically, there is nothing fixed about the boundaries separating Insiders from Outsiders” (Merton, 1972, p. 28). Merton (1972) contends that the boundaries are in fact permeable, and even outlined situations in which people moved from perceived outsider to insider status depending on the situation.

### **Continuum**

The dichotomy of the insider/outsider has ultimately been rejected by many researchers and re-conceptualized as points along a continuum (Labaree, 2002). The extreme positions of insider/outsider were hence relegated to abstraction only (Christensen & Dahl, 1997; Merton, 1972). This concept of researcher positionality as falling along a continuum can be interpreted as the “degree to which a researcher is located within or outside a group being researched” [due to] common lived experience or as a member of that group” (Gair, 2012, p. 137). This conceptualization supports Merton’s notion of the permeable boundary. Researchers seeking to experience a culture, group, or setting as an insider may slide along this continuum as they seek to simultaneously immerse themselves in a culture, while maintaining their positionality as an outsider (Patton 2002). “The challenge is to combine participation and observation so as to become capable of understanding the setting as an insider while describing to and for outsiders” (Patton, 2002, p. 268). Wax, as cited in Patton (2002b) explains that researchers need to “become capable of thinking and acting within the perspective of two different groups” (p. 268). The nature of the researcher’s degree of “insiderness” and

“outsiderness” could then, shift and change during the course of a project, especially if the project was one featuring prolonged engagement or one where the researcher and the participants shared a considerable bond of life experience, and if the project united them in a common purpose, such as in a program evaluation focused on their transformation into school leaders.

### **Intimate Insider**

One nuance that has emerged from the literature as significant to my study was the discussion of how close is too close to conduct ethical research (Labaree, 2002; Leigh, 2014; Taylor, 2011). An intimate level of researcher closeness to the group being studied offers some benefits, but also has effects on those involved (Taylor, 2011). When choosing to study those with whom the researcher shares a close cultural proximity, a depth of understanding exists that is born of shared lived experience. In these studies, Taylor (2011) reported high levels of trust and open lines of communication, which facilitated access and data collection but, led to complicated relationships with participants. “Friendships in the field are not entirely unproblematic...can sometimes be confusing and unstable due to role confusion, conflict, feelings of betrayal, differences in social worlds, the inevitable withdrawal from the field or interpersonal dynamics” (p. 7). Leigh (2014) related the emotional toll of an anticipated role conflict related to her intimate insider research involving one of her participants. Morriss (2015) noted disquieting feelings that she was carrying around a “dirty secret” after studying her own group of social workers. This work inevitably takes an emotional toll on researchers, who are increasingly recognized in the literature as being vulnerable in the research context (emerald & Carpenter, 2015).

However, as Labaree (2002) explained, the “value of insiderness” can be found in its natural capacity to dig out what otherwise would remain hidden. The level of access and what can be revealed, then is a function of the researcher’s “biographical profile, political activities, research agenda, and the relationship with the community under study” (Labaree, 2002, p. 102). The literature suggests that researcher roles can be viewed either positively or negatively and that all offer both benefits and challenges that researchers must be aware of and address (Kelly, 2014; Patton, 2002).

### **Negotiated, Fluid, or Performed Role**

Another concept arising from the literature around researcher positionality is that of the researcher not ever having a set relationship with the participants at any time throughout the research project. Taking the concept of the continuum one step further, there is this discussion of a fluid, interpersonal, and dialectical negotiation and performance that takes places through each encounter, and of the outcome, the data, the themes, and the findings being co-constructed through the process of the telling and the hearing (Blix, 2015; Court & Abbas, 2013; Denzin, 2001; Ergun & Erdemir, 2010; Naples, 1996). Blix (2015) explained that “meaning is created and performed in interviews. As an interviewer, I actively participate in this meaning-making. The stories people tell are recipient-designed” (p. 181). He is echoing the earlier words of Denzin (2001) who explained that “[i]n the moment of storytelling, teller and listener, performer and audience, share the goal of participating in an experience which reveals their shared same-ness” (p. 25). Finally, Ergun and Erdemir (2010) asserted that the “classification of field researchers as insiders require negotiations that revolve around the strategic highlighting of commonalities and the downplaying of differences” (p. 24). This narrative

highlights the fact that it is through the research process itself, indeed through the actual exchanges between the researcher and the participant, that the researcher's positionality is continually redefined along the insider/outsider continuum.

