Principals’ Experiences of Professional Learning: A Review of the Literature

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Introduction

There is a long history of the study of the roles and responsibilities of principals in creating and sustaining school cultures, particularly in times of school reform and change initiatives (Fullan, 2008). School administrators, particularly school principals, have long been seen as a key change element in the reform movements (Goodlad, 1984). While there have been some studies of principals’ activities during these times of reform, there has not been a great deal of attention to principals’ professional learning as they underwent school reform. There have also been some studies of principals’ professional development or professional preparation for undertaking reform movements while serving as principals (Fullan, 2008). Much of what is written focuses on best practices and how well principals engage in these best practices (Fullan, 2011). Some of the research appears to be undertaken with a sense of assessment of how well principals are able to fulfill the prescribed duties and responsibilities nested within best practices and hence appears to work from a somewhat deficit view of school principals (Fullan, 2003, 2005). Other studies narrow their focus to attend to only the work of a principal in relation to a particular school reform, which diminishes attention to the complex multilayered contexts in which principals live and work.

While terms to define principals are somewhat contested, we note that terms such as school leaders, school managers, instructional leaders, school administrators, and principals are frequently conflated to refer to the person or persons who serve as principals. It is not our intention to differentiate these terms in this literature review. Our intention is, rather to review recent, local, provincial, national, and international literature using the term principal and to attend to principals’ experiences of professional learning.
Methods for Undertaking the Literature Review

Criteria

In order to undertake a limited review of relevant literature, we focussed the scope of the search by designing a set of salient search terms: principal knowledge, principal learning, principal coaching, principal learning in assessment, and assessment leadership. We employed the University of Alberta’s online library system to access several databases and providers: Canadian Business and Current Affairs (CBCA) Education, Elton Bryson Stephens Company (EBSCOhost), Education Resource Information Center (ERIC), and ProQuest. Framed by these terms, searches were executed within each database to locate and extract relevant research. Searches were limited to English publications, which included articles obtained from refereed journals, as well as research theses and dissertations. We limited our searches to a temporal frame of 15 years. With a view to further vetting the literature, search results were placed in collective online folders respectively identified as Articles and Theses/Dissertations. Netted results yielded 20 articles, and a total of eight theses and dissertations. Literature identified as germane spanned a range of years with the oldest having been published in 2001 and the most recent published in 2013.

Process

Each member of the research team was assigned a selection of articles and theses and dissertations to read. As a means of summarizing the screened literature, a template was created with the following categories: Abstract, Discipline/Research site(s), Participants, Methodology, Data, Key points/Findings, and a final category of So What?. We used these categories to attend
to the practical and theoretical considerations raised in the research. As templates of the articles/theses/dissertations were completed, they were uploaded into a communal online folder for the purposes of synchronic sharing. Each template was discussed in detail over the course of several team meetings. During this period of deeper reading, we recognized that not all of the selected literature met the criteria. Upon culling these studies, 18 articles and six theses and dissertations remained. We engaged in a thematic analysis of the literature and developed seven distinct themes: (a) Relationship and trust as central elements in principals’ experiences of being coached; (b) The principal’s role in assessment; (c) The salience of teachers’ perceptions of principals; (d) The experience of being coached and of coaching; (e) Early life stories in shaping school leadership practice; (f) The need for professional development and central office support for principals, and (g) Principals’ beliefs about assessment and leadership practices. We explore these themes in more detail in upcoming sections. In the next section, we outline understandings of assessment for learning, which is the key reform context of our study.

Assessment for Learning

Assessment literacy is a phrase frequently encountered in research studies and articles regarding student-learning assessment. Stiggins (2001) described it as follows: “Assessment literacy comprises two skills: first is the ability to gather dependable and quality information about student achievement; second is the ability to use that information effectively to maximize student achievement” (p. 20). Assessment of learning usually refers to summative assessment, standardized testing and pencil and paper testing for the purposes of reporting, ranking, promotion to the next grade, and for establishing credentials. Assessment for learning (AFL/AfL)
is a contrasting term to assessment of learning and often used interchangeably with the term formative assessment. Black and Wiliam (2009) defined formative assessment as follows:

Practice in a classroom is formative to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited. (p. 9)

In her study of the role of school administrators in the implementation of a change in assessment practice, Hollingworth (2012) worked with 15 teachers, the principal, and the district administrator of a small, Midwestern high school in the United States (U.S.) and expressed the same idea when she observed, “Formative assessments are generally thought of as metacognitive tools designed to support instruction in order to facilitate the creation of a learning profile for students to track their progress over time” (p. 366).

