ABSTRACT

THOMPSON, PAULETTA SPENCE. Exploring Leadership Readiness: Perspectives of Aspiring School Leaders Within a District-run Leadership Development Academy. (Under the direction of Dr. Lisa Bass).

The leadership readiness gap is the one of the primary causes of novice principal attrition in the public school system (Kearney & Valadez, 2016; Young, 2013). The leadership readiness gap often occurs after aspiring leaders graduate from a university preparation program with the necessary credentials for licensure, yet still require further training and experience before becoming effective principals. Districts, as the main consumers of principal training, take the brunt of ill-equipped and incapable novice leaders. To address the leadership readiness gap of aspiring leaders, this study examined the relationship between transformative learning, contextual learning, and competency based learning to determine if these constructs, when all are present in a district-run program, produced learning experiences that addressed the remaining gaps in leadership readiness of aspiring leaders face. The goal of this study was to explore how district-run leadership development programs inform aspiring leaders’ leadership readiness prior to entering into the principalship. Exploring the development of aspiring leaders through the conceptual lens of transformative, contextually based, and competency based learning experiences provided an additional level of personalization to leadership development, which has the potential to build a thriving principal pipeline. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how aspiring school leaders’ participation in a medium-sized district-run leadership academy shaped their readiness to become effective school leaders. For this study, eleven participants were selected from the 2016-2017 cohort of Central Public Schools’ Aspiring Leaders Academy. The phenomenon of leadership readiness was captured through three sources of data— semi-structured interviews, archival program documents —reflection journal, leadership readiness survey, and curriculum materials, and field notes of the observations of
participant interaction and discourse in two learning workshops. Results from the interviews and self-assessments revealed that several participants shifted their thinking about effective leadership during their participation in the program.

The findings of the study helped to ascertain how the participation in the ALA program transformed the participants’ perspectives of school leadership, and to examine how the instructional components of the program helped to shape the participants’ leadership readiness. All of the participants acknowledged that their starting point of readiness upon entering the ALA varied. Several of the participants revealed lingering gaps that remained after graduating from their traditional graduate preparation program and receiving their credentials from the state. Also, several participants indicated gaps in knowledge and skill because of lack of exposure to practice in their current roles as assistant principals. Findings also suggested that aspiring leaders’ participation in job-embedded practice through transformative learning and competency based learning experiences had a greater influence on the participants’ readiness than exposure to any of the program elements. While the programmatic element of critical reflection seemed to have a minimal impact on shaping the leadership readiness of program participants, the element of rational discourse assisted in the transformation of all but one participants’ readiness. According to the participants, the program elements that were more theoretical in nature had a minimal impact on shaping the readiness of the participants, unlike the job-embedded practice from the contextual learning experiences.

This research concluded that aspiring leaders need more opportunities to develop their readiness through hands-on, authentic, job –embedded learning experiences that reflect the duties and responsibilities of a school principal within their school district.
Exploring Leadership Readiness: Perspectives of Aspiring School Leaders Within a District-run Leadership Development Academy

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Jeffrey, who has been my rock and a constant source of encouragement throughout my studies. I also dedicate this dissertation to my children: Emori, Trey and Jeremiah, who became my inspiration and my light throughout this journey. To my family, your love, support, and encouragement means more to me than you could ever know.
BIOGRAPHY

Pauletta Spence Thompson was born in Raleigh, North Carolina. As an undergraduate, she attended North Carolina Central University as a Ron Edmonds Scholar and majored in History Secondary Education. Pauletta earned a Masters of School Administration from North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Pauletta has dedicated her career to serving underrepresented and disadvantaged children. She taught middle school Language Arts, Social Studies and AVID for six years in North Carolina and Georgia. She also served as a school leader in three different redesigned schools in mid-sized and large districts in North Carolina and as a district level leader in Baltimore, Md. Currently, Pauletta works as a district level leader in a small rural county in North Carolina.

Pauletta’s research and teaching interests include principal development, organizational development, school improvement, social justice leadership, educational equity and educational policy, and personalized learning. After completing her studies, Pauletta plans to continue to pursue opportunities that will allow her to advocate for the underrepresented, disadvantaged and minority youth across the nation.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background the Study

In one medium-sized, urban district in North Carolina, 12% of the principal workforce left the district in 2016 (Duncan, 2010; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2016a). In another medium-sized district, 18% of the principal workforce left the profession in 2014. According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2016), this school district has had an attrition rate of six percent of its principals leaving the district since 2014. In 2016, an alarming 20% of principals left (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2016b).

The field of education has seen more change in the past ten years, than it has in over a century. Moreover, the role of the principal has steadily shifted. Principals in earlier decades had similar roles to middle managers with duties including overseeing budgets, managing bus and master schedules, and delivering student discipline. Now their role is more of a change agent, where they must transform the school. They must balance crucial roles, such as instructional leader, human and capital resource manager, and culture creator. They are also responsible for school improvement, which is driven heavily by the achievement of student standardized testing results (Briggs, Cheney, Davis, & Moll, 2013; Leithwood & Fullan, 2012). Leithwood and Fullan (2012) acknowledge the challenges and frustrations of the perpetually evolving role of the principal, which have produced increasingly rapid turnover of school leaders and an insufficient pool of capable, qualified, and prepared replacements.

School principals are expected to run a smooth school; manage health, safety, and the building; innovate without upsetting anyone; connect with students and teachers; be responsive to parents and community; answer to their districts; and above all, deliver results (Fullan, 2014). This new normal of increasingly demanding high-stakes accountability, along with the negative
perceptions of the role of the school leader, has resulted in novice administrators reverting to previous teaching positions or leaving the profession (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Fullan, 2014). In addition, with increasing expectations of schools and school leaders in society and in the workplace, the pressure on schools intensifies. The rate of change is fast, and the declining workforce has created an urgent need for effective, flexible, and dynamic school leaders like never before.

Many school principals find this breakneck pace of change in the public schools challenging. Linda Cliatt-Wayman’s first day as principal at a failing high school in North Philadelphia was like a day that most principals face when stepping into the role (Cliatt-Wayman, 2015). She felt ready to establish and enforce the rules. However, she quickly realized the job was more complex than she thought. She was faced with societal issues that had to be addressed in order to restore quality teaching and learning in her building. Her story is not unique (Leithwood & Fullan, 2012). Many new principals realize that their jobs are more complex than they anticipated. As Linda Cliatt-Wayman articulates in her Ted Talk (2015), school leaders in today’s society must be prepared for, not only the daily technical challenges, but also have the skills to lead fearlessly in difficult school environments. It seems that while the goal of education is to prepare students for the future, the field of education continues to operate in a long outdated model.

In the current school environment, principals must be flexible and adaptive. Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) suggest the “structures, culture, and defaults that make up an organizational system become too deeply ingrained, self-reinforcing, and difficult to reshape. It will take a skilled leader to navigate the necessary change, difficult in schools because they are “trapped by their current ways of doing things, simply because these ways worked in the past”
He poignantly highlights the battle cry for change in schools is
approaching a critical mass, as the reality that schools have changed and will continue to change, as students and societal norms change. Heifetz (2009) says school leadership must change in response. These adaptive challenges we face in public education, are those which “can only be addressed through changes in people’s priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 19).

Although certain aspects of the principals’ duties have changed, the primary responsibility of principals has always been to manage and direct the various facets of schooling that will lead to school improvement and student achievement. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act changed the school leadership landscape significantly because principals became legally responsible for the academic performance of every child in their school. This mandate compounded the already overwhelming work of the school principal. This change was a driving force for the school principal becoming a change agent, shouldering most of the burden mandated school improvements (Fullan, 2014). With the dynamic challenges that schools endure, principals must be skilled in leading complex changes in order to prepare students for the future.

Federal legislation, such as the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2016 (ESSA), has shifted more governing control of educational systems to the state and local level in the past 10 years. The shifts started with the adoption of federal policy that allowed for more flexibility to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2011 and expanded flexibility in 2016 with the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act. ESSA replaced the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. These policy changes gave local educational agencies the authority to begin making the significant shifts necessary to prepare American students for the future. In an effort to guide
these shifts, state agencies were tasked with building more efficient and effective systems of support for school and district improvement (Adelman & Taylor, 2011). In addition, districts across the country are engaged in improvement and effectiveness initiatives designed to ensure school and district leaders can address the needs of all learners, manage school culture and climate and achieve state mandated performance measures.

The added demands and pressures of the principalship contribute significantly to the current shortage of principal candidates entering the hiring pool (Fink & Brayman, 2006; Gajda & Militello, 2008; Matthew Militello, 2010). A myriad of factors deter quality candidates from starting a career as a principal. Hargreaves and Fink (2011) speculate that aspiring principals consider the principalship to be a demanding, difficult, and unattractive position. The unattractive demands include inadequate compensation, insurmountable stress, lack of work-life balance, the time required to meet accountability pressures, and navigating potential clashes that can arise between school and community. Hopkins (2007b) reports that the demands of the principalship include spending much more than the normal 40 hours per week at work, as well as bringing work home, contributing to the shortage of candidates because it jeopardizes family obligations and commitments. Furthermore, aspiring leaders are reluctant to move into a principal position out of fear that it could negatively impact personal relationships within the school communities (Kwan & Walker, 2009). An aspiring leader is a current assistant principal or teacher leader receiving training in K-12 school administration prior to seeking to obtain a position as a school principal (Zardoya, 2014).

In addition, evidence has shown that in some states, veteran teachers’ salaries rival that of principals’ salaries (Viadero, 2009). Bass (2006) asserts that compensation should be commensurate to the job responsibilities of the principalship, in order for districts to attract and
retain effective leaders. It seems that recent legislation and local players have created unrealistic expectations. As the job of the principal continues to become more complex, aspiring leaders are reluctant to aspire to a position that sounds impossible to perform (Scribner, Crow, Lopez, & Murtadha, 2011).

The revolving door of the principalship is more than an issue of balancing recruitment and retirement; retaining highly qualified principals has become equally problematic (Gajda & Militello, 2008). Fifty percent of superintendents around the country report difficulty finding qualified principals (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007). According to Béteille, Kalogrides, and Loeb (2012), “More than one out of every five principals leaves their school each year” (p.1). Principals serving in schools with a larger proportion of disadvantaged populations, such as minority students, low socio-economic status students, and English Language Learners, are more likely to leave the principalship. Typically, novice or inexperienced principals are assigned to schools with high concentrations of disadvantaged students (Battle, 2010). Novice principals tenure at such schools is typically three years or less, which is detrimental to school performance (Béteille et al., 2012; Mendels & Mitgang, 2013).

Novice principals often find the complexity of the position differs drastically from what they originally perceived about the position (Walker & Kwan, 2012). Barnett, Shoho, and Oleszewski (2012) found that novice principals consistently felt that the demands of the principal position were not realistic, and were not comparable to their training. Many novice principals reported that the job was overwhelming and had unreasonable expectations of cultivating the culture and climate, addressing parent and community concerns, improving teaching and learning, and raising student achievement (Walker & Kwan, 2012). Evidence suggest that while aspiring leaders’ assigned duties range significantly from school to school, many of the duties
are managerial in nature. In addition, aspiring leaders responsibilities are often dependent the school principal preference. Thus, principals have limited aspiring leaders’ access to instructional leadership opportunities, which, in turn, decreases their opportunity to develop leadership behaviors and skills necessary to effectively transition into the principalship (Barnett et al., 2012; Walker & Kwan, 2012). There has been a national call for improved principal training programs graduate programs to continue to use a theory-based approach, but it does not match the needs of the school leaders or the realities of the job (Darling-Hammond, Davis, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, & Orr, 2009; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012).

What are the indicators of effective change in our schools? Who will be the change agents? The answers to these questions point directly to the school leader. Who, then, is responsible for preparing aspiring school leaders to handle this change? Are the state agencies that oversee credentialing responsible? Are the institutions of higher learning that have provided the requisite skills for principal credentials responsible? Are the school districts that shoulder the student achievement results responsible? Should the institutions share the responsibility of training aspiring leaders and veteran principals? If so, what would that model look like?

According to Young (2013) “while there is no national shortage of certified principal candidates, 41% of superintendents believe principals should be better at their jobs and only 33% believe that principals are better prepared now than they were in the past” (p.11). Briggs et al. (2013) state “until we have outstanding leadership in every school, we will not achieve teacher effectiveness—nor significantly improved student-learning outcomes because while teachers are critical, is the principal who is best positioned to ensure successive years of quality teaching for every child” (p. 3). In order to meet these new demands, districts need a higher level of school
leaders, who can navigate societal norms to transform schools and provide instructional leadership. Since school leadership is the second most influential determinant of student achievement, it is extremely costly for districts to leave the recruiting and hiring quality school leaders to chance (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010).

Cursory attempts to overcome the unprecedented shortage of school leaders in the United States have led to the lack of readiness of novice leaders (Young, 2013). According to Orr, King, and LaPointe (2010a), “There needs to be a match between the district’s needs and the leaders that the programs produce” (p.1). For districts eagerly attempting school improvement, the leadership training for aspiring school leaders must prepare leaders who can handle the unique needs of schools and students (Mitgang, 2012). The lack of district representation and inclusion in principal development has proven to be a barrier to cultivating a competent principal pipeline (Clayton, Sanzo, & Myran, 2013). Most districts have a pipeline of prospective school leaders coming from a pool of current employees who pursued principal credentials on their own without a clear understanding of district goals. Hence, when principal vacancies occur there is often a limited pool of qualified candidates so districts hire ineffective school leaders. Their skills and knowledge depend on the quality of their university principal preparation programs. As the main consumers principal training programs, districts and schools take the brunt of ill-equipped and incapable novice leaders

**Statement of the Problem**

This research study addressed the problem of the need for more district-run leadership development programs designed to shape the leadership readiness of aspiring leaders who graduate from traditional principal preparation programs with readiness gaps that will hinder
their ability to be effective school leaders (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Honig, Venkateswaran, McNeil, & Twitchell, 2014; Lee, 2010; Sanzo & Scribner, 2015; Webber, Nelson, de la Colina, & Boone, 2008). District-run leadership development programs are essential to providing supplemental training to aspiring school leaders after state certification is acquired. Such development will help aspiring leaders achieve readiness prior to stepping into the principal role. As Adelman and Taylor (2011) asserts, there is no shortage of certified principals, but there is a shortage of capable and competent principals in today’s schools. A readiness gap is an oversight of necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes that may hinder the performance of an aspiring leader after entering into the principalship (Kearney & Valadez, 2016; Young, 2013).

The readiness gap is detrimental for aspiring leaders, schools, teachers, and students. Waiting to eliminate the gap once the aspiring leader is hired is too late. District leaders have often earned a doctoral level degree in education, and therefore are in a position to bridge the gaps between the theoretical knowledge, provided in graduate programs, with the contextual realities of working as a principal in the district. As Mendels (2012b) contends, “It’s time that we gain advantage from the potential leaders among us by developing this talent and growing the principals we need for our schools that desperately need them” (p.51).

Limited empirical research exists that evaluates the effectiveness of educational leadership preparation programs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Orr & Pounder, 2010), and even less exists on the effectiveness of district-run leadership development programs and strategies (Jacobson, Johansson, & Day, 2011; Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2013b). District-run leadership academies are a relatively new phenomenon (Sanzo, 2012), therefore, researchers contend that they are “limited by scholarly skepticism over the
perceived legitimacy and difficulties of launching large-scale comparative research” (Orr & Orphanos, 2011, p. 23). The primary goal of such programming must be to prepare the leaders holistically, with a sufficient balance of theory and practice. There is a limited body of research demonstrating the relationship between leadership preparation program quality features, graduates, and school leader outcomes (Orr & Pounder, 2010). Additional empirical evidence would help to expose the complex connections between leadership quality, preparation processes, and development experiences that increase aspiring leaders’ capacity to improve effectively students’ learning outcomes. While there are other mid-size districts that have taken a more innovative and cost-efficient approach to training their aspiring leaders, few are offered as supplemental programs that occur during or after aspiring leaders complete university preparation for state licensure (Sanzo & Scribner, 2015).

Critics, such as Orr and Orphanos (2011), say that university-based leadership preparation programs are out of balance. They give too much emphasis on theory, and too little emphasis on practice, or they give too little emphasis on theory and too much emphasis on practice. They also say that changing a preoccupation on mundane management issues at the expense of leadership would help resolve intractable problems in challenging schools and districts (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Fry, O'Neill, & Bottoms, 2006; Hess & Kelly, 2007; Levine, 2005). The various reforms and program innovations have continued to implement preparation practices that have “done little to cultivate new skills in school leaders” (Hess & Kelly, 2007, p. 177) and are “focused on the wrong things” (Fry et al., 2006, p. 10). The preparation practices continue to perpetuate the status quo and fails to prepare aspiring leaders and develop characteristics in them that will help them overcome their readiness gap (Hall, Childs-Bowen, Cunningham-Morris, Pajardo, & Simeral, 2016). There must be a reformation of not only the
program design of preparation programs, but also the learning approach, which has to be grounded in transformation.

Much of the national attention focused on the performance improvement of school leaders has been narrowly focused on large urban or small rural districts, despite the large numbers of PK-12 students receiving their education in small and mid-sized urban districts (Sanzo & Scribner, 2015, p. 36). There have been success stories of district-led leadership development in larger districts, such as New York City Schools, Baltimore County Public Schools, Cleveland Metropolitan School District among others, while many small to medium-sized districts are stifled by funding woes when attempting to implement such programs. According to Sanzo and Scribner (2015), medium-sized districts lack the political and financial capital to implement the leadership development needed to address the readiness gap of aspiring leaders and create transformative supplemental training that will effectively cultivate a thriving principal pipeline. In addition, medium-sized districts find it difficult to invest enough human capital to develop a program with a personalized approach designed to consider the experiences of the leader, opportunities to reflect on those experiences, and use the reconstructed knowledge to challenge their practice (Williams, 2007). District-run leadership academies, especially in medium-sized districts, have the potential to close the readiness gap that many aspiring leaders face when entering into a principal role. A Medium-sized District is a district with student enrollment over 10,000 but under 60,000 and operates 30-70 schools (Atkinson, January 2016). Medium-sized districts are commonly overlooked in policy-making and are perceived by researchers and by policymakers as less efficient (Baker & Weber, 2016). A district with student enrollment between 10,000 and 60,000 and operating 30-70 schools was considered medium sized compare to the characteristics of other districts across the state.
Outcomes of these district programs suggest that graduates do not become any more effective, than those who do not receive supplemental training at the district level. Districts must realize the valuable investment of leadership development, also known as a “grow-your-own” programs (Corcoran, Schwartz, & Weinstein, 2012; Versland, 2013). District-run programs must prepare the leaders holistically, with a sufficient balance of theory and practice, in order to eliminate the readiness gap that many aspiring leaders face when entering a principal position. Understanding how aspiring leaders conceptualize leadership and their experiences in district-run leadership academies expand the research base around this personalized approach to principal preparation.

University classrooms, schools, and districts all have separate, overlapping, and nested contexts. Thus, education leadership programs can no longer simply exist in a related-yet-separate context of their own, but must be centered upon school and district context to effectively prepare leaders (Brazer & Bauer, 2013). Johnson (2008) states, “effective leaders are effective not because they have more knowledge or experience than ineffective leaders; rather, it is because they have a more valid and effective way of handling the complex issues they face” (p.86). Unlike university programs, district-run programs can provide aspiring school leaders the time and space to develop habits of reflective practice that they will use as a principal. By providing these authentic experiences with sustained exposure to the emotional pressure of a school leader’s workplace, aspiring leaders are able to critically reflect on their practice and make adjustments to their mental models, thus eliminating potential preparation barriers that hinder novice leaders from truly being ready to immediately tackle the role of the principal (Jacobson & Cypres, 2012). Critically reflective thinking is meditative thinking that seeks to assess how the role of power and purposes of underlying assumptions that determine values,
ways of understanding, and behavior (Brookfield, 1995) Therefore, preparation must be grounded in district context to be effective because, as Sanzo and Scribner (2015) suggests, it must provide aspiring leaders with contextualized, job-embedded, authentic learning experiences. Leadership development programs often support aspiring school leaders by building their technical skills and content knowledge, but neglect to attend to their personal and professional understanding of the complexities of the principal role. An approach that fosters transformative learning is needed to change the way that aspiring leaders make meaning of the role of a school leader, thereby changing how they engage in professional practice (Perez, Uline, Johnson, James-Ward, & Basom, 2010).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how aspiring school leaders’ participation in a medium-sized district-run leadership academy shaped their readiness to become effective school leaders (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Honig et al., 2014; Lee, 2010; Sanzo & Scribner, 2015; Webber et al., 2008). Four district characteristics were examined prior to determining the need to focus on medium-sized districts: (a) locale (city/suburb, town, or rural), (b) student enrollment size, (c) number of schools, and (d) principal turnover rates over the past four years were chosen as characteristics of interest. These characteristics are important because districts that neighbor large districts often have similar issues but less funding than large districts to address the problems. Though smaller, these suburban districts may have similar poverty rates as large districts. They may also have a combination of urban and rural characteristics.

To test this perception, the study looked at leadership development in medium-sized districts in city/suburb locales in North Carolina, with medium student enrollment, and with
significant principal retention issues over the past four years. The specific characteristics considered for each district is reflected in Table 1.1. There are sixteen medium-sized districts in North Carolina. These districts account for 14% of the school districts in the state and 30% of the student enrollment (Atkinson, January 2016). While eight of the sixteen districts reported operating a supplemental leadership development program for their currently employed assistant principals in 2016, two of the districts reported aspiring leader programs targeting teacher leaders.

Table 1.1

*Characteristics of Medium Sized Districts in North Carolina*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Name</th>
<th>Student Enrollment</th>
<th>Number of Schools</th>
<th>Free and Reduced Lunch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alamance-Burlington*</td>
<td>22,751</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>61.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buncombe</td>
<td>24,148</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>53.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabarrus*</td>
<td>31,876</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>41.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davidson</td>
<td>18,956</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>44.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durham Public Schools*</td>
<td>52,907</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>63.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaston</td>
<td>31,266</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>64.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iredell-Statesville*</td>
<td>20,759</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnston*</td>
<td>34,964</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>44.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hanover</td>
<td>26,096</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>55.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pitt*</td>
<td>23,224</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>65.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Randolph*</td>
<td>17,074</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Schools of Robeson</td>
<td>22,799</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>99.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rowan-Salisbury</td>
<td>19,135</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>66.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union*</td>
<td>41,349</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>33.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayne</td>
<td>18,321</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>85.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>405,625</td>
<td>613</td>
<td>58.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: *Indicates Districts that operate an Aspiring Leaders Program for currently employed assistant principals*

Table 1.2 shows the principal turnover rates in the medium-sized districts. All of the districts reported at least an average of four percent turnover, while 60% of the districts have an average turnover rate of eight percent, or higher.
Table 1.2

Principal Turnover Trends in Medium Sized Districts in North Carolina

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Name</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alamance-Burlington*</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buncombe</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabarrus*</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davidson</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durham Public Schools*</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaston</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iredell-Statesville*</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnston*</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hanover</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pitt*</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Randolph*</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Schools of Robeson</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rowan-Salisbury</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union*</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayne</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *Indicates Districts that operate an Aspiring Leaders Program for currently employed assistant principals

In order to accomplish the research goals, the researcher explored the learning experiences of the 2016-2017 cohort of aspiring leaders participating in the Central Public Schools’ Aspiring Leaders Academy. The objective of this study was to examine how one medium-sized district-run leadership academy developed aspiring leaders using contextually based, and competency-based program elements that foster transformative learning affected the preparedness gap. The findings of the study identified the relationship between the instructional components and aspiring leader preparation through district-run leadership academies, allowing medium-sized districts in North Carolina to become informed of efficient and effective strategies to help eliminate the readiness gap that many aspiring leaders face. The findings of the study helped to ascertain how the participation in the ALA program transformed the participants’
perspectives of school leadership, and to examine how the instructional components of the program helped to shape the participants’ leadership readiness.

The knowledge of the types of learning strategies that aspiring leaders deem as meaningful to improve their professional practice is valuable to districts and other organizations aiming to develop aspiring leaders. Moreover, this study compared the gaps that exist among aspiring leaders’ experiences upon completing the supplemental leadership development programs to the gaps upon graduating from traditional university programs. This qualitative study relied on four data sources: (a) aspiring leaders semi-structured interviews, (b) participant reflection journals, (c) researcher observation field notes, and (d) archival program documents: a Leadership Readiness self-assessment and responses from the program mastery journal. These data sources provided a means to explore the phenomenon through a triangulation of data sources to answer the research questions and illuminate the study’s conceptual framework.

**Research Questions**

To identify the connection between aspiring leader readiness and participation in a district-run leadership academy, the following research questions guided this study:

1. How does a district-run leadership development program, in a medium-sized school district in North Carolina, shape the leadership readiness of aspiring leaders?
   a. According to the aspiring leaders, which program design components strengthen their leadership readiness?

2. How do aspiring leaders define readiness for effective leadership?
   a. Which leadership skills, behaviors, and competencies do the aspiring leaders perceive to be required for readiness prior to entering the principalship?
Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in the potential implications for the field of education leadership regarding how to best prepare aspiring leaders before entering into the principalship. As Duncan (2010) states:

The significant role of the principal in creating the conditions for improved student outcomes is largely ignored. The majority of principal preparation programs provide inadequate clinical training and mentorship by successful school leaders. And the curriculum has a limited connection to the real-world needs of principals. Now, again, it is far too easy to just implicate colleges of education for the mediocrity of most principal preparation programs. States, districts, and universities are all deeply implicated in second-rate programs. There’s no such thing as a high-performing school without a great principal. It is impossible. We’ve never asked so much of them. There’s nothing more important because the stakes have never been higher for our country. (p.1)

Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin (2013) claim “highly effective principals raise the achievement of a typical student in their schools by between two and seven months of learning in a single school year; ineffective principals lower achievement by the same amount” (p.2), therefore, principals can have direct, indirect, and reciprocal effects on student achievement (Roach, Smith, & Boutin, 2011). This study has potential implications for the field of principal preparation because it offers insight into how one program can transform aspiring leaders’ belief systems and ultimately their practice. Brazer and Bauer (2013) assert:

Whether we believe the criticisms and the responses or not, the central problem for education leadership programs is that the context of leadership has changed
over the past decade or two, and if programs do not continue to change too, they will become irrelevant. (p. 651).

By identifying the relationship between preparation strategies facilitated by medium-school school districts across the United States, aspiring leader development may be informed of strategies that can help shape the readiness of their aspiring leaders. The study also illuminated the instructional components that participants believe had the greatest influence on the leadership readiness.

Exploring the development of aspiring leaders through the conceptual lens of transformative, contextually based, and competency based learning aimed to provide an additional level of personalization to leadership development, which has the potential to build a thriving principal pipeline. Widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo in leadership preparation has led to new ideas about leadership development. Therefore, this study sought to inform the work of other leadership preparation programs seeking to better align district context to the realities of the principalship in the local setting. For aspiring leaders, this study offered an opportunity to see how the complexities and difficulties of the job can be addressed when an individual’s beliefs are challenged by new ways of thinking. The knowledge gained through district-run leadership development programs and the interplay between individual beliefs and preconceived notions regarding the role of the principal and their philosophy of leadership served as a meaningful step towards the professional growth and development of future school leaders. This research has the potential to identify beneficial implications in the field of educational leadership and to contribute to the underdeveloped literature base on principal leadership, particularly from the perspective of the aspiring school leaders.
Design and Methodology

This qualitative case study explored the perspectives of participants in a district-run leadership academy for aspiring school leaders. The foci of this inquiry are the learning experiences that created perspective transformation and ultimately shape the aspiring leaders' readiness for the principalship. The case study approach to inquiry also influences the formation of the research questions, the methods of data collection, the steps of data analysis, and the making of meaning for the final narrative. The case study design provided a rich, thick description how leadership readiness manifested in aspiring leaders. This singular case, the Aspiring Leaders Academy, establishes the boundaries for the study (Creswell, 2008).

This research study is situated in adult learning theory as defined by Malcolm Knowles. Adult learning is self-directed, self-motivated, problem-solving oriented, has a resource of rich experiences, and is based on the needs closely related to changing social roles (Knowles, 1977). Adult learners often undertake learning with a specific target that directly influences a personal and professional goal. Several researchers have approached the study of aspiring leaders’ professional development from this base of adult education (Drago-Severson, 2009; Lauder, 2000; Tucker, Gooden, & Byrne-Jiménez, 2016). However, there is insufficient research on the impact of prior experiences and assumptions of leadership and authority on learning and practice of aspiring school leaders (Drago-Severson, 2004; Hopkins, 2007a; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Tucker et al., 2016; Young, 2013). The development and training of aspiring school leaders must incorporate aspects of adult learning theory as well as provide a means to address prior experiences and beliefs in order to facilitate growth. The aspects of adult learning theory required for effective cohort-based training serve as the overarching premise of the leadership development program under study.
This research study was focused on the fusion of three approaches to adult learning that together provided a possible strategy to overcome the leadership readiness gap of aspiring school leaders. A conceptual framework comprised of transformative learning, contextual learning, and competency-based learning was used to guide the exploration. This study examined the connection between transformative learning experiences (Mezirow, 1997; Nerstrom, 2014), contextual learning experiences (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Nicolini, 2012; Scott, 2013; Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012) and competency-based learning experiences (Johnstone & Soares, 2014; Marion & Leather, 2015; Spencer & Spencer, 2008; Steele et al., 2014; Woodruffe, 1993) and leadership readiness. The study determined if when these three constructs, when paired, produced learning experiences that closed the leadership-readiness gaps of aspiring leaders. By addressing the lingering gaps through the multi-tiered lens of instruction, such programming could lead to more effective school leaders. Figure 1.1 illustrates how a leadership development program for aspiring leaders, grounded in the contextual learning, competency based learning, and transformative learning experiences can shape leadership readiness by closing leadership readiness gaps. The researcher deemed the leadership readiness gap as an insufficient acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to navigate effectively the complexity of the principalship. The leadership readiness gap often occurs after aspiring leaders graduate from a university preparation program with the necessary credentials for licensure, yet still require further training and experience before becoming effective principals. Current research on effective leadership focuses on the key elements of leadership readiness. Readiness to assume a principalship appears to be linked to an individual’s (a) encouragement and support from leadership mentors; (b) opportunities to engage in authentic leadership activities, and (c) perceptions of personal competence to assume school leadership responsibilities (Avolio &
Hannah, 2008; Kearney & Valadez, 2016; Petzko, 2008; Spillane & Lee, 2014a; Thompson & Reichard, 2016). In an effort to strengthen the leadership readiness of aspiring leaders from the district, Central Public Schools (CPS) developed the Aspiring Leaders Academy (ALA) with a focus on carefully selecting leadership doctoral level mentors from across the district. The idea was for aspiring leaders to learn from their mentors each month and to organize job-embedded authentic problems of practice to expand opportunities for aspirants to apply knowledge in practice (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2006).

**Figure 1.** The conceptual framework guiding this research study

Contextual learning occurs both consciously and unconsciously. It is a three pronged learning process that includes situated cognition, social cognition and distributed cognition (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Scott, 2013; Shove et al., 2012). In this study, contextually based learning theory illuminated how the contextual factors of the school district shaped aspiring leaders perceptions of the role of a school leader. District context matters when cultivating principals
that will be prepared to be effective when taking over a school. In order to develop desired leadership competencies and situational knowledge, new approaches to leadership development, such as district-run aspiring leaders programs, often emphasize specific district initiatives, policies, and practices. Context is vital for leaders to understand how to operate in essential functions of schools, such as instruction, community building, and change management, as well as district context (e.g., approaches to serving students with particular backgrounds or needs). Therefore, it is critical that development programs heavily incorporate district protocol, language, and process.

The second construct in the framework was competency-based learning. According to Voorhees (2001), competencies are the result of integrative learning experiences in which skills, abilities, and knowledge interact to form learning bundles that have currency in relation to the task for which they are assembled. Unlike theory based learning, competency based learning is an approach that focuses on the application of concrete skills as opposed to abstract learning (Johnstone & Soares, 2014; Marion & Leather, 2015; Spencer & Spencer, 2008; Steele et al., 2014; Woodruffe, 1993). Learning outcomes in competency based learning models are unambiguous and easily measurable (Klein-Collins, 2012). As a means of assessing learning in leadership development, competency based learning is beneficial for the learner because it, “provides students with a clear map and the navigational tools needed to move expeditiously toward their goals” (Voorhees, 2001, p. 7). Competency based learning is beneficial for the instructional designer because it provides clear results of mastery which helps in making critical decisions about strategies to improve student learning (Dwyer & Azevedo, 2016). In this study, mastery of the North Carolina Leadership Standards and Competencies were used as learning goals because they are clear and are reported in a meaningful way so that all relevant

The third construct in the conceptual framework is the incorporation of learning approaches that foster transformative learning. Transformative learning is a fundamentally rational and analytical process (Mezirow, 1997). Learning occurs because of an accumulation of transformations of the mental schema, caused by disorienting dilemmas or challenges to perspectives, over time. Critical reflective thinking and rational discourse were used as conduits to foster transformative learning in the leadership development program. Figure 1.2 shows the conceptual and theoretical relationship between adult learning theory and the concepts that frame the study. Instructional design of the leadership development program would create perspective shifts in the aspiring leaders understanding of school leadership and provide opportunities to apply the new ways of thinking.

![Figure 1.2. Theoretical and conceptual underpinnings used in this study](image)

For this study, eleven participants were selected from the 2016-2017 cohort of CPS’ Aspiring Leaders Academy. Participants were selected from the cohort using quota sampling to ensure the researcher could understand the problem and the research questions from each characteristic of the population (Creswell, 2008). Quota sampling, a form of non-probability
sampling, is a technique often employed in qualitative research when certain characteristics of individuals are used as the basis of selection, most often chosen to reflect the diversity and breadth of the sample population (Vogt, Gardner, & Haeffele, 2012). According to Abrams (2010), quota sampling allows the researcher to intentionally invite specific perspectives into the study and exercise judgment about who will provide the best perspective on the phenomenon of interest. Hence, the sample population in this study possessed certain characteristics in order to understand the influence of a district-run leadership development program on leadership readiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009; Yin, 2014). The program coordinator was asked to identify ideal individuals from the cohort, who have the following characteristics: currently enrolled or recently graduated from traditional principal preparation graduate program, currently employed as an assistant principal or instructional facilitator, and having more than two years of leadership experience in the district (Heckathorn, 2011). The researcher also asked the program coordinator to consider diverse demographics (e.g., race, gender), and participant quality (e.g., strong communicator, knowledgeable) when making his recommendations.

The phenomenon of leadership readiness was captured through three sources of data (a) semi-structured interviews, (b) archival program documents—reflection journal, leadership readiness survey, and curriculum materials, and (c) field notes of the observations of participant interaction and discourse in two learning workshops. Triangulation of the multiple data collection instruments allowed for more rigorous and valid conclusions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). Each source of data was essential to capturing the phenomenon of leadership readiness in the aspiring leaders. In addition, each of the data sources aligns directly to a one or more of the research questions that guide this study.
Semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity to capture the participant's voice and communicate their perspective, which is critical to understanding their transformation throughout the program (Newton, 2010). The purpose of the semi-structured interview was to understand how each participant constructed his or her philosophy of the school leadership and their perception of readiness after completing the program. The intention of the researcher was to elicit information about each participant's background and developmental capacities.