This conceptualization of the insider/outsider status of the researcher is a departure from the others in the literature, because it places the researcher role as a product a negotiated set of interactions between those involved in the relationship and incorporates the notion that regardless of any status or characteristic, people are free to interact on their own, fluid, and changing terms. It was this strand of the literature that I found most compelling and that caused me to question the nature of my positionality in the program evaluation and to reexamine my original study data, to reflect on the extent to which any of it might have been designed for this recipient.

### **The Complicated Array of Benefits and Challenges Facing Researcher-Practitioners Access**

As researchers have enumerated, Mercer (2007) found, there are significant benefits to conducting research within your own organization; she counts ease of access, organizational familiarity, and previously established rapport among the benefits, noting that all of these likely made data collection efforts considerably more efficient. Since researcher practitioners are, by definition, working as well as conducting this research, efficiency is a considerable benefit. While Anderson and Jones (2000) agreed that researchers that studied their own workplaces were given greater access to data than were outside researchers, they also contended that getting access is only part of the issue, adding that once inside, many researchers studying their own organizations find it impractical to find the time during the workday to complete the research.



Similarly Arber (2006), Brannick and Coghlan (2007) and Leigh (2014), found that access for insiders is not automatic, that even an insider needs to negotiate with gatekeepers within the organization, since having access to one aspect of an organization does not automatically grant full access to the entire system. Nor does it get you willing participants. Once through the gate, Arber (2006) admitted to having to make further efforts to gain participants through her own “impression management” and to achieving a greater degree of accessibility through a conscious effort to “appear approachable” and having to “push [for] the help I needed from them to accomplish my research” (p. 150). Essentially studying one’s workplace offers researcher practitioners significant, but not unfettered, practical advantage of familiarity and enhanced access compared to outsiders coming in to study the organization.

### **Insider Myopia**

Qualitative researchers discuss research challenges presented by “insider myopia” or “blindness to the mundane” which is the phenomenon of being so familiar with or accustomed to something that you don’t notice it any longer (Taylor, 2011, p. 15). Mercer (2007) warned researcher practitioners to be wary of failing to ask the obvious questions or missing out on gathering valuable data because people assume you already know something. Holloway and Biley (2011) described just such an experience, when studying a group to which they belonged. They described a situation in which participants would “stop mid-sentence and say, ‘Well, you know what I mean.’ and I thought I did. On exploration though, it became obvious that often I assumed what they meant” (Holloway & Biley, 2011, p. 7). The more intimately familiar the researcher is with the group being

studied, the more this presents an issue for the trustworthiness of the data, since the researcher benefits from analytic distance (Taylor, 2011).

### **Data Quality**

Mercer (2007) argued that out that conducting research within your own organization can be like “wielding a double edged sword” because what researchers gain in terms of familiarity with the setting and its culture and norms, they may lose if participants have preconceptions about the research or the researcher and may actually distort the data they provide for their own motives. With a researcher practitioner conducting a study, everyone involved will inevitably continue their working relationships after the findings are made known to stakeholders. This eventuality may have implications for the data provided by the participants, for the analysis done by the researcher, and for the approval of and continued support for the project by the organization (Anderson & Jones, 2000; Humphrey, 2012; Mercer, 2007). Humphrey (2012) echoed this sentiment, and reminded those researchers who may have a power imbalance with their participants to mind their dual role and any work to counteract any undue influence this may have on an authentic informed consent process. Humphrey (2012) also warned of a dilemma regarding indirect participants, those about whom participants may “tell tales” (p. 537). When researching one’s own workplace, the data might inadvertently reveal something about a colleague or supervisor without his or her knowledge or consent. This presents the researcher practitioner with an ethical dilemma regarding whether or not the data can or should be used.

## **Taboo Topics**

In the literature, there are common narratives of “something going wrong;” either the researcher approached topics that were taboo, or inadvertently engaged in unwelcome behaviors, or initiated questioning along a line that prompted participants to react strongly and change the nature of the conversation. Researchers noted experiencing these reactions as being relegated to outsider status, even momentarily. Humphrey (2012) explained that when she approached the topic of theory, she provoked anxiety in her participants and had to change the topic of conversation to reestablish her insider status. Arber (2006) describes a similar phenomenon of experiencing discomfort from being in a “marginal place” since it is “not possible to be both a stranger and a friend” (p. 153). These research moments present challenges because they challenge the researcher’s role and may push comfort levels and ethical boundaries. However, Brannick and Coghlan (2007) contended that insiders have the advantage of “preunderstanding” the organization being studied, and therefore “know the legitimate and taboo phenomena of what can be talked about and what cannot” (p. 69). It may be easier for researcher practitioners to minimize these discomfiting research moments than it would be for outsiders, less familiar with the organization’s history, culture, and taboos.