There has been a steady movement for several decades in student learning assessment to move beyond assessment of learning for ranking, promotion, and credentialing to assessment for learning linked to student competency and instructional strategies. Stiggins (2001) wrote about the changing landscape of assessment and particularly about the principal’s role in assessment, stating “in standards driven high schools, perhaps the most promising dimension of a new assessment vision is the opportunity to use assessment as a powerful motivator and instructional intervention through student involvement in assessment, recordkeeping, and communication” (p. 18). For Stiggins there are two conditions that help integrate assessment into the teaching and learning process. One condition is the expression of clear, appropriate achievement targets and the other is an assessment literate faculty (p. 20). He goes on to describe a set of standards for
quality assessment, which include the need for sound assessments to be specifically designed to serve instructional purposes (p. 21). Stiggins describes the principal’s responsibilities as being crucial to developing assessment literacy in schools. His belief is that principals must themselves be - first and foremost - assessment literate and that their subsequent job is to remove all barriers to the development of teachers’ assessment literacy.

Hollingworth (2012) used the terms formative assessment and assessment for learning interchangeably but describes formative assessment “in contrast to more traditional ways of assessing knowledge at the end of a unit of study (summative assessments), and is different from the once-a-year high-stakes State tests that are used for State accountability reporting purposes” (p. 367). Formative assessment is intended to provide the teacher with feedback on student learning so that the teacher can decide on instructional strategies that will enable learners to move forward. An important feature of formative assessment is its ability to enable students to be self-reflective about their learning (p. 366).

In their attempt to develop a theory of formative assessment, Black and Wiliam (2009) identified unifying factors. They suggested that early work on formative assessment is centered on five main activities:

- Sharing success criteria with learners
- Classroom questioning
- Comment-only marking
- Peer and self-assessment
- Formative use of summative tests (p.7)
They also note that there are three key processes, relative to these activities, in learning and teaching:

- Establishing where learners are in their learning
- Establishing where they are going
- Establishing what needs to be done to get them there (p. 7)

These three processes, in turn, involve three agents in the classroom; that is, the teacher, the peer, and the learner. These processes can be conceptualized as consisting of five significant strategies:

1. Clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success;
2. Engineering effective classroom discussions and other learning tasks that elicit evidence of student understanding;
3. Providing feedback that moves learners forward;
4. Activating students as instructional resources for one another; and
5. Activating students as the owners of their own learning. (p.8)

Key to the formative assessment discussed by Black and Wiliam are the moments of contingency where the teacher hears and interprets what students are thinking and which may enable teaching moments (p. 10). Black and Wiliam established that even though the teacher's goal is to create student autonomy in their learning, the teacher is in control of learning.

The teacher must be accountable to the students in terms of taking on board, as far as reasonably practicable, the students’ needs, preferences, and so on, but they must also be
accountable to the discipline into which the students are being enculturated so that they can eventually operate as effective learners in that discipline. (p. 22)

Change in student assessment is part of the pedagogical landscape in schools. We now understand that assessment for learning is an important feature of the professional work of teachers. Teachers are in the process of implementing new assessment approaches and they need the support of school leaders. We have provided a brief overview of assessment for learning as we explored the experiences of professional learning of school principals.

Coming to Terms

In our literature review we encountered terms that clearly meant different things to various researchers and which required exploration. The idea in this section is to highlight some of the more prevalent terms we encountered, their varied usages, and to situate ourselves relative to the available definitions.

Coaching and Mentoring

In the literature that our research team consulted about the professional learning of school leaders, in some cases we discovered that coaching and mentoring are terms that are used interchangeably, while in other articles authors attempted to make a distinction between the two. In their discussion of the CLASS program (Coaching Leaders to Attain Student Success) at the New Teacher Center at the University of California Santa Cruz, Bloom, Castagna, and Warren (2003) viewed mentoring as a relationship between an experienced administrator and a novice principal in the same district and coaching as a relationship provided by an external person and
the novice with more specific agendas in mind, perhaps around instructional leadership (p. 21). It is possible for the novice principal to have both a mentor and a coach.

We claim that effective coaches move between instructional coaching strategies, in which the coach serves as expert, consultant, collaborator and teacher; and facilitative strategies, in which the coach adopts a mediational stance, with a primary focus on building the coachee’s capacity through metacognition and reflection. (p. 22)

Celoria and Hemphill (2014) worked with six coaches to new principals over a one-year period to examine the practice of new principal coaching. In their opening remarks, they treated the terms coaching and mentoring interchangeably. They then go on to elaborate on a concept of coaching where “new principals are aided by coaches, as experts, to move from the role of novice through the process of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ toward the ultimate goal of becoming experts” (p. 73). In a study of 40 research-based papers on the mentoring of principals, Hansford and Ehrich (2006) used the following definition of mentoring:

Formal mentoring is a structured and coordinated approach to mentoring where individuals (usually novices – mentees and more experienced persons – mentors) agree to engage in a personal and confidential relationship that aims to provide professional development, growth and varying degrees of personal support. (p. 39)

As part of their review of the literature during an evaluation of coaches’ implementation of a specific coaching model, and identification of principals’ responses to this coaching, Huff, Preston, and Golding (2013) found two strands of coaching: performance-based coaching and in-depth personal coaching. For the purposes of their article the authors defined coaching “in
general as a helping relationship between (1) a client with managerial authority in an organization and (2) a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioral techniques and methods to help the client achieve a mutually identified set of goals, within a formally defined cooperative agreement” (p. 507).