An examination of three program components provided another data source to understand the influence that transformative learning, contextual learning and competency based learning in a district-run leadership development program has upon leadership readiness of aspiring leaders. The following documents were reviewed, (a) the Aspiring Leaders Academy Reflection Journal, (b) Program documents and training agendas, and the (c) Aspiring Leaders Academy Leadership Readiness Survey pre and post results. The content analysis of each of these sources of data occurred at the conclusion of the program to ensure that participants had an opportunity to complete their capstone project and final reflection submission. A content analysis was used to illuminate any significant transformations in the participants’ perspectives while analyzing the capstone projects and reflection journal submissions.

Since a researcher’s task in the case study research is to describe and interpret social action or behavior within a particular context, the researcher took field notes during three of the learning workshops to collect the topical information that was contributed by the participants during the rational discourse and the questions that were asked in the classes to identify critical reflection. The observations notes provided thick descriptions of the observed social actions, capture the thoughts and beliefs of participants, and led to interpretations and meanings that were reported during the analysis phase of the research. Observation data helped to identify and create
thick descriptions of what occurred during the learning sessions. Figure 1.3 displays the data sources used to illuminate the phenomenon under study.

Transcript coding consisted of identifying common beliefs, phrasings, and ideas from the aspiring leaders’ perceptions of leadership readiness. Using both a priori and emergent coding, the data was studied and coded using Nerstrom’s Transformative Learning Model (2014), the North Carolina School Executive Standards and the North Carolina Leadership Competencies. The analysis to uncover the findings of district context began with emergent coding of the data and transitioned to more specific codes (Miles et al., 2013). Interview data was transcribed and coded, along with the data collected from observation and document analysis of the archival program documents, using ATLAS.ti software, and housed in a safe and secure site.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1.3.** Qualitative data sources used to illuminate the phenomenon under study

Expert support was sought to review the credibility and trustworthiness of the interview guide to prevent researcher bias and ensure the alignment of the guide with the research questions and the purpose of the study (Yin, 2014). Triangulation of three data sets enabled the researcher to identify patterns, themes, and draw conclusions. In addition, the researcher sought confounding evidence of the findings for irregularities that may challenge the phenomenon
An analysis of all data permitted the identification of common themes among participants’ beliefs regarding leadership development and transformative learning experiences. By using three data sources, validity, and reliability of the study findings were increased. Triangulation is defined as a technique that facilitates the validation of data through the collection and cross verification of data from a diverse range of individuals and sources (Maxwell, 2013). To avoid possible misinterpretation of participants’ perspectives and allow subsequent opportunities for participants to volunteer additional information after the initial interaction, it was important to employ a system of member checking. Each participant was allowed to review the transcribed interview. In clarifying the potential for bias, preconceived notions regarding the outcome of the study are separated. Bracketing strategies were used to guard against potential bias as well. The researcher had a conversation with the program coordinator and a neutral colleague to discuss personal biases and experiences about the research topic. By reflecting with them on separate occasions, the researcher had an opportunity to reveal any preconceived notions and potential biases that may arise. In addition, the researcher memoed and kept notes in a bracketing journal to keep track of other biases that may arise during the data collection process.

Limitations of the Study

The goal of this study was to explore how district-run leadership development programs inform aspiring leaders’ leadership readiness prior to entering into the principalship. Unfortunately, even the most well-planned research studies will have limitations. To limit the effect the researcher has on the findings, protocols were established for administering the data collection instruments, coding sources of data, and data analysis to reduce subjectivity and bias. In an effort to avoid over-generalizing participant perspectives, the researcher was deliberate
when selecting the sample participants. Sixteen participants initially elected to participate, five of
them later declined due to unforeseen circumstances. Since qualitative findings are dependent on
context, sampling, and the depth of the case study, further research would need to verify whether
findings from one study would be generalizable to a different setting (Patton, 1999). The
participating school district was similar to several other medium-size school districts in North
Carolina. However, the findings of this study may, or may not be, generalizable to other
medium-size school districts in North Carolina. To reduce the over-generalization of the
findings, an emphasis on characteristics and leadership development unique to the sample district
provided a distinction between similar entities. Additionally, the fidelity of the program design
and implementation rested solely with the program coordinator because there was no norming
process or standardization of the program. In this regard, the execution of some of the most
critical elements of the program’s design as mentioned in this study, were lacking or non-existent
due to timing and participants needs. The researcher recorded the lack of implementation of
these elements in the reflection journal to note them when discussing the findings. Next, the
researcher gave great consideration to the limitation of the data collection instruments. Since
self-assessment surveys were subjective, the outcomes may not accurately portray the
participant’s true level of leadership readiness. Lastly, those who agreed to participate in the
semi-structured interviews were given an opportunity to select a time and place that was
convenient to them, which resulted in multiple interview settings.

Assumptions of the Study

There were several assumptions to consider in this research study. The first assumption
was that participant responses would genuinely reflect their individual experiences and reactions
to their participation in the leadership development program. There was a potential that the
participants only shared information that they felt was suitable for the study and chose not to divulge thoughts or reflections that would expose any remaining gaps. Another assumption of the study is that participant responses regarding transformation of their perspectives was a direct reflection of the effectiveness of ALA curriculum and other curricula components. There was a potential for other job-embedded factors to contribute to the mental shifts, which may not have been identified. Finally, there was an assumption that the number of participants who engaged in this study was adequate and appropriate to meet requirements for valid research.

Definitions

These definitions are offered in this chapter, as they may be useful to the reader in understanding the terms used within the remainder of the study.

Aspiring Leader: a current assistant principal or teacher leader receiving training in K-12 school administration prior to seeking to obtain a position as a school principal (Zardoya, 2014).

Critical Reflection: Meditative thinking that seeks to assess how the role of power and purposes of underlying assumptions that determine values, ways of understanding, and behavior (Brookfield, 1995) Savaya and Gardner (2012) suggest “critical reflection (CR) is a process by which one may identify the assumptions governing one’s actions, question them, and develop alternative behaviors” (p. 145).

District-run Program: a formal school district provided leadership development program for aspiring leaders. Also, referred to commonly as a grow-your-own program (Corcoran et al., 2012).

District Context: the factors that emphasize specific district initiatives, policies, and practices (Sanzo & Scribner, 2015).
**Leadership Readiness**: The pivotal link connecting high potential to capacity and competence (Avolio & Hannah, 2008; Spillane & Lee, 2014b).

**Medium-sized District**: A district with student enrollment over 10,000 but under 60,000 and operates 30-70 schools (Atkinson, January 2016).

**Perspective**: An individual’s vantage point of a situation, issue, or person that is based on prior experiences, assumptions, and beliefs (King, 2007).

**Perspective Transformation**: Occurs after an individual questions prior personal assumption, beliefs, understandings, or values and readjust thoughts based on new information (King, 2007).

**Principalship**: The condition of being the principal of a school (Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlen, 2013a).

**Rational Discourse**: The content-focused dialogue meant to objectively examine and discuss evidence for and against competing viewpoints (Mezirow, 1997).

**Readiness Gap**: An oversight of necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes that may hinder the performance of an aspiring leader after entering into the principalship (Kearney & Valadez, 2016; Young, 2013).

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, the researcher described the knowledge, attitudes, and attributes of an effective 21st-century school principal, especially focusing on those working in a medium-sized school district, while examining how the current state of the principal preparation programs are addressing the knowledge gap that aspiring leaders face. This chapter also addressed the school principal shortage, a situation playing out in both states, especially North Carolina, and the national arenas across the United States. This research study is based in the problem of the need for more district-run leadership development programs designed to shape the leadership
readiness of aspiring leaders who graduate from principal preparation programs still ill-prepared to be effective school leaders (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Honig et al., 2014; Lee, 2010; Sanzo & Scribner, 2015; Webber et al., 2008). This research has the potential to identify beneficial implications in the field of educational leadership as well as to contribute to the underdeveloped literature base on principal leadership, particularly from the perspective of the aspiring school leaders. The researcher investigated a district-run leadership development program, the Aspiring Leaders Academy in Central Public Schools. This study examined the connections between leadership readiness (Avolio & Hannah, 2008; Kearney & Valadez, 2016; Petzko, 2008; Spillane & Lee, 2014a; Thompson & Reichard, 2016) and the instructional design components of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997; Nerstrom, 2014), contextual learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Scott, 2013; Shove et al., 2012) and competency based (Johnstone & Soares, 2014; Marion & Leather, 2015; Spencer & Spencer, 2008; Steele et al., 2014; Woodruffe, 1993) in a district-run leadership academy. The objective of the study was to explore how the program design shaped the readiness of aspiring leaders face. A review of the literature that supports the conceptual framework of this study is contained in Chapter 2. The methodology for this study is revealed in Chapter 3. The findings of the study are found in Chapter 4. Finally, the study concludes with conclusions, recommendations, and implications for further study in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Effective Schools Need Effective Leaders

School principals are the most crucial factor in ensuring that 21st-century schools are equitable and excellent. According to Duncan (2009), “if at the end of the day, if our 95,000 schools each had a great principal; this thing would take care of itself.” Research has overwhelmingly affirmed that effective school leadership and effective schooling are inseparable from one another (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Jacobson, Terry Orr, & Young, 2008; Spillane & Kenney, 2012). In fact, school principals are such critically important components that, “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 3), and accounts for one-fourth of all school-related effects on student achievement (Louis et al., 2010). The research findings further bolster the claim by displaying that although school leadership does not make its impact directly, its indirect workings have a statistically significant effect on student achievement. In fact, the researchers state they “have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership”(Louis et al., 2010, p. 9). Orr (2010) remarks, “Principal leadership practices contribute significantly to school effectiveness and performance but primarily indirectly through teacher and organizational conditions” (p.116).

The importance of effective leadership for student achievement is apparent in a recent longitudinal study of distributed leadership(Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2003). Principals directly impact the school’s academic capacity, while indirectly influencing student growth (Heck & Hallinger, 2009). Similarly, after a meta-analysis of the research on the influence of school leaders, Leithwood and Jantzi (2009) identified four types of influence that leaders have
on student performance: (a) rational, (b) emotional, (c) organizational and (d) familial. In addition, Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) revealed through a meta-analysis of the literature that the more educational leaders focus on teaching and learning, the greater the effect on student performance.

Harvey and Holland (2012) assert that effective principals need to remain in a single school for five to seven years for the effects of their work to transform the school into an effective school. Schools experiencing exceptionally rapid principal turnover are often reported to suffer from “a lack of shared purpose, cynicism among staff about principal commitment, and an inability to maintain a school-improvement focus long enough to actually accomplish any meaningful change” (p.1). Zardoya (2014) emphasizes that they have not found any cases of a school improvement in absence of talented leadership because an effective principal is an irreplaceable key to continuous school improvement and student achievement.

Over the past 30 years, there has been substantial research conducted and reviewed to isolate the effects of leadership practices on school effectiveness and to distinguish the most effective practices (Edmonds, 1979; Leithwood et al., 2008; Robinson et al., 2008). Fusarelli and Militello (2012) suggests, “Effective schools are led by principals who are equipped with the requisite knowledge, skills, beliefs, and dispositions required to improve teacher quality.” (p. 49). The influential research on effective schools conducted in the 1970s (Edmonds, 1979) revealed that effective schools are characterized by a learning-oriented culture and, with that, LaPointe and Davis (2006) write:

Much attention has been given recently to the development of reform-minded school leaders who can directly influence the quality of teaching and learning in their schools and school districts, who can close achievement gaps, and who can
shepherd their organizations through thoughtful, ongoing, and strategic change efforts. Such leaders are in short supply (p.1).

In studies of effective leadership and school improvement, several researchers have delineated the relationship between leadership practices, school improvement practices, and student outcomes (Orr & Orphanos, 2011). Odhiambo and Hii (2012) posit that effective leadership at the school level is more crucial than ever in this era of accountability and school leadership effectiveness will continue to be a central focus of research and practice in the United States.

Effective School Leadership in North Carolina

In 2006, North Carolina redesigned their school executive standards for school leaders to align with the findings of a Wallace Foundation study (Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, & Gundlach, 2003). In the New Vision of School Leadership for North Carolina, Atkinson Atkinson (2006) declares:

Public education’s changed mission dictates the need for a new type of school leader – an executive instead of an administrator. No longer are school leaders just maintaining the status quo by managing complex operations but just like their colleagues in business, they must be able to create schools as organizations that can learn and change quickly if they are to improve performance. Schools need leaders who are adept at creating systems for change and at building relationships with and across staff that not only tap into the collective knowledge and insight they possess but powerful relationships that also stir their passions for their work with children…The successful work of the leader will only be realized in the creation of a culture in which leadership is distributed and encouraged with teachers, which consists of open, honest communication, which is focused on the
use of data, teamwork, research-based best practices, and which uses modern tools to drive ethical and principled, goal-oriented action. (p.1)

The study outlined several points about what effective leadership should look like in North Carolina Schools:

1) Leadership is not a position or a person.

2) Leadership is not about doing everything oneself but it is always about creating processes and systems that will cause everything to happen. Leadership is about setting direction, aligning, and motivating people to implement positive sustained improvement.

3) Leaders bring their person to the practice of leadership. Matching the context of leadership to the person of the individual is important to the success of the leader.

4) The concept of leadership is extremely complex and systemic in nature. Isolating the parts of leadership completely misses the power of the whole. It is not just knowing what to do, but why to do it, how to do it, and when to do it.

5) Within a school district there are nested leadership systems (local boards of education, central office, school, and classroom). For the organization to be successful, these systems must be aligned and supportive, and function as a team. (p.2)

By 2010, NC policymakers zeroed in on improving school leadership preparation as a crucial step toward improving student achievement. The state devised a three-pronged plan to address the crisis: (1) Masters of School Administration (MSA) programs within the public university system (2) alternative licensure Leadership Academies, and (3) high-impact professional development for existing principals. According to the State Board of Education meeting minutes, “Action on all three fronts is mutually reinforcing, aligned with the newly adopted North Carolina Standards for School Executives, and driven by a commitment to
improving school leadership as a means to facilitating student learning” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2010, p. 3).

Training and Preparation of a 21st Century School Leader

A survey conducted by the Wallace Foundation in 2010 found that improving school leadership is a key priority for school reform and many underperforming university programs have been placed on the chopping block (Mitgang, 2012). In 2005, there were approximately 600 educational leadership programs in the United States (Levine, 2005). Three years later there were 580 degree-granting programs (Hackmann & McCarthy, 2011), which shows growth of traditional university programs has stalled. As McCarthy (2015) points out that the lack of new traditional programs should not be a concern; it is the ability to adequately prepare leaders for the real work of school leadership that remains problematic. Many universities feared that increasing the rigor of their preparation programs would result in a loss of revenue (Hackmann & McCarthy, 2011). Recently, a survey of principals across the United States exposed that most believe their university preparation programs deserve an F. School leadership preparation reform efforts have been designed to respond to two challenges: (a) a diminishing supply of school leaders due to retirements and job transition; and (b) concerns about the quality of the principal pipeline and new principals’ readiness to effectively take over the helm (Collaborative, 2010).

Models of Leadership Preparation

Programs have been encouraged by leading organization in the field, such as the Wallace Foundation and the University Council for Education Administration, to provide a more coherent and rigorous curriculum and stop downplaying the practice of school leadership (Goldring & Schuermann, 2009; Hernandez, Roberts, & Menchaca, 2012).
Despite the evidence regarding the components of high quality preparation programs, relatively little is still known about how to most effectively develop school principals (Hess & Kelly, 2007; Jacob, Goddard, Kim, Miller, & Goddard, 2015). In 2010, forty-seven state legislatures passed laws to enhance school leadership preparation (Shelton, 2010). Also, the last decade has seen the emergence of alternative principal training models and providers. This emergence can be attributed to the $4.35 billion federal Race to the Top program that rewards funding for recruiting, developing, and retaining effective teachers and principals. Since policymakers are recognizing both the importance of good school principals and what’s needed to shape them, there are several funding options available for alternative preparation programs. While traditional preparation programs based on the university campus are still the primary training and licensure options for aspiring leaders, several program designs have emerged that seem to establish a principal pipeline for school districts. There are four alternative programming models: (a) university-district partnerships; (b) state and regional academies; (c) alternative licensure programs and (d) district-run academies.

**Current State of Traditional University Programs**

Since effective school leadership is even more crucial for improving schools with low-achieving students, preparation has to become much more contextual, with a laser-focus on practices of school. The quality of a preparation program can positively influence leaders’ professional practice, which should ultimately result in improved student achievement (Orr & Orphanos, 2011). Therefore, the primary outcomes of preparation programs should be development of emotional intelligence of school leaders, and increased practical leadership competency of graduates. Yet, university program quality is typically determined by four key program outputs: (a) graduation rate, (b) licensure rate, (c) placement rate, and (d) retention rate
(Fuller, Hollingworth, & An, 2016). There seems to be a misalignment between current state licensure requirements and institutional norms in higher education and the individual growth and development of aspiring school leaders (McCarthy, 2015). Similarly, Pounder (2010) points out that inquiry into leadership preparation would be most fruitful if greater attention were given to the relationship between preparation program quality features and graduate on-the-job leadership behaviors.

Ample research on school leadership preparation programs indicates that existing university preparation programs are in dire need of a design and implementation overhaul (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Orr, Young, & Rorrer, 2010b; Pounder, 2010). At minimum, universities have been charged with scaffolding their principal preparation programs using the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards (ISLLC) and the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards, which are used for national accreditation of leadership preparation programs (Pounder, 2010). Currently, university preparation programs are in a quandary because while improvements are required to stay current with today’s school needs, for many universities, school leadership preparation is considered a primary revenue source for many universities and raising the bar on admissions will mean that programs may lose potential candidates (McCarthy, 2015).

In 1988, the National School Boards Association conducted a nationwide survey of district- and building-level administrators and found that 51% of their 1,123 school administrator participants classified their preparation as either fair or poor, with the primary claim that professors and their theory-based approach to preparation did not adequately prepare them for the reality that awaited them upon obtaining a principal position (Jacobson & Cypres, 2012). Principals pinpoint the primary problem with their leadership preparation as the course work
(Black & Murtadha, 2007). Most principals report that their coursework seems to only emphasize instructional and managerial leadership skills and failed to teach the more complex combinations of leadership skills necessary for school leaders to possess cultural, strategic, and external development leadership. Moreover, they also revealed a lack of focus on navigating district bureaucracy. Another key criticism of university programs is that state policies heavily influence the quality of principal preparation through program approval, certification, and targeted technical assistance. According to Brazer and Bauer (2013) “Impetus for developing a new model for leadership preparation comes from a sense of disjuncture between the call for instructional leadership in schools and the ways in which leadership preparation programs appear to be organized” (p.648).

**Issues of Program Design**

Leadership education and training are important parts of the development of a leader that can be influenced by participation in programming (Williams, 2007). However, in the past twenty years, criticisms of university preparation programs have focused on the programming features of candidate selection, focus, content, and rigor. In fact, most university programs have lenient admissions standards, a curriculum that doesn’t reflect the needs of school districts and diverse student bodies, and field experiences that are poorly designed (Mitgang, 2012). Several recent empirical studies have highlighted that programs continue to be criticized for low quality (McCarthy, 2015; Orr, 2010; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Orr & Pounder, 2010), lack of rigor (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Jacobson & Cypres, 2012), outdated content, inappropriate pedagogy (Baker, Orr, & Young, 2007; Orr & Orphanos, 2011), and poor student recruitment and retention strategies. These failures illustrate a lack of concern regarding resign and reform for program
structure and more importantly program outcomes (Fuller et al., 2016; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Spiro, 2013).

Much of the criticism surrounding conventional principal preparation involves the copious state regulations regarding school leadership. Many states have adopted and adapted the ISLLC standards to serve as the bedrock of school leadership program design, school leader licensure, and assessment (Baker et al., 2007). While the central theme of ISLLC is to place student achievement at the heart of school leadership, some argue that issues of cultural context and school-community demographic are disregarded in the standards (Brown, 2006; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Ginsberg, Knapp, & Farrington, 2014; McCarthy, 2015). In turn, traditional preparation programs and state licensure requirements are grounded by standards that provide a limited scope of school leadership. While universities ultimately determine program design, most programs adhere to a basic framework that is aligned to state regulations without deviation. The framework typically includes: (a) a pre-determined number of discrete courses; (b) a loosely regulated field experience; and (c) a proficient score on the School Leadership Licensure Assessment (SLLA) (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Fuller & Hollingworth, 2014; Pounder, 2010).

The SLLA is a major point of contention in the field because there is no evidence to show a correlation between the SLLA and desired skills and behaviors of school leaders (Orr & Barber, 2009). Scholars and practitioners alike have stated that SLLA devalues key issues of class, race, and poverty while promoting a limited view of instructional leadership (Cooper, 2009). Further, McCarthy (2015) states, “others similarly have asserted that use of SLLA may impede efforts to increase diversity among public school educators by not assessing important leadership behaviors such as tolerance, creativity, and commitment to social justice” (p. 424).
Yet, policymakers continue to require the SLLA and similar assessments as a prerequisite to administrative licensure, which allows these tests to influence the content of leadership preparation programs and output of school leaders.

In addition to the over-regulated program design of school leadership, several scholars have indicated that candidate selection is problematic for university programs as well (Baker et al., 2007; Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Orr & Orphanos, 2011). In recent years, there has been a proliferation of non-traditional school personnel such as teacher coaches and subject matter experts entering school leadership programs with the intention of improving schooling through an emphasis on distributed leadership (Brazer & Bauer, 2013). In addition, there has been an influx of candidates who are seeking school leadership licensure as a method to increase their salary or status. Baker et al. (2007), writes “candidates are cited as lacking prior teaching and administrative experience; demonstrated effectiveness; or adequate skills, knowledge, and dispositions for the principalship” (p. 281). According to Orr and Orphanos (2011):

Critics of the leadership preparation field identify a potential influence on the preparation program–leadership practice relationship: differences in the leadership potential and the prior skills of students admitted to programs. Some critics argue that programs’ admissions decisions are more determinant of graduate outcomes than are their program features. Moreover, many programs have been shown to use weak selection criteria (e.g., low or nonexistent admissions expectations) based on prior academic performance or leadership experiences. (p. 20)

Despite the criticism, McCarthy (2015) states that school leadership programs continue to accept 41% more candidates than most other disciplines. In spite of the concern regarding
candidate selection, university programs have continued to operate under the assumption that most candidates entering the field are classroom teachers moving into administration, who need to learn management beyond their classroom (Brazer & Bauer, 2013). Another candidate selection misstep is the heavy reliance on the Graduate Record Exam (GRE). While the GRE is a normative test, its outputs do not equate with leadership potential. Therefore, usage of the GRE as a selection assessment may be disadvantageous (McCarthy, 2015). Given the lack of evidence demonstrating a correlation between criteria for selection into university programs and competence as a school leader graduates (Fuller et al., 2016; McCarthy, 2015), researchers have even argued that eliminating ambiguous selection criteria such as the GRE would “raise the quality of individuals who enter the field” (Smith, 2008, p. 31).

University resistance is a major issue that continues to plague university programs. University, primarily faculty’s resistance to substantial change, has caused university programs to lose step with the transformation that has occurred in K-12 schooling over the past twenty years. Kowalski (2009) contends even in the face of such a threat, many professors have been unable to alter their theory-laden approach to instruction or reach a compromise with practitioners in order to make strides that are essential to reform. It seems the education administration field has been stymied by walls of resistance signifying divergent philosophical views regarding school leadership (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Hernandez & Kose, 2012; Miller & Martin, 2015). The professorate and other scholars tend to believe that a combination of pre-service training offered through university-based graduate degree and certification programs, along with, continued on-the-job learning will sufficiently prepare school principals for their roles. However, the preceding and subsequently discussed criticisms of low admissions standards, insufficient clinical components, and curricula that is not reflective of the issues of
diversity, race, and gender (Cunningham & Sherman, 2008; Dodson, 2014; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006) indicate clear limitations on the potency of graduate-level training for future instructional leaders (Ginsberg et al., 2014).

**Call for High-Quality Programs**

Instead of redesigning programming to include evidenced-based suggestions and building a standards-based program focused on increasing student learning, many preparation programs simply have plugged the 2015 Professional Standards for Educational Leaders into existing courses without making substantive changes (McCarthy, 2015). Stakeholders are beginning to strike back and force the necessary change to produce school leaders who are able to effectively lead today’s schools. For instance, the Commonwealth of Kentucky decided to phase out all of their master’s degree programs in leadership at the end of 2011, rather than continue to battle universities to improve their programming design. This policy move makes it very clear that state requirements could be altered in order to force universities to redesign preparation programs or face a loss of revenue. Yet, some universities have heeded the call and introduced additional ethics courses and courses emphasizing social justice, including the concepts of privilege, power, spirituality, and related topics (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillo, & Urban, 2011).

The call for high quality programming has increased, with high-quality being defined as a preparation program whose curriculum is reflective of the realities of practicing principals and is aligned to state and professional leadership standards (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013; Perez et al., 2010; Young, Crow, Murphy, & Ogawa, 2009). McCarthy (2015) remarks that high-quality programming that is characterized as innovative or exemplary must be substantiated by linking specific programmatic features that will produce the desired administrative practices to school and student outcomes. Once the effects of linking explicit aspects of leadership behaviors to
programmatic features are validated, researchers will then be justified in labeling programs with such characterizations.

There is a small body of research that identifies the influences of leadership preparation on leadership practices and school outcomes; however, this research is limited by scholarly skepticism lack of evidence-based findings and its inability to conduct large-scale comparative research studies (Kottkamp & Rusch, 2009; McCarthy & Forsyth, 2009). Those who have researched the topic agree that supportive program structures, intensive field experiences, competent faculty, student-centered instruction, and innovative program design are essential components of a high-quality preparation program (Browne-Ferrigno, 2007; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Dodson, 2014). According to Orr et al. (2010a), features of high-quality programs must be guided by three aims: improving alignment to district reform approaches, fostering candidates’ skill development, and balancing theory and practice. Further, Orr and Pounder (2010) add that high-quality programs should include seven essential components.

1. A program features centered on shared values, beliefs, and a well-defined theory of leadership for school improvement.

2. A coherent curriculum, aligned with state and professional standards that integrates learning of effective instructional leadership, organizational development, and change management.

3. Implementation of learning strategies that integrate theory and practice and stimulate critical reflection.

4. Field experiences that provide opportunities to apply leadership knowledge and skills under the guidance of an expert practitioner–mentor.

5. Staffing knowledgeable university faculty
6. A cohort model that allows for social and professional support, in which students take common courses together in a prescribed sequence, formalized mentoring, and advising from expert principals.

7. Standards-based assessments for candidate and program feedback that are tied to the program vision and objectives.

Davis and Darling-Hammond (2012) assert that program content should also pay greater attention to issues of diversity, race and gender, and equity.

Originally, Leithwood, Jantzi, Coffin, and Wilson (1996) found that effective leadership programs opportunities for authentic field-based learning experiences engendered real-life problem-solving skills, and twenty years later, Orr (2006) maintained that case-based and problem-based teaching strategies should be utilized to “ground aspiring leaders in the problems of their field and to expand their problem-framing and problem-solving capabilities” (pp. 495-496). Moreover, high-quality preparation programs must help aspiring leaders to develop habits of reflection and critical analysis, which will allow them to learn from practice.

McCarthy (2015) asserts that while the most popular models entail many of the same leadership practices, transformative approaches will increase the level of rigor in the coursework and field experiences that will develop the aspiring leader in a more personalized manner (Johnson, 2008). Personalizing instruction means designing instruction to develop individual aspiring leaders’ habits of mind. A great deal of time is required to refine complex habits of mind; yet, time is a rare commodity in the current high accountability context of education reform. If pre-service preparation fails to spend the time providing personalized opportunities to inquire about, plan, and enact solutions to authentic student learning problems
(Hackmann & McCarthy, 2011; McCarthy, 2015), then “pre-service leadership preparation risks being characterized as a misnomer” (Perez et al., 2010, p. 256).

**University-District Partnerships**

University-district partnerships allow participants to learn through job-embedded practice and enroll in pre-certification university programs, which will ultimately lead to state licensure (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005). In this model, university professors serve as advisors to districts developing job-embedded study and/or offer university courses tailored to the local district. These programs are championed because through collaborative efforts university-based programs are sustainable and district initiatives and needs are addressed. Baker et al. (2007) indicate such collaborations receive more federal and state grant funding because they hearten program innovation and responsiveness to district needs, includes developing strong partnerships with universities. Perez et al. (2010) found that by incorporating authentic problems of practice, aspiring leaders were better equipped to handle current and pressing student needs at their schools. It not only helped them to better understand the job of principal, but also helped them recognize how their practice enhanced learning results for the students in their respective schools. This approach is applauded because it gives districts control over program design and graduate outcomes, while still relying on universities to provide essential programmatic resources, such as faculty. Districts also are able to avoid any organizational conflicts that may arise when partnering with a university or external organization.

There are several documented challenges to university-district partnerships. Orr et al. (2010b) found that faculty turnover, leadership changes, and other university-related changes disrupted sustainability of the eight districts that were included in their study. That study also found that like conventional leadership preparation programs, university-district partnerships are
beholden to state accreditation and licensure requirements, resulting in requirements that mimic
the status quo. Additionally, in the case of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, their original
partnership with nearby Winthrop University was severed due to a misunderstanding of roles and
duties for each partner (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013). The district has since partnered with a
second-area institution, Queens University, in hopes of creating a sustainable model. Other
criticisms of this approach include the heavy cost and time expense needed to operate the
program. Also, sustainability is vulnerable to districts shifts in leadership, funding, and reform
initiatives (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013; Mitgang, 2013b; Sanzo & Scribner, 2015; Turnbull et al.,
2013b).

The leadership preparation offered by the university is closely consistent with district
initiatives. The faculty model is a cooperative between district and university staff. Aspiring
leaders may be selected and their salaries are underwritten by the district as investments in their
principal pipeline. Even in some cases, the district and university continue to offer ongoing
development for the program. Partnerships between the university and district have the potential
to change the structure and content of leadership preparation (McCarthy, 2015).

**Alternative Licensure Programs**

Over the last twenty years, non-university, third-party organizations have emerged as
alternative licensure programs (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005;
Pounder, 2010) and have taken the corner market away from university programs (Corcoran et
al., 2012; Ryder, 2006; Urban Education Collaborative, 2010). Murphy, Moorman, and
McCarthy (2008) suggest that some states have loosened existing licensure requirements for
aspiring leaders, which foregrounded non-profit and for-profit alternatives to university
leadership preparation to increase significantly. These alternative programs include: professional
associations training school leaders, grow-your-own administrators district-run programs, and privatized organizations providing development options to aspiring leaders (McCarthy, 2015). Some operate as separate entities, and some include collaboration with school districts. Alternative credentialing programs have an array of provider options and program designs. While some programs consider a candidate’s leadership potential more heavily than his/her academic proficiency, others debate the use of lenient or stringent selection criteria to identify candidates with a suitable combination of practical experience and leadership potential (Hess & Kelly, 2007).

There are a variety of alternative licensure programs and pathways for those inside and outside of the field of education. Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) found that in California passing a state exam was sufficient to obtain administrative licensure, and in New Jersey, candidates who possess a master’s in business administration, public administration, or management science could qualify for provisional administrative licensure. McCarthy (2015) writes:

Currently New Leaders for New Schools prepares principals in twelve urban areas; the Broad Superintendents Academy prepares non-traditional candidates for urban school districts; and the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) trains its own principals in charter schools that are operating in twenty states for at-risk students (p.428).

In multiple studies, researchers found that principals who graduated from alternative licensure programs rated their programs significantly higher on having clear focus and clarified values about leadership and learning; active, student-centered instructional practices; supportive organizational structures to facilitate retention and engagement; coherent, challenging, and reflective content and experiences; competent faculty; and supportive student relationships than
did principals who graduated from more traditional programs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Orr, 2010). Though school boards still seek leaders with graduate degrees from conventional university preparation programs (Smith, 2008), they are more concerned about candidates’ preparation and ability to lead than how they acquired their license (Brown, O’Connor Jr, Neal, & Overturf, 2011). While there is practically no research available to compare alternative providers to university preparation programs, and the bulk of aspiring leaders continue to seek training at university programs, the alternative and privatization movement is gaining traction, providing alternatives to the traditional route to obtain a school leadership license (McCarthy, 2015).

**State and Regional Academies: Advantages and Critiques**

State policy makers realized that investing in leadership preparation was a cost-effective way to improve teaching and learning (Fusarelli & Militello, 2012). So, states began to identify support models that could aid universities in refining their preparation programs to prepare new principals (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). Policy makers in several states established state or regionally-based leadership academies to better prepare aspiring leaders to lead school change and instructional improvement, and in effect, successful school improvement. Davis and Darling-Hammond (2012):

> The state and regional academies often provide a range of programs for leaders, or leadership teams, at different stages of their careers and facing different challenges. Their strategies include workshops and institutes that occur throughout the academic year and can be organized as part of a long-range professional development plan, as well as principal networks and, in some cases, coaching or internship models. (p. 17)
A stark difference in state-wide efforts has been the conversion to local cohorts in lieu of on-campus residency (McCarthy, 2015). Cohorts allow aspiring leaders to matriculate through a multi-year program with a set number of students. Most often enrollment is only offered to aspiring leaders from one or two districts, and the curriculum is tailored to district initiatives (Collaborative, 2010). A chief concern regarding the effectiveness of state or regional academies, specifically the cohort model, is that rigorous assessments have not been conducted to evaluate the performance of cohort versus non-cohort educational leadership graduates (McCarthy, 2015; McCarthy & Forsyth, 2009).

**North Carolina’s Principal Preparation Efforts**

In January 2008, the State Board of Education adopted a proposal for a new program approval process for Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) that were operating school executive preparation programs (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2010). By 2010, policymakers zeroed in on improving school leadership preparation as a crucial step toward improving student achievement. States have the flexibility to allocate Race to the Top (RttP) funding based on their greatest needs, provided that allocation fits into the parameters of the grant guidelines. North Carolina placed increasing educator effectiveness at the core of their RttP plan. State leaders have placed the highest priority on this pillar so that every student has a great teacher, and every school has a great principal (Marks, Fuller, Edward-Guthrie, Henry, & Stallings, 2015). North Carolina’s policy objectives under the Great Teachers and Principals pillar of the RttP plan sought to advance five major goals, with two of the goals specifically designed to address principal preparation. Goal one states, “through the use of RttP funds, North Carolina will fund high-quality pathways and alternative routes to certification for teacher and aspiring school leaders” (p.3). Goal five of the plan reflects the state’s plan to “provide effective
support for teachers and school principals by providing effective, ongoing, job-embedded professional development to address weaknesses or to implement school initiatives” (p.3). In January 2009, North Carolina State University’s Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) was awarded monies from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to design a research-based model of preparation, early career support, and ongoing professional development for aspiring leaders who have the desire and commitment to lead rural, low-performing schools in northeast North Carolina. In 2011, after being awarded $400 million of Race-to-the-Top funding, North Carolina established two additional Regional Leadership Academies (RLAs) “to address the need to recruit, prepare, and support leaders of transformational change in challenging school contexts (Fusarelli & Militello, 2012, p. 47). The three state academies include: (a) the Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA), which serves fourteen Local Education Agencies (LEAs) in northeast North Carolina; (b) the Piedmont Triad Leadership Academy (PTLA), which served four LEAs in north-central North Carolina; and (c) Sandhills Leadership Academy (SLA), which serves thirteen LEAs in south-central North Carolina (Brown, 2014). Each RLA was responsible for preparing fifty to sixty aspiring leaders by “providing a customized, comprehensive, research-based program that will position leaders to improve high-poverty, underperforming schools” (Fusarelli & Militello, 2012, p. 48). The following findings were reported in the North Carolina Regional Leadership Academies Final 2013 Report by Brown (2014):

1. All three RLAs utilized the content, pedagogy, and experiences that reflect best practices for developing leaders who can facilitate high-quality teaching and learning for all children.