## **Rigor and Trustworthiness**

There has of course, been a raging philosophical and paradigmatic debate regarding what approach is best to take when conducting research, with qualitative, naturalistic inquiry often being compared less favorably with more “scientific” and statistics-based quantitative methods (Patton, 2002). This debate rightfully challenges researcher practitioners to explicitly outline in their methodology how they intend to

protect the integrity of their work, given the nature of naturalistic inquiry and the researcher's unique role in the project and the impact of research relationships on the study (Maxwell, 2005). One such tool that researcher practitioners use to ensure their work is trustworthy, is the use varied reflexive practices throughout the study.

Therefore, another challenge faced by researcher practitioners is the need to find ways to ensure that their work is rigorous, trustworthy, as well as applicable to their workplace. The incorporation of reflexivity into the research design supports both goals. Arber (2006) defines reflexivity as “the capacity to reflect upon one’s actions and values during the research, when producing data and writing accounts, and to view the beliefs we hold in the same way we view the beliefs of others” (p. 147). She notes this is particularly a challenge for researcher practitioners who, by definition, play a dual role. Anderson and Jones (2000) note that an increasing number of administrators are choosing, for logical and practical reasons, to conduct studies in their place of work so that they can apply their research to their practice and make meaningful contributions to their organizations. However, given the fact that they have histories with the research site “raises epistemological problems in the sense that unexamined tacit knowledge...tends to be impressionistic—full of bias, prejudice, and unexamined impressions and assumptions that need to be brought to the surface and examined” (p. 443). Qualitative researchers will often turn to critical friends as well as their research journal in order to accomplish these tasks through self-reflection, and “overcome their insiderness” to “ensure the success of their fieldwork” (Ergun & Erdemir, 2010, p. 18).

## **Political Realities**

There is one final challenge that is of considerable import to research conducted within the workplace context—political challenges. Brannick and Coghlan (2007) contend that “managing organizational politics” is “probably the most important issue for insider researchers, particularly when they want to remain and progress in the institution” (p. 71). Without the prior approval and continuing support for the research project, and without leaders with a growth mentality at the helm, there is considerable political risk to the researcher practitioner if the findings are less than stellar. “Administrators are seldom rewarded for creating and disseminating knowledge that challenges the legitimation of institutional arrangements” (Anderson & Jones, 2000, p. 446). Anderson and Jones (2000) suggest that this impacts the nature of studies that are envisioned, approved, or published and encourage organizations to embrace the tenets of emancipatory action research practices. Roth, Shani, & Leary (2007) echo support for internal capability development through insider-led action research projects and agree with Mercer’s (2007) notion that familiarity with an organization is a benefit to being able to accomplish the research project successfully. They explain that action oriented research is focused on making changes to practices, changes that are not always universally welcomed. This takes some finesse, or “street smarts” as they call it, and they claim that the “insider action researcher has the advantage of knowing when it is the appropriate time to deliver the results and to avoid unnecessary setbacks by delivering results in a blunt way or to the wrong people at the wrong time” (Roth, Shani, & Leary, 2007, p. 52). Similarly, Brannick and Coghlan (2007) contend that insiders know how the informal organization works and to whom to turn for information...they know the critical events and what they

mean within the organization” (p. 69). The literature around this challenge is so compelling, that at times it even reads as a caution flag for practitioner researchers to make careful decisions before wading into this pool. Without the strategic plan requirements and leadership support for the program evaluation as a foundation, I might not have stood on such firm footing in my own endeavor and might well have sought my dissertation topic elsewhere.

### **The Research**

Before exploring the emergence of the “alongsider” researcher role that will be the purpose and focus for the balance of the article, a brief account of the context of the original program evaluation is appropriate: specifically the nature of program evaluation and how my relationship to the program contributed to the emergence of the alongside role.