Israel and Fine (2012) described a three-year intensive coaching model in principal preparation programs facilitated by university personnel who selected experienced principals to convey theory-based learning using cognitive coaching as described by Costa and Garmston (1986). In this frame, coaching involved the entire scope of what it means to be a principal. For her part, James-Ward (2011) described a leadership coaching model in California based on cognitive science where coaching is intended to offer "school leaders opportunities to learn and improve their craft by building a trusting relationship and using collaboration, instruction, facilitation, reflection and transformational strategies" (p. 3). Williamson (2012), as part of a brief analysis of coaching and its benefit to teachers, presents the idea of principal as instructional coach working with teachers. The coaching process, in this view, is focussed but teacher-driven.

Instructional coaching provides individual teachers with one-to-one assistance working on identified instructional needs. It is an improvement model based on the belief that teachers, given an opportunity, can diagnose their own teaching and identify ways to strengthen their work. Coaches help teachers identify the focus and then work with them to reflect on and improve their practice. (p. 1)
Loving (2011), in her phenomenological study of which coaching-induced practices are acquired during novice principals’ first year as principal, created the following table for comparison of mentoring and coaching:

**Table 1**

*Comparison of Terms*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MENTORING</th>
<th>COACHING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructional model characterized by “lead by example” thinking</td>
<td>Inquiry-based learning characterized by collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect through exemplary work and/or endurance</td>
<td>Helping practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From within same district</td>
<td>Generally from outside district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of advice and information regarding district matters</td>
<td>Confident and expert support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority is managerial</td>
<td>Authority is collegial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides advice</td>
<td>Leads to finding own solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short-term solutions</td>
<td>Long-term goal attainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not new education</td>
<td>New method of induction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usually over one year or as needed</td>
<td>Usually of one year experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Robertson (2011) explored new principals’ experiences of coaching from the principal’s perspective. She questioned how new principals experience their coaching program and how coaching enhances their experience as novice administrators. Unlike the meanings offered by Loving (2011) above, Robertson (2011) examined the terms mentoring and coaching and ultimately seems to use them interchangeably.

Coaching strategies tend to fall into two categories: the teaching relationship and the personal relationship. The teaching relationship is characterized by knowledge-transmission where the veteran administrator shares strategies for solving managerial and instructional problems. The personal relationship is characterized by knowledge-construction where the veteran administrator listens to and reflects back neophyte concerns and then co-create understandings of the profession, the organization, and other related performance-impeding issues. . . (p. 6)

She asserted that one of the important features of a coaching relationship is mutual trust. The four coaching-related themes that emerged from her study are as follows:

1) Shaping Reflective, Instructionally-Focused Practice,
2) Feeling Supported during Emotionally Stressful Times,
3) Having an Authentic, Trusting Relationship and
4) Enhancing Relationship-Building through Technology. (p. 17)
As evidenced above, the terms mentoring and coaching are somewhat contested in the literature. That said, there is substantial overlap in their use. They can both, for example, be said to be defined - at least in part - by the creation of trusting, personal relationships and by the presence of some form of knowledge transmission, or sharing, between someone trained/more experienced and someone novice/less experienced. Due to the conflation of definitions in the literature, our team employs the terms somewhat interchangeably in this literature review, but we also came to our own understanding of them. We view coaching as a relationship provided by an external person and/or school administrators with a targeted focus of specific professional learning and mentoring as a more general relationship between experienced practitioners and novice practitioners with the purpose of induction into the practice of principalship.

**Instructional Leader**

This term appears repeatedly in the literature to distinguish the role of the principal as manager of a school from an educational leader with responsibility beyond staffing, budgeting, and other organizational tasks. Aimed to investigate the impacts on professional teacher practice and student outcomes, Hert (2010) studied principal participation in an established, executive leadership development program. He paints an interesting picture of the role of the principal in today's schools.

Principals today are expected to be charismatic, energetic, intelligent, and experts in instructional design and curriculum. Principals are expected to be advocates of social justice, role models, experts in assessment, disciplinarians, fiscal managers, policymakers, and community leaders who also create and maintain a culture of high expectations and exceptional ethics. (p. 3)
For the purposes of this literature review, we adopt a multifaceted perspective on the role of instructional leaders, also referred to as school leaders, school administrators, and principals throughout this work. As indicated in the introduction, we seek to understand their experiences and not the varied, externally imposed expectations of what defines their successful performance.