2. Fidelity of implementation of program designs was strong.
3. Participants in every cohort in each RLA have found internship placements in targeted schools and LEAs.

4. The year-long internship experience for the principal candidates has consistently provided them with mentoring and coaching that the candidates believe will enhance their effectiveness as principals.

While the findings are promising, several challenges face the RLAs and the state now that funding support is no longer available, with the greatest challenge being sustainability. It may be impossible for these academies to sustain long-term mentor selection and training and induction support without funding designated to the program. Like university-district partnerships, data and evidence-based research on the long-term outcomes of the RLAs are not yet available.

To address a lingering gap in knowledge and skills of novice principals, North Carolina launched the Principal Ready program in 2012 (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2014). Principal READY is a professional development program for current school principals that focus on instructional leadership to help the principal support the growth of teachers. Participants explore curriculum tools and receive coaching support to help them better support their teachers. During work sessions, principals participate in cooperative activities aimed at increasing their understanding of the NC teacher evaluation process and NC teacher evaluation rubric. In 2014, North Carolina was recognized by the United States Department of Education for their increased efforts in turning around low-performing schools as well as their investment in teachers and school leaders (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2014). However, it seems most of their efforts have been directed toward school turnaround and the Principal READY program, not training and developing aspiring leaders at the state level.
District-run Aspiring Leaders programs

District-run leadership development programs, also called Grow-Your-Own programs, are a recent phenomenon in educational administration; with much of the national attention focused on the performance improvement of school leaders in primarily large urban or small rural districts (Versland, 2013). Districts have started to exercise their “consumer clout” by identifying training providers that will require selective admissions, a tailored curriculum to district realities, job-embedded field experiences, and intensive and timely feedback (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013; Orr et al., 2010a). Districts have exercised their consumer power by becoming a discerning consumer, as well as, by defining expectations for leadership standards and competencies. Additionally, districts have become a competitor of university programs by creating a grow-your-own preparation program aligned with the district's choice of standards and reform priorities.

In most cases, these alternative programs are responses to the inadequacies of traditional preparation programs as school districts seek to develop new paradigms for principal certification and licensure. For instance, The Wallace Foundation has provided grant funding to help bolster the work of several large districts throughout the United States. Six of those districts, Prince George’s County, Md.; Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C.; Denver, Colo.; Gwinnett County, Ga.; Hillsborough County, Fla., and New York City, were invited to participate in a pipeline initiative to study the successes of their existing development program models.

The most substantive innovation of district preparation programs is the scope of preparation beyond minimal requirements for leadership licensure or certification. The new requirements typically included more content about school and district systems and procedures and more applied learning experiences, such as job-embedded field experiences (Orr et al.,
2010b). According to Sanzo (2012), districts have realized that streamlined and contextualized development programs are vital to address the gaps that many aspiring leaders have upon graduating from traditional programs. Davis and Darling-Hammond (2012) assert the emergence of district-sponsored and operated programs are becoming an increasingly attractive way of establishing a sustainable principal pipeline with qualified, competent candidates who are well-versed in the context of district needs, structures, and cultures.

District officials said they would like to see more university preparation programs prepare leaders with the necessary situational knowledge aligned to their local priorities (Cunningham & Sherman, 2008; Dodson, 2014; Spiro, 2013a). University and alternative preparation programs have redesigned leadership preparation models to address some of the gaps that seem to plague the development of school leaders; however, one of the most burdensome criticisms is that the instructional features in their program models are often designed as one-size fits all approaches (Sanzo & Scribner, 2015). While there are no mandatory features of the programs, each program serves as a supplement to university programs by adding a form of job-embedded experiences, mentoring and training in a district-specific context to the general principal preparation acquired in a university program. Also, districts can refine district officials’ roles and responsibilities to include oversight or at least participate in the preparation program to avoid paying for external support for the program (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013; Mitgang, 2013b; Turnbull et al., 2013a).

Until recently, leadership preparation was an afterthought for most districts, often leaving the task to university programs and subsequently, important pipeline elements were either insufficient or missing altogether (Mendels, 2012). There has been a clear distinction between university programs laser focus on preparation for universal leadership skills, qualities, and
dispositions and districts’ need for leadership readiness. Districts have since recognized that they can improve the principal quality in the districts by training and developing the principals that our schools need so desperately. Given the current criticism surrounding university preparation programs and the new focus on principal quality and school leadership, school districts are exerting influence over the quality of their school leaders and the quality of school leadership preparation programs (Orr et al., 2010a). School districts are beginning to challenge the status quo that has led to the credentialing of less effective school leaders. They are using their clout as astute customers to require principal preparation programs to improve their practice or be replaced by district models. School districts are strategically positioned to influence the content and design of school leader preparation program practices because the effectiveness of the program graduates directly impact school and district performance (Spiro, 2013a).

After graduating from university preparation programs and receiving necessary credentials, aspiring principals often require years of further training and experience before becoming effective in their positions. Since the length of time between program completion and securing a principal role varies, districts must intercede to lessen the time gap as well as ensure that aspiring leaders are prepared to take a school leadership position within the district (Spiro, 2013a). By requiring aspiring leaders to complete supplemental preparation prior to being hired in a principal role, districts have the potential to improve principal quality, which is a particularly cost-efficient method of improving teaching and learning (DeVita, 2009).

**Succession Planning**

Success in the first year of the principalship is critical to the long-term success of a school and the individual principal (Doyle, Locke, & Thomas, 2014; Fink, 2011). Yet, new principals often find that they have prepared to perform a role that is different from the actual
demands of the position. In the case of medium-sized and suburban school districts, there are not
enough resources for leadership development, so the development of new principals and assistant
principals is often left to chance. Much of the national attention focused on improving school
leaders’ performance has been narrowly focused on large urban or small rural districts, in spite of
the fact, “large numbers of PK-12 students are receiving their education in small and medium-
sized urban districts” (p.36). There has been an emergence of larger school districts, principal
academies, professional administrator groups, and university educational leadership departments
pooling resources and expertise to establish local, regional, or state orientation programs for
aspiring leaders, leaving outlying small and medium-size -often urban-districts to fend for
themselves (Sanzo & Scribner, 2015). Small to medium-size district officials realize that they
lack the political capital to conceptualize or implement the programmatic changes needed to
build the necessary principal pipeline at the local level, thereby, recognizing that the scholar
practitioners that are employed by the district are capable of training aspiring leaders from both a
theoretical and practical perspective (Grissom & Harrington, 2010). Small to medium-size
districts are positioned to provide such programming with heavy reliance on their doctoral-level
staff. Mendels and Mitgang (2013) found that small to medium-size districts such as St. Louis,
Missouri and Springfield, Illinois; have created district-sponsored programs that include
consultation with several area training providers to create programming tailored to their district
needs and conditions. With the keen oversight of these programs, districts feel confident in
giving hiring preference to program graduates (Corcoran et al., 2012; Mendels & Mitgang,
2013). As Sanzo and Scribner (2015) posit:

One size fits all models are not appropriate and districts such as small and
medium-size ones must adjust models to fit their own context. It is incumbent
upon us as a field of educational leadership researchers to better understand the leadership development and preparation practices currently occurring in small and medium-sized urban districts because of the significant numbers of children being educated in this setting. (p.36)

Aspiring Leaders Need Supplemental Training

Davis (2006) asserts school leaders’ face turbulent and unpredictable daily work, they rely more frequently on mental shortcuts or heuristics to manage complex organizational problems than on highly analytical decision processes, which don’t allow for time to devote to prolonged periods of deep and critical self-reflection. Helsing et al. (2008) claims:

Most professional development for novice school leaders is pedagogically naive; a demeaning exercise that often leaves its participants more cynical and no more knowledgeable, skilled, or committed than before. And all this is accompanied by overblown rhetoric about the challenge of change, self-renewal, professional growth, expanding knowledge base, and lifelong learning. (p.440)

District and school leaders may participate in isolated events with little or no follow-up (Hall, 2008; Helsing, Howell, Kegan, & Lahey, 2008) simply for the purposes of satisfying their continuing licensing requirements or to be compliant with other district-imposed policies (Hall, 2008).

Since professional development opportunities for educational leaders to learn new ways of understanding their roles and acquiring new skills tend to be limited once in a principal role (Helsing et al., 2008), it is critical for aspiring leaders programs to take the time to train leaders to be reflective and critical of their practices through transformative learning experiences. According to Christie, Carey, Robertson, and Grainger (2015), when learners are more critically
aware of their own habits of mind, they will be able to “transfer the knowledge they acquire in their discipline to new and unexpected situations.; they will be able to acknowledge invalid assumptions and possibly change their beliefs and job behavior” (p.10). By providing aspiring leaders the opportunity to transform their understanding of the field, schools, and student achievement will improve because “if enough individuals within a field change, the field itself has a chance to change” (p. 12).

**Essential Skills Needed by Aspiring Leaders to Become Effective Leaders**

There is a significant dearth in the recent literature regarding the essential skills needed by aspiring school leaders to become effective leaders. More than ever, schools and districts need aspiring leaders to become effective leaders quickly in order to take on the challenges and opportunities facing education today and in the future (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). Daresh and Playko (1994) found that aspiring principals believed the mastery of technical skills was the most critical aspect of readiness, while practicing principals believed that proficiency in socialization and self-awareness skills is more important for novices. The characteristics of effective school leaders have evolved since the Effective Schools Research Era from squarely pinpointing the principal as the cajoler and sole advisor to one who is responsible for and skilled in collaborative facilitation and distributed leadership (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Edmonds, 1979). Aspiring leaders must attain knowledge, skills, and dispositions that continually improve teaching and learning, in order to, create and maintain successful schools (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Nettles & Herrington, 2007). Confidence, and high levels of agency, according to Hannah, Avolio, Luthans, and Harms (2008), are necessary for effective leadership in educational contexts. According to Madden (2008) instructional leadership tasks, personnel leadership tasks, and school management tasks ranked
the highest among the study participants regarding perceived ideal tasks that assistant principals should perform prior to becoming principal. Yet, significant differences between the ideal and actual tasks performed by assistant principal were found which also revealed that assistant principals are not adequately prepared to make the transition to principal. By investigating the capacity of assistant principals to be instructional leaders, Searby, Browne-Ferrigno, and Wang (2017) found that those, who completed redesigned programs focused on instructional leadership reported feeling less prepared that those completing programs before the mandated redesign, which supports the need to couple traditional preparation with a more contextualized supplemental program.

Factors that Influence Aspiring Leaders’ Readiness Gap

The leadership readiness gap often occurs after aspiring leaders graduate from a university preparation program with the necessary credentials, yet still require years of further training and experience before becoming effective in their positions. While the decision to transition into the principalship allows aspiring leaders to affect more students positively throughout the school setting, many novice principals report not being ready to accomplish the tasks once they begin their principalship (Bickmore, Bickmore, & Raines, 2013; Hancock & Müller, 2009; Young, 2013). Recruiting and retaining highly qualified principals is becoming increasingly difficult because the job of a principal is growing increasingly more complex (Walker & Crow, 2006). While opportunities are available for those ready to transition into the principalship, most aspiring leaders are unable to accurately assess their readiness to pursue the principalship, thereby, lacking the confidence and attitude needed to be personally and professionally successful upon obtaining the role.

According to Kwan and Walker (2009), the primary factor influencing aspiring leaders’
aspirations to transition into the principalship is their sense of efficacy. Self-efficacy, according to Federici and Skaalvik (2012), is the leaders’ belief about what he or she can achieve in a given context. In addition to confidence and agency, several other factors influence aspiring leaders’ readiness to become a school administrator. For instance, Burchfield (2015) found that years of experience and level of degree positively influenced readiness. Conversely, family responsibilities and the number of children in the principal’s household were reported as being a negative predictor of readiness.

Despite the basic requirements for obtaining a principal position often resting on prior teaching and leadership experiences; other factors have been identified as crucial to addressing the readiness gap. By investigating the capacity of assistant principals to be instructional leaders, Searby et al. (2016) found that years of teaching experience and age had no significant impact on assistant principals’ perceived readiness as an instructional leader. In the same study, the researchers were also able to identify that those who completed redesigned programs focusing on instructional leadership reported feeling less prepared that those completing programs before the mandated redesign. This supports the need to couple traditional preparation with a more contextualized supplemental program. Bodger (2011) states that novice principals believe a training ground of experience to understand the complex tasks of a 21st-century principal coupled with a district-wide commitment to provide support for new school leaders is critical to overcoming the readiness gap.

A deliberate leadership development program and a network of support and continuing professional development are vital to attracting and retaining quality individuals who have the capacity to lead a school (Johnson-Taylor & Martin, 2007). School districts can minimize the time it takes for a new principal to become effective by increasing the capacity of their assistant
principals to ensure a successful transition when a vacancy occurs. Browne-Ferrigno (2007) studied aspiring leaders in a preparation program in order to assess their growth and development while preparing to fill principal positions. The study revealed that socialization and continuous improvement were crucial elements to readiness. Again, district-run leadership development was cited as key to developing the skills to lead as well as to become certified for the principalship.

Using the Principal Readiness Survey, Lightfoot (2014) found “the more heavily assistant principals are involved in duties and situations that fall under the heading of Administrative Skills, the more prepared they will feel to become effective principals” (p. 1). According to Madden (2008), instructional leadership tasks, personnel leadership tasks, and school management tasks ranked the highest among the study participants regarding perceptions of ideal tasks that assistant principals should perform prior to becoming principal. Yet, significant differences between the ideal and actual tasks performed by assistant principal were found, which revealed that assistant principals are also not adequately prepared to make the transition to a principal.

**Theoretical Underpinnings**

Adults’ ability to continuously grow and develop in a way that facilitates meaningful learning is at the heart of adult education. Adult learning is distinguished from childhood learning through the context of andragogy and self-directed learning (Knowles, 1978; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). These emphases are found in another body of literature that may serve to inform professional development: adult learning theory. Adult learning is self-directed, self-motivated, problem-solving oriented, has a resource of rich experiences, and is based on needs closely related to changing social roles. Adult learners often undertake learning with a specific target that directly impacts a personal and professional goal. Several researchers have
approached the study of aspiring leaders’ professional development from this base of adult education (Drago-Severson, 2009; Lauder, 2000; Tucker et al., 2016); however, there is insufficient research on the impact of prior experiences and assumptions of leadership and authority on learning and practice of aspiring school leaders (Hopkins, 2007; Leithwood et al., 2008; Young, 2013). The development and training of school leaders must incorporate adult learning theory as well as provide a means to address prior experiences and beliefs in order to facilitate growth. Figure 2.1 shows how adult learning theory is used in this study as a theoretical background for the learning experiences in the conceptual framework.

![Adult Learning Theory Diagram]

**Figure 2.1.** Theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of the study

Adult learning theory indicates that adults bring an array of prior experiences to any new learning experience that may serve as a barrier to new learning. Collaborative learning, more specifically cohort learning, has been identified as one of the most effective tools for encouraging enhanced learning outcomes for adults (Brockett & Hiemstra, 2018; Drago-Severson, 2009; Lauder, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Since the effective application of leadership behaviors is fostered through collaboration with peers, then cohort-based training can encourage empowerment, and enhance the capacity of others in the process (Compton & Compton, 2017; Lave & Wenger, 1991). When adults are in a collaborative learning environment, they are more apt to clarify their thinking, exercise the use of self-awareness...
techniques, and are able to test their attitudes and values through the process of participation (Boyd, 2015; Brockett & Hiemstra, 2018). Additionally, Compton and Compton (2017) suggests the benefits of cohort membership include the development of individuals their interpersonal skills, greater ability to test new ideas and attitudes, and an opportunity to receive continuous feedback in a supportive and safe environment. By developing shared values, norms, members of the cohort are able to deepen their peer relationships and offer emotional support as peers at differing developmental stages test ideas and question preconceived notions and changes in perspective (Schroeder & Terras, 2015). Lastly, cohort membership can serve as a network for continued collaboration, learning partnerships and professional and personal relationships after members assume leadership roles (Tucker et al., 2016).

**Conceptual Framework**

Aspiring principals are challenged to understand the overall conceptualization of the role of school leader as soon as they enter the principalship. This requires the understanding of the "priority demands," of the job and the requisite skills in relation to those responsibilities. The awareness of the networked complexities of the role will not be met unless the aspiring principal develops an integrated conceptualization of the issues, the context of the work, and an understanding one's own understanding of the leadership role (Tucker et al., 2016). Readiness to assume a principalship appears to be linked to an individual’s (a) encouragement and support from leadership mentors; (b) opportunities to engage in authentic leadership activities; and (c) perceptions of personal competence to assume school-leadership responsibilities (Green, 2013; Kearney & Valadez, 2016; Petzko, 2008; Petzko & Scearcy, 2001, April).

This research study is focused on the fusion of three concepts that together may provide a possible strategy to overcome the leadership readiness gap of aspiring school leaders. A
conceptual framework comprised of transformative learning, contextual learning and competency based learning was used to guide the exploration. Figure 2.2 shows how the instructional design of the leadership development program would create perspective shifts in the aspiring leaders understanding of school leadership and provide opportunities to apply the new ways of thinking. This study examined the relationship between transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997; Nerstrom, 2014), contextual learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Nicolini, 2012; Scott, 2013; Shove et al., 2012), and competency based learning (Johnstone & Soares, 2014; Marion & Leather, 2015; Spencer & Spencer, 2008; Steele et al., 2014; Woodruffe, 1993) to determine if these constructs together produced learning experiences that addressed the remaining gaps in leadership readiness of aspiring leaders face.

Figure 2.2. The conceptual framework guiding this research study
Transformative Learning

Transformative learning theory, first introduced by Jack Mezirow in 1978, relies on the basic premise that unexamined thoughts, beliefs, and judgments create repressive gaps of understanding, learning, and development in adulthood (Mezirow, 1991). Stemming from adult learning theory, transformative learning theory involves a process of organizing disorientation in one’s thinking through self-reflection about one’s frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997). Transformative learning theory addresses the human need to understand the meaning of our experiences. Originally, the theory was centered on the notion that individual learning was primarily influenced by self-reflection as a tool for deep and lasting personal change, but later there was an emphasis placed on the need to deconstruct and reestablish knowledge frameworks, as well as to “develop an appreciation of our own culture and the associated privileges and powers” (Shields, 2010, p. 580). The bedrock of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory is rooted in self-directed learning that attempts to extract meaning from experiences (Mezirow, 2008).

Mezirow (1997) distinguishes transformative learning from other types of learning by stating that:

learning becomes transformative when a distorted, inauthentic, or otherwise unjustified assumption is replaced with a new or transformed point of view (meaning scheme) or habit of mind (meaning perspective), resulting in a more differentiated, complex, inclusive, reflective meaning structure as a guide to action. (p. 222-223)

Transformative learning has been defined as the significant change in the way one views self or the world in which one lives (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). According to
Mezirow (1991), the perspectives we develop that allow us to structure, comprehend, and simplify the complexities of experience can also serve to limit or distort the world. Although it is possible for us to live in ignorance of the flaws in our perspectives, or defend our worldview in various ways, sometimes new experiences force attention on a problem with our basic assumptions, thereby exposing our perspectives as limited or distorted in some way. Experiences create a disorienting dilemma, triggering self-examination and critical assessment of our biased foundation in the world

**Nerstrom’s Transformative Learning Model (NTLM)**

Discussion of transformative learning over the years have shifted from its emphasis on “meaning making” on a cognitive level and developmental progress to carefully considering its impact on social change and the process of non-cognitive and imagination within it (Brown, 2006; Larsen & Derrington, 2012; Mezirow, 1990) Nerstrom’s Transformative Learning Model (2014) was developed to simplify and explain transformative learning. Nerstrom (2014) posits that, “once transformative learning occurs, individuals are more receptive to experiencing it again because once transformative learning occurs; it is unlikely that adults revert back to their prior beliefs” (p.329). While closely aligned to Mezirow’s phases of transformative learning; the model shifts from a lock-step progression of stages to a more fluid and dynamic order of four segments. This model is a “visual representation of how transformations are constructed and identifies transformative learning as a continuous cycle of learning” (p.328). Contrary to Mezirow’s non-sequential phases, this representation follows a more successive process where all phases of the model are encountered; yet, the entry point to the phases is inconsequential. The four phases are “(a) having experiences; (b) making assumptions; (c) challenging perspectives; and (d) experiencing transformative learning” (p. 328). Once the learner has encountered all the
phases, transformative learning becomes a new experience or understanding. By using the 
Nerstrom Transformative Learning Model in research, scholars can better visualize and explain 
how transformative learning is constructed. Additionally, using the visual model may deepen 
scholarly understanding and strengthen the findings regarding transformational experiences.

**Fostering Transformative Lens in Adult Learning and Leadership Development**

Learner readiness is a valid concern raised by critics of transformative learning theory 
because each student has a unique pedagogical entry point (e.g. preconceived notions, cultural 
background) (Johnson, 2008). Thus, the instructional strategies, including reflection, writing, 
collaboration, interactive presentations, and discussion, used to foster transformative learning 
should also help students make meaning and find their point of readiness (Glowacki-Dudka, 
environment is a significant aspect of fostering transformative learning--and not just any type of 
support. Comfortable support will not yield transformation. For instance, support must not 
provide an overindulgence of the status quo, but instead create a disequilibrium, which will aid 
learners in sustaining the courage needed to transform and recognize their own narrative while at 
the edge of meaning-making. Glowacki-Dudka et al.(2012) emphasize the connection between 
the five-facet model and learner readiness for engaging in transformative learning experiences as 
a way of authentically moving from concrete understandings of self, others, relationships, 
context, and reflection through to multifaceted and integrative perspectives. Instructional 
Designers are encouraged to design transformative learning experiences for learners that are 
grounded in the five facets of transformative learning, which are:
Figure 2.3. Nermstrom’s Transformative Learning Model

1. A strong sense of self-awareness
2. A deep awareness of the needs and interest of learners and how they may differ from the interest of the educator
3. Fostering the ability to be genuine and open with others.
4. Developing awareness of how context shapes practice
5. Engaging critical reflection and critical self-reflection about practice. (p.118)

In designing learning experiences for adults to engage in transformative learning, Mezirow (1991) suggests instructional techniques that promote critical meaning-making reflection such as ‘life histories, journal writing, and literature explored through repertory grids, metaphor analysis, and conceptual mapping’ (p. 219). The founding father of reflection in adult education, John Dewey, writes as early as 1933 that reflective thinking is an important component of learning (Lundgren & Poell, 2016). Dewey later coined the concept of the “transformative experience” to describe the outcomes of transformative learning, which Pugh
(2011) later used to emphasize that “an experience is fundamentally transformative in that it changes one’s relationship with the world” (p. 110). As transformative learning theory has been applied, questioned, critiqued, and restructured, the current literature theorizes that there are “core elements that illicit transformative learning experiences (Taylor, 2009). These include “individual experience, critical reflection, and dialogue, as well as “a holistic orientation, awareness of context, and an authentic practice”’ (p. 4). In addition, Taylor (2009) proclaims one of the most powerful implementations for fostering transformative learning is providing students with authentic learning opportunities that are personally engaging and incite reflection.

In a study of their study of a doctoral program cohort, Ginsberg et al. (2014) found discomfort with openness amongst the members due to external professional relationships within the cohort. This discomfort undermined and compromised learning opportunities because some members were unwilling to engage authentically in complex political issues and examine their own assumptions related to education policy. Transformative learning is more socially oriented and leads to the creation of a more just world. It can lead to personal empowerment as social transformation occurs through problem posing, reflection, and dialogue with teachers and other learners allowing adults to become aware of and act upon injustice. Pugh (2011) asserts that individuals experience perspective transformation when they actively employ a concept that allows them to see aspects of the world in a new way.

By centering the learning on this individually-focused process, educators will establish an instructional model and learning environment conducive to fostering transformative learning. Taylor (2009) suggests forethought and great consideration are necessary when planning for transformative learning experiences because their implementation requires “intentional action, personal risk, a genuine concern for the learners’ betterment, and the ability to draw on a variety
of methods and techniques that help create a classroom environment that supports personal
growth and, for others social change” (p. 14). He adds that the value of “establishing
meaningful, genuine relationships with students building trusting relationships that learners
develop the confidence to deal with learning on an affective level, where transformation at times
can be perceived as a threatening and an emotionally charged experience” (p. 13) are significant
contributors to fostering transformative learning because only through authentic relationships can
teachers and learners establish a foundation for transformative learning.

Transformation involves some unlearning, which suggests that old knowledge must be
examined upon encountering new or unfamiliar knowledge (Nicolaides & McCallum, 2013).
This examination should involve both analytical reasoning and emotion. In order for authentic
transformation to occur, the learner must be convinced that existing frames of reference and
habits of mind need to be transformed (Choy, 2009). Transformative learning is distinguished
from other types of organized learning by requiring the learner to regularly reexamine the
validity of prior knowledge and its connections to new learning, reconsider established thought
processes and point of view, and apply new learning in unexpected and unfamiliar situations
(Christie et al., 2015). Transformative learning is a fusion of informational and communicative
learning with the former taking the form of task-oriented problem solving and the latter a
reflection on and revision of pre-existing assumption (Johnson, 2008). Informational learning or
communicative learning alone may add depth and complexity to one’s current mental models.
Transformative learning, which is a combination of both types of learning, will increase a
leader’s effectiveness by establishing new mental models that are more capable of handling new
and complex phenomena. This implies that developmental learning should not be designed to
only drive the improvement of technique or skill because it will culminate in superficial learning
and temporary change. Instead, it should involve participants in examining, enhancing, and converting their personal reality.

**Rational Discourse**

Mezirow (1997) expresses that group and individual learning is accomplished by analyzing the related experiences of others to arrive at a common understanding that holds until new evidence or arguments present themselves. Mezirow (1990) posits that one can never really make interpretations of our experience free of bias; therefore, objectivity often emerges from exposing a repressed idea through rational and reflective discourse. “The resulting understanding can be further transformed as we come to discover its metaphoric significance in other experiential, theoretical, literary, or aesthetic contexts” (p.14). Brown (2005) defines rational discourse as:

> involving a commitment to extended and repeated conversations that evolve over time into a culture of careful listening and cautious openness to new perspectives, not shared understanding in the sense of consensus, but rather deeper and richer understandings of our own biases as well as where our colleagues are coming from on particular issues and how each of us differently constructs those issues.

(p.161)

The engagement in rational discourse focuses on achieving coherence and searching, often intuitively, for themes and metaphors by which to fit the unfamiliar into a meaning perspective, so that an interpretation in context becomes possible.

Rational discourse in transformative learning is grounded in communicative learning. In communicative learning, the learner attempts to make meaning of learning by listening to and conversing with another learner. Christie et al. (2015) write at the heart of “transformative learning theory is the need to develop communicative skills, so that internal and external
conflicts, which result from changes in perspective, can be resolved via rational discourse rather than force” (p.13). Meaning-making of any expressed idea requires that one must understand under what conditions is it true or valid (Mezirow, 1990). In communicative learning, there are no empirical tests of validity; only collective validation of an assertion. Learners engage in reflective learning through rational discourse, often with bracketed existing biases held in abeyance, and, through a critical review of the evidence and arguments, make a judgment about the justifiability of the contested idea. Also, Christie et al. (2015) declare:

rational discourse demands complete and accurate information, freedom from coercion or distorting self-deception, an ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively, an openness to other points of view, an equal opportunity to participate, critical reflection of assumptions and a willingness to accept informed, objective and rational consensus as a legitimate test of validity. (p. 12).

In essence, validating a belief through communicative learning involves making a determination of the justifiability of an assertion based on the situation and its circumstances (Mezirow, 1990).

Since most adult learning is predicated on what others communicate, concerning concepts such as values, ideals, and moral decisions, the importance of peer dynamics and rational discourse must be integrated into the instructional design in order for a transformative learning experience to occur. Learners can appropriate another person’s point of view, but the same cannot be said for a habit of mind. Points of view center on awareness and feedback from others, however habits of mind are based in prior knowledge, understanding, and practice (Taylor, 2007). It is only through trustful relationships that individuals can interact in authentic discourse and include a transformative degree of rational discourse, share information openly and achieve mutual and collective understanding. In addition, a study by Eisen in 2001 investigated peer-
learning partnerships used as an instructional tool for community college teachers engaged in a mandatory professional development workshop, and identified seven relational qualities that are indicative of a ‘peer dynamic’ which is important to transformative learning: (a) trust; (b) non-evaluative feedback; (c) nonhierarchical status; (d) voluntary participation, (e) partner selection; (f) shared goals; and (g) authenticity (Taylor, 2007). According to Thompson and Pascal (2012) rational discourse aids in the conscious understanding of one’s own biases as well as how others in the learning group construct their frames of reference. The dialogue involves the purposeful weighing of current knowledge, the examination alternative perspectives, and the critical inquiry of assumptions.

**Critical Reflection**

According to Mezirow (1990) reflection includes making generalizations, and using inferences analogies, interpretations, as well as emotions to analyze and solve problems both consciously and unconsciously. Mezirow (1990) defines critical reflection as “challenging the validity of presuppositions in prior learning, not to be concerned with the how or the how-to of action, but with the why, the reasons for and the consequences of what we do” (p. 13). Later, scholars expand on the definition. Brookfield (1995) adds:

that part of the critical reflective process is to challenge the prevailing social, political, cultural, or professional ways of acting… Through the process of critical reflection, adults come to interpret and create new knowledge and actions from their ordinary and sometimes extraordinary experiences. Critical reflection blends learning through experience with theoretical and technical learning to form new knowledge constructions and new behaviors or insights. (p.18)
Thus, reflection is integral to determining how best to immediately implement action, becoming an essential element of thoughtful action. Ex post facto reflection and metacognition are both terms for those cognitive and affective practices, in which individuals explore their mental models in order to lead to new understandings and appreciation.

Davis (2006) emphasizes that transformative learning theory “involves the acquisition (or manipulation) of knowledge that disrupts prior learning and stimulates the reflective reshaping of deeply ingrained knowledge and belief structures” (p. 1). Critical reflection of experiences is needed to give meaning to the experience, which in turn, leads to the successful transformation of one’s frame of reference (Merriam et al., 2007). According to Rigg, Trehan, Stewart, Rigg, and Trehan (2008) critical reflection in the workplace occurs when “creating new understandings by making conscious the social, political, professional, economic, and ethical assumptions constraining or supporting one’s action in a specific context” (p.56). Reflection on frames of reference and habits of mind births critical reflection. Critical reflection depicts the highest category of the “levels of reflection hierarchy” (p.16). Lundgren and Poell (2016) also add that the word reflection “can be defined as the activity of exploring or examining an issue of concern and considering it in relation to personal experiences, whereas levels of reflection describe different categories of this activity, often ordered in a hierarchical way” (p.13).

**Context is Key for Aspiring Leaders**

District context matters when preparing aspiring leaders and preparation must move beyond the notions of generic leadership that is so often taught in traditional programs and not district-specific programming (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). Research in the field supports the notion that preparation programs are more effective when they work from an understanding of the challenges the districts face (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; McCarthy, 2015; Miller & Martin,
Since school performance determines district performance, effective school leadership is a key element of survival for the district. Therefore, district needs and local context should be at the core of training and development of school leaders (Mendels, 2012a).

According to Brazer and Bauer (2013), a well-prepared instructional leader would be able to “read the local context—to understand the waves of reform, the nature of teacher resistance to change, and the potential that exists in the tendency for teachers to hybridize reforms—and to make decisions accordingly” (p. 655). Hence, school leadership preparation must involve more than “applying the latest best practice without considering the context from which it was derived and the different context in which it is to be applied” (p. 649). School districts can minimize the time it takes for a new principal to become an effective principal by increasing the capacity of their assistant principals and by providing a training ground of experience for aspiring administrators to understand the complex tasks of a 21st-century to ensure a successful transition in the event a vacancy occurs (Johnson-Taylor & Martin, 2007). Thus, a deliberate leadership development program and a network of support and continual professional development are vital to attracting and retaining quality individuals who have the capacity to lead a school.

Traditional preparation programs have a separate context of their own and typically do not reflect the contextual norms of a school, nor can they capture the critical contextual factors that affect major district reforms (Mitgang, 2013b). Unlike university programs and non-university programs, district programs are best equipped to provide aspiring leaders with real world experiences through their everyday work. According to Zardoya (2014):

aspiring school leaders need opportunities to practice the work and be responsible for leading change on behalf of students in real schools because only through these immersive school-based experiences can they understand what it takes to
create the conditions that enable students and teachers to thrive and succeed.

(p.14).

In order to develop desired leadership competencies and situational knowledge, new approaches to leadership development, such as district-run aspiring leaders programs, often emphasize specific district initiatives, policies, and practices. More specifically, context is vital for leaders to understand how to operate in essential functions of schools, such as instruction, community building, and change management, as well as district context (e.g., approaches to serving students with particular backgrounds or needs). In the Leithwood et al. (2004) study, researchers found that leadership competencies must be contextualized to fit the different kinds of schools that leaders are expected to lead. Further, the researchers emphasize that districts should tailor their selection procedures to match candidate characteristics and qualifications with the school-community demographic, cultural context, and economic stability context in which they will be working (Orr, 2010). Since school improvement occurs within a specific context, leadership for school improvement is likely to be layered in the nested contexts of classrooms, schools, and districts (Brazer & Bauer, 2013). Thus, district-run preparation programs are better equipped to prepare aspiring leaders to be effective. The findings from the study pinpoint several significant effects of district leadership and other district organizational conditions on school leaders’ efficacy, thereby offering evidence of how district influence on aspiring leader preparation can be beneficial to the district. An understanding of the district context is instructive in strategically planning for future principal leadership (Mitgang, 2013). Central office staff members who have earned doctorate level degrees are better positioned to recast themselves as helpers-in-chiefs and provide theory and application training to aspiring leaders than university professors, who have never experienced the complexities of school leadership and often lack
situational knowledge (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Mendels & Mitgang, 2013).

**Professional Practice for School Leaders**

Transformative principal preparation can influence the likelihood of creating school conditions that enhance student learning (Pounder, 2010). When learning opportunities are constructivist in nature, they can reveal the social constructs of knowledge and allow students to reconsider their own worldview and analyze the assumptions that underlie that view. Orr, et al. (2010) emphasizes how reflective practice experiences improved how candidates apply content knowledge to school problems and leadership actions. Therefore, the guiding principles of transformative learning, of openness, reflectiveness, inclusiveness, and emotion, have the potential to help leaders address problems of practice and allow for the capacity to change (Ciporen, 2010). The programmatic design of a leadership development program for aspiring leaders must consider the prior experiences of the leader, and then allow students the opportunity to reflect on those experiences and challenge their practice (Williams, 2007). Putting transformative learning into principal preparation is critical for prospective school leaders because their own life experiences may not allow them to see how contextual factors and roadblocks inhibit the teaching and learning process (Brazer & Bauer, 2013).

**Standards-Based Learning for Principals**

By 2014, forty-five states and Washington, DC had adopted or adapted the ISLLC standards in policy or statute (McCarthy, 2015). The standards were codified in all state regulations regarding school leadership such as: school leader licensure, assessment, and proficiency requirements. Though a new set of standards have been approved to guide the work of education administration, a universal standards-based framework will underpin the work of school leadership because the standards will be infused in preparation program standards,
graduates assessment and licensure, program accreditation processes, graduate mentoring and induction, and subsequently, most principal performance measures. In fact, several states and institutions are currently going through the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) accreditation process and will have 18 months from the time the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NLP) standards are finalized to transition to the new NLP standards and assessments (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015).