The purpose of the formative program evaluation of an in-district leadership academy in a suburban regional high school district in New Jersey was to explore and evaluate how participation engaged the 32 teacher/participants in the process of preparing for future formal administrative roles. After meeting in the spring of 2014 to elicit topics of interest from the group, this cohort met on five occasions throughout the pilot year featuring the topics of leadership and communication, leadership for change, educational law, ethical decision making and school finance, and transitioning out of the classroom. All sessions were held after the conclusion of the school day with all of the sessions featured a speaker making a formal presentation of material, followed by opportunities for large group discussion and individual questions.

My researcher role and relationship to the Aspiring Administrators Academy was one of organizer, facilitator, attendee, and presenter. I participated, as the Director of Personnel with the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent in the design of the pilot year program offerings. I was responsible for all program-related postings and communications with staff. I arranged for the timing and location of all meetings, and ensured that attendance was taken, name badges were available, and that professional development certificates were issued for each session. I arranged for speakers for each session, and served myself as the speaker at one of the sessions, presenting on the topic of professional ethics. I attended all events in their entirety, welcoming participants, and serving as a host of sorts, I introduced and wrapped up each session and addressed housekeeping items, such as making sure that all members had copies of the book that was selected by the Superintendent for the book study.

I also made clear to the participants from the start that this program was going to be the subject of my dissertation study. It was during these discussions that I was able to start to consciously negotiate research relationships with the teachers in the program, and add to my own credibility with them by sharing some of my own experiences when I was in the classroom or in various school leadership positions. I was also able to convey to them early on that since the district's strategic plan required that the program be evaluated, that their feedback would be very important on three fronts: to my work as a researcher; to the district to improve the program; and most importantly to their own growth in leadership capacity.

After all sessions were completed, the study was launched using qualitative methods and a program evaluation research design (Patton, 2002a). Two focus groups

and a series of seven semi-structured interviews were used to elicit participant data from purposefully selected participants and, as will be explored later, a researcher journal was maintained throughout the research process, which facilitated reflexivity and bracketing, and also revealed insight into my positionality within the research context and process (Ahern, 1999; Berger, 2013; Gearing, 2004; Janesick, 1999; Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Qualitative methods are useful in program evaluations, in order to “tell the program’s story” and discover instrumental uses for findings (Patton, 2001; Patton, 2002a, p. 10). In fact, program evaluation has been alternately defined as “the application of qualitative research methods to questions of practice” (Anastas, 2004) and as “the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs to make judgments about the program, improve program effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future programming” (Patton, 2002a, p. 10). Four evaluative findings emerged from the study and are described below.

1. Living in limbo: That aspiring administrators have experienced a shift in their perspective on many educational issues, and as such are “living in limbo” between the classroom and positions of formal leadership.
2. Refuge and validation: That the program offered by the district provided validation and refuge for them through its cohort model, which allowed them to meet regularly with like-minded peers and escape, even temporarily, their feelings of alienation from teachers;
3. Sheltered authentic practice: That the program would benefit from expanding its emphasis on authentic, scenario-based activities in order to thoroughly prepare participants for the real day-to-day work of school leadership.



4. Emergent leader identity: That the presence of an in-district leadership development program is mutually beneficial, allowing the district to prepare for succession events, empowering teacher leaders/aspiring administrators, to embrace their newly redefined role—as translators—between the administration and the teaching staff.

### **The “Alongsider” Researcher Positionality**

These findings did not take into account any of the data from the researcher journal. Instead, these findings represent the outcome required by the stakeholders. The strategic plan approved by the Board of Education in 2012 required the designers of the program to provide for the iterative solicitation of feedback, annual progress reporting, and informed improvements.

For the remainder of this article, however, we will consider a different question, related to the role of the researcher in relationship to the participants. In essence, what is the nature of the positionality of a researcher practitioner, who is also a central office administrator, conducting a program evaluation of a workplace program where participants are all employees of the same district? The main argument of the rest of this article, and therefore the study’s fifth finding, is that a researcher practitioner conducting a formative evaluation on a workplace program can occupy a role that does not conform to, nor fall precisely within, any traditionally considered positionality between the theoretical outsider at one extreme and the theoretical insider at the other extreme. Instead, the position of the researcher may also found “alongside” the participants. An “alongsider” is interpreted in this article as a researcher who is making an epistemological claim, legitimized through her own lived experiences, to identify with,

know, and understand the workplace culture, institutional language, and professional journey of the participants. An alongsider researcher therefore has access to the insider perspective, accompanied by a related stance of teacher-leader policy advocacy, while simultaneously maintaining a professional neutrality, and outsider perspective appropriate to the public education setting and her formal workplace role.