**Thematic Analysis**

As indicated in *Methods for Undertaking this Literature Review*, we identified seven themes in the literature:

**Theme 1**: Relationship and trust as central elements in principals’ experiences of being coached

**Theme 2**: The principal’s role in assessment

**Theme 3**: The salience of teachers’ perceptions of principals

**Theme 4**: The experience of being coached and of coaching

**Theme 5**: Early life stories in shaping school leadership practice

**Theme 6**: The need for professional development and central office support for principals

**Theme 7**: Principals’ beliefs about assessment and leadership practices

The identification of these themes is grounded in our focus on the experiences of principals. Specifically, our mandate is to explore principals’ experiences relative to coaching they have undergone, or offered to others, as well as their unfolding relationship to formative assessment strategies and practices. In the exploration of the themes that follows, our hope is to deepen attention to the situated and relational complexity of these experiences.
**Theme 1: Relationship and Trust as Central Elements in Principals’ Experiences of Being Coached**

A theme in the literature revealed the importance of developing and maintaining a positive, trusting relationship between coaches/mentors and principals as they learn about assessment for learning in their practice. James-Ward (2013) in her study alongside four novice principals who received leadership coaching, highlighted an important relationship component. She contended that a “critical attitude” (p. 22) of a coach is the ability to establish trust, and a trusting relationship, with principals. James-Ward (2013) observed that trust and neutrality complement one another in the coaching/leadership relationship. As noted by one novice principal in her study:

> Usually when you speak to someone that is ahead of you professionally, they are someone that is in a supervisory position, so it becomes more difficult to be completely honest about your experience. The neutrality of the coaching relationship removes that barrier. (James-Ward, 2013, p. 30)

Robertson (2011) illuminated the importance of having authentic and meaningful relationships between coaches and novice principals. In her study, trusting relationships between coaches and principals were seen as being the foundation in having honest conversations as principals shared their experiences. Five of the six principals identified their coaches as being a ‘friend’, and expressed their desire to have the relationship continue even after the formal coaching relationship had ended. Robertson (2011) also noted that while novice principals identified their relationship with coaches as being nurturing, experienced principals described their relationship with coaches as being more collegial.
Parylo, Zepeda, and Bengtson (2012) described a secondary analysis of data from a larger study conducted in the state of Georgia, U.S. where the high value of being mentored spontaneously arose with 16 participant principals during interviews that were originally designed to discuss other aspects of being a principal (p. 121). Using the term coach and mentor interchangeably, they found that mentoring in instructional leadership was viewed as “the best support” (p. 128) by both new and experienced principals. New principals perceived these mentoring relationships as meaningful and important to their practice and, in some cases as “a safety net” (p. 128) where they were able to rely on their mentor for emotional support in a confidential environment. Like their novice counterparts, experienced administrators appreciated the supportive nature of their mentors, but also considered the mentor relationship as one that helped to build their professional networks. All the principals in the study valued trust and confidentiality in the relationship they had with their mentor.

Loving (2011) also identified one of the key elements of coaching as the need for the coaching relationship to be based upon trust and confidentiality. The participants in her study further noted that the non-evaluative nature of the coaching model was important. One participant, in particular, speaks to both ideas when she said of her coach:

I think she allowed me to vent and in a nonjudgmental way and it allowed me to really say what was on my mind knowing I wasn’t going to see her in a meeting and think, I probably shouldn’t have said that. (Loving, 2011, p. 75)

It is evident that feelings, and environments, of trust, support, neutrality/non-evaluation, and confidentiality are defined, by the literature reviewed, as deeply important to a mentoring or coaching relationship.
Theme 2: The Principal’s Role in Assessment

Several authors illuminated the importance of understanding the principal’s role in assessment. In their study of rural Canadian school principals and their varied assessment leadership roles, Renihan and Noonan (2012) referenced numerous studies from the educational leadership literature to underscore the “crucial role that principals can play in improving teaching and learning” (p. 2). Following their study involving 12 principals from three Western Canadian school districts, they emphasized the principal’s role in providing assessment leadership, defined in their earlier work as “the role and expectations of formal school leaders in relation to the task of enhancing assessment literacy among school professionals and paraprofessionals” (p. 1). Drawing from Stiggins’ work, the authors stressed that successful school-based assessment was dependent upon a principal’s assessment literacy and her/his ability to remove constraints to teachers' assessment literacy.