The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders center around the success of every student by having principals facilitate the interplay of the school vision, a safe learning environment, and the external school community in an ethical manner, while understanding and responding to a variety of contexts (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). Prior to the revised standards, some state leaders have moved beyond the ISLLC standards and developed leadership standards that are much more specific to state goals (Roach, Smith, & Boutin, 2011; Spillane & Kenney, 2012). These state standards can be grouped by leadership role and career stage, and progress in meeting them can be teachable and measurable. State leadership standards, which are often outcomes-based and require principals to demonstrate various skills and behaviors are frequently focused on student learning and enabling principals to reflect upon their work and strengthen their effectiveness as leaders (Roach et al., 2010).

In 2015, new professional standards for educational leaders were developed by National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), and American Association of School Administrators (AASA) after an intensive review of empirical research and discussions with school and district leaders. The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, replaced the ISLLC standards (2008) and serve as the guideposts to all levels of educational leadership (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015).
Administration, 2015). The revised standards define the nature and the quality of work of educational leaders. They are, “student-centric, outlining the foundational principles of leadership to guide the practice of educational leaders; so they can move the needle on student learning and achieve more equitable outcomes.” (p.1-2).

In addition, the standards center on the success of every student by having principals facilitate the interplay of the school vision, a safe learning environment, and the external school community in an ethical manner, while understanding and responding to a variety of contexts. The work involving the new professional standards has yet to be empirically researched. Yet, scholars and practitioners are hopeful that the new standards will lead to substantive change in programming and practice. The alignment of the national standards to the NC School Executive Standards can be found in Figure 2.4.

Scholars, practitioners, and professional organizations have outlined the skills needed by future leaders (Breaking ranks: 10 skills for successful school leaders (2nd ed.), 2014; Council of chief state school officers., 2008; Parylo & Zepeda, 2014; Steiner & Barrett, 2012). The newly implemented Professional Standards for Educational Leaders and National Educational Leadership Program Standards are grounded in current research and real world experiences of educational leaders and serve as the guideposts for developing school leaders of the 21st Century. These new standards require aspiring leaders to develop skills that will allow them to effectively address the following ten aspects of school leadership:

1. Mission, Vision, and Core Values
2. Ethics and Professional Norms
3. Equity and Cultural Responsiveness
4. Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
5. Community of Care and Support for Students
6. Professional Capacity of School Personnel
7. Professional Community for Teachers and Staff
8. Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community
9. Operations and Management

Chapter Summary

While a consensus of the skills necessary for effective school leadership in every school context is ambiguous, there are several identifiers commonly held as being critical. University and non-university programs have redesigned leadership preparation models to address some of the gaps that seem to plague the development of school leaders, however, the instructional features in their program models are often designed as one-size fits all approaches. Ultimately, principals must provide assistant principals with appropriate job-embedded opportunities to master the skills that will be needed to prepare assistant principals for the transition into the principalship (Johnson-Taylor & Martin, 2007). Districts must support these experiences with other contextualized supports to further their understanding of school and district norms. Though key factors have been identified, research on the influencing factors to aspiring leader readiness lacks significant empirical evidence. The question now becomes, if preparation programs are expected to develop effective leaders to lead effective schools, what should be the desired characteristics of a graduate from a preparation program? Though schooling and school leadership are highly contextual, the one consistent need of every school is an effective leader (Duncan, 2009a). Effective school leaders are the linchpin for effective schools because they
create conditions that enable the schools to succeed. In Chapter 3 the methodology for this study is detailed. The findings of the study are found in Chapter 4. Finally, the study concludes with conclusions, recommendations and implications for further study in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This qualitative case study explored how the leadership readiness of aspiring leaders was shaped while participating in a district-run leadership development program grounded in transformative learning experiences, contextual learning and competency based learning. The goal of the research was to determine if participation in a district-run leadership development program reshaped their leadership readiness prior to entering the principalship. This chapter provides a framework of the study to include the research design, study population, site description and sample selection. Additionally, information regarding the validity and reliability of the sources of data are identified. Next, this chapter outlined the data collection, management, and analysis procedures used to conduct the research study. This chapter also addressed the ethical considerations, limitations, delimitations, and researcher subjectivity as they relate to the research. Finally, the chapter summary reiterated the salient points within the chapter that provided the context for the next chapter, which expounds on the research data and results.

This study focused on understanding how medium-sized school districts grow aspiring leaders through leadership development programs that may shape the refinement of leadership behaviors, competencies, and dispositions that will result in leadership readiness. Four research questions guided this study:

1. How does a district-run leadership development program, in a medium-sized school district in North Carolina, shape the leadership readiness of aspiring leaders?
   a. According to the aspiring leaders, which program design components strengthen their leadership readiness?

2. How do aspiring leaders define readiness for effective leadership?
a. Which leadership skills, behaviors and competencies do the aspiring leaders perceive to be required for readiness prior to entering the principalship?

A qualitative methodology was most suitable for this study, due to the applied social science, context and interpretive nature of the research (Babbie, 1998; Baxter & Jack, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The use of qualitative research methodology provided an opportunity to construct meaning from the aspiring leaders experiences while participating in a district-run leadership development program (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Drago-Severson, 2009; Tucker et al., 2016). A qualitative research design allowed the flexibility to understand how a district-run leadership development program shaped the behaviors, competencies, and dispositions identified as necessary for aspiring leaders to transition into a principalship (Babbie, 2013). In addition, the qualitative approach help to illuminate the competencies that the aspiring leaders felt were essential for leadership readiness.

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study because as qualitative research is most useful in the exploratory stages of a construct and can often illuminate radically new ways of approaching a phenomenon as complex as leadership (Conger, 1998). Qualitative study adopts a constructivist, naturalistic stance toward the ways that individualistic knowledge is created and understood. The qualitative paradigm focuses on understanding the meaning people construct in a holistic manner without manipulating or controlling the subject being studied (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In addition, Creswell (2007) contends “knowledge is within the meanings people make of it, is gained through people talking about their meanings, is laced with personal biases and values, and evolves, emerges and is inextricably tied to the context in which it is studied” (p.19). Qualitative study seeks to understand human situations and the meanings made of the participants’ perspectives with the goal of understanding being an end in itself.
Thus, the analysis of qualitative research strives for a depth of understanding rather than a
generalizable result (Patton, 2015). The ontological assumption of qualitative inquiry is that research participants construct meaning individually, though multiple realities are assumed to exist within any phenomena. Thus, the researcher is required “to investigate and report these realities in order to understand the participants’ perceptions and the meaning making of their experiences” (Creswell, 2007, p. 12). In this study, the methodology permitted the researcher to explore the aspiring leaders’ multiple realities as well as how experiences steeped in transformative and contextual learning shaped their individual perspectives (Creswell, 2007).

Case Study

In this study, the researcher explored the multiple facets of leadership readiness through the perspectives of the aspiring leaders participating in the Aspiring Leaders Academy (ALA) in Central Public School district. Qualitative case study is a holistic approach to research that facilitates a revelation and in depth understanding of a phenomenon within its context using a myriad of data sources (Yin, 2014). The researcher studied the process through a holistic lens to understand the phenomenon that occurred during a district-run leadership development programs and how it shaped aspiring school leaders’ readiness for school leadership (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009) assert, “case study research is a qualitative approach in which researchers focus on a unit of study known as a bounded system” (p 426). This case study was conducted in order to understand from what context the ALA was created, to examine the program components, and comprehend how the program transformed the participant's meaning making structure regarding school leadership. Case study methodology provided the framework from which to understand the depth and breadth of the phenomena, leadership readiness (Yin, 2012). The focus of this inquiry was to explore how the perceptions of aspiring leaders
transformed throughout their participation in a district-run aspiring leaders program to determine the program’s ability to shape their leadership readiness. Thus, the case study design allowed the researcher to explore human behavior in educational practice by considering the actual conditions and constructs that are required for develop the necessary skills and dispositions to transition into an effective school leader.

This research inquiry was an instrumental, exploratory case study that provided a rich, thick description of the leadership readiness phenomenon in preparing aspiring leaders for the principalship. Yin (2014) emphasizes the importance of the researchers’ work in capturing the phenomenon within the natural environment to deepen their understanding of the case. An instrumental case study design was most appropriate because it provided the framework needed to explore the complexities of a social phenomenon related to the educational research (Babbie, 2013). By conducting this research study via an instrumental case study, the researcher will be able to understand the context, structure, and supports offered to aspiring leaders and their development within the construct of the Aspiring Leaders Academy. In addition, an instrumental case study can be used to reveal insight into a construct or topic or it can help to refine a theory. The implications of transformative, contextual and competency based learning on leadership development, particularly in a district-run leadership academy, is largely unknown. Thus, exploring the learning approach and unique setting provided an information-rich inquiry from which to gain further insight into this potentially useful approach to learning and leadership development (Patton, 2002). Culling these insights from a small, purposeful sample of participants allowed for a deeper understanding of the ways that transformative, contextual, competency based learning was perceived and experienced by the learners, and thus how it could be potentially useful in practice. A highly descriptive final product of this study allowed for rich
analysis of the perceptions of those in the program and the process by which their leadership development occurred.

**Site Selection**

To understand the influence of district-run leadership development programs, it was essential for the selected district to have an established leadership development program in place for aspiring leaders. As a former employee of a medium-sized district in North Carolina, the researcher was able to employ convenience sampling to identify and connect with the ideal district-run program from the medium-sized school districts in North Carolina that offer such programming. The district-run leadership development program in Central Public School district was designed to provide currently employed assistant principals, aspiring leaders, with transformative learning experiences that would lead to their mastery of the North Carolina School Executive Standards and prepare them for smooth transition into a principalship. Studying a medium-sized district with a diverse student population was essential to ensuring the research study could generate an appropriate amount of data regarding transformative learning, district context, standards application and leadership readiness.

Central Public Schools is a medium-sized suburban school district serving more than 33,000 students from a 150 square mile area. The county school system is unusual in that it draws from a community with a poverty rate of 19%, yet the rate of residents with a Bachelor’s degree or higher is 45%. The school district student population includes 14% exceptional students and 66% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch. It is home to 65 public schools: 30 elementary schools, nine middle schools, 11 high schools, two secondary (6-12) schools, two magnet schools, and one alternative school. (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2016). Central Public Schools is a low to mid-wealth school district that performs at
levels at, or below, state and national norms. The district’s 2014-2015 per pupil expenditures of $11,095 are above the state average of $8,296 (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015a). Though the district is among the ten highest in the state with respect to per pupil expenditures; it ranks below statewide averages on reading, math, and English proficiency exams in all ethnic subgroups except Caucasian. The school district has an 81% graduation rate with 54% continuing for postgraduate education. Approximately 17% of the current school and district administrators in Central Public Schools are within a five year of retirement age and 30% are novice principals with one to three years of experience (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015b). Additionally, over the past five years, the principal turnover rate has averaged at 14%. With almost half of the district’s principals at both ends of the workforce spectrum, student achievement remaining sub-par, and emergent issues of retaining highly qualified teachers and principals, district leaders recognized the need to establish a pipeline of competent and capable school leaders.

Aspiring Leaders Academy Program Overview

The focus of this inquiry was the Aspiring Leaders Academy operated by the Central Public School district in North Carolina. Central Public Schools has acknowledged the tremendous impact of filling principal and assistant principal positions with qualified leaders who are prepared to lead schools in an urban setting (Discussion with the program coordinator, 2016). As a result, district officials established a supplemental leadership academy, the Aspiring Leaders Academy (ALA) with the primary goal of the academy being to identify, train, and support aspiring school leaders to develop a thriving principal pipeline for the district. The program was intended to provide learning opportunities grounded in contextual understanding of district processes, and transformative, job-embedded development opportunities that would
influence the aspiring leaders’ application of the leadership competencies needed to be an effective leader. The goal was to groom program participants to become reflective practitioners in an effort to transform into more effective school leaders prior to obtaining a principalship. These approaches to leadership development provided aspiring leaders with opportunities to dialogue and reflect, which critical aspects of transformative learning. This collaborative effort of problem-solving and discussion by doctoral level district leaders was intended to connect the program participants understanding of key leadership challenges and their own understanding, beliefs, and dispositions relative to those issues.

The ALA program goals were based on research on how aspiring leaders come to understand the role of school leader and internalize their own readiness for the role as they transition into a principalship. The ALA program was organized around the seven leadership standards of the NC School Executive Standards framework:

- Standard 1: Strategic Leadership
- Standard 2: Instructional Leadership
- Standard 3: Cultural Leadership
- Standard 4: Human Resource Leadership
- Standard 5: Managerial Leadership
- Standard 6: External Development Leadership
- Standard 7: Micro-political Leadership

Each of these standards was the foundation for one of the monthly two-hour learning workshops. The first hour of each session was academic in nature. It was intended to help the participants deeply understand the underlying principles of the standard under study. The second hour focused on the applications of that standard in the school setting by incorporating video and
simulations of real-world situations. District leaders expected that developing an understanding of these standards would enable aspiring leaders to enter more purposefully into dialogues about instruction and learning as they encounter similar situations in their leadership roles.

The curriculum components of the ALA was based on a growing body of research on leadership development (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Orr and Pounder, 2010; Mitgang, 2012) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997). All experiences in the program were sequenced to provide an opportunity for introduction, development, application, refinement, practice, and modeling of knowledge, skills, and beliefs about leadership for learning and best practices. All instructional classroom experiences were integrated with field experiences. Over the course of the program, participants developed practical leadership expertise through:

- The applied practice of leadership concepts.
- Participation in a cohort group of aspiring leaders.
- Timely and deliberate feedback from instructional leaders.

Program participants were required to attend eight 4 hour workshop sessions throughout the school year. The learning workshops included a book study of two books, *The Principal 50* (Kafele, 2015) and *The Principal Influence* (Hall et al., 2016). Additionally, participants engaged in discourse and reflection activities, guided by the district superintendent, program coordinator, and other invited district leaders, on a variety of school leadership topics. The topics also aligned with the seven leadership standards for North Carolina School Executives. Participants were required to attend all sessions and participate actively in the discussions, assignments, and experiences.

Since the participants are currently assistant principal or instructional coaches within the district, the expectation was that the learning that takes place during the learning forums would
be immediately transferred into practice in their current roles. Each month, participants were required to detail which aspects of the previous lesson they were able to implement in their professional practice. There was time to reflect both verbally and in writing, on the implementation and discuss the success, failures, and opportunities for improving their professional practice.

**Assessment and Feedback.** The program assumes a level of knowledge and understanding regarding the North Carolina School Executive Standards among program participants and builds from that knowledge base to help aspiring principals make critical connections between behaviors, competencies, and dispositions as they progressed throughout the program. The knowledge of the program participants was assessed using a pre-post self-assessment of the North Carolina School Executive Standards rubric, a monthly reflection journal, and a capstone project. During the first learning workshop, the program participants completed a leadership self-assessment. At the conclusion of the program, the participants completed the same self-assessment. The pre and post self-assessments were conducted in order to examine the participants’ understanding of the principal's role, their current level of readiness, and how participation in the study impacted their readiness. The self-assessments were intended to deepen the understanding of the relationship between the aspiring leaders' professional practices and the responsibilities of the school leadership. Participants completed an electronic portfolio using the Wikispaces platform. Through Wikispaces classroom, cohort members uploaded evidence of their required activities, engaged in collegial discussions, and responded to reflection questions on their required book study. The artifacts uploaded to the participant’s electronic portfolio provided evidence of the participants’ mastery of the North Carolina School Executive Standards. The artifacts included job-related documents, supporting articles and
responses to a self-assessment survey. Participants received monthly feedback and progress monitoring by the program coordinator. At the conclusion of the program, the aspiring leaders submitted a capstone project, which was a 90-day plan of action for a new principal. This plan of action would frame their first 90 days of the principalship once hired.

**Study Participants**

The purpose of this case study was to explore how transformative learning experiences, contextual learning and competency based learning in a district-run leadership academy informed the leadership readiness for aspiring school leaders. This study explored the experiences of aspiring leaders participating in a district-run leadership academy. The goal of the research was to determine if participation in a district-run leadership development program informs leadership readiness of the aspiring school leaders, thus reducing their leadership readiness gap prior to entering the principalship. The sample was chosen from 2016-2017 cohort of the Central Public Schools’ Aspiring Leaders Academy. The cohort included 24 full time instructional facilitators and assistant principals who are preparing to become school principals within the school district.

**Sample**

Participants were selected from the cohort using quota sampling to ensure the researcher could understand the problem and the research questions from each characteristic of the population (Creswell, 2008). Quota sampling, a form of non-probability sampling, is a technique often employed in qualitative research when the certain characteristics of individuals are used as the basis of selection, most often chosen to reflect the diversity and breadth of the sample population (Kothari, 2004; Robinson, 2014; Saunders, 2012). According to Abrams (2010), quota sampling allowed the researcher to intentionally invite specific perspectives into the study.
and exercise judgment about who provided the best perspective on the phenomenon of interest. The program coordinator was asked to identify ideal individuals from the cohort, who have the following characteristics: currently enrolled or recently graduated from traditional principal preparation graduate program, currently employed as an assistant principal or instructional facilitator, and having more than two years of leadership experience in the district (Heckathorn, 2011). The researcher also asked the program coordinator to consider diverse demographics (e.g., race, gender), and participant quality (e.g., strong communicator, knowledgeable) when making his recommendations. The sample population in this study possessed certain characteristics in order to understand the influence of a district-run leadership development program on leadership readiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2014). By selecting participants from each of these subgroups, the researcher will be able to uncover and confirm the basic constructs that undergird the study. The characteristics of the program participants are reflected in Table 3.1.

After the researcher determined the participant characteristics, the first available subjects, who met the inclusion criteria were selected, thereby variability and bias cannot be controlled (Bowen, 2009; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Vogt et al., 2012). Like most non-probability samples, the variability forced the researcher to rely on the concept of saturation to ensure the sample size sufficiently included all perspectives. According to Fusch and Ness (2015) by interviewing six participants a researcher can uncover 80% of the major findings associated with the research problem, yet after about twelve participants, that number tends to remain stagnant at around 90% (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Originally, the sample size consisted of 16 of the 24, or 67%, of aspiring leaders in the cohort. However, due to unforeseen circumstances five of the 16 participants withdrew from the study. Approximately 46% of the sample population participated
in the research study, which provided a deeper understanding of the perceptions of leadership readiness among a broad section of program participants.

**Data Collection**

All 24 of the participants in the Aspiring Leaders Academy were informed of the study during the orientation session in September of 2016. The researcher wanted to ensure that participants were aware at the start of the program that the study would involve a review of their program documents and their interactions would be analyzed. Program participants were given a choice to inform the program coordinator if they wished to be excluded from the study. Sixteen of the aspiring leaders consented to participate in this study and completed a Participant Informed Consent Form (Appendix A). Participants received the official consent form through email and consented in two of three ways. Participants were given the option to respond to the email with their consent, sign the document at the next learning workshop, or sign a hard copy during their interview session. Information about potential benefits and risks associated with participation in this study are found in the informed consent form, as well as on the interview instrument.

**Sources of Data**

This section provided a detailed account of the data collection process and its management. The phenomenon of leadership readiness was captured through three sources of data—semi-structured interviews (Appendix B), archival program documents —reflection journal, leadership readiness self-assessment (Appendix C), and capstone project, and field notes of the observations of participant interaction and discourse in two learning workshops. Triangulation of the multiple data collection instruments allowed for more rigorous and valid conclusions (Miles et al., 2013). Each of the sources of data was essential to capturing the
phenomenon of leadership readiness among the aspiring leaders. In addition, each of the data sources aligns directly to one or more of the research questions that guided the study (Appendix D).

Table 3.1

_Demographic and Background Data of Aspiring Leaders_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Current School Level</th>
<th>Highest Level of Education</th>
<th>Years of Leadership Experience</th>
<th>Years since graduate school completion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bridgette Lawrence</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>15+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chrissy Cherry</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>10-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian James</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>0-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine Rainer</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>10-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren Thompson</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>M.A</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>0-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia Rodgers</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>M.A</td>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>5-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle Donner</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>M.A</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>5-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie Williams</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>0-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheila Thomas</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>M.A</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>0-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevor Cline</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>M.A, M.B.A</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>0-5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Since the primary function of qualitative research is to find answers to questions that stress how social experience is created, open-ended questions were asked to yield responses for maximum use of ideas, thoughts, and memories in the participants’ own words rather than words of the researcher (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Understanding the participants' initial and changing perspectives of the role of the principal and their own readiness for the role was the central focus of the research study. The intention of the researcher was to elicit information about each participant's background and developmental capacities from the start to the end of the program. Expert support was sought to review the credibility and trustworthiness of the interview guide to prevent researcher bias and ensure the alignment of the guide with the research questions and the purpose of the study (Yin, 2014).

**Semi-Structured Interview**

The semi-structured interview instrument was divided into two sections (Appendix B). Semi-structured interviews were utilized at the conclusion of the program to understand how each participant constructs his or her understanding of the school leadership, as well as, their perception of readiness after completing the program. The first section of interview questions measured the perceptions of leadership readiness through the lens of 11 aspiring leaders. The second section was developed from the study’s conceptual framework, transformative learning, contextual learning and competency based learning, to measure the aspiring leaders’ perceptions of the program’s design on their leadership readiness. It was critical that the interview questions measured the participants understanding of leadership readiness, their individual skills, and their transformed perceptions of the challenges faced by school leaders. Specific questions assessed the participants’ understanding of their perceptions of their leadership readiness and how
participation in the ALA influenced their readiness for the principalship based on the seven NC School Executive Standards.

Table 3.2

**Instrumentation and Data Collection Processes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What</th>
<th>How</th>
<th>Why</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured Interviews</td>
<td>The researcher conducted face-to-face, virtual or phone interviews</td>
<td>To better understand how that participant constructs his or her</td>
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<td></td>
<td>with participants using an interview protocol (Appendix B).</td>
<td>philosophy of the principalship, their leadership readiness and</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>their perceptions of the program.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Archival Program Documents</td>
<td>The researcher used a content analysis process to analyze the</td>
<td>To identify any significant transformations in the participant's</td>
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<td>program training documents and electronic reflection journal of</td>
<td>perspective that may have occurred during the course of the</td>
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<td></td>
<td>each participant. The researcher received raw results of the</td>
<td>program.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Leadership Readiness Survey for Aspiring Leaders to analyze.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning Session Observations Field Notes</td>
<td>The researcher conducted two observations to collect field notes</td>
<td>To observe the critical reflective practice and rational discourse</td>
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<td>during the learning sessions.</td>
<td>that takes place during three learning forums. This will allow the</td>
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<td>research to identify phases of transformative learning that may</td>
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<td>take place during participant interactions with other aspiring</td>
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The semi-structured interviews were designed to last from thirty-minutes to one hour. At the start of the interviews, the participant received the hard copy of the Participant Informed Consent form, as well as, the interview protocol and interview questions. The consent form was read to each participant and each participant was asked to sign the form at the conclusion of the interview. The researcher used an audiotape and memoed notes during the interview, to collect the data accurately. Following, administration of the thirteen interview questions, each
participant completed a post-interview questionnaire designed to collect additional participant contact data and provide a written explanation the member checking process.

Though the researcher did not know any of the participants personally, many of the participants were familiar with her previous work in the district. Most participants were receptive to scheduling the interviews and participating fully during the interview session. Most participants appeared relaxed and were willing to dialogue. This helped to create rich and descriptive data. The responses were transcribed verbatim to preserve impressions and to collect thick, rich descriptions. At this point, member checking was employed to ensure the transcripts accurately reflected the participants’ voice. Miles et al. (2013) describe member checking as critical to establishing credibility in a research study. Each participant was allowed to review the transcribed interview as a means of member checking. The transcribed interview was sent to each participant via an encrypted email attachment to their personal email address. After receiving the transcribed version of the interview, the participants were given three weeks to review the transcribed interview, make corrections or add comments, and return the electronic document. The protocol concluded when the revised transcription was returned, and a thank you note was sent to the participant. At the end of the ten days, the interview transcriptions were uploaded into the qualitative data analysis tool, ATLAS.ti 8, for coding.

Archival Program Documents

An examination of three program components provided another data source to understand the influence that transformative learning, contextual learning and competency based learning in a district-run leadership development program has on the leadership readiness of aspiring leaders. The following documents were reviewed, (a) the Aspiring Leaders Academy Reflection Journal, (b) Program documents and training agendas, and the (c) Aspiring Leaders Academy
Leadership Readiness Survey pre and post results. The program coordinator provided the researcher with login access to the ALA Reflection journal and the raw data from the first and second administration of the ALA Leadership Readiness survey. Along with the data, the program coordinator provided a copy of the ALA Leadership Readiness survey instrument. The document analysis of each of these sources of data occurred at the conclusion of the program to ensure that participants had an opportunity to complete their capstone project and final reflection submission. A document analysis protocol was used to illuminate any significant transformations in the participants’ perspectives while analyzing the capstone projects and reflection journal submissions. An analysis of the archive documents allowed the researcher to determine if the transformative, contextual and competency based learning experiences utilized in the program aligned to the behaviors, competencies, and dispositions associated with leadership readiness.

**Reflection Journal**

The first source of archival program data consisted of three different types of written assignments that are embedded in the course design for the ALA, and therefore do not represent additional assignments for the program participants. The first document data source was the ALA Reflection Journal. The reflection journal was a closed virtual discussion forum, hosted through Wikispaces, consisting of five critical reflection questions. The program coordinator posted a new question after every other learning workshop. Participants were asked to contribute their initial responses to the questions at that time. For the remainder of the program, the program coordinator encouraged the participants to continually visit the journal to reflect on their practice and to make modifications to their initial response or dialogue with peers. The journal served as an asynchronous extension to the rational discourse that occurred in the learning workshops, wherein, participants were required to respond to fellow classmates’ forum posts. In
addition, the program coordinator provided feedback to the participants though the feedback did not serve as a form of assessment. The journal topics were not discussed during the learning workshops as the primary purpose was to engender the critical reflection of the participants’ professional practice. The final entry of the reflection journal was the capstone project that the participants had to complete, their 90-plan into the principalship. The capstone project was a culminating activity in which participants constructed a plan for their first 90 days as a principal of a fictitious school. The participants were asked to conduct independent research of the school (e.g., community needs, student achievement) of their choice, engage in thoughtful dialogue with fellow aspiring leaders, peers and other district officials about the school’s potential needs as they plan their first 90 days as the principal. The participants were asked to create a five to ten minute presentation that would be shared with the cohort during the last learning workshop. The presentation should reflect “a deep understanding of their school and their path forward” (Discussion with the program coordinator, 2016). Each presentation highlighted their understanding of broad leadership concepts, their individual leadership competencies, and their plan for transitioning into the role. The participants were asked to reflect on the process of completing the capstone project, including how the transformative, contextual, and competency based learning experiences in the program helped to establish their plan. They also were asked to reflect on how the overall program contributed to their growth and readiness to lead the school. The tangible copies of the 90-day plan were uploaded into the ALA reflection journal. The researcher observed the final learning workshop, where each participant presented their capstone project and program reflection. Each participant also uploaded electronic versions of the presentation to the ALA Reflection journal. In addition, the participants’ oral presentations were audio recorded and transcribed for coding.
Curriculum Materials

The second archival program document data source were the curriculum materials used to facilitate the program. The curriculum materials that were used to develop the course were collected from the program coordinator. Those documents included: (a) learning session agendas, (b) two books used for book study discussion and (c) leadership readiness articles that were used to guide the dialogue during the learning session. These documents were reviewed to determine learning objectives, content, and activities aligned to standards-based instruction, transformative learning, and district context.

Leadership Readiness Self-assessment

The third program document data source used was the ALA Leadership Readiness Survey for Aspiring Leaders. The Leadership Readiness survey was a self-assessment conducted at the beginning and end of the program. The self-reporting inventory was used to measure the aspiring leaders’ perceived mastery of the 21 school leadership competencies and their pre and post perceptions of their own leadership readiness based on seven of North Carolina School Executive standards. The survey provided a wide range of data focused on aspiring leaders’ perceptions of their own demonstration of the seven leadership standards and their abilities to complete the duties and tasks required of the principalship as illustrated by the NC School Executive Standards Evaluation Rubric.

The Leadership Readiness Survey was administered at the first and next to last learning workshop. The survey results were tabulated by the program coordinator, thus, providing each participant with a score of their perceived readiness and a leadership readiness profile. Each participant received their results from the initial administration of the survey and used the results to guide a dialogue with their peers regarding their leadership readiness during the last learning
workshop. The participant was also asked to use the results of the survey to determine an action plan for ongoing job-embedded development. The researcher did not receive copies of the Leadership Readiness Profiles as results were classified as personnel documents and the information could not be released.

**Field Notes**

The researcher’s task in case study research is to describe and interpret social action or behavior within a particular context (Babbie, 1998). The researcher took field notes during two of the learning workshops to collect the topical information that was contributed by the participants during the rational discourse and the questions that were asked in the classes to identify critical reflection. The observations and field notes provided thick descriptions of the observed social actions, captured the thoughts and feelings of participants, and led to thick interpretations and meanings that were reported during the analysis phase of the research. Observation data helped to identify and create thick descriptions of what occurred during the learning workshops.

After receiving approval from the University Institutional Review Board and the school district, the researcher received approval from the program coordinator to attend the last three learning workshops. The researcher observed the critical reflective practices and rational discourse that occurred during two learning forums. As a means to capture what was observed, the researcher took notes regarding the learning environment, participants’ interactions during dialogue, and activity details. A memoing technique was employed to capture the observation, and the researcher converted the observation notes to field notes on the same day that the observation occurred. Due to the subjective nature of the research and the researcher’s familiarity with the program there was the potential for researcher bias during code development, which was
minimized through journaling. A research journal was maintained to track coding, analytic, and interpretive processes, as means to reflect on and reduce the possibility for researcher bias (Miles et al., 2013). The field notes were uploaded into the qualitative data analysis tool, ATLAS.ti 8, for coding.

Data Management

To begin the data collection, the researcher received approval from two entities. An application was submitted to the North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board requesting exempt status to conduct research using human subjects. After approval was granted from North Carolina State University, an application was sent to the Central Public Schools with the required abstract of the study and a request to conduct the research study. Once Institutional Review Board approval was received, study participants were notified and the study was conducted over a four-month period.

After receiving the necessary approvals, the program coordinator identified 16 of the ALA participants based on the researcher’s selection criteria. The researcher sent an email to the 16 recommended participants reminding them of the research study that was discussed during the orientation in September of 2016 and asking them to participate in the dissertation study focused on leadership readiness. The Participant Informed Consent Form was attached to the email explaining that participation was voluntary and that they could opt out at any time (Appendix A). Eleven participants responded and agreed to participate, three participants never responded, and two opted out of the study. The eleven individuals who agreed received a follow-up email and were asked to respond to an attached Doodle poll to determine a time and place for the interview to occur. The participants were able to determine the time, location, and method of the interview. The method options included phone or face-to-face interviews. Nine participants chose to meet at
their schools to conduct the interview face-to-face, while two requested a phone interview. Contacting the researcher to determine the interview time and place served as an indication of consent to participate in the study.

The researcher kept all of the research data on a password-protected personal computer. In addition, all hard copies of data were secured in a locked fireproof filing cabinet throughout the study. At the end of the review, the researcher secured all data sources collected throughout the study. Following the completion of the study, electronic data was transferred to a backup hard drive, and hard copies of data and codebook were locked in a fireproof filing cabinet and will remain there for the next five years. At the end of five years, all data files will be deleted from the hard drive. In addition, all hard copy data will be shredded.

Data Analysis

The data sources were used to explore how district-run leadership development programs, shaped aspiring leaders’ leadership readiness. Data sources consist of (a) semi-structured interviews; (b) program archival documents; (c) observations of the learning workshops. Miles et al. (2013) suggests that researchers remain flexible and open during the initial data collection stage of the research. Cousin (2005) writes, “In case study research, data collection and data analysis tends to proceed at the same time” (p. 425), therefore, as qualitative data is gathered, the researcher consistently reviewed data through a content analysis process to find common themes amongst the semi-structured interviews, program documents, and learning workshop observations. Content analysis is an analytic method used to classify written or oral materials into identified categories of similar meanings (Klenke, 2016; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013; Weber, 1990). It is “a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material” (Schreier, 2012). As such, the researcher first developed codes using the
theoretical frameworks that grounded this study: transformative learning and competency based learning. Additionally, three codes were created related to contextual learning in a district setting. Second, the researcher coded the various data sources for manifest and latent content (Cho & Lee, 2014). After several iterations of the a priori coding, the researcher used open coding to capture any emergent patterns that were not captured through the prior iterations of the coding process.

The Leadership Readiness Survey results were numerical in nature, thus, the researcher used a basic counting method to convert the data into a visual source of data prior to analyzing the results. For consideration the researcher studied the implications of variance theory on research. Variance theory seeks to understand the variables and the correlations among them in data (Maxwell, 2010a). Data analysis using variance theory research seeks to identify the contribution of differences in values of particular variables to differences in other variables and tends to be associated with research that employs experimental or correlational designs, quantitative measurement, and statistical analysis. Since this study is a qualitative study, the researcher did not choose to explore the variances in the survey results through a quantitative lens, but instead focused on a means of quantizing the data to help facilitate patterns of readiness based on participant responses to the survey. The raw results of the survey were simply counted to determine each participant’s overall self-rating of the NC School Executive Standards and NC Leadership Competencies (Maxwell, 2010b). Using this method maintained the process theory approach of understanding an analysis of the processes by which some events influence others. Sandelowski, Voils, and Knafl (2009) pointed that “quantizing” qualitative data is done in qualitative research “to facilitate pattern recognition or otherwise to extract meaning from qualitative data, account for all data, document analytic moves, and verify interpretations” (p.
Additionally, the researcher considered other points regarding the analysis of all the sources of data. Clarkeburn and Kettula (2012) noted that the findings of the reflection journals might be more dependent on the participants’ written communication skills rather than on their leadership competency. To minimize writing skill bias, the researcher used an a priori method of content analysis to code participants’ written responses. Nerstrom’s Transformative Learning model (See Figure 2.3), heavily based on Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning, created a visual effect of the transformative learning process. The researcher used this model to develop codes around transformative learning. The NC School Executive standards and competencies model was also used to develop codes. According to the North Carolina State Board of Education, “an effective administrator is one who receives a rating of at least “proficient” on each of the Principal Evaluation Standards 1-7 and receives a rating of at least “meets expected growth” on Standard 8 of the Principal Evaluation Instrument (Atkinson, 2006). The Leadership Readiness survey instrument used in the ALA was derived directly from the North Carolina School Executive Standards Evaluation Rubric. Figure 3.1 outlines the rating scale for North Carolina School Executive Standards. Designed by the program coordinator replicated the rubric in Google Forms. The program coordinator also included a section to the self-assessment to allow the participants to assess their readiness based on the North Carolina 21 leadership competencies.

The self-reporting inventory includes a 4- point Likert scale, with descriptive values that aligned with objective ranking categories. The categories are: (1) Developing, (2) Proficient, (3) Accomplished, and (4) Distinguished. The categories descriptive values are:

- Developing: The aspiring leader does not meet standards for performance, but has the
knowledge to make adequate growth toward meeting standard during the period of performance

- Proficient: The aspiring leader can demonstrate basic competence on standards of performance
- Accomplished: The aspiring leader can exceed basic competence on standards for performance most of the time
- Distinguished: The aspiring leader can consistently and significantly exceed basic competence on standards of performance.