### **Reflexivity, Bracketing, and Use of the Researcher Journal**

A researcher's life experiences affect the studies we select, the research questions we construct, the participants we select, or avoid, in essence the voices we hear or silence (Foote & Bartell, 2011; Holloway & Biley, 2011). It is a privilege being a trained researcher; with that privilege comes responsibility to act within established ethical standards and to be accountable for how the data gathered is ultimately presented to academia and to the participants (Holloway & Biley, 2011) As Berger (2015) explicitly states,

Researchers need to increasingly focus on self-knowledge and sensitivity; better understand the role of the self in the creation of knowledge; carefully self-monitor the impact of their biases, beliefs, and personal experiences on their research; and maintain the balance between the personal and the universal. (p. 220)

One way that researchers can explore the "self" and to engage in this monitoring is through reflexive practices, such as the keeping of a journal and the engagement with qualified critical friends. Dowling (2006) argues that pervasive use of reflexive practice throughout qualitative research "closes the door on a belief that researcher objectivity and researcher-participant distance is paramount and opens another one to the transparency of

reality and the need to address ethical, political, and epistemological concerns of research” (p. 18).

As Janesick (1999) explains, qualitative researchers act as the instrument of their own research and so must explicitly examine their own thinking, and “coming to terms with exactly what one is doing as the qualitative researcher” (p. 507). The keeping of a richly detailed researcher journal can be a tool to support the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Janesick (1999) explains, this practice encourages the researcher to interact with his own inner beliefs about what is happening in the study. “The clarity of writing down one’s thoughts will allow for stepping into one’s inner mind and reaching further into interpretations of the behaviors, beliefs, and words we write” (Janesick, 1999, p. 514).

This process of iterative reflection is especially important given that I have, simultaneously both an emic and an etic perspective. As a current administrator where the study took place, I am not on the inside of the program, as a voluntary participant would be, but rather on the outside, as an evaluator of the program. However, as one of the presenters of the program, my own performance was part of what was being evaluated, so I found this to be one area in which the use of a researcher journal proved to be of tremendous value. In the journal excerpt that follows, reflections on the first focus group’s discussion reveal that my identification with and empathy for the professional journey the participants are facing.

Engaging with them, listening to them talk about their experiences in the classroom, as they “spill out” of their classroom, brought back memories of my own experiences...my own journey- what leadership experiences I had while still

as a teacher- I could see myself in their shoes...or rather locate them along the path I have already traveled. Kind of a been there, done that. “Yeah, I get you” moment. I don’t know them, but I am them, or rather, they are me, or maybe they are where I used to be, about fifteen years ago (6/16/2015)

As I reflected on the experiences of participants that relate to my own work with them I needed to bracket against bias and personal defensiveness that may impact my findings. Gearing (2004) explained that through the use of bracketing techniques “[t]he researcher is able to set aside and hold in abeyance all of his or her ‘natural attitude’ which consists of the researcher’s internal beliefs, ego, experiences, understandings, biases, culture, judgments and assumptions” (p. 1436).

In this journal entry, I documented an unanticipated emotional roller coaster ride I endured during the second focus group.

To hear feedback about something that you have been involved with –in front of other people, is hard. Can make you defensive. I feel like I want to jump in and defend or at least explain. Especially when participants missed a session and then commented about how we should have offered something that actually had been offered in that missed session! Had to push those feelings down and try to focus on what they are saying about the program, so the data will be useful. Why use this time as a chance to grandstand...? Glad I have the video and the audiotape so I can return later to collect my data with a cool head! Right now, I am just not ready (6/17/2015).

When I returned to this entry after some time had passed, I realized my emotional reaction to the comments made by this individual were strong and needed to be

bracketed, and set aside, so that I could hear the powerful message he was giving me about the program. Indeed his feedback proved valuable to the evaluation process, contributing to three of four emerging themes about the program; but hearing the data from this participant would not have been possible without the application of reflexive researcher practices.