Administrators’ role in leading assessment is interconnected with their role in leading learning. Brookhart and Moss (2013) designed their study to understand how principals learn about formative assessment practices, how this shifts their teaching and learning, and their relationships with teachers. They found,

principals who saw themselves as learners were best able to lead a shift towards a culture of learning in the school. Conversely, principals who did not see themselves as learners, but as supervisors, led buildings where an evaluative culture still prevailed. (p. 12)

Brookhart and Moss emphasized that administrators need to see themselves as the leading learner in order for a school culture to transform around assessment and contended that as principals grow in their understanding of formative assessment, they also grow in their
understanding of what learning looks like in classrooms. Hollingworth (2012) similarly found that “school leaders also served as instructional leaders by learning the research and pedagogical goals of assessment for learning” (p. 377).

In their Norwegian study, Smith and Engelsen (2013) emphasized that, rather than becoming involved at the implementation phase, principals need to be involved as learners from the very beginning of assessment initiatives. They studied the experiences of two principals engaged in a three-year project aimed at incorporating assessment for learning practices in their schools. Both principals identified their role as one of “knowledgeable authority” (p. 118) in creating an assessment for learning atmosphere within their schools. Smith and Engelsen noted that principals must become involved as active learners in the project from the beginning in order to be trusted by teachers and to lead the project effectively. Without seeing themselves as learners, principals are less able to lead the school atmosphere towards assessment for learning practices.

While the principal is positioned as the ‘lead learner’ or ‘assessment leader’ in the aforementioned studies, sometimes the principal’s primary role is also one of providing external support. For example, Hollingworth (2012) contended that, alongside providing teachers with the requisite training and securing funding, principals also need to facilitate teachers’ professional development by creating opportunities for collaboration through the provision of time and space for discussions. Further, as referenced earlier, Renihan and Noonan (2012) emphasized the need for principals to remove barriers to teachers’ assessment literacy.

In summary, the role of the principal revolves around their assessment literacy and their ability to see themselves as learners and facilitators in the shift to assessment for learning practices within their schools.
Theme 3: The Salience of Teachers’ Perceptions of Principals

The ways in which teachers perceive leaders are important contextual factors to the experiences of administrators. To better understand the experiences of administrators in their work with teachers around coaching and/or assessment for learning, attention must be paid to how school leaders’ effectiveness is understood by teachers.

Identifying teachers’ perceptions of principals’ effectiveness as evaluators, Zimmerman and Deckert-Pelton (2003) worked with 86 teachers from five different Florida counties using a survey method. The results indicated that there were four key areas, identified by teachers, in order for principals to engage in effective evaluation of teachers. These included the interactions between teachers and principal, consistency in evaluations, a commitment by the principal for effective professional evaluation, and the principal’s knowledge in pedagogy, content, and evaluation. The authors concluded that teachers perceive principals as both an encumbrance and a facilitator to the evaluation process. Teachers in the study seemed to view the evaluation process “as holding great potential for improving their pedagogical knowledge, skills, and abilities” (p. 34). However, “When teachers believe that their evaluators do not have the pedagogical background necessary to critically evaluate their teaching, they lack trust in the process, their evaluators, and the results” (p. 35).

Based upon a U.S. national study of 100 elementary and secondary school principals and 300 teachers, Benedict (2005) sought to verify the degree of pedagogical knowledge principals’ had about research-based practices that support student achievement. She contended that there may be a discrepancy between the way principals and teachers perceive the principal’s instructional leadership practices. While principals saw themselves as central to the learning
process, teachers regarded the principal’s instructional leadership role as consisting mainly of providing support and encouragement.

Hollingworth (2012) emphasized the “evolving roles of the individuals on the school leadership team as a catalyst for innovation in instruction and classroom assessment” (p. 365) with a particular focus on the responsibility teachers take for student learning using formative assessment. In her work, there were 15 teachers (39%) of the staff on the Building Leadership Team focussed on formative assessment. Teachers viewed principals as a “catalyst for building teacher knowledge and implementation of formative assessment practices” (p. 365). It is important to note that “the success of the change initiative hinged on relationships between teachers and school leaders” (p. 365).

What was apparent in this theme was the importance of the congruity between principals’ perceptions of their work as instructional leaders with teachers and teachers’ perceptions of the principals’ knowledge and skills.

**Theme 4: The Experience of Being Coached and of Coaching**

Despite the variance in use, and meaning, of the words ‘coach,’ and ‘mentor’ as previously discussed, there is a powerful sense in the literature reviewed that coaching and mentoring can be a vital part of school leadership practice, development, and sustainability (Hert, 2010; Parylo, Zepeda, & Bengtson, 2012; Robertson, 2011). One principal, despite “knowing that he would be unable to have the same coach as he had his first year . . . did not hesitate when asked to participate in the program for a second year” (Hert, 2010, p. 96). This suggests “it’s the discourse. It’s the conversation. It’s the combination of camaraderie, critical friend, sort of a thinking partner to speculate and wonder with” (Robertson, 2011, p. 30) that is most valuable to
the relationship of a principal with his/her coach or mentor. Huff, Preston, and Goldring (2013) noted that it is the delivery of a coaching model through deep, not superficial, discussion (pp. 510, 518-519) which makes coaching truly valuable. They contended that it is the use of “role play” (p. 519), recursive feedback conversations, the ability to track progress and refine goal-setting strategy (p. 520), and careful attention in each coaching session to the review of past experience and discussion of “upcoming concerns” (p. 520) that encourage the success of coaching programs with principals.