*Figure 3.1. NC School Executive Standards Evaluation Ratings. Published July 2015, by the North Carolina State Board of Education and retrieved from NCEES Wikispaces*

In addition, an emphasis was on the content of the journal entry, rather spelling and writing conventions. Transcript coding consisted of identifying common beliefs, phrasings, and ideas from the aspiring leaders’ perceptions of leadership readiness in all 13 interview questions. The coding methods began with broad topics and transitioned to more specific codes as the data was analyzed (Miles et al., 2013). Observing and interviewing a representative sample of aspiring leaders while they participated in transformative learning enabled insight into how a diverse group of learners interpret, understand, and utilize their experience.
Primarily using a deductive data analysis, this study provided a deeper understanding of how district-run leadership development programs shape the development of the aspiring leaders’ leadership behaviors, competencies, and dispositions necessary to become an effective school leader during the first year of their principalship. The outcomes of the data analysis process were to: (a) to condense extensive and raw data from multiple sources to determine meanings and themes; (b) to establish the relationship among the participants’ responses relative to the research questions; and (c) to formulate a position about the participants’ experiences and how they relate to leadership readiness. This study utilized three primary data collection methods—(a) observation field notes, (b) semi-structured interviews, and (c) archival program data—to triangulate the data. The goal of this study is to explore participants’ conceptions (thoughts and cognitive understanding) and their perceptions (affective responses to certain felt experiences) of their experiences in the program, thus gaining insight directly from the participants are crucial. Observations of the program allowed the researcher to witness and record behavior as it happened, which would later be used as reference points in the semi-structured interviews. The Leadership Readiness Survey results and reflection journal passage enabled the researcher to glean more of the participants’ self-perceptions, which could be cross-referenced with the conceptions identified from the observations and interviews.

In this way, use of multiple data collection methods most appropriately produced a holistic picture of the connections between theory, setting, and context. Analyzing the field notes along with the reflection journal entries served as a lens to determine if and how the phases of transformative learning occurred. By using Nerstrom’s visual model of transformative learning, themes and patterns were extrapolated from the data regarding shifts in participants’ frame of reference, emergent understandings of school leadership, and knowledge development.
Pinpointing shifts and transformations through their oral and written communication strengthened the analysis. Additionally, as outlined in the study, the analysis of the reflection journal entries allowed the researcher to gauge the program’s ability to prepare candidates for the principalship. The self-proclaimed ratings from the survey results at the onset of the program were compared to the ratings from the results during the last learning workshop to explore any changes in the participants’ beliefs of leadership and leadership readiness. These comparisons revealed how the program informed their leadership readiness gap.

Moreover, the data directly aligned with this study’s four research questions. This study’s first and second research questions focused on how contextual learning can influence aspiring leaders’ leadership readiness. Data from the semi-structured interview and the Leadership Readiness Survey results provided information on each participant’s current application of leadership skills and competencies. The first set of research questions focused on how transformative and, contextual learning experiences in leadership development inform aspiring leaders’ readiness. These two questions addressed the data acquired from the semi-structured interviews, field notes, and reflection journal entries. The data collected from these two instruments permitted the researcher to comprehend each participant’s recognition of their own perspective transformation. The second set of research questions focused on how competency based leadership development informs aspiring leaders’ definition of effective leadership and leadership readiness. These research questions were addressed with data from the semi-structured interviews and the Leadership Readiness survey. The comprehensive data collected from these two instruments enabled an understanding of the participants’ perceptions regarding completing activities and tasks required of school principals. These three instruments provided rich data that answered the four research questions and explained the phenomenon.
Trustworthiness of the Study

Qualitative research design does not control for the effects of particular variables as in quantitative research. Therefore, the qualitative researcher must address specific threats to the validity of the study, which enhances the study’s credibility. In qualitative research, validity and reliability come about as a result of the trustworthiness of the data collected. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) describe the concept of credibility as “the degree to which findings correctly map the phenomenon in question” (p. 100). Credibility or internal validity addresses the question of how closely research findings match reality. Maxwell (2012) states the researcher’s primary responsibility is to make threats to validity clear, thereby explaining the ways the researcher may be wrong. There are several strategies that can be used to enhance credibility, including triangulation, member checks, clarifying researcher’s biases, rich descriptions, peer review, and feedback (Maxwell, 2013). The utilization of these strategies within this study is outlined in this section.

The identified data sources enabled the collection of data that led to a deeper understanding of how competency, contextually based, transformative learning experiences in district-run leadership development shaped aspiring leaders readiness for the role of school principal. Triangulation of three data sources enabled the researcher to identify patterns, themes, and draw conclusions. In addition, the researcher sought confounding evidence of the findings for irregularities that may challenge the phenomenon (Miles et al., 2013). An analysis of all data permitted the identification of common themes among participants’ beliefs regarding leadership development and transformative learning experiences. By using three data sources, validity, and reliability of the study findings were increased. Triangulation is defined as a technique that facilitates the validation of data through the collection and cross verification of data from a
diverse range of individuals and sources (Maxwell, 2013). Baxter and Jack (2008) maintain that triangulation "gives a more detailed and balanced picture of the situation." (p.147) Triangulation is a technique used to cross-checking data from multiple sources to search for regularities in the research data (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Triangulation also reduces the risk of inadvertent associations and intrinsic biases that may result from using a single data collection method.

Member checking is a technique for establishing to the validity of a data collection method. Miles et al. (2013) describe member checking as critical to establishing credibility in a research study. Soliciting feedback about the data and conclusions directly from participants after data is collected ensured an accurate portrayal of their experience. To avoid possible misinterpretation of participants’ perspectives and allow subsequent opportunities for participants to volunteer additional information after the initial interaction, member checks were included in the data collection. Each participant was allowed to review the transcribed interview. After the final interviews were conducted and the reflection journals were analyzed, participants were provided the opportunity to assess the adequacy of data and preliminary results, thereby confirming specific aspects of the data.

In addition to member checking, two post-doctoral researchers utilized a Validation Rubric for Expert Panel (VREP) to ensure alignment existed between research instruments and research questions. Following the VREP, all research instruments (e.g., interview questions and content analysis protocol) received confirmation of alignment from each post-doctoral researcher. The VREP process indicated that research instruments were appropriate and aligned to the goals of this study (Appendix F).
Limitations of the Study

The goal of this study was to explore how a district-run leadership development program informed aspiring leaders’ leadership readiness prior to entering into the principalship. Unfortunately, even the most well-planned research studies have limitations. Patton (1999) noted four ways that a researcher could affect a qualitative study: (a) participants may change behaviors due to the presences of the researcher; (b) researcher may change his or her behavior during the course of data collection, or analysis; (c) bias may be present in the qualitative researcher, and; (d) a researcher may be unskilled or lacks training on proper research practices. To limit the effect the researcher had on the findings, protocols were established for administering the data collection instruments, coding sources of data, and data analysis to reduce subjectivity and bias. The researcher also had identified several limitations that had the potential of affecting this study. This section reviewed the limitations and steps to mitigate their influence on findings and participants.

First, in an effort to avoid over-generalizing participant perspectives, the researcher was deliberate when selecting the sample participants. While sixteen participants were initial elected to participate, five later declined due to unforeseen circumstances. Since qualitative findings are dependent on context, sampling, and the depth of the case study, further research would need to verify whether findings from one study would be generalizable to a different setting (Patton, 1999). Participants may attend the same district-run leadership development program, but not the same principal preparation graduate program. Also, the number of years as a district leader may vary significantly. In addition, the characteristics, behaviors, and skills that identify an aspiring leader’s leadership readiness may differ from school district to school district. In addition, the use of quota sampling minimizes over-generalizations being that variability and bias cannot be
measured or controlled, which means the participant perspectives cannot be generalized beyond this sample.

Second, another attempt to minimize overgeneralization, the researcher was purposeful when selecting the sample school district. The researcher cannot assume that other medium-sized districts across the state that provide leadership development programs to aspiring school leaders would operationalize district context or leadership development the same. What one district identifies as the behaviors and skills necessary to become a principal may differ from another. The participating school district was similar to several other medium-size school districts in North Carolina. However, the findings of this study may, or may not be, generalizable to other medium-size school districts in North Carolina. To reduce the over-generalization of the findings, an emphasis on characteristics and leadership development unique to the sample district provided a distinction between similar entities.

Additionally, the program’s influence on aspiring leaders can only be as effective as its implementation. Since, there is no norming process or standardization of the program design, the fidelity to which the program was implemented could only be determined by the coordinator. In this regard, the execution of some of the most critical elements of the program’s design as mentioned in this study, were lacking or non-existent due to timing and participants needs. The researcher recorded the lack of implementation of these elements in the reflection journal to note them when discussing the findings.

Next, the researcher gave great consideration to the limitation of the data collection instruments. Since self-assessment surveys were subjective, the outcomes may not accurately portray the participant’s true level of leadership readiness. An aspiring leader may believe they possess leadership behaviors, skills and competencies that are not evident to others or
conversely, they may be overly self-critical. The researcher cannot control how participants respond to the self-assessment, but aspiring leaders were urged to be reflective and to choose responses that best represent their leadership capacity. Clarkeburn and Kettula (2012) noted that the findings of the reflection journals might be more dependent on the participants’ written communication skills rather than on their leadership competency. To minimize writing skill bias, the researcher used an a priori method of content analysis to code participants’ written responses. An emphasis was on the content of the journal entry rather than if words were accurately spelled and sentence structure was correct.

Finally, a couple of limitations surfaced surrounding the semi-structured interview process. To begin with, there was a lack of consistency when it came to standard interview conditions. The researcher conducted the 11 interviews in various settings. As part of the process, the researcher contacted aspiring leaders by email to request their participation in a semi-structured interview. Those who agreed to participate were given an opportunity to select a time and place that was convenient to them, which resulted in multiple interview settings. Settings included private residences, schools, telephone conversations, and virtual meeting places. Interview conditions varied from participant to participant, as many of the aspiring leaders selected to conduct the interviews during their Spring Break vacation.

**Delimitations of the Study**

The study considers the influence that a district-run leadership academy has on the leadership readiness for aspiring school leaders. Leadership readiness, moreover the knowledge, skills and dispositions gap that remains after school leaders receive their state licenses was chosen as the phenomenon of study. Research suggests that the leadership readiness gap has been overlooked in recent studies. The purpose of this case study was to explore how
transformative learning experiences, contextual learning and competency based learning in a
district-run leadership academy informed the leadership readiness of aspiring school leaders.
These three constructs were chosen to emphasize their role in shaping aspiring leaders' professional practice and to identify programmatic features that may be critical to the success of other aspiring leaders’ academies. The historical and organizational context of the district was identified as a key factor in reducing the readiness gap through onboarding. A competency based instructional design was essential to ensuring that aspiring leaders understand the measures to success in the principalship. Transformative learning experiences were vital to ensuring that the knowledge and disposition gap can be reduced. Only the perspectives of the eleven selected participants in the 2016-2017 cohort of the Aspiring Leaders Academy in Central Public Schools were included in the results of the study. Aspiring leaders were limited to current assistant principals and teacher leaders in the district. The perspectives of former participants of the program were not considered be as accurate because of the time that has passed since their participation. Also, many of the former participants have different roles in the district and their perspective may not only reflect their opinions from when they were an aspiring leader.

**Statement of Subjectivity**

The researcher had extensive experiential knowledge about school leadership and leadership development from technical knowledge and personal experiences (Maxwell, 2013) that were a source of data for the study. In this study, the researcher assumed the role of observer as participant (Iacono, Brown, & Holtham, 2009). This means, the researcher’s observation activities are known to the group and information-gathering activities are primary. The researcher interacted closely enough with members to establish an insider’s identity without participating in the activities constituting the core of group membership. The researcher was
clear with all participants that her role was to identify themes based on the interviews, document analysis, and observations conducted. With each interaction, participants were assured that their identity would be protected.

Qualitative inquiry is susceptible to biases since researchers tend to believe a particular outcome is correct. To control for bias, however, qualitative researchers must raise awareness to and report the potential for personal biases (Hays & Singh, 2011). Since the researcher was employed with Central Public Schools for seven years, the potential for bias from prior experiences exists. The researcher served as a Central Public Schools teacher from 2000 to 2004 and a principal from 2010 to 2013. While serving as a principal, the researcher was exposed to the district-run leadership academy when asked to sponsor one of her assistant principals. The researcher also served as a member of the ALA program staff from June 2014 to January 2015 during a doctoral internship. While serving on the program staff, the researcher facilitated a learning forum activity for the participants at that time and observed each program session. Consequently, the researcher has not been employed by the district for over three years; however, it is prudent to note that being a former employee of the school district tended to make the data more accessible.

In clarifying the potential for bias, preconceived notions regarding the outcome of the study are separated. Bracketing strategies were used to guard against potential bias as well. The researcher had a conversation with program coordinator and a neutral colleague to discuss personal biases and experiences about the research topic. By reflecting with them on separate occasions, the researcher had an opportunity to reveal any preconceived notions and potential biases that may arise. In addition, the researcher memoed and kept notes in a bracketing journal to keep track of other biases that may arise in my mind during the data collection process. Lastly,
a list of the biases that arose during the study is identified in results and interpretations section of the analysis. This study was designed to mitigate the prior experiences and potential biases of the researcher, as well as, challenges due to the sensitive environment collaborative and transformative leadership development through the triangulation of data: observation of group, interviews of individual participants, and analysis of documents (Klenke, 2016).

**Ethical Considerations**

Informed consent processes were enacted, and anonymity was assured. In compliance with the Institutional Review Board at North Carolina State University, all ethical considerations were upheld. A review form will be filed to provide information about the research study to include the principal investigator, project title, source of funding, type of review requested, and number and type of subjects. Research permission for the application was provided and detailed information about the description of the research study, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, significance of the study, limitations, and delimitations of the study, methods, and participants in the study. An informed consent form was given to participants regarding their right to confidentiality, voluntary nature of participation, rights guaranteed, and assurance of no anticipated risks. For the purposes of confidentiality, all study data such as interview audio-tapes was transcribed by an IRB certified transcriptionist. Transcripts will only be accessed by the researcher and will be destroyed after a period of five years. Participants will be informed that data from the study would be shared with the academic community, but all identifiable characteristics will be redacted and cannot be traced to individuals, programs, or school district.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter outlined the methodological approach chosen to conduct this research study. Qualitative methodology was used to explore and understand how transformative, contextual and
competency based learning informed the leadership capacity of aspiring leaders participating in a
district-run leadership development program. The participant sample consisted of 11 program
participants, who recently graduated from the Aspiring Leaders Academy, offered by the Central
Public Schools. A description of the Academy, including the site and its program design,
contextualized the approach to leadership development under study. The chapter identified the
instrumentation used for data collection. Procedures, data collection, data analysis, the means of
dealing with issues of trustworthiness, and ethical issues involving the consideration of human
subjects were discussed as well. Chapter three described the research design and research
techniques selected to execute the study. It is organized into five parts: (a) research methodology,
(b) research questions, (c) population and sample selection, (d) data collection methods, and (e)
analytic process. Each subject was considered individually and summarized in the conclusion. In
Chapter 4, the researcher details the findings of this study after conducting the data analysis.
Chapter 5, the final chapter, details the conclusions and recommendations for this study.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this case study was to explore how transformative learning experiences, district context and standards-based learning in a district-run leadership academy shapes aspiring leaders’ readiness for effective school leadership and helps to eliminate their leadership readiness gap prior to entering the principalship. This research methodology used provided the researcher a considerable amount of data to increase an understanding of the influence of district-based leadership development on those aspiring to transition to the principalship. This chapter presents the key findings that emerged from 11 semi-structured interviews with participants of the Aspiring Leaders Academy and detailed notes from the researcher’s direct observations of the program. Data from the participants’ reflection journals and Leadership Readiness self-assessment results were used to triangulate the data. This chapter provides an overview of the participating aspiring leaders’ demographic and background information. In addition, the data analysis procedures and research findings are described in this chapter. Chapter IV is organized into the following three sections (a) demographic and background information of the program and participants, (b) data analysis procedures and (c) findings. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary.

This qualitative study relied on three data sources ---- aspiring leaders’ semi-structured interviews, observation field notes, and archival program documents: a Leadership Readiness self-assessment and responses from the program mastery journal. These data sources provided a means to explore the phenomenon through a triangulation of data sources to answer the research questions and illuminate the study’s conceptual framework. To identify the connection between
aspiring leader readiness and participation in a district-run leadership academy, the following research questions guided this study:

1. How does a district-run leadership development program, in a mid-sized school district in North Carolina, shape the leadership readiness of aspiring leaders?
   a. According to the aspiring leaders, which program design components strengthen their leadership readiness?

2. How do aspiring leaders define readiness for effective leadership?
   a. Which leadership skills, behaviors and competencies do the aspiring leaders perceive to be required for readiness prior to entering the principalship?

Descriptive Data

This single-case study was conducted in a medium-sized school district in North Carolina. The Aspiring Leaders Program participants were comprised of assistant principals from all grades (k-12) and school types in the public school system (elementary, middle, high, and alternative). There were 24 total participants in the 16-17 cohort of the ALA, however only 11 chose to participate in the study. Basic demographic information was obtained from the eleven participants prior to beginning the semi-structured interviews as a means of further placing the findings in context, and accounting for possible outlying variables in the analysis. A copy of the post-interview questionnaire can be found on Appendix B. The questionnaire acquired information on the following variables: age range, gender, current position grade span, years of school leadership experience, and length of time since completion of the traditional graduate school program.
Characteristics of Participants

Pseudonyms are used to ensure participant confidentiality. The majority of the sample was female at 73% and male at 27%. The ages of the participants ranged from 30-50 with 64% of the sample consisted of those aging 30 and 40 and 36% aging 40-50. The participants were ethnically diverse with 55% reporting as African American, 9% Hispanic, 9% White and 18% Other. Twenty-seven percent reported having middle school leadership experience, with 36% reporting elementary experience and 36% reporting high school experience. Most (73%) reported having less than five years of leadership experience. Thirty-six percent had advanced degrees in education. Two participants had also obtained Master of Business Administration degrees and consider education to be a second profession. Most of the participants recently graduated from a traditional graduate program, with 55% graduating within the past five years. This information was obtained for three reasons: (a) to explore possible patterns of experience in the participant group; (b) to gain a sense of the ways in which these experiences may have impacted the individual's' motivation to participate in a transformative learning experience; and (c) to explore whether these prior experiences may or may not have influenced the participants’ learning in the current program. A summary of the demographic and professional background data can be found in Table 4.1.
Table 4.1

Summary Demographic and Background Data of Aspiring Leaders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic and Population Background</th>
<th># of Participants (n=11)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current School Level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Level of Education Attained</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of Leadership Experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5 years</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10 years</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years since completing the graduate program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-5 years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10 years</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-15 years</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 + years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Sources

This qualitative study relied on three data sources ---- aspiring leaders semi-structured interviews, archival program documents: capstone project, participant reflection journal responses, and Leadership Readiness Self-Assessment, and observation field notes.
Semi-Structured Interviews

A semi-structured interview was conducted with eleven aspiring leaders. A copy of the interview schedule can be found in Table 4.2. The interviews consisted of seven questions based on perceived readiness and three on the perceived influence of transformative learning and three on the programmatic elements that helped to shape leadership readiness. The questions were designed to connect the leadership development program to the perceived readiness of the aspiring leaders. The thirteen open-ended questions provided a structure to connect perceived leadership readiness to the gaps that were revealed through participation in the program. A summary of the interview transcription data is demonstrated in Table 4.2. Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted between April 1 and April 20, 2017 at a location identified by the aspiring leader, or via a telephone conversation. The interview durations ranged from 36 minutes to 81 minutes, resulting in 96 single-spaced pages transcribed.

Table 4.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Minutes</th>
<th># of Transcription</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bridgette Lawrence</td>
<td>4/3/2017</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chrissy Cherry</td>
<td>4/19/2017</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian James</td>
<td>4/12/2017</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Richmond</td>
<td>4/4/2017</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine Rainer</td>
<td>4/20/2017</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren Thompson</td>
<td>4/3/2017</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia Rodgers</td>
<td>4/3/2017</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle Donner</td>
<td>4/5/2017</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie Williams</td>
<td>4/4/2017</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheila Thomas</td>
<td>4/11/2017</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevor Cline</td>
<td>4/20/2017</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Archival Data

In conjunction with the semi-structured interviews, the researcher analyzed archival program data. A summary of the archival program documents analyzed for this study can be found in Table 4.3. The first archival data source was the results of the pre and post administrations of the Leadership Readiness Self-Assessment taken by each of the participants (Appendix C). Next, the researcher collected participant responses from the mastery journal, which included the capstone project (See Table 4.4). Finally, the curriculum materials from the program were analyzed. The archival documents were collected from the program coordinator. Those documents included: (a) learning session agendas, (b) two books used for book study discussion and (c) leadership readiness articles that were used to guide the dialogue during the learning session. These documents were reviewed to determine learning objectives, content, and activities aligned to standards-based instruction, transformative learning and district context.

Table 4.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artifact Documents</th>
<th># of Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program Overview Documents</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training Materials: Articles</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training Materials: Books</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agendas</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery Journals Responses</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Readiness Survey Results</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Leadership Readiness Self-Assessment

The Leadership Readiness Self-Assessment was administered to all twenty-four ALA participants during the first learning workshop session and again during the last session as an evaluation of the program. The eleven participants who were a part of this research study allowed the researcher to review the raw results from their pre and post surveys. The survey
sought to measure the participants’ perceived leadership readiness at the start and conclusion of the program. The survey was created by the program coordinator. The tool included two distinct sections—Indicators of Effective Leadership and Required Competencies for Leadership, with each section aligning to the NC School Executive Standards and NC School Executive Leadership Competencies.

The section devoted to the NC School Executives Leadership Standards was taken directly from the NC School Executives Evaluation Rubric (See Appendix G). The Program Coordinator converted the rubric to a google form as to ease the data analysis. Participants were asked to self-assess using the Likert scale ratings of Developing, Proficient, Accomplished and Distinguished. This is the same rubric that was used by current principals to evaluate assistant principals in the district. The last section consisted of a list of the NC School Leadership Competencies. Participants were asked to rate themselves using a Likert scale of 1-4. The ratings were designed to have participants gauge their understanding and comfort with employing the competencies into their daily practice. The rating scale was as follows: 1: I need help with understanding and employing this competency; 2: I can recognize when to employ this competency, but I need help prioritizing it in application; 3: I apply this competency to practice regularly; and 4: I employ this competency regularly and can teach others to use it. The survey results were tabulated by the program coordinator, thus, providing each participant with a score of their perceived readiness and a leadership readiness profile. Each participant received their results from the initial administration of the survey and used the results to guide a dialogue with their peers regarding their leadership readiness during the last learning workshop. The raw results of the survey were simply counted to determine each participant’s overall self-rating of the NC School Executive Standards and NC Leadership Competencies (Maxwell, 2010a).
Reflection journal entries

Participants were asked to enter three required journal entries and two optional entries in the electronic mastery journal. The mastery journal was structured in a discussion board format in Wikispaces. Each participant was asked to register on the discussion forum during the first learning workshop. Table 4.4 displays the journal questions and the number of responses to each question.

Table 4.4

Reflection Journal questions and Number of Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question #</th>
<th>Journal Questions</th>
<th># of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>What do you believe is the core work of school leaders? How does your purpose for leadership align with your belief? In what ways do you, as an aspiring leader, help to elicit the greatness that exists in your school from all students, teachers and larger school community? Envision yourself as the principal of your school. Identify the one topic that you believe would achieve the greatest transformation in your school. What is your topic? Why is this topic important to you? How does this topic reflect your leadership identity? What can you draw from the course readings of The Principal Influence by Hall et.al that relates to this topic (2-3 points)? Optional: What type of school would you consider to be an ideal school? List the features. Why are those features appealing to you? Why do you believe you are a good fit for your ideal school? What about your prior professional and personal experiences do you believe makes you qualified to lead the school? Who would be the stakeholders that you would address first? Why? Optional: Reflecting on your personal and professional prior experiences, what considerations would you make prior to meeting with the stakeholders? What school data would you familiarize yourself with during your first 30 days? Why would you deem that data to be most pertinent to your transition? What did you learn about yourself as a leader through the process of completing the 90-day plan? What are three things that you have learned about yourself after completing the program?</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observation Data

Lastly, the researcher used observation and memoing notes as a source of data collection. Observation data was collected during each of the learning workshops while participants
conducted the book study sessions, guest presentations, and critical reflection activities. The observations were collected primarily to record participant dialogue and behavior as a source to observe the behaviors and dialogue when critical reflection and rational discourse activities were occurring. The researcher took field notes during two of the learning workshops to collect the topical information that was contributed by the participants during the rational discourse and the questions that were asked in the classes to identify critical reflection. The observations and field notes provided thick descriptions of the observed social actions, captured the thoughts and feelings of participants, and led to thick interpretations and meanings that were reported during the analysis phase of the research. Observation data helped to identify and create thick descriptions of what occurred during the learning workshops.

As stated above, the purpose of this case study was to explore how transformative learning experiences, district context and competency based learning in a district-run leadership academy shaped aspiring leaders’ readiness for effective school leadership and helped to inform their leadership readiness prior to entering the principalship. The three constructs under consideration in this study were somewhat abstract and complex processes, thus the researcher used a semi-structured interview format to allow respondents to fully describe their experiences and obtain the richest possible description of their learning experiences. Results of the findings were also corroborated from researcher notes taken during participant observations during the learning sessions. Lastly, archival program documents were collected from the program coordinator. Specifically, the raw results of the pre and post Leadership Readiness self-assessment that participants were required to complete. Participant mastery journals were also provided to the researcher by the program coordinator. In addition, a review of the curriculum
for the district-based leadership development training for learning objectives, content, and activities aligned to transformative learning, competency based instruction and district context.

**Triangulation**

In studies about complex phenomena, such as aspiring leaders’ development, the systematic combination of various types of data is a crucial aspect. To ensure validity and reliability throughout this research study, a clear account of data collection and data analysis procedures were outlined in Chapter Three. Three triangulation strategies were implemented to increase the validity of the study (Bazeley, 2004; Miles et al., 2013). First, method triangulation was used to examine the reliability of the qualitative data collected from the interview questions, and pre and post survey results. Second, member checking was used to provide a triangulation of sources, which allowed the researcher to compare and cross-check the consistency and reliability of aspiring leaders’ responses from the semi-structured interviews. Member checking was repeated multiple times over a three-week period. Next, to reduce bias a second analyst reviewed and coded a representative sample of interview transcriptions and reflection journal entries to ensure the researcher was consistent during the coding process. To keep track of individual responses, participants’ identities were identified through pseudonyms. Lastly, the use of perspective triangulation allowed the researcher to understand the perceptions of the aspiring leaders’ beliefs in leadership readiness. This chapter further explains how the triangulation strategies were used to confirm the reliability of the findings. To increase reliability, the researcher provided a research matrix that illustrates the alignment between the four research questions and three data sources (Appendix E) and a research study codebook, which list the codes and descriptions. The data sources collected, research techniques used to analyze results,
and the overall comprehensive nature of this study strengthen the validity and reliability of this study.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

This qualitative case study relied on three data sources— aspiring leaders’ semi-structured interviews, archival program data: curriculum information, mastery reflection journals entries, Leadership Readiness self-assessments; and observation field notes. A vast amount of data collected from these sources will be presented in this section. To ensure a holistic approach to data analysis, a data management system was employed to maintain focus and alignment to the four research questions (Yin, 2014). In addition, the management system permitted the data to be organized within the three components of the conceptual framework—transformative learning, competency based learning, and contextual learning—identified as essential for aspiring school leaders’ development. The researcher conducted a manual review of the data in conjunction with the use of ATLAS.ti 8 software. Initially, the data were manually coded to search for themes and patterns in their surrounding context. Next, ATLAS.ti 8 software was used as an organizational tool. It is a repository for the data and a means of linking the coding which allowed the researcher to access and manipulate the coding results quickly during the findings and analysis stage. Again, pseudonyms were used to ensure participant confidentiality.

Multiple electronic data platforms assisted the researcher in organizing and managing the extensive data obtained through the study. The Leadership Readiness Survey was administered through Google Forms. The program director transferred the self-assessment rubric from the NC School Executive Evaluation Process booklet and replicated in the rubric using Google Forms to easily manipulate the data. The data collected through Google Forms was transferred to a Google Sheets. The program director shared the results of the survey with the researcher. The researcher
downloaded the results to Excel in a password protected the document. This enabled the data to be organized in a manner to compute frequency of responses from both administrations of the survey. Additionally, the Excel document computed the data from the pre and post survey to find the frequency in the aspiring leaders’ self-assessment of the standards. In addition to using Google Apps and Excel, the researcher created a matrix aligning data sources to individual research questions (Appendix D) a data codebook formed by themes and sub-themes, and a qualitative software program (e.g., ATLAS.ti) that enabled data points to be visualized and triangulated. A complex thematic data analysis process was followed that progressed from broad categories (e.g., transformative learning, competency based learning and contextual learning) to specific categories based on deductive coding.

The Leadership Readiness Survey conducted at the beginning of the program was comprised of two sections. The first section was identical to the NC School Executive Standards Evaluation Rubric. The aspiring leaders assessed themselves on the seven standards. The second section, a list of the NC Leadership Competencies, required the aspiring leaders to rate their embodiment of each competency on a Likert scale of Developing to Distinguished. The raw results of the pre-survey assisted the researcher in determining any gaps that remained after analyzing the post-survey (Appendix C). The post-survey mirrored the pre-survey. After reviewing the data several times, the researcher was able to identify patterns between the self-assessment rating and the rating of the leadership competency for each participant using a method of quantizing the qualitative data (Maxwell, 2010a; Sandelowski et al., 2009). By using this approach to analysis, the researcher was able to construct meaning related to the development of leadership readiness in aspiring leaders. An analysis of this data allowed the
research to interpret an understanding of if participation in the leadership development programs is shaped aspiring leaders’ behavior and skills needed for readiness (Drago-Severson, 2009).

In an effort to conduct a qualitative analysis on the Leadership Readiness Survey results using the Likert scale ratings, the researcher used a basic count of responses to determine each participant’s perception of their readiness. Leadership readiness was operationalized as an aspiring leader who possesses the leadership skills, behaviors, and competencies necessary to be an effective principal after completing a district-run leadership development program. Thus, the researcher determined that for aspiring leaders to meet the effectiveness threshold a majority of proficient ratings, or greater, on the standards rubric and at least half of the leadership competencies are necessary. There were 139 indicators embedded in the seven standards across the four ratings. To visualize how participation informed the aspiring leaders’ readiness, the researcher created a summary rating form for each participant that captured the pre and post administration overall rating results (Appendix I). To explore the overall perception of readiness amongst the group at the end of the program, the researcher tabulated the sum of each participant’s rating form. This process revealed instances of growth and change that could be attributed to participation in the ALA program. These findings revealed if the group, as a whole, perceived to be ready for the principalship after completing the ALA program.

Using the crosswalk of leadership standards and leadership competencies provided insight into the aspiring leaders perceptions of their readiness. An analysis of the ratings for this portion of the instrument yielded several questions associated with the factual knowledge and experiential knowledge of leadership identified as crucial to demonstrate leadership readiness. The researcher identified the aspiring leaders’ factual knowledge and experiential knowledge of leadership based on their ratings of their mastery of the 21 NC leadership competencies.
The third data sources analyzed were the ALA program archival documents. The mastery journal reflections were downloaded from the Wikispaces discussion forum. Each reflection question and corresponding participant’ response were placed in a matrix word document. To keep track of individual responses, the researcher assigned participants a pseudonym. Eleven documents were uploaded into ATLAS.ti 8 to code; one document per participant interview. The ATLAS.ti 8 software program permitted data to be clustered and organized by themes and patterns. Reflection questions were originally clustered by predetermined themes or categories (e.g., evidence of transformative learning, evidence of contextual learning, evidence of competency based learning, and perceived readiness gaps). Using the qualitative software program, allowed the raw data to be explored from multiple perspectives and provided rich data for analysis.

Additional program archival documents were provided to the researcher by the program director. These documents were quickly reviewed for content. If the artifact contained key data points (e.g., course descriptions & learning experience outcomes) for the study, they were uploaded individually into the qualitative software system. Next, all program training materials provided from the program director were uploaded. Once all of the program documents were uploaded, the coding process began. Initial coding consisted of a broad look at key themes—competency based learning, contextual learning and transformative learning—essential in fostering leadership readiness (Appendix F). The researcher found that some of the archival data lacking descriptions or detailed content that would allow an understanding of the course outcomes. Due to the lack of details the researcher coded archival documents to the categories that most aligned to leadership readiness. Some of the material fell into multiple categories and may have counted in more than one category. For example, a review of the course syllabus may have contained
words or phrases that aligned to both transformative learning and contextual learning which resulted in the data to be included in both themes. Using the qualitative software program allowed the raw data to be explored from different angles and provided rich data for analysis.

The next data source to be analyzed was the 11 semi-structured interviews with the aspiring leaders. Following each interview, the audio recording was transcribed by a transcriptionist. To verify the accuracy of the recording, the researcher listened to the recording while reviewing the transcription. Several corrections were made to the transcriptions before asking the participants to read and validate the interview transcription. The transcriptions were sent to each participant via an encrypted Google document. The password was shared with the participant via email and sent from the researchers personal email address. The password was sent in an open email which only included the password itself. While this lengthy process was repeated multiple times over a two month period, the implementation of member checking strengthened the validity of the findings (Yin, 2014). In addition to member checking, two post-doctoral researchers scored the alignment that existed between the research instruments and research questions using the Validation Rubric for Expert Panel rubric (Appendix E). Once all instruments (e.g., interview questions, Leadership Readiness Survey) received confirmation from the panel, the researcher proceeded with the data analysis process.

Upon receiving the member checked transcriptions from the aspiring leaders, the researcher separated the participant responses by the 13 interview questions. Each interview question and corresponding participants’ transcribed response were placed in a matrix word document. To keep track of individual responses, the researcher assigned participants a pseudonym. Thirteen documents were uploaded into ATLAS.ti 8 to code, one document per interview question. The ATLAS.ti 8 software program permitted data to be clustered and
organized by themes and patterns. Interview questions were originally clustered by predetermined themes or categories (e.g., transformative learning, perceived readiness gaps, district context, and standards-based instruction). For example, questions one through five focused on leadership readiness beliefs and behaviors; whereas questions six through eleven, are linked to programmatic elements. Using the qualitative software program, allowed the raw data to be explored from multiple perspectives and provided rich data for analysis.

The last data source analyzed was field notes. The field notes were broken down into two categories- critical reflection and rational discourse. A matrix word document was designed to include the two categories and corresponding researcher observations. The two documents were uploaded in ATLAS.ti 8. Additionally, once a thorough examination of aspiring leader data was completed, data from aspiring leader semi-structured interviews, Leadership Readiness surveys, mastery journal and program archival data were triangulated to corroborate information and identify patterns from different qualitative sources.

**Presentation of the Findings**

The section that follows contains a discussion of the key findings, each of which is supported and explained in detail. Quotations illustrating the participants’ perspectives are included to provide richness and texture to the study, and assist the reader to more fully understand the participants’ experience. The researcher’s observational data, as well as, data from the leadership readiness survey are included where appropriate. The key findings for this study are organized first by the four research questions:

1. How does a district-run leadership development program, in a mid-sized school district in North Carolina, shape the leadership readiness of aspiring leaders?
a. According to the aspiring leaders, which program elements strengthen their leadership readiness?