### **Positionality as an “Alongsider”**

**Shared lived experience.** As human beings, all researchers bring aspects of themselves along with them wherever they go; life experience has an impact on researcher positionality and therefore on the content, process, and product of the research (Foote & Bartell, 2011). Positionality can be interpreted to mean the worldview or perspective of the researcher, in relation to a study and its participants (Foote & Bartell, 2011). The participants in the Aspiring Administrators Academy were all high school teachers in the same district where the study was conducted. I am a central office administrator there, having taught elsewhere for over a decade, although never at the high school level, and never in this district. In one sense, we are all in the same group, insofar as we work in the same school district. This shared status did permit me a significant degree of insider level access to the participants, who were likely willing participants, forthcoming with significant amounts of information related to their shared organizational experience with the program. Taken up a level, we are also in the same professional group, of educators and educational leaders, so we also share in the content knowledge and scholarly research related to pedagogy, leadership theory, and change theory, and have found ourselves similarly caught up in external pressures and public

policy debates over high stakes testing, accountability, national standards, and, more recently, the marketization and privatization of public education.

Within that group of educators we are also sharing in the lived experience as members of a subgroup of New Jersey educators, who have experienced a deluge of regulation in the wake of The Teacher Effectiveness and Accountability for the Children of New Jersey (TEACHNJ) Act, 2012, c. 26 which went into effect on August 6, 2012. TEACHNJ ties the acquisition and retention of tenure for teachers and principals to a revamped evaluation system that quantifies goal attainment, educator practice, and value-added growth in student performance on the state assessment. Because of these shared lived experiences, working in the same field, in the same state and in the same district, we enjoy a common language, culture, and a tacit knowledge of what it is like to be in education in the current time. These are ties that bind.

The most significant area, however in which we share lived experience is the familiarity with the personal and professional transformation that takes place as teachers embark on a journey from one role into another. As teachers become teacher leaders, and as teacher leaders become aspiring administrators, individuals often experience a shift in their identity, or perception of self, as they start to see themselves as capable of performing in a new role (Bataginnis, 2011). This is a phenomenon that is well-established in the literature, and I offer a brief overview here, it is this shared experience that provided the bonds necessary to facilitate the emergence of the alongsider researcher role.

***Transformation of self-perception.*** Bataginnis (2011) found that graduate students developed an emerging leadership identity as they engaged in planning an action

research project for their coursework. These projects gave them the opportunity to imagine themselves in the role. Bataginnis (2011) found their perspective of self was shifted from teacher to aspiring administrator by the experiences (p. 1324). “It was this leadership identity that would inform their creative leadership decisions and capacity for problem solving. The more distinctly defined that identity was, the more insightful the potential leadership would be” (Bataginnis p. 1306). Moorosi (2014) found leadership development to be more of a social event, involving others, such as followers in the formation and reinforcement of the leadership identity. “Leadership development is best understood as a process through which leadership identity is co-constructed through transformative practices of (amongst others) mentoring, networking and shared learning (Moorosi, 2014, p. 796). Similarly, Orr (2010) found that leadership preparation programs that help aspiring administrators develop confidence in their own capacity as leaders improve the likelihood that these professionals actually pursue administrative positions (p. 122).

***Theoretical foundations.*** Bandura’s (1993) self-efficacy theory sheds light on these findings. He explained that high levels of self-confidence or self-efficacy-allows people to envision themselves being successful at challenging future endeavors—such as applying to an administrative position—and therefore allows them to persist in pursuing their goals. Completing the transformation from teacher to administrator requires more than accepting a job and actually functioning in the role of an administrator, it involves a change in perspective about oneself. This transformation is complete when the individual is freed from prior societal or cultural role expectations and embraces the role of

choice—in this case that of the school leader (Mezirow, 1981). Mezirow (1981) explained that:

Perspective transformation is the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings. It is the learning process by which adults come to recognize their culturally induced dependency roles and relationships and the reasons for them and take action to overcome them (p. 6-7).

Mezirow (1981) clarified that this process, which he posited is normal as humans develop into adults, actually takes place along a predictable dynamic but can be gradual or sudden in nature, depending on the nature of the precipitating event (p. 7). This event, or “disorienting dilemma” in the case being considered, would be whatever occurred to the participants of the program that made them want to aspire to be administrators in the first place. As Mezirow (1981) explains this event would be followed by a period of critical self-reflection, and consideration of what other options might be pursued before making preparations to put an action plan into place (p. 7).