Parylo, Zepeda, and Bengtson (2012) searched for thematic understanding of mentoring as discussed by participating principals, and identified five general themes where mentoring was found to:

1. enhance the ability to recruit new leaders (p. 127)
2. help socialize acting principals away from isolation in their work (p. 128)
3. offer a powerful form of support in their daily practice as principals (p. 128)
4. was a form of professional development (p. 129); and
5. acted as a reciprocal process which benefits both the mentors and the mentees (p. 129)

Noting that relationships with mentors defined by “non-judgmental,” “non-intrusive,” “ask anything,” “anytime” (p.128) practice were especially valued by the novice principals in the original study, it was generally observed that all the principals “valued the non-evaluative nature of mentorship they received” (Parylo, Zepeda, & Bengtson, 2012, p. 130). McGough (2003) collected the stories of 23 veteran principals with a view to understanding how they became aware of, and committed to, new perspectives and practices. A key participant in his study said, “How do I determine which mentors I hook on to? Number one trust and credibility. Somewhere
there is a mechanism that says I can learn from this person, they are trustworthy … they have my best interest in mind. I don’t feel manipulated” (p. 465).

Roberston (2011) brings specificity to the idea of “anytime,” “anywhere” (Parylo, Zepeda, & Bengtson, 2012, p. 128) support through an unanticipated emergent theme in her study, namely that email held a particular importance to the coaching relationship (Robertson, 2011, p. 42). She reported that five out of the six principals in her study felt that the unlimited access to email support by their coaches, as provided by the coaching model in which they were engaged (p. 16), acted as “a meaningful point of connection that alleviated the feelings of isolation and inadequacy, summaries that captured their experiences for further reflection, and related to this, as an action plan for future work” (p. 42).

In addition to the many potential benefits of being coached/mentored, there are perceived benefits to acting as a coach/mentor. It has been found that “the best mentors were practicing principals who have a ‘strong desire to learn and be willing to commit time’ to mentoring. Additionally, mentoring was described as a professional learning opportunity for experienced principals” (Young et al., as cited in Parylo, Zepeda, & Bengtson, 2012, p. 124). Parylo, Zepeda, and Bengtson (2012) also found that the mentors in the Georgia study perceived being a mentor as “very gratifying,” “ongoing and timely,” and “very informative” (p. 129); that it “promoted relationship building among the leaders in the district” (p. 129) which, in its turn, reduced feelings of isolation often tied to being a principal (p. 129). One mentor made a point of saying, “I am not so foolish to believe that I cannot continue to learn. I don’t need to reinvent the wheel. I enjoy that mentoring opportunity” (p. 129). Additionally, when coaches are also responsible for liaising with district leaders, James-Ward (2011) found that there could be disparity between district intent and principal understanding of district initiatives and mandates (}
The implications for the ways in which coaches might help mediate these misunderstandings – effectively first locating and then filling a crucial communication gap - and be able to share “principal’s concerns” (James-Ward, 2011, p. 8) also speaks to the value of the coaching and mentorship of principals.

The literature reviewed serves to bring into relief the multifaceted experiences of coaching/mentoring and being coached/mentored. Positive experiences and effects of coaching/mentoring seem to touch upon ideas explored in Theme 1 and Theme 3, as they invoke ideas of trust, support, relationships free of judgment or evaluation, establish that the best coaches/mentors are those with openness and humility and add that the best coaching/mentoring relationships provide ‘anytime’ access to support.

**Theme 5: Early Life Stories in Shaping School Leadership Practice**

Though it is evident that coaching and mentoring have influence on the professional learning of school leaders, we found that early experiences with leaders and leadership are also key in the development of a school leader’s practice. A current school leader’s first, and/or most noteworthy, encounters with teachers, principals and sports coaches etc. – when reflected upon as part of professional learning – have been found to illuminate the way a school leader approaches learning and defines themselves as a leader (Mackay, 2012; McGough, 2003).

Describing a “learning story” as “the landscape of private inner dialogue within which the constructs of meaning as established over one’s lifetime are organized and processed,” and as a “co-constructive mediator to one’s everyday agency in the world,” McGough (2003, p. 450) showed that the way school leaders approach their work is initially shaped by such things as “teaching as a family business, parent or guardian constantly emphasized value of school,
disabled family member in need of care” (p. 459). Through her work with 200 novice and veteran instructional leaders in the United Kingdom (UK) as part of what was the Aspiring Principals and Senior Leadership Programme, Mackay (2012) used the language of “personal leadership theories” (p. 405) and “coherent leadership story” (p. 393) as distinguished from official “published models” (p. 405) and asked participants to sit for an hour and a half engaged in the creation of a timeline “to capture their earliest experiences” (p. 395). She found that participants hold “attachment to particular images and ‘mantras’ of leadership developed from their earliest experiences” (p. 397). These ‘mantras’ “might include, interactions with fathers and mothers, siblings, as well as early experiences with institutions such as schools and social structures” (p. 397).