2. How do aspiring leaders define readiness for effective leadership?

   a. Which leadership competencies do the aspiring leaders perceive to be required for readiness prior to entering the principalship?

To explore the perceptions of the aspiring leaders regarding their readiness for the principalship after completing a district-run leadership development program, four research questions guided this study. The research questions looked at how district-run programming can help to shape the leadership practices that are essential to become an effective school leader. There are two central questions addressed in this study. The first question asked: How does a district-run leadership development program, in a mid-sized school district in North Carolina, shape the leadership readiness of aspiring leaders? The second question asked: How do aspiring leaders define readiness for effective leadership? The two central questions focus on how each component of the conceptual framework—transformative learning experiences, district context and competency based instruction—individually shape aspiring leaders’ readiness to transition into the principalship. Since leadership readiness is operationalized by possessing the factual knowledge and experiential knowledge identified through the North Carolina School Executive Standards and Leadership Competencies, one sub question followed each of the central questions to better understand the aspiring leaders’ perceptions.

The aim of this study was not to glamorize the nature of a district-run aspiring leaders’ academy, but to explore the inner workings, and to capture the learning experiences of the cohort members to better understand what makes a district-run aspiring leaders program distinct and significant to principal preparation. As previously noted, the perspectives on leadership readiness
gathered from the eleven aspiring school leaders were addressed in order of the four research questions as they relate to the conceptual framework. Organizing the findings in this manner will limit the analysis to those areas within the original scope of this study. This discussion will begin with the first research question as noted below.

**Effective Programmatic Elements**

Research Question 1 asked: *How does a district-run leadership development program, in a mid-sized school district in North Carolina, shape the leadership readiness of aspiring leaders?* This question encompassed all three elements of the conceptual framework - transformational learning, district context and competency based instruction—identified as essential for aspiring leader preparation. Research Question 1a: *What program elements shape aspiring leaders’ leadership readiness?* This question allows the central to be broken down into the specific elements related to each of the concepts in the framework that enhanced the formation of aspiring leaders’ readiness.

The structure of the ALA allowed for critical reflection and rational discourse to occur. The learning sessions were designed to engage participants in a cyclical thinking and reasoning process through an assigned reading, job-embedded application and discuss experiences both orally and written. Each assigned reading and job embedded task correlated to one or more of the NC School Executive Standards. Figure 4.1 shows the transformative learning process that was embedded in the design of the program.

The instructional design of the ALA sought to create a disorienting dilemma through a job-embedded task for each participant to consider each month. While cycling through the transformative learning process, the participants were asked to read articles and book chapters that related to the task. This reading was intended to provide additional considerations. During
the next learning session at the end of the month, the participants had time to reflect on their experiences and discuss their transformation through a rational discourse process.

Figure 4.1 Illustrates the program elements of the ALA.

**Critical Reflection**

Critical reflection is a process of reasoning that allows one to make meaning of an experience (Brookfield, 1995). It is a descriptive, analytical, and critical process that can be articulated in a written form, orally, or as an artistic expression. Savaya and Gardner (2012) suggest “critical reflection (CR) is a process by which one may identify the assumptions governing one’s actions, question them, and develop alternative behaviors” (p. 145). When implemented effectively, critical reflection begins with a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1995). Critical reflection is a primary component of transformative learning theory, in that individuals are able to move about the phases of transformation as their frame of reference is critiqued and
adjusted. Participants in the ALA engaged in critical reflection during dialogue with their peers and district level representatives, while engaging in job-embedded tasks, and through their written responses to the mastery journal questions. George indicated that he engaged in critical reflection in and outside of the learning sessions. He said:

> I’m able to refine my practice with those surveys, even taking, I went home and did the Myers-Briggs and did that, and learning about yourself, because so many people can categorize you and being in there and being able to reflective, you need to be able to speak when people tell you and ask you tell me a little bit about yourself, the buzz words they are looking for are not the buzzwords I was given.

Brian discussed how he is reflecting on his practice and applying the new strategies. He indicated:

> The articles have really been very in-depth and very helpful, not only just for me and that particular cohort, but to say, when I get a chance to run a school, and you are building a capacity with the teachers to become leaders, maybe I can use some of this and being able to research on top of those articles.

Lauren realized how important reflection is to her ability to lead. She remarked that “the practice of critical reflection in the program showed that you have to be able to deflect and reflect. Like, you have to be able to like step back for a moment in order to see the big picture.” While critical reflection was considered as a critical element of the program design.

**Rational Discourse**

Another important component of transformative learning theory and a critical step to facilitate transformative learning is rational discourse. Mezirow (1991), states that rational discourse allows for the testing of the validity of one’s construction of meaning. It is considered
to be the catalyst through which transformation is promoted and developed. Rational discourse differs from general conversation because it requires ample time to accommodate repeated conversations about a topic that will evolve with time. The practice of rational discourse helps to facilitate an environment of respectful listening and tolerance to new perspectives. Participants engaged in rational discourse with one another, program leadership and their colleagues at the schools about the required task each month. Participants were encouraged to speak with others as well to ensure that they were able to talk through their biases and preconceived notions. Generally speaking, participants realized that the discourse that occurred in the learning workshops often assisted in their transformed perspectives. Sheila acknowledged how the rational discourse process influenced her learning by stating:

I absolutely felt like having that varied discussion from high school to elementary, you know, talking to those administrators or aspiring leaders gave me an opportunity to see it from a different lens. So, I absolutely felt like it was valuable in my present as well as where I plan to go.

George echoed the sentiment by stating:

it made me reflective, it made me feel like it is not about, it’s about preparation, but it is about process, it’s about reflectiveness, and you are to going to get everything. It is almost a spiritual thing when I go into the Aspiring Leaders, because it is not like, you are not going to get every job that you go for. Not everybody is going to like you, but they don’t have to like you for you to lead them. And that’s how I feel. Having those daily conversations with our cohorts and breaking up in groups and actually seeing it from a different perspective and
being able, we are in there with so many different people on so many different levels. But everybody is in there trying to be a leader, a better leader.

Bridgette stated what struck her most was “Just the dialogue with peers or you can read the same article and sort of it can strike each person a little bit differently depending on where they are in their profession or with what their experiences have been.”

Contrarily, one participant felt the rationale discourse had a negative impact on her development. Maggie connected the rationale discourse process to the need for a stronger candidate selection process. She stated:

They should be able to pick out people in strategic places. They should be looking at the data for the schools that almost are there. There are schools that ain’t going to get there, and they need to take those schools that are almost there and have them leaders in something like this so they can come back and they can be bouncing ideas off. I’m at an A+ school; nobody asked me anything about data. Nobody asked me anything about instruction. I was in a group the other day, we were talking about the evaluation or something, the teach evaluation piece. I think it was what we were talking about. And one person went on for like 30 minutes about teacher evaluations. Well, I went to the NCDPI workshop about the teacher evaluation piece and I understood clearly what it was. We didn’t need any extra time to talk about it. We kept trying to cut her off and she kept going on and on as if she was teaching us. So, I’m like she must just be happy just to talk, right, because this is not what we need to discuss.
Determining Leadership Readiness

Research Question 2 asked: *How do aspiring leaders define readiness for effective leadership?* Research question 2a asked: *Which leadership competencies do the aspiring leaders perceive to be required for readiness prior to entering the principalship?* These two research questions coupled together allowed the participants’ factual and experiential knowledge data to be examined and provide an understanding of the participants’ perceptions of their current capacity for leadership readiness.

First, in order to determine the starting point of the participants’ leadership readiness, the researcher asked questions to understand the readiness baseline for each participant. From the aspiring leaders perspectives’, participation in the Aspiring Leaders Academy shaped the aspiring leaders’ readiness by addressing their cognitive and behavior readiness gaps lingering after completing their traditional graduate programs. A few participants shared their frustrations with the lingering gaps after completing their traditional principal preparation program and receiving state certification during their semi-structured interviews. The researcher coded the responses about readiness gaps along with barriers and growth factors. Table 4.5 describes the codes that were used to identify the leadership readiness gaps.

George shared that the gaps caused a loss of faith in his abilities, “I interviewed for an assistant principal position 22 times in two years and like in seven different counties. I was eleven times a finalist and two times it was between two candidates.” Chrissy mentioned that:

> Before the (ALA) program, I was assistant principal for a year and I really couldn’t gauge myself as a leader because I was so busy on the job, because going to school to get a MSA and putting it into knowledge into practice is totally different.
Similarly, Sheila acknowledged her gaps stemmed from the perspective from which the instruction was situated between the two programs. She stated:

“my graduate program training was centered on the transformative leader as well.

So, they trained us to be transformative, to look at the big picture, look at all the goals and objectives, and make sure that we cross our “t’s” and dot our “l’s. The ALA program is doing the same thing but differently, because it talks about the heart and passion of what you’re doing. And I think that’s the difference.”

Table 4.5

*Initial and Thematic Codes with Definitions to Express Leadership Readiness Gaps*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Readiness Gaps</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gap-ALA Gap</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant identifies remaining knowledge, skill and disposition gaps after completing the ALA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gap-Leadership Readiness Gap</td>
<td>This code is used when participants identify their own shortcomings and/or lack of training regarding becoming a principal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gap-Traditional Program Gap</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant identifies a knowledge, skill or disposition gap that remains after completing a traditional principal preparation program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Barriers to Readiness</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readiness-Bias</td>
<td>This code is used when participants make reveal an explicit bias that may be addressed through the transformative learning process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readiness-Potential</td>
<td>This code is used when participants reveal a belief or an action that may not necessary translate to readiness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readiness- Negative Tendencies</td>
<td>This code will be used when participants reveal beliefs that are counterproductive to becoming an effective leader.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Growth Factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readiness-Self Affirmed Growth</td>
<td>This code will be used when participants reveal growth in any area of leadership that could help shape their readiness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readiness-Ready to Lead</td>
<td>The code is used when participants references the knowledge, skills and dispositions required being an effective leader and how one knows they have what it takes to be a principal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Also, Maggie shared that for her “the Aspiring Leaders taps into that passion, into the why you want to do something versus going to one of them traditional programs and you just trying to get your work done and you getting out the door, right.” Lauren indicated the dichotomy of practicality and theory reveal itself during the program when stating:

I knew about that from graduate studies, but when you come from a vastly different place, you going from may affluent to less affluent or poverty, let’s be real. It is an eye opener when you going to students moving out, one student moving out the whole year, out of a classroom to you can come in on a Friday and you have 20 new students enrolling and 10 redrawing.

In addition, the aspiring leaders’ goals upon entering both the traditional graduate program and the district-run aspiring leaders program should also be considered. George noted how his frame of mind upon entering the Aspiring Leaders Academy helped to shape his readiness in the following comment:

My definition of leadership has definitely changed since I have been in the Aspiring Leaders Program. I stated this once before, you know, going through just a MSA program was a means to obtaining a job, where my experience in the Aspiring Leaders Academy allowed me to actually put those practices, those best practices, to work. So my leadership goal after the Aspiring Leaders Program is now about growing as a leader, unlike my goal from my traditional program, which was getting a job.

Jasmine recognized that her participation in the ALA helped her to become a “more informed leader who realizes more than anything that each school community is different, and its needs vary based on the students who attend, the teachers who teach, and the community it serves.”
Another pattern that emerged from the participant responses about gaps after completing the ALA program was that of new ways to apply existing knowledge. For instance, Bridgette stated, “the program kind of helped affirm some things that I kind of entered this journey in, but now I actually have some dendrites to hook on to it, where before you just kind of blindly taken in information.” She went further by stating, “I really do believe a lot of things; however the existing knowledge that I have from my graduate programs still depends on the system, on your current principal, people’s adaptability to change and what they are used to.” Michelle echoed the sentiment when she acknowledged a reawakening of her own biases. She stated:

The program for me has opened my eyes to the fact that I spoke earlier about culture and climate. I knew about that from graduate studies, but when you come from a vastly different place, you going from may affluent to less affluent or poverty, let’s be real. It is an eye opener when you going to students moving out, one student moving out the whole year, out of a classroom to you can come in on a Friday and you have 20 new students enrolling and 10 withdrawing.

Results from the interviews and self-assessments revealed that several participants shifted their thinking about effective leadership during their participation in the program. Maggie stated that the program showed her that “every decision must be carefully calculated, in order to clearly assess the leaders impact, and adjust their actions as necessary by engaging in ongoing reflection.” Chrissy acknowledged how the program refined her understanding of the use of data and data-driven decisions by stating, “I increased my knowledge in Exceptional Children’s Education; I learned how to look at the data of a school and build a master schedule based on the needs of students.” Jasmine recognized that:
An instructional leader does not mean that I must be an expert in every subject area to give proper and constructive feedback when assessing teachers; it means knowing what highly effective lessons are composed of and how to assist teachers in providing lessons that maximize instructional time and engage all students.

There were several participants who indicated that the ALA program provided an avenue to reflect upon why effective school leadership was important as opposed to only focusing on the how to be an effective leader. Maggie shared her view that “the ALA program is about that, about making you connect with why you are doing what you are doing verses, how to do it.” In addition, she stated:

Aspiring Leaders makes you realize that it is not pretty. It doesn’t look good. It’s not all suit and tie. Some days you’ve got to have your jeans and tennis shoes on because you’ve got to get dirty. And that I don’t think will ever come out of graduate school programs. In going to one of the traditional program, you just trying to get your work done and graduate, right.

Also, in order to distinguish the participants’ understanding of leadership from leadership readiness, the researcher asked three interview questions to measure each participant’s definition of effective leadership. The three questions were: Thinking back to the days before you participated in this program, how would you have defined leadership? and Now that you have completed the aspiring leaders program, has your definition of leadership changed? If so, how would you define or describe leadership? Each participant shared their how their definition evolved from the beginning to the end of the program. Jasmine stated in her culminating narrative of the program:
Before completing the leadership program, I would have described my style of leadership as one in which the duty to lead falls on the principal alone. Although I realize that it is the ultimate responsibility of the principal to lead the school, the staff and students of the school should be leaders as well. As a result of my participation in the leadership program, I realize the importance of having a shared vision with the school community. In order to lead change, stakeholders must feel that they are a meaningful component of that change. Encouraging staff to take on the responsibility to lead in their respective areas of expertise will further enhance their buy-in and support of your mission and vision.

She also shared that:

Prior to my participation in the leadership program, I defined leadership as the act of managing, supervising, and making decisions for a group of people or in regard to a common interest. Since I have completed the leadership program, my definition of leadership has changed to some degree, I would now define leadership as the implementation of processes to positively influence a shared vision. Effective leadership is not owned by a single person, but by the team. Leadership is collaboration, cooperation, and an understanding of the overall mission and goals.

Bridgette stated the program helped to broaden her view of leadership:

Where it used to be much narrower, where leadership was who runs the school, which runs the district. I now see it from several advantage points in terms of school boards, state legislators, and federal policy makers. They control a lot more of our lives than what we actually think they do. And so, I see it as all of
that. Just everybody just has a different piece or a responsibility or different charge.

Trevor recognized that the core of his definition did not change but grew more encompassing when stating “I still believe leadership involves integrity, but my definition has expanded to include accountability, holding those around me accountable to my vision of where our school should be and pushing teachers toward that end.”

There were two participants whose definition of leadership did not believe the program changed their definition of effective leadership. Lauren stated:

So before the program I would have said, fully vested, committed and involved leader, especially as it relates to the instructional component for the school. That would have been how I would have defined leadership and reaching out to various sources to help propel the school toward success with your partnerships and such things. After participating in the program it was more like a confirmation.

Similarly, Michelle stated:

I don’t know if the program changed my definition of leadership, but I would define leadership as a person who is passionate about whatever their mission or goal is, someone who is influential, meaning that they are able to have people who can follow them. I also think that a person who is a leader is a person who is able to also do the same thing as others, like you are not a dictator, but someone who is able to work along with you and empower people. So I think the program only confirmed for me what leadership is or what leadership can become, but not so much changed my view.

Jasmine stated:
This is the greatest change within my leadership style. I’ve had the opportunity to apply new techniques and knowledge in every aspect of my current role as a leader. I am truly a wiser, more informed leader who realizes more than anything that each school community is different, and its needs vary based on the students who attend, the teachers who teach, and the community it serves even within the same district.

While many of the participants were able to articulate their cognitive understanding of readiness, some were only able to share examples of what readiness would look like in application. Chrissy shared that the program addressed her readiness gap with scheduling and exceptional children. She shared that “I increased my knowledge in Exceptional Children’s Education; I learned how to look at the data of a school and build a Master Schedule based on the needs of students.”

Many of aspiring leaders definitions of leadership at the end of the program aligned with the seven North Carolina School Executive Standards. For instance, Jasmine mentions strategic leadership when she stated that she now realizes that “school leaders have an obligation to promote a shared vision among the entire school community and lead in an environment that embraces growth and systemic change.” Bridgette connects her learning to human resources leadership and micro-political leadership when she states, “I believe good leaders constantly assess the strengths and interests of staff and try to match with their responsibilities so the internal motivation and personal fulfillment aspects are more likely to be present.” Brian spoke to cultural leadership when he shared “school leaders have to influence the staff, students and community in order to make connections that will incite growth in their educational development.”
The researcher also needed to determine a measure for leadership readiness. The participants were asked, “After completing the program, do you believe that you are ready to become a school principal? If so, why do you believe that you are ready? If not, why not?” All of the aspiring leaders stated that they believe they possessed the requisite skills and knowledge to enter the principalship and be effective in year one. The researcher disaggregated the understandings of readiness and its relationship to the participants’ perceptions of effective leadership, summarized in Table 4.6, and defined leadership readiness for the participants in this program as the possession of the knowledge and skills needed to be an effective instructional leader. All of the participants’ responses included aspects of instructional and human resources leadership, while there were few mentions of managerial, micro-political and external leadership.
### Table 4.6. Evolution of Participant’s Definition of Effective Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Before the Program</th>
<th>After the Program</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bridgette Lawrence</td>
<td>Well, I’ve been very blessed to have varied educational leadership experiences. I liked helping people solve problems. I liked that it wasn’t as isolated as I found that teaching was. I felt like I got to use a lot of different skills and I enjoyed it. The problem part was a challenge, not really a burden to me. When I first started in educational leadership, my definition was much narrower, where leadership was who runs the school, who runs the district. I now see it from several advantage points in terms of school boards, state legislators, and federal policy makers. They control a lot more of our lives than what we actually think they do. And so, I see it as all of that. Just everybody just has a different piece or a responsibility or different charge.</td>
<td>My definition has changed you know, kind of helped affirm some things that I kind of entered this journey in, but now I actually have some dendrites to hook on to it, where before you just kind of blindly taken in information. But, more than 20 years I guess, of experiences and educational leadership, I’m much more grounded in yes, you’re right, yes, you’re right! I read that article. You know, it actually validates a lot more of my experiences of why preparation programs are important. Why research is important. And, networking and supportive networks are important. So it has been very validating and all of that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chrissy Cherry</td>
<td>I define leadership as the ability to influence learning by focusing on goals in order to establish environments that support teachers to help students succeed.</td>
<td>Participating in the program did not cause me to change my definition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian James</td>
<td>A leader is someone who can accomplish task or inspire others to do their share of a task.</td>
<td>Participating in the program did not cause me to change my definition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Richmond</td>
<td>One person who had a certain set of characteristics that were a vision, uh, a visionary who was charismatic somewhat a people person, someone who has great social skills and great networking abilities. I stated this once before, you know, leadership from that perspective and just and individual thing just going through just a MSA program obtaining a job to actually being able to put those practices, those best practices, into work, so leadership was about the leader and getting a job.</td>
<td>Leadership is about the ship. It is everyone rowing in the same direction, everyone having a buy in, everybody wanting to move forward, everyone buying into the vision and mission of what is going on, and looking at things from a different perspective.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.6 (continued).

Jasmine Rainer  Prior to my participation in the leadership program, I defined leadership as the act of managing, supervising, and making decisions for a group of people or in regard to a common interest. Since I have completed the leadership program, my definition of leadership has changed to some degree, I would now define leadership as the implementation of processes to positively influence a shared vision. Effective leadership is not owned by a single person, but by the team. Leadership is collaboration, cooperation, and an understanding of the overall mission and goals.

Lauren Thompson  I would define leadership as a person who is passionate about whatever their mission or goal is, someone who is influential, meaning that they are able to have people who can follow them. I also think that a person who is a leader is a person who is able to do the same thing as others, like you are not a dictator, but someone who is able to work along with you and empower people. So I think the program only confirmed for me what leadership is or what leadership can become, but not so much changed my view. I would actually add some additional synonyms, and it would be flexible and malleable especially when you take into consideration your school culture and climate, because maybe your school culture and climate is such that that flexibility is needed more depending on if your called for student behavior concerns or parent concerns.

Lydia Rodgers  I would have defined the principalship as simply the instructional leader of the school. A more realistic view of school leadership, that perhaps my expectations for what a person should do and be able to accomplish in this role were too high in the context of federal, state, local and school challenges.

Michelle Donner  I would have said, fully vested, committed and involved leader, especially as it relates to the instructional component for the school. That would have been how I would have defined leadership and reaching out to various sources to help propel the school toward success with your partnerships and such things. I also realize that it helped me to see other perspectives, like it helped me to realize that you, not that I ever thought that you can’t do it alone, but that it definitely helped me to understand that you really have to know how to prioritize yourself and also be able to make sure you have time for yourself. I think before that time it like I have to do this, I have to do this, I have to do this, but one of the things that I realized in the program was you have to be able to deflect and reflect. Like, you have to be able to like step back for a moment in order to see the big picture.
Table 4.6 (continued).

| Maggie Williams | I would have just thought of that would be the person that was in charge, by the person that’s doing what needs to be done or taking responsibility for what needs to be done on a daily basis. But now, I think that leadership is about being able to facilitate the learning of the leaders in the building. |
| I don’t think I ever saw the other part of leadership where you have to be responsible for every little thing. I think that being now in the leadership program; it shows me how much emphasis is placed on student achievement and how well students do from a teacher’s perspective. You always think it is about you, but it is not even about you, it is about everybody together, working together to achieve the same goal. |

| Sheila Thomas | I looked at leadership then as my role of meeting individuals as well as a collective group of people to more so become, I guess, if you want to say, defining who they are as individuals as well as leaders whether in the classroom or out of the classroom of a collective group as a cohort |
| I think it is important that, you know, as a leader you pull out the best in those that are surrounding you. I never see myself, and I think this is one of your questions, like I see myself as a servant leader so you know part of my role was to serve you, but in the midst of me serving you is something that I would tell my teachers is that, you know, give me the opportunity to fine tune who you are as a leader in your classroom as well as someone who may want to led based on their career path out of their classroom. |

| Trevor Cline | Leadership, I do believe, is full of integrity, what you do when people are not watching you. In addition, assessing those steps that you are using to proactively scan your environment, assess those weaknesses, opportunities, and threats then to provide and allocate the optimal resources in order to get the job done. A lot of the leadership is centered on example, providing a positive, strong example of someone who can get the job done. You're not going to get anybody to follow you if you all you do is talk. They have to see you actually working. |
| I think that I have refined my idea of leadership after participating in the program. I still believe leadership involves integrity, but my definition has expanded to include accountability, holding those around me accountable to my vision of where our school should be and pushing teachers toward that end. |

While the participants shared their beliefs of leadership readiness in different ways, three overall themes emerged from their descriptions of leadership readiness. The definition of leadership readiness varied by participants, however, by analyzing the responses, two themes emerged. By analyzing each of the definitions, several patterns were revealed. The readiness
themes of (a) making data informed decisions; and (b) engaging with the school community, were at the heart of what aspiring leaders believed make a leader effective. The aspiring leaders provide examples and direct responses to that spoke to their belief that leadership readiness is a result of focusing on the data and people.

Brian’s shared that he felt he was ready, “my ability to read and interpret data and the resources listed above I could show positive growth within the school and community. My ability to team build, motivate and inspire individuals would be accomplished through clear and concise communication.” Sheila stated that she believed her readiness was a result of her ability to coach her staff. She said:

We are going to talk about data. We are going to look, and it is hard, you know, it may be a hard conversation looking at the data. It may be a hard conversation, you know, correcting what instruction should look like, but if I’m here, I’m here to coach you. I’m here to support you and get you all the resources that you need, but let’s do it together. I want you to understand that you are not by yourself. I’m here to support you and I’m going to get all the right people in the places to do that.

Brian echoed Sheila’s sentiment by explaining readiness starts with understanding the data and the people. When sharing his 90-day plan, he shared:

I would look at test scores first, but I would examine and interpret all types of school data from the last 3 years to identify areas of strength, weakness and any trends in school and people performance. I would do this to help guide any professional development and identify staff that has apparent expertise.

Similarly, Chrissy spoke to the importance of understanding and analyzing data by sharing:
but then also looking at all of the data, and not just performance data, but looking at, you know, the climate and culture of this school, really digging in and talking to people about what it is that they would like to see changed and what is one thing that you don’t want me to touch coming in, those kinds of things you would see.

Trevor summed up the notion of being data informed and stakeholder supportive by sharing:

I have learned that readiness will come when leaders learn to be consistent and add progress monitoring steps in order to maintain a positive and collaborative culture while creating and empowering teacher leaders. I’m here to serve the community. And, I want to be seen as that person. I want to be seen from my students and my cafeteria staff, and my custodial staff. I’m here with you. If I need to pick up a broom, I’m picking up the broom. If I need to wash a table, I’m washing a table. If you need me to clean that bathroom, I’ve got that with you because we are here together. And so, I want my staff to see me as that person. That I am going to stay with you.

The aspiring leaders shared their interpretations of the competencies that effective leaders possess and explained how school improvement occurs when an effective leader is at the helm. Though the participants conducted a self-assessment using the NC School Executives rubric each year as a requirement of the state evaluation process, they were asked to complete a self-assessment using the same tool to measure their perceived growth through the program. The participants revealed how participation in the program shifted their thinking about leadership. To illustrate the transformation of the participants’ perceptions of their readiness, the researcher interpreted their Leadership Readiness self-assessment survey results. After receiving the raw
results of the pre and post administration of the survey from the program coordinator in the form of a Google spreadsheet. The researcher compiled the results into a pre-program and post-program snapshot for each participant first for the NC School Executive Standards and then for the NC Leadership Competencies (Appendix G). The snapshots were used to identify changes individual participant responses, in the overall ratings for each individual and collectively as a group. The results of the pre and post Leadership Readiness survey revealed the participants’ self-diagnosed proficiencies and gaps in leadership readiness by standard (skills) and by competency (behavior). For the purposes of this study, proficient is equal to effective.

Participants were asked to self-assess their perceived proficiency of the seven North Carolina School Executive Leadership Standards. The results varied by person, however most participants scored at a proficient level. The overall ratings by standard are shown in Figure 4.2. The results show how each participant rated themselves based on their perceived proficiency of the NC School Executive Standards and changes that participants reported from the first administration of the survey to the last.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-Program</th>
<th>Post-Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not Demonstrated</td>
<td>Developing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridgette Lawrence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chrissy Cherry</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian James</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Richmond</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine Rainer</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren Thompson</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia Rodgers</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle Donner</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie Williams</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheila Thomas</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevor Cline</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4.2. Participants’ Overall Rating for the Seven Executive Standards*
Participants were also asked to self-assess their perceived mastery of the twenty-one North Carolina leadership readiness competencies. While the results varied by person, there were several similarities in the results. The comparison of the pre and post survey results showed that most participants mastered three competencies prior to entering the program (1) Customer Focus, (2) Systems Thinking, and (3) Personal Ethics and Values. The competencies that the participants felt remained non-mastered at the start of the program were: (1) Results Orientation, (2) Creative Thinking, and (3) Change Management. The results from the post survey revealed that most participants believed to have mastered the same three leadership competencies from the pre-administration of the survey as well as: (a) Personal Responsibility for Performance, and (b) Visionary. In addition to the competency gaps that were revealed initially, the participants collectively identified lingering gaps around: (a) Results Orientation, (b) Responsiveness and (c) Conflict Management. The overall ratings by competency are shown in Appendix G.

The results of the survey identified individual gaps were reduced in some areas between both administrations, which may be a direct result of the program. Since effective leaders must possess the ability to get results, be responsive to the needs of the school and community and manage relationships, it seems that the leaders’ perception of leadership readiness is skewed.

**Conceptual Framework Findings**

The findings were first interpreted through the lens of the research questions. Next, the researcher examined the data and illuminates the findings through the conceptual framework. The three components of the conceptual framework are: (1) transformative learning, (2) competency based learning and (3) contextual learning.
Transformative Learning

For this study, the researcher used Nerstrom’s Transformative Learning Framework (2014) to illustrate the transformative learning process. Nerstrom’s’ framework details the cycle of the phases and outcomes that individuals encounter as their frame of reference shifts on account of learning experiences. The model is loosely based on Mezirow’s (1978) phases of transformative learning and reduces Mezirow’s ten-phase process to four segments. While Nerstrom’s’ model is heavily based on Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning; it provides a visual representation of how transformations are constructed and identifies transformative learning as a continuous cycle of learning. A priori method of coding was conducted using Nerstrom’s Transformative Learning Model. The codes used to identify the occurrence of transformative learning are displayed in the Table 4.7 below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transformative Learning Phase</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLP-Experience</td>
<td>This code is used when the learner enters the Experience phase. This phase stems from prior learning such as knowledge, skills, attitudes that have been developed over a lifetime of interactions with the environment. Learners enter the transformative learning cycle at the experience phase when a learning event, situation or encounter has led to stimulation of their prior learning and belief patterns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLP-Assumption</td>
<td>This code is used when the learner enters the Assumptions phase. This occurs are constructed from experience. They form the lens of worldview. Learners enter the transformative learning cycle at the assumption phase when a learning event, situation or encounter leads to an awareness of and reconsider biases, stereotypes, and learned beliefs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLP-Challenged Perspective</td>
<td>This code is used when the learner enters the Challenged Perspectives phase. This occurs when new experiences require learners to challenge deeply held beliefs and consider new perspectives. Learners enter the transformative learning cycle at the challenged perspectives phase when a learning event, situation or encounter reveals flaws or misconceptions in their previously held assumptions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLP-Transformative Learning</td>
<td>This code is used when the learner enters the Transformative Learning phase. This occurs when the learners adopts and acts upon a new perspective. Learners’ worldview is broadened to include a more encompassing lens. Though rare, learners enter the transformative learning cycle at the transformative learning phase when a learning event, situation or encounter lead the learner to produce action based on new perspectives. Most often learners will enter at a different phase and later act upon the new understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transformative Learning Outcome</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLO-Examined Prejudices</td>
<td>This code is used when learners in the assumptions phase question their previously held biases, stereotypes and learned beliefs after being confronted with new information and reflection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLO-Incidental Experiences</td>
<td>This code is used when the learners in the experience phase displays behaviors of increased self-confidence, renewed personal values, cultivated social involvement and lasting friendships after being confronted with new information and reflection.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.7 (continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TLO-Fostering</td>
<td>This code is used when the learners in the challenged perspective phase cite critical reflection and rationale discourse in cohort and residential learning as well as traditional learning models as impacting the acknowledgement of the occurrence of transformative learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformative Learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLO-Reconceptualized Learning</td>
<td>This code is used when the learners in transformative learning phase have an increased awareness of flawed perspective which causes one to challenge previously held perspective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLO-Transformed Personhood</td>
<td>This code is used when the learner takes action after the acknowledgment of new, deeper understanding.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order for transformative learning to occur, one must travel the phases of the transformative learning process, though, not every learning experience ends with a transformed perspective. Transformative learning then becomes a new experience. Thus, when transformative learning occurs, individuals are more receptive to experiencing it again. Also, once transformative learning occurs it is unlikely that adults revert back to their prior beliefs.

Unlike Mezirow’s phases, Nerstrom’s model follows a more sequential order where all phases are encountered and entry to the phases can begin in any segment (Nerstrom, 2014). The four phases are “(a) having experiences; (b) making assumptions; (c) challenging perspectives; and (d) experiencing transformative learning” (p.327). Nerstrom’s model identifies five themes or outcomes that occur after the 4 phases of transformation occur. According to Nerstrom (2014) those five outcomes are: “(a) examined prejudices—biases, stereotypes, and learned beliefs; (b) incidental experiences, with sub-themes of increased self-confidence, renewed personal values, cultivated social involvement, and lasting friendships; (c) program structure fostering transformative learning, with sub-themes of cohort and residential learning and traditional learning models; (d) reconceptualization of learning; and (e) transformed personhood” (pg. 328).
Each participant shared in great detail, how their perspective of the work of an effective principal has changed due to their participation in the ALA. Several of the participants acknowledged a transformative experience throughout the program. By using the visual model of transformative learning, themes and patterns were extrapolated from the data regarding shifts in participants’ frame of reference, emergent understandings of school leadership, and knowledge development. Pinpointing shifts and transformations through their oral and written communication strengthened the analysis. By analyzing the data from semi-structured interviews, program reflections, and mastery journal entries, the researcher was able to determine the phases and outcomes that the participants encountered throughout the program. Question 10 of the semi-structured interview asked:

Tell me about a recent leadership situation that worked well for you or one that went badly. Describe what happened. Were you conscious of how your prior experiences, preconceived notions, assumptions or biases that were at play while you were handling the situation? If so, in what way(s)? What, if anything, can you do differently now, that you didn’t do while handling the situation?

The researcher also asked follow-up questions to gain clarity about the transformative learning process being explained in the response. While most of the participants did not share a complete cycle of transformative learning in their interview or journal responses, some stories were able to capture the entire process. From those stories, the researcher was about to identify patterns in the five themes noted in the Nerstrom’s’ transformative learning model.

**Examined Prejudices**

Trevor told a story about how he adjusted his preconceived notions about parent involvement as a result of the learning and discussions in the program. He shared that:
this year, we started an attendance committee to address students who have excessive tardies and absences in class. Another part of the program involves meeting with parents to help them understand that there is an issue and create a plan to address it. As the administrators overseeing the program, I often work with the social worker to meet with parents and students and assign consequences. As you can imagine, many of the conferences can be contentious, but I work to allow parents and students to voice their concerns while making sure they understand the expectations of the school (experience). Looking at biases and assumptions (assumptions), I assumed that parents were being neglectful, and in many cases they are, but we ran into situations where mental illness and custody issues created the problem. I recalled from a discussion we had about a good instructional leader is one who involves all stakeholders in the learning process of student that the parents were one of most critical stakeholders in this process (challenged perspectives). In these instances the students did not need for us to punish them for uncontrollable life circumstances. We needed to find a way to increase their parental and family engagement in order to support the student learning (transformative learning).

Likewise Lydia reflected on a recent event that caused her to examine her previously held beliefs. She stated that she had a 7th grade teacher, who needed instructional support. She shared that:

The students are enrolled in a class with a struggling teacher and I did not realize it then, but my preconceived ideas of what a teacher should know and be able to do caused me to handle the situation with less empathy (assumptions). The 7th
teacher struggled in every way imaginable: with relationships, content, classroom management, and organization. At the time I was not conscious of the impact of my preconceived notions (experience). I realized that I should handle the transition differently by approaching the plan from a collaborative standpoint instead of simply rolling out a mandate (challenged perspectives). I worked with teachers of other grade levels to provide tutoring and enrichment for the students (transformative learning).