It follows that an effective leadership development program might play an important role in the emancipation of participants’ self-perceived potential as future school leaders as well as help them along the journey toward the development of their leadership identity as Moorosi (2014) described. It also follows that as a former teacher myself, and as a presenter in this in-district program designed to assist participants in making a transformation I myself had already made, that I would identify with those in



the program on multiple levels, empathize with their struggles, and eventually assume a stance of professional advocacy on their collective behalf, and on behalf of the findings derived from their feedback. Yet, given my role within the organization, professional ethics requires me to maintain a neutrality vis-a-vis them as individuals, while negotiating with the Superintendent and competing for scarce resources when planning the next phase of the program. This, I contend, is the positionality of an alongsider.

**Role of empathy in resolving role conflict.** Some of these issues facing educators today are significantly divisive enough to place me into outsider status. Arguably, the burden of TEACHNJ falls disproportionately on the teachers than on administrators, and, as I would find out in the focus group discussions, the participants' impressions of this new evaluation system was a taboo topic which, when approached by me, perhaps mistakenly, in my researcher role, relegated me quickly to a position of an outsider. From this excerpt from my researcher journal written the day of the second focus group, my struggle is evident.

This is a complicated role- I feel like I am in two places at once. [The participant] keeps taking the position of [an instigator]. [The participant] talked about how administrators have been disconnected so long from the classroom- that "they" cannot communicate as effectively with teachers as other teachers can. Othering us! (6/17/2015).

This participant contributed data that ultimately led to a major finding in the study. However, when the comments were first offered, I endured a moment of role conflict, laden with emotion that kept me from hearing or valuing the data at the time. Brannick and Coghlan (2007) explained that those conducting research inside their own

organizations are “likely to encounter role conflict and find themselves caught between loyalty tugs, behavioral claims, and identification dilemmas as a result of trying to sustain a full organizational membership role and the researcher perspective simultaneously” (p. 70). The interceding force that helped this researcher resolve the dilemma caused by these role conflicts, was empathy.

Gair (2012) offers that empathy is an essential ingredient for researchers who are seeking to connect with participants’ lived experiences. Perhaps it is fitting, then that Geldard and Geldard (2005) conceived of the concept of empathy as “having a togetherness with...going on a journey with...and walking beside” participants (p. 18). As the role of the alongsider researcher positionality became more apparent and concrete in my mind, I imagined myself walking alongside the participants as they embark upon their journey, and see myself the researcher, as having an insider view on many issues, but an outsider perspective on others, as defined to some extent by boundaries set by the participants themselves. This relationship is in flux and continues to evolve and be renegotiated, as time goes on, and the program progresses, and as the participants move farther along their journey.

### **Transcending We/They-Implications of the Role of the Alongsider Research**

The emergence of the alongsider researcher role introduces into the scholarly conversations a new conceptualization of the positionality taken up by a researcher practitioner. The concept of the alongsider is in a sense the story of one researcher who is on one sense a part of, and yet still apart from, the group being studied, who shares key lived experiences with participants and empathizes with their struggles to the point of

advocacy, yet who finds herself in a dilemma of organizational role conflict bounded by strict professional ethics. While this emerged as the experiences of one researcher, I assert that any administrator, acting as a researcher practitioner, conducting a program evaluation or action research project in the workplace with teachers as participants would find themselves with a similar positionality. This article adds to the richly diverse scholarly conversations around the topic of researcher positionality that has evolved from the days of the insider/outsider dichotomy, to its discussion of an infinite continuum, to a flexible, negotiated, interpersonal, and emergent performance taking place in each research moment. It begs the question, what else is there?

### **Policy**

There is a clear role for an alongsider to function as a local, state, and federal policy advocate, whenever shared lived experiences align with shared goals, such as in the completion of a program evaluation or action research project which leads to findings with policy change implications. Researcher practitioners are cautioned to make careful choices in selecting projects and securing organizational leadership support whenever such policy change implications might lead to unmanageable role conflicts. Familiarity with professional ethical codes, chain of command, and policy change procedures are also important before embarking on workplace research with implications for changes to policy.