Through engagement with these early stories, many participants in Mackay’s (2012) study were surprised to discover links between early encounters with leadership and their current practice as school leaders (p. 397). McGough (2003) found it noteworthy that all 23 of his participants “held a strong positive regard for schooling and teaching formed during their childhood years that continued to sustain them as administrators” (p. 460). It is also clear that school leadership practice is not only defined by positive experiences of school or of leadership, but by negative ones where negative role models can be viewed as those examples to be avoided (Mackay, 2012, pp. 398-399). Mackay’s work further suggested that a deepened understanding of one’s ‘leadership story,’ and an ability to know how to frame and present it to others, could lead to more effective leadership (p. 404). The idea at play: that when we take the time to know who we are and where we come from, we are better able to relay ourselves, and relate, to others as people who also carry their own “learning stor[ies]” (McGough, 2003, p. 450) or “leadership theories” (Mackay, 2012, p. 393).
Finally, McGough (2003) and Mackay (2012) make it clear that neither reflective practice nor leadership take place in isolation. McGough (2003) pointed out that the evolution of leadership identity is marked by an “interpersonal factor” (p. 467) and Mackay (2012) articulated that both identity construction and leadership are a “social process” (p. 405), collectively enabled, which has important “implications for leaders of organizations,” including, but obviously not exclusive to, school administrators (p. 405).

**Theme 6: The Need for Professional Development and Central Office Support for Principals**

Principals need to be supported as they learn to shift the school culture to assessment for learning. Smith and Engelsen’s (2013) study reinforced the idea that even though teachers are the key to change in assessment for learning, principals are also an important factor. As teachers are learning how to implement change, principals need to learn as well in order to provide support and leadership.

The principals claimed that they had not only learned more about assessment, goal-setting and criteria, but they understood that the processes they themselves had gone through as learners about AfL, could be transferred to teacher learning and to student learning, thus having an impact on the whole school. (p. 113)

Principals learned along with the teachers through consultation with the literature, visits to other school sites implementing the same types of change and through collaboration with teachers in job embedded practice. One finding of this study was that principals need time to work on the implementation project. The project had been funded to allow for some teacher time but had
neglected to account for the additional time needed by the principals. An important feature of this study was that it focused on the voice of principals in the change process.

Renihan and Noonan (2012), in their Canadian study, also proposed that the principal is important in the change process and must become assessment literate to be an effective facilitator of change. They highlighted some unique problems caused by limited resources, distance, and sparsity in rural settings and emphasized that while principals need to have leadership skills, particularly in the area of instructional leadership, they also need professional learning.

In the context of rural schools, the issue arises as to the supports available to principals, not only in acquiring knowledge, appreciations and skills required of assessment leadership, but using them effectively given the powerful constraints placed upon them by their context. (p. 1)

The principals emphasized the importance of knowing what is happening in the classroom, and having the ‘big picture’ concerning assessment practices in their building.

The role of the principal in support of teachers in change implementation is evident in many studies and this study speaks about the importance of central support to the principal.

The policy and action implications of our findings suggest that concerted attention to the articulation of the rural principal's support system would serve these professionals very well in ensuring coherent and consistent leadership for learning. Those elements of the support system that would seem to hold most promise in this regard include support for relevant preparation, leadership development, and planned mentorship. (Renihan & Noonan, 2012, p. 6)
James-Ward (2011) also recognized that principal leadership is second only to teaching in school improvement. From the perspective of leadership coaches working with principals, she discovered a gap between what district leaders believed about initiatives and mandates and what principals thought: “Overall, the district leaders, although at times visibly disheartened by information provided by coaches were very appreciative of the candor and willingness of coaches to share principals’ concerns” (p. 8). The researcher also found that it was useful and helpful for coaches to interact with each other. She suggested that care be taken when matching principals and coaches and that coaches be recruited from a variety of backgrounds.

Carver (2010) documented a case study of a mentor teacher working with a principal. The mentor teacher’s responsibility was working directly with new teachers. The mentor teacher was concerned with the principal’s instructional leadership and wondered how she might approach educative mentoring and distributed leadership. This case study explored the possibility of an experienced mentor teacher coaching a principal in instructional leadership.

It is evident that school leaders are a crucial factor in the implementation of assessment for learning in schools. To be successful in the implementation of change, they need support in their professional learning, additional time to learn and provide support to teachers, and they need the ongoing support of central office personnel.