Program structure of Fostering Transformative Learning

George expressed how the structure of the program helped to foster transformative learning for him when he shared that:

Since the program started, I will tell you the meat of it all, for me is the feedback. Sometimes I think we as leaders, they talk about feedback a lot and everybody has an idea of feedback, what does feedback look like (assumptions), but in Aspiring Leaders, I realized that it must be about feedback is immediate feedback and purposeful feedback (transformative learning). As I conducted my 2nd round of evaluations, I used a process like the simulations that we did in the last learning session when we looked over some instructional data related to the teacher evaluation. That was very reflective because if you are rating someone high in a specific area and they’re not supposed to be or you are just doing it because it something that has been done traditionally in that particular school and you are a new leader, I need to know how to gauge that (experience). So, as I have done my second round of evaluations being that I have to evaluate and sometimes it is not easy, but being in Aspiring Leaders has taught me but what does it have, what
are the components that you need to have. Because it is not about you at the end of the day it is about how we can service these children better. Instead of just saying, well I didn’t see this and I didn’t see that, the conversation is I had a situation yesterday with a teacher and I had to address her instructional practice. She was defensive and rude after I questioned things. I used the same questioning techniques that we discussed in the program, like, “What can we see? What do we need to see? How can I support you so that we can see it? How can we grow the students together?” I said what if I were to talk to you in a way you are talking to me and she is like well I’m not like that in my everyday life and you have to get to know me personally. Which I understand that it can be taken personally, but this is a professional setting and we are talking about children. If I didn’t have that program I would not have been able to respond because sometimes in the heat of the moment you look at yourself as the leader and you are not going to talk to me like that. I hope my feedback in this situation would be able to provide the teachable resources and I’m also being able to provide her with positive feedback along the way to help them get to where they she be (challenged perspective).

Incidental learning

The theme of incidental learning was illuminated by Jasmine’s story of reassigning a teacher from a tested subject. She shared that:

I had to make a to move a teacher from an EOC subject due to years of data showing that students were not proficient or meeting growth. I thought it would be in the best interest of both the students and teacher to move the teacher to a different subject with less pressure (assumptions). A fellow teacher, department
chair, came to my office to advocate for this teacher and I did not entertain the conversation. I simply told him that I would not discuss teacher concerns with other teachers as that was not best practice (experience). Looking back, I realize that the he was just trying to be supportive (challenged perspectives). If I could go back, I’d listen attentively and maybe suggest that ask the teacher if she’d like him to sit in on the next conference about the classes to show support. This year, I’ve developed a very close bond with core subject department that I oversee. By sharing a little bit of my life, getting to know who they are outside of school, recognizing and showing appreciation for them and their work, being timely with observations, evaluations, and discipline, we have built a high level of trust and respect between teacher and administrator. I am extremely proud of this accomplishment (transformative learning).

Reconceptualized Learning

Bridgette shared how she utilized her learning about Human Resources Leadership and the Leadership Competencies of conflict management, systems thinking, and personal ethics and values to address a vital core subject vacancy in her school. This was a challenge because it revealed a rift between the administrative team. In her past professional roles (experiences), she shared that the administrative team operated on a shared value system without much thought or conversation about what is in the best interest for children. She stated:

Sometimes I think, everybody has their own blind spots and you know, my blind spot is a certain level of trust with, especially the administrative team. Even if you have fundamental belief system differences. I thought that was always a safe place, you know. Because, you know, it is lonely at the top.
Her truths (assumptions) were challenged when a core teacher vacancy surfaced at the school. She shared that her beliefs are:

That [hiring] is a very sacred thing and we do nothing else right, when there is an opportunity to bring a teacher in this place that syncs up with our value systems, our vision, and what we are trying, to me there is no better thing that you can do as an administrator than to hire a very good person. Not to just hire a warm body, I say that because [I] don’t want to hire my brother-in-law.

This experience validated and renewed her personal values (challenged perspectives). She expressed that:

There were some things that I think were, if I had read some things more accurately in terms of my principals’ personal ethics around hiring, ok I would have been better able to navigate how I handled hiring for that position, so it felt like a win, win. All I wanted is the best person in for these children. I guess I just wasn’t aware of people thinking that differently from that or maybe people I’ve worked with in the past are just better at masking. And so being very clear about the end goal is having somebody here for these children to best support them and me considering all the different factors that may have gone into that. I would have done a better job of figuring out a way where the best we can get will be for the children while being mindful of all these other things. And I think I just sort of pressed it from a completely, this is right, that’s wrong, I’m not with that and, you know, I don’t get anything out of that. There is a lot more, I don’t know, a lot more mingling of folk than I’m used to. Personally, professionally, we were in school together, whatever. But I didn’t read some of that very well and I’m
discipline myself for not picking up on some of that. That may have harmed something that was already a little bit fractured anyway, but the ultimate group that got missed out I think was the kids. And that is my responsibility in making sure their needs are met. And so, I think that has impacted my approach to some things especially in the area of hiring (transformative learning).

Similarly, Lauren shared that she had an epiphany in January. She noted:

We had a modified schedule due to testing, so we changed the special time, the recess time, lunch time, to later in the afternoon, or whatever. My assumption was that the lunch duties or the people were covering lunch duties would go at the time that the gray levels went, based on their regular lunch duties before. Well, what happened was a mix up happened where people thought they were to go at the exact time based on what the regular lunch duty was verses the change (assumptions). I have been the testing coordinator in other schools and districts, but this was my first year as testing coordinator here. No, my prior experience, no, I didn’t have to at other schools (experience). Well, it was a hot mess. My assumption was it was something that was practiced here too, however that was not the practice. So, it was clearer this time around. This time I just followed practice. Whatever your old practice is, I need implement what is needed. practice. But just again, regardless, just being clear on communication and not having assumptions (transformative learning).

Transformed Personhood

There were no expressions of transformed personhood. Transformed personhood deals with learning that resonates with adult learners both personally and professionally. While some
of the transformative learning that were shared could bleed into the personal experiences of the participants, none of them articulated if that translation had occurred. It seems the learning in the program did not translate to both personal and professional learning for the participants.

**Transformative Learning Opportunities**

Question 11 of the semi-structured interview also addressed how the program fostered transformative learning by asking, to what extent do you think that your leadership practice has been, or will be impacted as a result of the transformative learning (e.g., dialogue with colleagues, critical reflection) experienced in the aspiring leaders program?" The essence of transformative learning suggests that one’s frame of reference is altered after going through an experience that contradicts ones preconceived notions. While the instructional design seemed unsuccessful with fostering transformative learning in both personal and professional settings, the participants shared how the learning experiences shed light on how their previously held beliefs were potentially hindering their readiness for the principalship. In leadership, such experiences can determine a leader’s success and professional longevity. Bridgette indicated:

The more experiences I have had in different places, the more I realize that everything depends on the environment you work in and what they need, what is the culture of that environment, what was the leadership style of the person that was in that job before, and whether or not that organization wants more of that or the opposite of that. But what I realized about myself and how I make decisions about, you know, my career or moving or whatever, is that I realized that I spend a lot more time on the effective piece, which is good because I want to be good at what I do. I don’t want to be just talk. I don’t want to be no PR game. I want to be the real thing. Whatever the grit work is, I want to be good at that.
Maggie realized that the transformative learning experiences in the program revealed personal attributes. She said:

Okay, I found out in this Aspiring Leadership Program that I’ve got a fatal flaw, that is, I’m all about the business. Right! I’m not a people person, but I get along with everybody. I’m not the flowery come on let’s hug, kumbaya or whatever person, but I’m about the business of getting things done.

Similarly, Michelle indicated she now:

realizes that it helped me to see other perspectives, like it helped me to realize that you, not that I ever thought that you can’t do it alone, but that it definitely helped me to understand that you really have to know how to prioritize yourself and also be able to make sure you have time for yourself.

Trevor stated:

I have held many positions including: language arts teacher, skills specialist, substitute teacher, testing coordinator, instructional resource teacher, and assistant principal. Coupled with those positions, I have work in three different states and have had the opportunity to learn from some strong principals- each with his or her own special skills. Throughout this program, I have made sure to reflect on what I have learned from each of them.

Later in the program, he shared the following sentiment about transformative experiences:

I think that the transformative learning experiences have improved my leadership practice by reinforcing the themes from the text we were required to read. It is one thing to read the information from the book, but something totally different once I
got a chance to reflect on my experiences and consider the experiences of other school leaders.

**Competency Based Learning**

Every aspect of the program was designed around the NC School Executive Standards and North Carolina Leadership Competencies. The seven standards guided the selection of the readings, the discussions, the readiness survey tool, the mastery journal responses and the capstone project. The program coordinator admitted that:

The competency based design was not intentional, but the use of the language of the standards was very intentional. It was meant to provide motivation and relevance to the work because the participants should be living and the breathing the application of the standards each day. It only makes sense to give them tools that will ensure their success not only in their current role, but also their future principalship.

While embedding the standards that are used as an evaluation for the assistant principals provides additional support to them in their current role, the conversations around the standards also deepens their understanding of the experiences and practices that are not able to master prior to the principalship. Question five on the semi-structured interview protocol asked participants, “Do you feel that participation in the aspiring leaders program has increased your readiness for becoming a school executive in North Carolina? If so, please explain.” Question six asked, “Do you feel that the program addressed the standards in which you need improvement? Please explain.” Most participants acknowledged the program deepened their understanding of the standards and in most cases influenced their application of the standards in their daily practice.
The application of the standards fit into two categories; Knowledge of the Standards or the Application of the Standard. Table 4.8 below describes how the responses were coded.

**Table 4.8. Initial and Thematic Codes with Definitions to Express Competency Based Learning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of Standards</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Know-Cultural Leadership</td>
<td>This code will be used whenever the participant states a conceptual understanding of the elements or interconnectedness of cultural leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Know-External Leadership</td>
<td>This code will be used whenever the participant states a conceptual understanding of designing structures and processes that result in community engagement, support, and ownership through external development leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Know-Human Resources Leadership</td>
<td>This code will be used whenever there is a reference to growth in the participant's understanding of processes and systems in place which results in recruitment, induction, support, evaluation, development and retention of high performing staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Know-Instructional Leadership</td>
<td>This code will be used whenever the participant states a conceptual understanding of best instructional and school practices for school leaders to embody.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Know-Managerial Leadership</td>
<td>This code will be used whenever the participant states a conceptual understanding of processes and systems in place for budgeting, staffing, problem solving, communicating expectations and scheduling that result in organizing the work routines in the building.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Know-Micro-political Leadership</td>
<td>This code will be used whenever the participant states a conceptual understanding of micro-political leadership by referencing the diversity in staff skills, backgrounds and professional knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Know-Strategic Leadership</td>
<td>This code will be used whenever the participant states a conceptual understanding of strategic leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of the Standard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Act-Cultural Leadership</td>
<td>This code is used when participants’ recognize how they have applied their understanding of cultural leadership competencies regarding the school’s traditions, norms and shared goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Act-External Leadership</td>
<td>This code is used when participants’ recognize how they apply their understanding of external development leadership competencies through designing structures and processes that result in engagement, support and ownership from the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Act-Human Resources Leadership</td>
<td>This code is used when participants’ recognize how they have applied their understanding of human resources leadership competencies regarding recruitment, induction, support, evaluation, development and retention of high performing staff.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.8 (continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Def-Act-Instructional Leadership</th>
<th>This code is used when participants’ recognize how they have applied their understanding of instructional leadership competencies regarding the school’s use of best instructional practices.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Def-Act-Managerial Leadership</td>
<td>This code is used when participants’ recognize how they have applied their understanding of managerial leadership competencies regarding processes and systems in place for budgeting, staffing, problem-solving, communication expectations and scheduling that result in the work routines in the building.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Act-Micro-political Leadership</td>
<td>This code is used when participants’ recognize how they have applied their understanding of micro-political leadership competencies regarding employing an awareness of staff’s professional needs, issues and interest to build cohesion and to facilitate distributed governance and shared decision making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Act-Strategic Leadership</td>
<td>This code is used when participants’ recognize how they have applied their understanding of strategic leadership competencies regarding school’s vision, mission, and goals in the 21st Century and building on its core values and beliefs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For instance, Chrissy acknowledged that “I increased my knowledge in Exceptional Children’s Education; I learned how to look at the Data of a school and build a master schedule based on the needs of students.” Maggie discussed her need to grow in micro-political leadership by stating:

I am also developing would be in the micro-political piece because I know how to do it a little bit, but I am not sure I know how to manage everybody’s professional needs because the building is everybody including the custodian, its including the cafeteria, its including everybody. I think I might can do the teacher’s and I might can do the office staff, but when it comes to all the people that really makes the building work, I don’t know that I could do, I don’t know where I stand in doing it. It probably is not a big deal once I see what I’ve got to do, but I haven’t seen what you have to make that happen.

Reflecting on the experience of the program, Lydia shared the following thoughts during capstone presentation, “This program was one of the single best educational experiences I have
participated in because it addressed the standards in which I needed to improve.” Chrissy raised a point about how the work of an assistant principal is vastly different in reality than is presented in the standards. She stated:

Our greatest impact is when we see what is happening, how the students are learning and engaged, how the teachers are being innovative and differentiating their teaching styles based on the individual needs of students. As an assistant principal we get bogged down with so many day to day issues that we forget to make time to go into the classrooms. Teachers will have a greater appreciation for what you have to say when you are in and out of their classrooms and providing feedback that is to help and not penalize. It is difficult to have time to focus on what matters most as an AP.

**Contextual Learning**

Findings related to the deliberate inclusion of various aspects of district context in the program designed were acquired primarily from the semi-structured interviews and the observations of the learning workshop sessions. The findings revealed the aspiring leaders’ knowledge, understanding, and application of the contextual nature of district processes as it relates to leadership readiness for a school principal position. The code table below in Table 4.9 shows how the researcher coded the data for contextual learning experiences.
Table 4.9

**Initial and Thematic Codes with Definitions to Express Contextual Learning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DCon-District Leadership Support</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant identifies the role of district leaders in their learning and experiences in the program have influenced their understanding of school leadership and leadership readiness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCon-District Community</td>
<td>This code is used when participants refer to aspects of the district's community demographics and unique features and its possible impact on their readiness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCon-Situational</td>
<td>This code will be used when participants identify how the situational context of their school has influenced their understanding of school leadership and leadership readiness.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the participants, understanding local context and interacting with district representatives was critical to readiness. While district context is important, a contextual understanding of the policies, practices, and norms is key to success for an aspiring school leader. An extensive review and open coding of transcribed interview data concentrated on the three categories that encompass district context. The categories were (a) District Community, (b) District Leadership Support, and (c) Situational context of the district. Patterns emerged from the aspiring leaders responses, which resulted in three themes. The data revealed that district context helped to positively shape the aspiring leaders readiness. The two themes that emerged from the data were: (1) Social Context, and (2) Organizational Context.

Social context, which included interactions with district leadership, principals and peers, was a prominent theme throughout most of the responses regarding district context. Bridgette stated the intimate access to district leadership helped to shape her readiness because she was always ready to impress. She shared:
I feel that objective that I had in learning more about CPS, learning more about what they expect out of their leaders, having the proximity of district leaders, once a month, that is golden. Lots of people don’t get to be that close to very important people who can make or break a recommendation.

Networking was also one of the program elements that contributed to the aspiring leaders’ leadership readiness. Bridgette was most intrigued by the program because it gave her an opportunity:

   to learn more about Central Public Schools, in learning more about what they expect out of their leaders, having the proximity to the Superintendent is golden. Lots of people don’t get to be that close to very important people who can make or break a recommendation.

She, like most of the participants, acknowledged they were attracted to the program because “being in the program is to learn more about Central Public Schools, because that is where I seek a principalship.” Networking with peers and other administrators from across the district revealed gaps in equity that Lauren did not realize existed. She commented:

   I think that’s been the biggest influence or a real reflection piece for me as to how you can be in the same city, same district, but totally different equity. There is no real equity in what we receive even to just basic cleanliness of the building and basic physical environment. It’s different, as to what you receive and what you don’t receive from the district. Some of us have to fight even more so for support. For me that’s been eye opening because you don’t want to think that we are being treated different, you know, by the district, but we are treated differently.
George highlighted the need for the network structure of the program design when he indicated:

I know that I need some people in here from the district whether I have the AIG [Academically and Intellectually Gifted] facilitator coming from a district to see where we can close the academic and opportunity gaps. It is about closing the gaps and it is also being able to reach out and not be afraid to talk and say, hey, I need another set of eyes on this data, because I think as school leaders we get so boggled down with feeling like if we ask a question it makes us look incompetent.

During one of the learning sessions, Lauren asked her peers about a particular problem of practice regarding parent engagement:

We had an event yesterday and we had more Hispanic parents and we had maybe two African American parents. How do we connect with our African American parents? What do we do to bring them in? We know that if we do like a program they might come for the program, but it’s like how can we bring them in?

She wanted to leverage the collective network of district leaders in the room to gain insight about issue that was occurring in her building.

The theme of organizational context consisted of understanding district policies and practices, consideration of district-wide performance, and understanding of district community norms and historical context. Access to and transparency of district performance data was noted in the participant responses about information because in order to create a learning environment for transformative learning open and honest dialogue must occur. During a discussion about school performance, George shared that his school has a richer story than what the data reflects. He stated this experience helped him to share more of their story and share unseen data points as well:
I think sometimes we lose compassion with numbers. I think we look at a school and we say its low, but they could be working their tails off, but you have to realize that innovation doesn’t come from a whole range of everybody looking the same. Innovation is based off experience, culture. Innovation, I can’t run (my school) like I would run (a more affluent school in the district) or something like that, but I think that sometimes its gets so political that we look at a number and say they are not meeting, but we are not looking at why they are not meeting. That leader that is in that school got that job because nobody probably wanted it.

According to several participants, data regarding student enrollment and fiscal management had never been presented to them in such as manner. As Maggie shared this level of transparency presented a renewed sense of urgency:

I feel that in CPS with the changes which have been taking place regarding charter schools, we need our community, we need to get the kids back. We need to show the communities that we are relevant. We nurture and that we will support their children. We have to market it. We are going to have to, in addition to being in the school, we are going to have to be out in the community and show them what we can do in the public school system and work together as a community to get our schools back in line and get these enrollments up to capacity.

From this sense of urgency, she revealed her new belief about human resource management:

You can’t come in my school, you can’t stay. You might can get in the door and I might try and see what you look like, but if don’t got time you don’t got no learning curve. You gotta go and I’m not afraid to say that now. Before (the ALA)
I would have been like, well let me work with ineffective teachers, because that’s what they teach you in your graduate courses, but the data from the ALA shows if we are going to move the proficiency and grow our students, we need to we have to understand that it’s now, right. It’s now. We can’t wait until later to help ineffective teachers. Students don’t have later time. What’s that they say, 19 of our schools are failing and when we get at 25, it’s now. Now is the time.

Maggie also acknowledged how the selection of resources shaped her readiness because:

the statistics presented by the program coordinator are not often shared in such a transparent manner to those outside of senior leadership. There were things that I didn’t know and didn’t realize the urgency of these schools failing. I now recognize the need to talk to everybody. We have nineteen schools failing, we only need six more for the state to come in. That is not acceptable. If you are an assistant principal in one of the underperforming schools, then this program is an opportunity to share obstacles and receive feedback from those who are in high performing schools in the district. It's a win-win situation.”

Summary of Findings

This chapter identified the findings as they related to the four research questions. The first research question sets the stage for the entire study: How does a district-run leadership development program, in a mid-sized school district in North Carolina, shape the leadership readiness of aspiring leaders? Leadership readiness is operationalized by the leadership competencies critical for aspiring leaders to possess to become an effective principal upon entering the principalship. The pedagogical components of transformative learning, district context and competency based instruction created an environment for honest and reflective
dialogue, which helped to ease personal anxieties, foster relationships, and think critically to deconstruct their preconceived understandings of leadership. By connecting the standards upon which the aspiring leaders are evaluated and the district processes needed to effectively master the standards, the aspiring leaders felt they were able to apply their learning in the daily work.

Four research questions explored the individual program components required to ensure readiness for an aspiring leader wanting to transition into the principalship. To ensure this qualitative case study yielded data aligned to the four research questions, an inductive and deductive analysis were completed. Results presented in this chapter were derived from the three concepts that promote leadership readiness, (a) district context, (b) transformative learning, and (c) competency based instruction, which underpinned the conceptual framework of this study.

The data management and coding process utilized predetermined subcategories (e.g., NC School Executive Standards and Competencies, and Nerstrom’s Framework) associated with each concept were used as a guide to ensure an alignment to this study’s theoretical foundation, literature review, and data collection instruments (e.g., interview questions). Also, data was organized in tables and graphs to understand the significance of each theme. Tables, graphs, interview responses, and program archival documents were used to provide a thorough explanation of this study’s findings. The data collection, which was based on triangulation, included three sources (a) semi-structured interview questions of 11 purposively selected assistant principals, (b) program observations, and (c) aspiring leaders’ academy program archival documents. All data were reviewed and codes were developed to identify themes that were observable across the data sources. In this inductive process, 53 codes merged into six distinct categories were observable in the data. Initial coding consisted of a broad look at key categories identified as essential for school leaders. The themes were transformative learning
experiences, district context and culture, and understanding of standards and competencies. The researcher found that the complete leadership readiness survey data retrieved from the program coordinator included heavily personalized information that could create bias for the researcher, therefore the researcher only analyzed the participants raw results from the pre and post Leadership Readiness Survey with interpretation. Some of the program curriculum archival data were lacking course objectives, and detailed content that would allow an understanding of the course outcomes. Due to the lack of details, the researcher coded archival program documents to those categories aligned to leadership readiness. The mastery journal and capstone project data were also reviewed. The researcher found that some of the material fell into multiple categories and may have counted in both in two categories. For example, a review of the capstone project presentations may have contained words or phrases that aligned to both transformative learning outcomes and understanding of the standards which resulted in the data to be counted in both themes. Using the qualitative software program allowed the raw data to be explored from different angles and provided rich data for analysis. Additionally, once a thorough examination of the observation field notes and aspiring leaders’ Leadership Readiness Self-Assessment survey data was completed, data from aspiring leaders’ semi-structured interviews, mastery journals, and capstone projects were triangulated to corroborate information and identify patterns from different qualitative sources. After these themes were established the researcher revisited the literature and found that additional codes from the literature expanded and refined the areas of focus in the data analysis. The themes applied to the data expanded from six to seven. Several research techniques were deployed to ensure the validity and reliability of findings. Triangulation of methods, multiple data sources, and perspective aided to validate the results. Additionally, semi-structured interview participants had an opportunity to member-check their
responses before analysis. Chapter 5 will include a comprehensive summary of the entire study. The chapter will summarize findings and present conclusions based on analysis of data. After the summary and conclusions there will be a thorough examination of what could happen because of this research study’s findings, specifically the theoretical, practical, and future implications. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes with implications for policy and practice and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Statement of the Problem

Capable and competent aspiring leaders play a significant role in the structure of school leadership. The assistant principal position is typically the first step for teachers transitioning from the classroom into school leadership (Kearney, Herrington, & Aguilar, 2012). The transition to the principalship usually begins with an existing teacher choosing to attend a traditional graduate educational leadership program. Additionally, some school districts have developed and implemented succession, or principal pipeline plans in an effort to cultivate the next generation of principals via the assistant principal position. Succession plans often include aspiring school leadership programs designed to prepare aspiring leaders for the next level of school leadership (Turnbull et al., 2013b).

Novice principals may find the complexity of the position differs drastically from what they originally perceived about the position (Kwan & Walker, 2012). Barnett et al. (2012) found that novice principals consistently felt that the demands of the principal position were not realistic and were not comparable to their training. Many novice principals reported that the job was overwhelming and that expectations to cultivate the culture and climate, address parent and community concerns, improve teaching and learning, and all the while raising student achievement were unreasonable (Kwan & Walker, 2012). Evidence suggest that while aspiring leaders’ assigned duties range significantly from school to school, many are managerial in nature. In addition, aspiring leaders responsibilities are often dependent the school principal preference. Thus, principals have limited aspiring leaders’ access to instructional leadership opportunities, which, in turn, decreases their opportunity to develop leadership behaviors and
skills necessary to effectively transition into the principalship (Barnett et al., 2012 & Kwan & Walker, 2012).

This qualitative case study explored how transformative learning experiences, contextual learning and standards-based learning in a district-run leadership development program shaped leadership readiness for 11 aspiring school leaders in a mid-size district in North Carolina. It was not known how district-run leadership development programs shape aspiring leaders’ understanding of requisite leadership skills, behaviors, and competencies for leadership readiness. For the purpose of this study, leadership readiness was operationalized as an aspiring leader who possesses the leadership skills, behaviors and competencies necessary to be an effective principal after completing a district-run leadership development program. The components of the instructional design of the program—transformative learning, contextual learning and competency based learning—sought to foster an environment for readiness. Four research questions explored the relationship between the program components and the participant’s perceived readiness. Specifically, research questions one and sub question 1a probed the influence of the program design components and the participants perceived readiness, and questions two and sub question 2a studied the connection between the aspiring leaders’ definition of readiness and their perceived readiness for the role. The remainder of Chapter 5 draws conclusions around the most significant findings of the study and how those findings contribute to the body of knowledge concerning school leader preparation. Additionally, the chapter acknowledges the implications that derived from this research study. Chapter 5 concludes with the researcher’s recommendations for future research and practice related to this study’s findings.
Discussion of Findings

School districts are in need of highly skilled and thoroughly prepared aspiring school leaders who demonstrate readiness for the principalship. Therefore, the theoretical foundation that supported the design of this study, transformative learning, contextual learning and competency based learning, helped to illuminate the differences in leadership readiness. Leadership readiness was operationalized as an aspiring leader who possesses the leadership skills, behaviors and competencies necessary to be an effective principal after completing a district-run leadership development program. The components of the instructional design of the program—transformative learning, contextual learning and competency based learning—sought to foster an environment for readiness. A case study design allowed the phenomenon of leadership development to be studied within the context of a mid-size public K-12 school district’s aspiring leadership program in North Carolina. Specifically, this single-case study centered on the leadership readiness of current aspiring leaders and yielded vast amounts of data. The high principal turnover rate and the high number of low performing schools has caused this district as well as others to create leadership development plans to ensure that they have a viable principal pipeline in place to fill vacant school leader positions. At the time of the study, this school district relied on two formal systems of leadership development—monthly district-based assistant principal meetings and a district-run aspiring leader’s academy for select aspiring leaders—to prepare their district’s future school principals vacancies. This qualitative case study of one medium-size public K-12 district in North Carolina provided an opportunity to explore how district-run leadership development programs shape aspiring leaders’ leadership readiness through the perceptions of program participants. The case study design granted an exploration into how district-run leadership development programs shape the development of leadership
skills, behaviors, competencies, and capacity of aspiring leaders to transition effectively into the principalship. In addition, the case study design permitted the researcher to study the how and why of the phenomenon within its natural environment (Yin, 2014).

The findings and implications in this section represent how district-run leadership development programs shape aspiring leaders readiness and their development of requisite leadership behaviors, skills, and competencies needed to transition to the principalship. A summary of the study findings was developed by comparing, contrasting, and synthesizing data across the four research questions and four data sources. The summary of the findings is presented first in subcategories by the research question and is aligned with the conceptual framework. Within these two subcategories, the researcher explains the significance of each finding and connects implications to previous research. Leadership readiness was operationalized as an aspiring leader who possesses the leadership skills, behaviors, and competencies necessary to be an effective principal after completing a district-run leadership development program. The components of the instructional design of the program—transformational learning, contextual learning and competency based learning—sought to foster an environment for readiness. There was a paucity of research highlighting how district-run leadership development programs shape aspiring leaders’ readiness.

**Finding 1: Effective Programmatic Elements**

Participants felt that all three programming elements were effective in shaping readiness, though not equally. Research Question 1 asked: *How does a district-run leadership development program, in a mid-sized school district in North Carolina, shape the leadership readiness of aspiring leaders?* This question encompassed all three elements of the conceptual framework—transformational learning, district context and competency based instruction—identified as essential for aspiring leader preparation. Research Question 1a: *What program elements shape
aspiring leaders’ leadership readiness? Three participants indicated that the critical reflection elements embedded in the instructional design of the program helped to shape their readiness. Those participants believed that through the practice of critical reflection, they were able to develop an understanding of the skills and behaviors necessary to enter the principalship. There was no mention of the impact of critical reflection as a catalyst to shaping the readiness from eight out of the eleven participants, therefore the programmatic element of critical reflection seemed to have a minimal impact on shaping the leadership readiness of program participants.

Contrarily, participants’ believed that the rational discourse that occurred throughout the learning workshops aided in gaining a deeper understanding of how to apply the requisite competencies for the principalship. The thoughtful discussion prompts about the required monthly learning tasks encouraged participants to reflection and articulate their biases and preconceived notions. The process of rational discourse assisted in the transformation of all but one participants’ transformed perspective about leadership.

The most impactful program element according to most of the participants was the use of job-embedded practice coupled with the written reflection and discussion board. Participants felt their readiness was most impacted by applying of the skills and behaviors discussed during the learning forums and subsequently reflecting on the experiences through the reflection journal.

Determining Leadership Readiness

Participants felt that though leadership readiness gaps remained at the conclusion of the program, they were ready to enter the principalship. Research Question 2 asked: How do aspiring leaders define readiness for effective leadership? Research question 2a asked: Which leadership competencies do the aspiring leaders perceive to be required for readiness prior to entering the principalship? All of the participants acknowledged that their starting point of
readiness upon entering the ALA varied. Several of the participants revealed lingering gaps that remained after graduating from their traditional graduate preparation program and receiving their credentials from the state. Also, several participants indicated gaps in knowledge and skill because of lack of exposure to practice in their current roles as assistant principals. Additionally, the participants identified shifts in their definition of effective leadership after participating in the ALA. All of the participants believed at the start and end of the ALA that they were ready to enter the principalship; however the results of the Leadership Readiness Survey revealed that most of the aspiring leaders did not possess the requisite competencies in Results Orientation or Change Management, both of which are critical to school improvement.

**Transformative Learning**

From the literature, the researcher found studies detailing the importance of embedded transformative learning experiences in the instructional design of development programming to foster leadership readiness. They also identified aspects of the transformative learning theory—critical reflection and rational discourse—were necessary to cultivate the self-examination, acquisition of new knowledge and competence building needed to shape leadership readiness. Data sources indicated that aspiring leaders were exposed to transformative learning practices through informational learning during the leadership development process. Their exposure to transformative learning strategies—critical reflection and rational discourse—allowed the aspiring leaders to experience the shift in their perspectives regarding the principalship. Aspiring leaders referenced reconceptualized learning around Personal Responsibility for Performance and Visionary leadership competencies. In addition, data suggests that the aspiring leaders’ description of leadership shifted from individualized approach to a systems thinking model.
Contextual Learning

Contextual learning acted as the second component of leadership readiness. Hull’s (1995) contextual learning theory says that learning occurs only when students process new information or knowledge in such a way that it makes sense in their frame of reference. In other words, the connection between what aspiring leaders learn, when they learn it and how they learn it will maximize learning outcomes. Aspiring leaders expressed contextualized learning by articulating the lingering gaps from graduate program to aspiring leaders program and after completing the aspiring leaders program. The data suggest significant readiness gaps remain as captured by the responses to the leadership readiness survey and semi-structured interviews. The data reinforced previous research that the understanding of district context is vital for aspiring leaders to fulfill the responsibilities of a school leader. District leaders reinforced the importance of contextual learning by facilitating discussions and activities during the learning forums and providing district specific data and context during their sessions. Aspiring leaders responded during their interviews with examples of how the activities influenced their understanding of district processes, procedures, and hierarchy. In addition, program archival documents reviewed also emphasized district context. Data also suggests a possible disconnect between the contextual learning experiences and job-embedded practice needs of aspiring leaders. The district may need to include more job embedded practice in their current leadership district-run development programs to ensure that aspiring leaders continue to develop their contextual understanding of school leadership.

Competency Based Learning

Lastly, competency based learning was the third program design component that fostered leadership readiness. Woodruffe (1993) proclaims that competency determines one's capacity to
perform in context. Later, Johnstone and Soares (2014) found that as practitioners engage in job-embedded practice they increase will increase their understanding of the context and content of their occupation and of their workplace. Evidence suggest that learning and cognition are essentially contextual or ‘situated’, thus performance and understanding can be considered one and the same (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Woods, 2012). Competency based learning was used in this study to determine how understanding the North Carolina leadership standards and leadership competencies shaped the aspiring leaders’ readiness. Data from the Leadership Readiness Survey administered to aspiring leaders suggests that the aspiring leaders entered the program with a perceived command of the NC School Executive Standards (Young et al., 2017). In addition, the aspiring leaders indicated a possession of the requisite leadership competencies required of school principals. Interview and journal responses reveal that the aspiring leaders were unable to translate the perceived command of the standards and competencies when asked to describe the real world application. Moreover, findings indicated that aspiring leaders increased readiness by actually performing the duties and tasks associated with school leadership with the support of district level staff.

**Conclusions**

This case study confirmed that aspiring leaders require a diverse set of behaviors, skills and competencies to transition into the principalship as an effective school leader. It also reveals that traditional graduate preparation programs may leave lingering gaps that hinder aspiring leaders’ readiness. Through an analysis of the district-run leadership development program design and learning session observations, it was revealed that aspiring leaders believed the amount of time participating in authentic transformative learning experiences that were personalized based on the needs of the aspiring leaders varied in the reconceptualized leadership
readiness. Furthermore, the exposure to contextual elements of the district and involvement of district leaders shaped the readiness of the aspiring leaders in a variety of ways. The findings of this study may be insightful to universities, school districts, and aspiring school leaders by providing insight into programmatic design elements that lead to a viable principal pipeline that contains effective aspiring leaders ready to enter the principalship in the future. Aspiring school leaders who possess requisite leadership behaviors and have the capacity to transform his or her perspective when confronted with disorienting dilemmas associated with the principalship may demonstrate a higher effectiveness rate when transitioning into the position. In addition, school districts need aspiring school principals who are able to demonstrate competency through a collective use of leadership behaviors and skills in order to reach school and district goals. To help ensure that novice school principals are capable of entering the principalship as effective leaders, universities may want to begin to identify measurable indicators, of graduate performance after graduation. For instance, traditional graduate programs may want to measure the percentage of graduates who attain a school leadership position within three years of completing their leadership program and who remain in the principalship for at least three years after completion as well.

Given the findings, this study may lead districts to evaluate current leadership development programming to ensure a viable pipeline of aspiring school leaders who possess the requisite behaviors and skills and are valued by the district. School districts may want to formalize a leadership development plans that allow to effectively preparing aspiring school leaders to move into the principalship. The findings of this study suggest that aspiring school leaders’ readiness was most influenced by critically reflecting on their authentic job-embedded practice. In addition, the results suggest that aspiring leaders felt there was not enough time in
the program model to engage in the transformative learning experiences to experience transformed personhood. Therefore, school districts may want to consider a multi-layer approach in addition to the aspiring leaders program to ensure a viable succession plan. The first level of programming may center on teacher leaders who demonstrate leadership skills that benefit the school and district, but may not have attained a Master’s in Educational Leadership. The second layer of the program would gather those who have completed their educational leadership program and seek an assistant principal position in the near future. Lastly, the district can develop a third level, which would be similar to the program of study for those existing aspiring leaders who believe they are ready to move into a principal position.