### **Practice**

It is increasingly more common for practitioners to conduct research at their place of work. With the proliferation of site-based academic research projects, it is critical that researchers be fully informed of the potential benefits and challenges that often

accompany workplace research as well as the importance of their positionality to it (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). Securing permissions and support from the highest possible level, or grounding the work itself in the organization's approved strategic plan provides legitimacy for the work and provides a firm foundation from which the alongsider can successfully advocate for meaningful changes, based on the findings from the study. Additionally, given the shared lived experiences that bind the alongsider with participants, the use of reflexive practices is highly recommended. These practices might include the use of videotaping or a minimum, audiotaping of interactions for later review, which supports the keeping of a richly detailed researcher journal, along with regular consultation with critical friends to facilitate reflexive bracketing, to bring bias and suppositions to the surface, so they can be dealt with by the researcher.

As Merton (1972) described we all occupy myriad layers of insider and outsider status vis-à-vis one another, simultaneously. There are uniting and dividing statuses, and indeed shifting ones. My experience as an alongsider researcher revealed the nature of these shifting relationships while conducting research in the workplace. While I maintained my professional neutrality demanded by my administrative role in the workplace, I was able to establish connections through shared lived experiences with participants, and negotiate a more intimate status in most cases, therefore gaining access to more detailed data related to the project. These shared connections yielded valuable feedback for the program that convinced me to take up a stance of advocacy for their serious and immediate consideration. I would assert then that a researcher can, as Merton (1972) described, simultaneously occupy multiple layers of insider and outsider status with each participant, but I would add that this status is 1) dependent on the issue at hand

at the moment; 2) is a function of the level of shared lived experiences; and 3) facilitated by a researcher's ability to connect to the participant through the shared goals of the research project.

### **Conclusion**

Qualitative researchers routinely have to dedicate themselves to cultivating, negotiating, and navigating a complex array of relationships in the field. From gaining entry to the field to preparing to submit an article for publication, engaging in this process of academic inquiry is one of carefully built relationships. When the inquiry happens to be situated within the workplace of the researcher, there is the potential for considerable benefit to the organization, and to the researcher, an innate reciprocity, since both stand to mutually benefit from the fruits of the research, the findings. There is also the potential for new and stronger relationships to be forged within the organization, since the researcher practitioner will be engaging with participants, and new social networks will be formed within the organization as cohort members become acquaintances and friends, their bonds strengthened for having shared in building something together.

With relationships often come challenges, and with workplace research comes complexity in workplace relationships since the researcher must take on a dual role. Rossman and Rallis (2012) stress the importance of establishing and maintaining trusting relationships in the field since that is likely to enhance the quality of the research product. Since I adopted an alongsider researcher positionality establishing trust was facilitated through a focus on shared organizational goals, build on a foundation of mutual lived experiences. This allowed me to empathize with participant views, and take up a stance

of advocacy and engage in negotiations with my Superintendent to plan for the next iteration of the Aspiring Administrators Academy, informed by their feedback.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Focus Group Protocol**

1. Please each share your name, school, subjects taught, teaching experience inside and outside the district, and indicate if you attended all or some of the AAA sessions.
2. What does it mean to aspire to a leadership position in this district? What role do you each aspire to in the short/medium/long-term?
3. What, in your view were the goals of the AAA? In what ways did the program meet or fail to meet those goals?
4. What do you think of any unexpected experiences during the program?
5. How would being a principal change you personally? Professionally?
6. What is your thought about how the program supported your growth toward reaching your professional goals?
7. What is your opinion regarding barriers that exist that keep you from taking on a leadership role?
8. How can/does the program help prepare teachers to become administrators?

## **Appendix B**

### **Semi-Structured Interview Protocol**

1. Why did you volunteer to participate in the Aspiring Administrators Academy?
2. What expectations did you have for the program when you decided to participate?
3. What other leadership opportunities have you been involved with in the district?
4. What if anything has held you back from participating in opportunities to develop your leadership skills?
5. With regard to your own experiences, how do you think the district changed since the strategic plan was put into place? To what extent, for you is the AAA part of those changes?
6. How did you experience the planned activities within the program?
7. In what ways did the structure of the program, meaning the meeting time, place, topics, and design of activities, work for you or not work for you? Why?
8. What top three ideas or concepts did you learn or take away from the program?
9. What topic/session was the most supportive of your professional growth as a leader? Why?
10. What topic/session was the least supportive of your professional growth as a leader? Why?
11. Explain how your participation in the program changed your view of school/district leadership and your role in it?