First, this approach to leadership development would allow the school districts to establish and maintain a pipeline of highly qualified and highly capable aspiring school leaders. Secondly, district leaders may need to revisit the design of district-based leadership preparation programs to ensure that an alignment exists between behaviors and skills desired by the district and program outcomes. District-run leadership development programs provide a unique opportunity for aspiring school leaders within the district to hone specific skills that are aligned to district values and would ultimately benefit their school and district. District-run programs enable the district to have their own doctoral level personnel to nurture aspiring school leaders. This provides control and flexibility for the district to focus on potential candidates who already have background knowledge of the district for positions that are on the horizon. Lastly, the findings suggest that districts may want to develop relations with universities to ensure both parties are bridging the gaps that aspiring leaders possess. University programs have an opportunity to align their curriculum to district needs and district-run leadership development program outcomes. In other words, universities need to work closely with school districts to
ensure that aspiring leaders in university graduate programs have an opportunity to transfer their theory based learning in a real-world practice. Based on the study and its findings, district-run leadership development significantly influenced aspiring leaders’ readiness when they were given disorienting dilemmas that challenged their perspectives and time to process the shifting in their perspective through job embedded practice and critical reflection. Aspiring leaders need a district-run program that provides an opportunity to put the theories they learned in a graduate leadership preparation program to practice.

Implications of the Research

The review of the literature, findings, and conclusions revealed a need to further understand how district-run leadership development programs shape the leadership readiness of aspiring school leaders. Implications for policy considerations, current practice and future research could assist in building a deeper understanding of the gaps in this research. The recommendations all relate to expanding this research study to include: (a) influence of job-embedded practice, (b) impact on student achievement and school performance, and (c) replicate the study but with a multi-case design, which would strengthen the understanding of the research community.

Implications for Policy

This research study yielded one primary implication for educational policy, which is to consider the student achievement and district performance when making decisions and legislation aimed at the credential programs for school leaders. Student achievement and school performance is a key policy issue in the state of North Carolina. As mentioned in the Literature Review, Leithwood, et.al (2007) stated school leadership accounts for approximately 25% of a school’s student achievement results. This data signifies the need for school districts to ensure
they are hiring aspiring leaders and principals who possess the skills and behaviors to affect student learning. In North Carolina, student achievement on End of Grade or End of Course test directly correlate to school performance results. To understand the impact of the district-run leadership development program development on student achievement, a study should be conducted to measure the effectiveness of the participants who complete the program and transition into the principalship. Specifically, a study should be conducted that follows one graduating cohort from the aspiring leaders program to see how their leadership impacts the student achievement results of their school. Findings suggest a longitudinal quantitative study that looks at the effectiveness of principals who participated in the program, versus those who did not participate in the program, may be appropriate.

**Implications for Practice**

This research study yielded four recommendations for future practice, which are further explained in this section. The four recommendations are:

1. Develop a principal pipeline.
2. Build leadership capacity in aspiring leaders.
3. Enhance job-embedded practice opportunities.
4. Strengthen partnerships with universities and districts to ensure success

Districts must develop a principal pipeline. Currently, school districts entrust the development of school leaders to colleges and universities. Typically, state licensing agencies expect universities to graduate potential school leaders from their program with the requisite knowledge and skills needed to effectively lead a school. However, this study confirms earlier research that the heavy reliance on theoretical perspectives on schooling in graduate programs causes lingering readiness gaps that confront aspiring leaders when they start their principalship. A potential solution is that
districts develop their own multi-layer development programming necessary to establish a succession plan to will lead to a viable principal pipeline. The first level of programming may center on teacher leaders who demonstrate leadership skills that benefit the school and district, but may not have attained a Master’s in Educational Leadership. The second layer of the program would gather those who have completed their educational leadership program and seek an assistant principal position in the near future. Lastly, the district can develop a third level, which would be similar to the program of study, for those existing aspiring leaders who believe they are ready to move into a principal position.

In addition, districts must build leadership capacity in aspiring leaders. Participants shared that they are often encountered with the challenge of connecting what was learned in the traditional graduate program, without the district context, to practice which makes determining readiness almost impossible until they are in the principalship. It seems as if they are prepared to be assistant principals, though the responsibilities of assistant principal is often left to the individual principals to decide. Many of the aspiring leaders shared frustration regarding the typical responsibilities of discipline, athletics, and textbooks and not on tasks that were not related to instructional leadership and improving student learning. As a result of this finding, it is recommended that in order to build capacity, aspiring leaders should have time built into their schedule to practice all aspects of leaders. District officials should provide clear goals and expectations to school principals regarding assigning duties to aspiring leaders. For example, principals should be required to allow assistant principals to participate in data analysis and data driven decision making, to engage with community stakeholders, and to facilitate professional development. Principals are the linchpin to ensuring aspiring leaders build capacity and improve their leadership readiness.
Also, job-embedded practice should be enhanced. The aspiring leaders in this study indicated a need for more job-embedded practice to serve as a catalyst for reflection. They indicated that the identified authentic learning and critical reflection were essential in their development of their leadership behaviors and competencies. Additional research could help build a deeper understanding of how job-embedded practice and critical reflection influence leadership readiness. A qualitative case study may provide further data supporting an increase in job-embedded practice and critical reflection activities for aspiring school leaders. The district-run leadership development program was only able to provide limited opportunities for job-embedded practice and those experiences were based on the leadership experiences and priorities of the program coordinator. Several participants stated that the implementation of job-embedded practice and critical reflection contributed significantly to their overall learning experience. Further research in this area may allow district-run programs to determine how to best embed those experiences within an authentic school environments.

Finally, strengthen partnerships with universities and districts to ensure success. The findings from this study suggest participants had lingering gaps after completing traditional graduate programs, as well as the district-run development program. Participants shared that they are often encountered with the challenge of connecting what was learned in the traditional graduate program, without the district context, make determining readiness almost impossible until they are in the principalship. Districts may want to develop relations with universities to ensure both parties are bridging the gaps that aspiring leaders possess. University programs have an opportunity to align their curriculum to district needs and district-run leadership development program outcomes. In other words, universities need to work closely with school districts to ensure that aspiring leaders in university graduate programs have an opportunity to transfer their
theory based learning in a real-world practice. In addition, Participants stated that their greatest shifts in their learning came from job-embedded experiences, exposure to district context and critical reflection. Therefore, it is recommended that both traditional graduate programs and district-based leadership development programming allow opportunities for job-embedded practice, district context and critical reflection throughout their programs to ensure that participants connect theory to practice. Traditional graduate programs and district-run leadership development programs that are designed to foster authentic connections and transferring learning will help to reduce the readiness gap that remains after program completion.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Three opportunities for future research emerged from this study. The primary recommendation is to perform a multi-site study to gain more unique perspectives. To understand the influence of district-run leadership development programs on the leadership readiness in aspiring school leaders in North Carolina, this study should be replicated in multiple counties who offer such programming. Performing a multi-site case study within several school districts across North Carolina, would allow the findings to be generalized among the larger population of aspiring school leaders in the state. The multi-site case study should include districts with different contextual factors such as size, demographics, socioeconomic tiers, and geography. Second, a longitudinal study of the ALA participants is recommended to understand the lasting effects of the program and the evolution of the participants’ perspectives of readiness. Finally, a comparison analysis of the job performance of ALA participants, after obtaining a principalship, to the job-performance of novice principals who did not participate in the ALA program would illuminate the effects of the program on the job performance of novice principals.
Conclusion

Effective schools cannot exist without effective school leaders. Since traditional graduate programs are not producing aspiring school leaders who are ready to transition into the principalship and be effective as a novice principal, district-run leadership development programs must produce aspiring school leaders who possess the behaviors and competencies that have proven to be key for effective school leadership in today’s schools. Aspiring leaders must possess the competencies and behaviors that allow them to effectively lead schools in a manner that concentrates on the needs of a diverse group of learners, despite their personal characteristics and social background (Green, 2013). School districts are in need of highly skilled and thoroughly prepared aspiring school leaders who demonstrate readiness for the principalship. District-run leadership development programs must produce aspiring school leaders who possess the proven behaviors and competencies for effective school leadership in today’s schools. It was not known how district-run leadership development programs shape aspiring leaders understanding of requisite leadership skills, behaviors and competencies for leadership readiness. This qualitative case study explored how transformative learning experiences, contextual learning, and competency based learning in a district-run leadership development program shaped leadership readiness for of 11 aspiring school leaders in a mid-size district in North Carolina. The findings from this study revealed that more research is needed to identifying the best practices for developing aspiring leaders and establishing a viable principal pipeline.
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Appendix A: Participant Informed Consent Form

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

Title of Study: Shaping Leaders Developing the Leadership Readiness of Aspiring Leaders Within a District Run Leadership Program
Principal Investigator: Pauletta Spence Thompson Faculty Sponsor (if applicable): Dr. Lisa Bass

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue.

You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of the research project is to examine the development of aspiring school leaders participating in a district-run leadership academy. This research study will investigate how a district-run preparation program prepares leaders for handling the complexities of school leadership.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in the data collection process. This study involves the analysis of learning activities and discourse within your cohort that occurs during the monthly workshops. This study will also involve a 30-minute-long interview at the completion of the program. This confidential interview will be tape recorded and transcribed, and used in the analysis of your development as a result of participating in this study. This interview will be scheduled between you and the researcher in late April 2017 and will be based upon your availability. Your capstone project, inclusive of the mastery journal, will also be analyzed.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Participation in this study is not a requirement of your employment at Durham Public Schools, and your participation or lack thereof, will not affect your job. You are free to decide not to participate in this study at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the researcher, North Carolina State University, or your district.
Risks and Benefits

There are minimal risks associated with participation in this research. I will ask you questions about your development as a person. Participation in the interview could involve questions about which you may be uncertain or uncomfortable. Other questions may be about the influence others have had on your personal development. You may refuse to answer any questions, and may discontinue the interview and your participation in this study at any time.

There are no direct benefits to your participation in the research. The indirect benefits are that you may find the interview process to be enjoyable and beneficial as you explore the various ways that you have developed as a leader and as a person. You may make personal discoveries. You may learn new strategies to handle personal and professional complexities. You may learn more about your own personal and professional development.

Confidentiality

The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely in a secure Google Drive maintained by North Carolina State University. Your responses will be kept confidential. Your responses may be included in the study, but your name will not be associated with the responses and will remain confidential. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study. Research documents, audio recording and transcripts, will only be seen by the principal researcher during this study, and will be retained for five years after the study is complete, after which time all data will be destroyed. The information obtained in this study will be published in a dissertation. No reference will be made in oral or written reports, which could link you to the study.

Compensation

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

What if you are a NCSU student?

Participation in this study is not a course requirement and your participation or lack thereof, will not affect your class standing or grades at NC State.

What if you are a NCSU employee?

Participation in this study is not a requirement of your employment at NCSU, and your participation or lack thereof, will not affect your job.

What if you have questions about this study?

If you have questions at any time about the study itself or the procedures implemented in this study, you may contact the researcher, Pauletta Spence Thompson at pdspenc2@ncsu.edu or by phone at 919-827-5060 or her doctoral advisor, Dr. Lisa Bass, at lrbass@ncsu.edu or by phone at 919-515-6291.
What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator at dapaxton@ncsu.edu or by phone at 1-919-515-4514.

Consent To Participate

“I have read and understood the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Subject's signature_____________________________________________ Date ______________

Investigator's signature_________________________________________ Date ______________
Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. The purpose of this interview is for me to gain a better understanding of your experience as an aspiring leader participating in the Aspiring Leaders Academy. During the interview, I will try to limit my comments because I want to focus my attention on your story. I may ask clarifying questions from time to time in order to explore a particular subject in greater depth. However, it is my intention to quietly follow along as you describe your experiences. And, if you have a question at any point during this interview, please do not hesitate to ask. With your permission, I would like to record this interview. The purpose of recording this interview is so that I can actively listen and not get lost in extensive note-taking. However, I may make short notes to capture my own thoughts. As described in the consent form, everything covered here today is strictly confidential. After I review the transcriptions of the interviews, I would like to ask for permission to contact you as clarifying questions may arise during the course of later interviews. Thank you again.

Do you have any questions for me before we start? If you have no further questions, I will start the recorder and we’ll get started.

Part I.
Leadership is often defined in very different ways. The first set of questions will help me understand more about of what leadership means to you.

1. Thinking back to the days before you participated in this program, how would you have defined leadership?

2. Now that you have completed the aspiring leaders program, has your definition of leadership changed? If so, how would you define or describe leadership?

3. Going back to the time before you completed the aspiring leaders program, how would you have described your own leadership style?

4. Do you believe that you are ready to become a school principal? If so, why do you believe that you are ready? If not, why not?

5. Think about your responses to the Leadership Readiness survey. Do you feel that participation in the aspiring leaders program has increased your readiness for becoming a school executive in North Carolina? If so, explain your growth in each of the 7 standards.

6. Do you feel that the program addressed the standards in which you need improvement? Please explain.

7. How has the program helped you to understand the NC Leadership Competencies?

8. In what ways, if any, have you applied the learning gained in the aspiring leaders’ program to your current role as a leader?

Part II. Transformative Learning Experiences
The goal of the program is to force aspiring leaders to consciously consider how their prior experiences, preconceived notions, assumptions, and biases may shape their readiness for the principalship by creating barriers or promoting growth.

The aspiring leaders program promotes learning through transformative experiences (e.g., critical reflection of book study, electronic reflection journal, and discourse with peers, and dialogue with the superintendent and completing the 90-day plan capstone project) and engagement in order to help leaders to address and view problems of practice through alternative lenses.

I’d like to know more about what it was like for you to learn in this way, as well as, the ways transformative learning may or may not have affected your leadership practice.

9. From your experience with the aspiring leaders' program, what do you value most about participating in transformative learning activities (listed above) and processes?

10. Tell me about a recent leadership situation that worked well for you or one that went badly. Describe what happened. Were you conscious of how your prior experiences, preconceived notions, assumptions or biases that were at play while you were handling the situation? If so, in what way(s)? What, if anything, can you do differently now, that you didn’t do while handling the situation?

11. To what extent do you think that your leadership practice has been, or will be impacted as a result of the transformative learning (e.g., dialogue with colleagues, critical reflection) experienced in the aspiring leaders’ program?

12. If you were the facilitator in this program, what would you do differently in order to foster or facilitate leadership using transformative practices?

13. Do you have any further comments, concerns or advice on the issues that we have been discussing, that you would like to share at this point?

This concludes the interview. I want to thank you for your generosity of time and patience with me today.

I have a few demographic questions that would like to ask. This information will be used to illustrate the participant sample for the student.

1. Which age range best describes your age? 20-30, 30-40, 40-50
2. What is your gender? M or F
3. What is the grade span of the school where you work currently? K-5, 6-8, 9-12, 6-12
4. How many years of school leadership experience do you have?
5. How long has it been since you graduated from the traditional graduate school program?
**What’s next:**

It is my goal and responsibility to use the information that you have shared responsibly. As described in the consent form, everything discussed is strictly confidential and will be housed in a password-protected NCSU google account. You will continue to have access to this transcript throughout the data collection process.

After your interview is transcribed, I will do the following:

1. Strip the transcript of identifiers (e.g., people’s names, school names, program names, etc.…).
2. Send you the transcript of the interview within two weeks. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript and make any necessary adjustments.
3. Contact you via your personal email address if I have clarifying questions.

Do you mind sharing your personal email address with me?

Please do not hesitate to call email me with any questions or additional information that you feel may help me better understand your responses. Please email me at pdspenc2@ncsu.edu.

Again, thank you!
Appendix C: Pre and Post Leadership Readiness Self-Assessment Tool

Aspiring Leaders Academy Leadership Readiness Survey

Please complete the following survey. You will take the survey at the beginning of the program and after completing the program. This will help to determine the growth that occurs throughout the program.

* Required

Indicators of Effective Leadership

Rate yourself on the following standards and competencies based on your beliefs about your mastery of the standards and competencies. Treat this the same as your annual self-assessment.

1. School Vision, Mission and Strategic Goals: The school executive/teacher leader embodies the school’s identity, in part, is derived from the vision, mission, values, beliefs and goals of the school, the processes used to establish these attributes, and the ways they are embodied in the life of the school community. *

   Check all that apply:
   - [ ] Developing
   - [ ] Proficient
   - [ ] Accomplished
   - [ ] Distinguished

2. Leading Change: The school executive/teacher leader articulates a vision and implementation strategies for improvements and changes which result in improved achievement for all students. *

   Check all that apply:
   - [ ] Developing
   - [ ] Proficient
   - [ ] Accomplished
   - [ ] Distinguished

3. School Improvement Plan: The school executive/teacher leader uses the school improvement plan to provide the structure for the vision, values, goals and changes necessary for improved achievement for all students. *

   Check all that apply:
   - [ ] Developing
   - [ ] Proficient
   - [ ] Accomplished
   - [ ] Distinguished
4. Distributive Leadership: The school executive/teacher leader creates and utilizes processes to distribute leadership and decision-making throughout the school.*
   Check all that apply.
   □ Developing
   □ Proficient
   □ Accomplished
   □ Distinguished

5. Focus on Learning and Teaching, Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment: The school executive leads the discussion about standards for curriculum, instruction and assessment based on research and best practices in order to establish and achieve high expectations for students.*
   Check all that apply.
   □ Developing
   □ Proficient
   □ Accomplished
   □ Distinguished

6. Focus on Instructional Time: The school executive/teacher leader creates processes and schedules which protect teachers from disruption of instructional or preparation time.*
   Check all that apply.
   □ Developing
   □ Proficient
   □ Accomplished
   □ Distinguished

7. Focus on Collaborative Work Environment: The school executive/teacher leader understands and acts on the understanding of the positive role that a collaborative environment can play in the school’s culture.*
   Check all that apply.
   □ Developing
   □ Proficient
   □ Accomplished
   □ Distinguished

8. School Culture and Identity: The school executive/teacher leader develops and uses shared vision, values and goals to define the identity and culture of the school.*
   Check all that apply.
   □ Developing
   □ Proficient
   □ Accomplished
   □ Distinguished
9. Acknowledges Failures; Celebrates Accomplishments and Rewards: The school executive/teacher leader acknowledges failures and celebrates accomplishments of the school in order to define the identity, culture and performance of the school. *
   Check all that apply.
   □ Developing
   □ Proficient
   □ Accomplished
   □ Distinguished

10. Efficacy and Empowerment: The school executive/teacher leader develops a sense of efficacy and empowerment among staff which influences the school’s identity, culture and performance. *
    Check all that apply.
    □ Developing
    □ Proficient
    □ Accomplished
    □ Distinguished

11. Professional Development/Learning Communities: The school executive/teacher leader ensures that the school is a professional learning community. *
    Check all that apply.
    □ Developing
    □ Proficient
    □ Accomplished
    □ Distinguished

12. Recruiting, Hiring, Placing and Mentoring of Staff: The school executive/teacher leader establishes processes and systems in order to ensure a high quality, high-performing staff. *
    Check all that apply.
    □ Developing
    □ Proficient
    □ Accomplished
    □ Distinguished

13. Teacher and Staff Evaluation: The school executive/teacher leader evaluates teachers and other staff in a fair and equitable manner with the focus on improving performance and, thus, student achievement. *
    Check all that apply.
    □ Developing
    □ Proficient
    □ Accomplished
    □ Distinguished
14. School Resources and Budget: The school executive/teacher leader establishes budget processes and systems which are focused on, and result in, improved student achievement. *
   Check all that apply.
   □ Developing
   □ Proficient
   □ Accomplished
   □ Distinguished

15. Conflict management and Resolution: The school executive/teacher leader effectively and efficiently manages the complexity of human interactions so that the focus of the school can be on improved student achievement. *
   Check all that apply.
   □ Developing
   □ Proficient
   □ Accomplished
   □ Distinguished

16. Systematic Communication: The school executive/teacher leader designs and utilizes various forms of formal and informal communication so that the focus of the school can be on improved student achievement. *
   Check all that apply.
   □ Developing
   □ Proficient
   □ Accomplished
   □ Distinguished

17. School Expectations for Students and Staff: The school executive/teacher leader develops and enforces expectations, structures, rules and procedures for students and staff. *
   Check all that apply.
   □ Developing
   □ Proficient
   □ Accomplished
   □ Distinguished

18. Parent and Community Involvement and Outreach: The school executive/teacher leader designs structures and processes which result in parent and community engagement, support and ownership for the school. *
   Check all that apply.
   □ Developing
   □ Proficient
   □ Accomplished
   □ Distinguished
19. Federal, State and District mandates: The school executive/teacher leader designs protocols and processes in order to comply with federal, state and district mandates. *
Check all that apply.

- Developing
- Proficient
- Accomplished
- Distinguished

20. School Executive Micro-political Leadership: The school executive/teacher leader develops systems and relationships to leverage staff expertise and influence in order to influence the school's identity, culture and performance. *
Check all that apply.

- Developing
- Proficient
- Accomplished
- Distinguished

**Required Competencies for Leadership**

Rate yourself on the following standards and competencies based on your beliefs about your mastery of the standards and competencies. Treat this the same as your annual self-assessment.
21. Please rate your mastery of the following leadership competency using the scale provided. *
Check all that apply.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>1 (I need help with understanding and employing this competency)</th>
<th>2 (I can recognize when to employ this competency, but I need help prioritizing it in application)</th>
<th>3 (I apply this competency regularly)</th>
<th>4 (I employ this competency regularly and can teach others to use it)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Change Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conflict Management</td>
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<td>Communication</td>
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<td>Creative Thinking</td>
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<td>Delegation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dialogue/Inquiry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional Intelligence</td>
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<td>Environmental Awareness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Global Perspective</td>
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<td>Judgement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organizational Ability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal Ethics and Y</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal Responsibility for Performance</td>
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<td>Responsiveness</td>
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<td>Results Orientation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sensitivity</td>
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<td>Systems Thinking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Visionary</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix D: Research Design Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question (s)</th>
<th>Coding Instrument/Framework</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How does a district-run leadership development program, in a medium-sized school district in North Carolina, shape the leadership readiness of aspiring leaders?</td>
<td>1. Nerstrom's Transformative Learning Framework</td>
<td>Interview Question (s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Open Coding for district context</td>
<td>Observation Field Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>According to the aspiring leaders, which program design components strengthen their leadership readiness?</td>
<td>Protocol Questions Appendix B Interview Questions # 1, 2, &amp; 3</td>
<td>Journal Reflection Questions #1, 3, 4 &amp; 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Protocol Questions Appendix B Interview Questions # 8, 9, 10, &amp; 11</td>
<td>Leadership Readiness Self-assessment Pre and post survey raw scores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do aspiring leaders define readiness for effective leadership?</td>
<td>1. NC School Executive Leadership Competencies Framework</td>
<td>Interview Questions # 8, 9, 10, &amp; 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This data point could not be interpreted through observation.</td>
<td>Journal Entry Questions Reflection Questions #2, 4 &amp; 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This data point could not be interpreted through the analysis of the Leadership Readiness Survey.</td>
<td>JE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. NC School Executive Standards Rubric</td>
<td>Interview Questions # 8, 9, 10, &amp; 11</td>
<td>Journal Entry Questions Reflection Questions #1 &amp; 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which leadership competencies do the aspiring leaders perceive to be required for readiness prior to entering the principalship?</td>
<td>&amp; 5</td>
<td>analysis of the Leadership Readiness Survey.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Appendix E: Validation Rubric for Expert Panel Rubric

## Survey/Interview Validation Rubric for Expert Panel - VREP

By Jacquelyn White and Marilyn K. Simon

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Operational Definitions</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Questions NOT meeting standard (List page and question number) and need to be revised. Please use the comments and suggestions section to recommend revisions.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Charity                         | - The questions are complete questions  
- Only one question is asked at a time  
- The participants can understand what is being asked                                                                                                          |       |                                                                                                                                  |
| Wordiness                       | - Questions are concise and understandable  
- There are no unnecessary words                                                                                                                                       |       |                                                                                                                                  |
| Negative wording                | - Questions are asked using the affirmative (e.g., Instead of asking, "Which methods are not used?", the researcher asks, "Which methods are used?")                                                                 |       |                                                                                                                                  |
| Overlapping responses           | - No responses cover more than one choice                                                                                                                     |       |                                                                                                                                  |
| Balance                         | - The questions are unbiased and do not lead the participants to a response. The questions are asked using a neutral tone.                                                                                        |       |                                                                                                                                  |
| Use of Jargon                   | - The terms used are understandable by the target population                                                                                                     |       |                                                                                                                                  |
| Appropriateness of Responses    | - The choices listed allow participants to respond appropriately. The responses apply to all situations or offer a way for those to respond with unique situations.                                                   |       |                                                                                                                                  |
| Use of Technical Language       | - The use of technical language is minimal and appropriate.                                                                                                      |       |                                                                                                                                  |
| Application to Praxis           | - The questions asked relate to the daily practices or expertise of the participants.                                                                          |       |                                                                                                                                  |
| Relationship to Problem         | - The questions are sufficient to resolve the problem in the study, answers the research questions, and obtain the purpose of the study                                                                                     |       |                                                                                                                                  |
| Measure of Construct: A: ( )    | - The survey adequately measures this construct.                                                                                                              |       |                                                                                                                                  |
| Measure of Construct: B: ( )    | - The survey adequately measures this construct.                                                                                                              |       |                                                                                                                                  |
| Measure of Construct: C: ( )    | - The survey adequately measures this construct.                                                                                                              |       |                                                                                                                                  |
| Measure of Construct: D: ( )    | - The survey adequately measures this construct.                                                                                                              |       |                                                                                                                                  |
## Appendix F: Research Study Codebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comp-Change Management</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant articulates knowledge of application of effectively engaging staff and community in the change process in a manner that ensures their support of the change and its successful implementation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comp-Communication</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant articulates knowledge or application of effectively listening to others; clearly and effectively presenting and understanding information orally and in writing; acquires, organizes, analyzes, interprets, maintains information needed to achieve school or team 21st century objectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comp-Conflict Management</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant articulates knowledge of application of anticipating or seeking to resolve confrontations, disagreements, or complaints in a constructive manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comp-Creative Thinking</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant articulates knowledge or application of engaging in and fostering an environment for others to engage in innovative thinking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comp-Customer Focus</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant articulates knowledge or application of understanding of the students as customers of the work of schooling and the servant nature of leadership and acts accordingly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comp-Delegation</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant articulates knowledge or application of effectively assigning work tasks to others in ways that provide learning experiences for them and in ways that ensure the efficient operation of the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comp-Discussion/Inquiry</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant articulates knowledge of application of creating a risk-free environment for engaging people in conversations that explore issues, challenges or bad relationships that are hindering school performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comp-Emotional Intelligence</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant articulates knowledge of application of managing oneself through self-awareness and self-management and is able to manage relationships through empathy, social awareness and relationship management. This competency is critical to building strong, transparent, trusting relationships throughout the school community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comp-Environmental Awareness</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant articulates knowledge of application of becoming aware and remaining informed of external and internal trends, interests and issues with potential impacts on school policies, practices, procedures and positions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comp-Global Awareness</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant articulates knowledge or application of understanding the competitive nature of the new global economy and is clear about the knowledge and skills students will need to be successful in this economy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comp-Judgement</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant articulates knowledge or application of effectively reaching logical conclusions and making high quality decisions based on available information. Giving priority and caution to significant issues. Analyzing and interpreting complex information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comp-Organizational Ability</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant articulates knowledge or application of Effectively planning and scheduling one’s own and the work of others so that resources are used appropriately, such as scheduling the flow of activities and establishing procedures to monitor projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comp-Personal Ethics and Values</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant articulates knowledge or application of Consistently exhibiting high standards in the areas of honesty, integrity, fairness, stewardship, trust, respect, and confidentiality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comp-Personal Responsibility for Performance</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant articulates knowledge or application of Proactively and continuously improving performance by focusing on needed areas of improvement and enhancement of strengths; actively seeks and effectively applies feedback from others; takes full responsibility for one's own achievements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comp-Responsiveness</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant articulates knowledge or application of refusing to leave issues; inquiries or requirements for information go unattended. Creates a clearly delineated structure for responding to requests/situations in an expedient manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comp-Results Orientation</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant articulates knowledge or application of effectively assuming responsibility. Recognizes when a decision is required. Takes prompt action as issues emerge. Resolves short-term issues while balancing them against long-term goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comp-Sensitivity</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant articulates knowledge or application of effectively perceiving the needs and concerns of others; deals tactfully with others in emotionally stressful situations or in conflict. Knows what information to communicate and to whom. Relates to people of varying ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comp-Systems Thinking</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant articulates knowledge or application of understanding the interrelationships and impacts of school and district influences, systems and external stakeholders, and applies that understanding to advancing the achievement of the school or team.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comp-Technology</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant articulates knowledge or application of effectively utilizing the latest technologies to continuously improve the management of the school and enhance student instruction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comp-Time Management</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant articulates knowledge or application of effectively using available time to complete work tasks and activities that lead to the achievement of desired work or school results. Runs effective meetings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comp-Visionary</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant articulates knowledge or application of Imagineering by creating an environment and structure to capture stakeholder dreams of what the school could become for all the students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCon-District Community</td>
<td>This code is used when participants refer to aspects of the district's community demographics and unique features and its possible impact on their readiness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCon-District Leadership Support</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant identifies the role of district leaders in their learning and experiences in the program have influenced their understanding of school leadership and leadership readiness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCon-Situational</td>
<td>This code will be used when participants identify how the situational context of their school has influenced their understanding of school leadership and leadership readiness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Act-Cultural Leadership</td>
<td>This code is used when participants recognize how they have applied their understanding of cultural leadership competencies regarding the school's traditions, norms and shared goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Act-External Leadership</td>
<td>This code is used when participants recognize how they apply their understanding of external development leadership competencies through designing structures and processes that result in engagement, support and ownership from the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Act-Human Resources Leadership</td>
<td>This code is used when participants recognize how they have applied their understanding of human resources leadership competencies regarding recruitment, induction, support, evaluation, development and retention of high performing staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Act-Instructional Leadership</td>
<td>This code is used when participants recognize how they have applied their understanding of instructional leadership competencies regarding the school's use of best instructional practices.</td>
</tr>
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<td>Code</td>
<td>Description</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Act-Managerial Leadership</td>
<td>This code is used when participants recognize how they have applied their understanding of managerial leadership competencies regarding processes and systems in place for budgeting, staffing, problem-solving, communication expectations and scheduling that result in the work routines in the building.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Act-Micro-political Leadership</td>
<td>This code is used when participants recognize how they have applied their understanding of micro-political leadership competencies regarding employing an awareness of staff's professional needs, issues and interest to build cohesion and to facilitate distributed governance and shared decision making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Act-Strategic Leadership</td>
<td>This code is used when participants recognize how they have applied their understanding of strategic leadership competencies regarding school's vision, mission, and goals in the 21st Century and building on its core values and beliefs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Know-Cultural Leadership</td>
<td>This code will be used whenever the participant states a conceptual understanding of the elements or interconnectedness of cultural leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Know-External Leadership</td>
<td>This code will be used whenever the participant states a conceptual understanding of designing structures and processes that result in community engagement, support, and ownership through external development leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Know-Human Resources Leadership</td>
<td>This code will be used whenever there is a reference to growth in the participant's understanding of processes and systems in place which results in recruitment, induction, support, evaluation, development and retention of high performing staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Know-Instructional Leadership</td>
<td>This code will be used whenever the participant states a conceptual understanding of best instructional and school practices for school leaders to embody.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Def-Know-Managerial Leadership</td>
<td>This code will be used whenever the participant states a conceptual understanding of processes and systems in place for budgeting, staffing, problem solving, communicating expectations and scheduling that result in organizing the work routines in the building.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Def-Know-Micro-political Leadership</td>
<td>This code will be used whenever the participant states a conceptual understanding of micro-political leadership by referencing the diversity in staff skills, backgrounds and professional knowledge.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Def-Know-Strategic Leadership</td>
<td>This code will be used whenever the participant states a conceptual understanding of strategic leadership.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gap-ALA Gap</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant identifies remaining knowledge, skill and disposition gaps after completing the ALA.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gap-Leadership Readiness Gap</td>
<td>This code is used when participants identify their own shortcomings and/or lack of training regarding becoming a principal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gap-Traditional Program Gap</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant identifies a knowledge, skill or disposition gap that remains after completing a traditional principal preparation program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PE-Improvement</td>
<td>This code is used when the participant provides strategies for improvement or suggestions that would help one attain readiness after participating in the ALA program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PE-Strengths</td>
<td>This code is used when participants identify aspects of the program that helped to shape their readiness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readiness- Negative Tendencies</td>
<td>This code will be used when participants reveal beliefs that are counterproductive to becoming an effective leader.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readiness-Bias</td>
<td>This code is used when participants make reveal an explicit bias that may be addressed through the transformative learning process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readiness-Potential</td>
<td>This code is used when participants reveal a belief or an action that may not necessary translate to readiness.</td>
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<td>Code</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>Readiness-Ready to Lead</td>
<td>The code is used when participants references the knowledge, skills and dispositions required being an effective leader and how one knows they have what it takes to be a principal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Readiness-Self Affirmed</td>
<td>This code will be used when participants reveal growth in any area of leadership that could help shape their readiness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>TLO-Examined Prejudices</td>
<td>This code is used when learners in the assumptions phase question their previously held biases, stereotypes and learned beliefs after being confronted with new information and reflection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLO-Incidental Experiences</td>
<td>This code is used when the learners in the experience phase displays behaviors of increased self-confidence, renewed personal values, cultivated social involvement and lasting friendships after being confronted with new information and reflection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLO-Fostering Transformative Learning</td>
<td>This code is used when the learners in the challenged perspective phases cite critical reflection and rationale discourse in cohort and residential learning as well as traditional learning models as impacting the acknowledgement of the occurrence of transformative learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLO-Reconceptualized Learning</td>
<td>This code is used when the learners in transformative learning phase have an increased awareness of flawed perspective which causes one to challenge previously held perspective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLO-Transformed Personhood</td>
<td>This code is used when the learner takes action after the acknowledgment of new, deeper understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLP-Assumption</td>
<td>This code is used when the learner enters the Assumptions phase. This occurs are constructed from experience. They form the lens of worldview. Learners enter the transformative learning cycle at the assumption phase when a learning event, situation or encounter leads to an awareness of and reconsider biases, stereotypes, and learned beliefs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>TLP-Challenged Perspective</td>
<td>This code is used when the learner enters the Challenged Perspectives phase. This occurs when new experiences require learners to challenge deeply held beliefs and consider new perspectives. Learners enter the transformative learning cycle at the challenged perspectives phase when a learning event, situation or encounter reveals flaws or misconceptions in their previously held assumptions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLP-Experience</td>
<td>This code is used when the learner enters the Experience phase. This phase stems from prior learning such as knowledge, skills, attitudes that have been developed over a lifetime of interactions with the environment. Learners enter the transformative learning cycle at the experience phase when a learning event, situation or encounter has led to stimulation of their prior learning and belief patterns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLP-Transformative Learning</td>
<td>This code is used when the learner enters the Transformative Learning phase. This occurs when the learners adopts and acts upon a new perspective. Learners’ worldview is broadened to include a more encompassing lens. Though rare, learners enter the transformative learning cycle at the transformative learning phase when a learning event, situation or encounter lead the learner to produce action based on new perspectives. Most often learners will enter at a different phase and later act upon the new understanding.</td>
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### Appendix H: Alignment Chart of NC School Executive Standards and National School Leadership Standards

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<td>2. School Culture and Instructional Program</td>
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<td>4. Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment</td>
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<td>8. Internship and Clinical Practice</td>
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Appendix I: Participants’ Overall Self-Ratings on NC School Executive Standards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Summary Rating Form</th>
<th>Not Demonstrated</th>
<th>Developing</th>
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<th>Accomplished</th>
<th>Distinguished</th>
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<td><strong>Standard 1: Strategic Leadership</strong></td>
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<td>C: School Improvement Plan</td>
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<td>D: Distributive Leadership</td>
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<td>B: Focus on Instructional Time</td>
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