Theme 7: Principals’ Beliefs about Assessment and Leadership Practices

Several researchers pointed to the significant role principals’ personal beliefs can have on how they view assessment and/or their leadership practices. Mackay (2012) found that leadership models revolving around “early experiences of exclusion and engagement with peers” could be traced back to the “impact of past managers both negative and positive, teachers, neighbours,
local heroes, and first work colleagues, and friends” (p. 398). Extrapolating from her findings, Mackay contended early constructions of leadership may reflect “an unconscious understanding of what is seen to be acceptable characteristics and/or stereotypes of leaders” (p. 399). For our purposes, this study is suggestive in that it implicates the early experiences of leadership as possessing a covert potentiality to shape future leadership practices about and around assessment. Similar in some respects to Mackay’s work in the United Kingdom, Parker’s (2006) research in Canada emphasizes how meaning “is constructed through experiences” (p. 29). She found 70% of the principals in her sample believed their past and current experiences in diverse leadership roles impacted their understanding of assessment. However, Parker made definitive links to how principals’ beliefs informed assessment practices in the classroom and additionally, how these beliefs influenced leadership practice.

Parker (2006) conducted interviews with 10 principals from 10 different jurisdictions. Parker determined that each principal in her study perceived the existence of an interdependent relationship between classroom assessment and learning. For instance, while principals responded favourably to the construct of assessment for learning, “few principals spoke specifically about its impact in classroom assessment practice or learning” (p. 41). Summative assessments were acknowledged as significant tools in assessment of learning though opinion diverged in how these assessments could support student learning. Further, principals differed in how they thought about consistency in grading, parental input, sites for professional growth, the impact of teacher isolation, assigning a grade of zero, and whether increased value should be ascribed to traditional forms of assessment or to assessment deemed more innovative. More specifically, principals believed “data can play a short-term and long term role in informing both student and professional learning” (p. 65). Other influential factors discussed by principals
included: district initiatives, professional development with special emphasis on professional learning communities, time spent on professional reading, how change is processed in schools, the supervision and evaluation of teachers, and the creation of space by principals for teachers as a way to foster formal and informal discussion. As well, Parker elucidated, “Principals’ philosophies of leadership are tied to their perception of themselves and awareness of their strengths and challenges as leaders” (p. 81).

Whereas Parker’s (2006) research purposely sought to pinpoint principals’ understandings about classroom assessment, Benedict’s (2005) American study explored the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding principal practices about the supervision of classroom instruction and the support of student achievement. Results indicated that principals for the most part have a solid understanding of research-based instructional practices and that they tended to promote such practices. In spite of these particular findings, Benedict ascertained that principals at times encourage conflicting practices and moreover, teachers do not always perceive their principal’s practices in the same light as their principal. Dumas’s (2010) research investigated the declarative knowledge high school principals employed in Nebraska, possess (or do not possess) around creating a collaborative environment for teachers. Using a survey instrument, principals were determined as having knowledge in eight of the nine elements of creating a collaborative school environment. Where principals lacked knowledge was in the area of student learning. Dumas recommended current and aspiring principals receive explicit training in the establishment and/or improvement of practices in curriculum, instruction, and assessment as a means of ameliorating the gap between knowing and doing.

Taken together these four studies indicate that principals’ beliefs about assessment and/or leadership do influence practice in complex and nuanced ways, which defy a superficial
rendering of the relationship(s). Separately, each study speaks to unique facets of the same notion. Mackay’s (2012) work affirms the significance of prior experience in how principals come to shape their leadership identities. Parker’s (2006) research makes the connection between how principals’ beliefs on and about assessment can contribute to differing leadership practices. Benedict’s (2005) study provides yet another link as to how a principal’s perceptions towards assessment can act as a guiding force in his/her practice. Lastly, Dumas’s (2010) investigation accentuates the possibilities in producing meaningful change when principals are furnished with the appropriate tools to enhance their leadership practices.

Silences in the Literature Around Principals’ Experiences of Professional Learning

In our review of the literature we noted several silences, or unexplored topics, relative to principals’ experiences of professional learning as schools underwent reform initiatives. One such silence is defined by the lack of empirical evidence related to sustaining practices of coaching. While there are calls to recognize and design sustainable practices of coaching, there are no longitudinal studies that show how coaching practices can be sustained over time. For example, while Smith and Engelsen (2013) speak to embedding assessment for learning practices into the fabric of the school culture for sustainability, they do not provide empirical evidence of how this might, or has, been done. James-Ward (2013) discussed how “the value of the coaching experience was grounded in the practicality of the work” (p. 31), and thereby highlights the importance of grounding the coaching experience in daily leadership practices. However, she did not discuss how even the most grounded of coaching practices can be sustained over time.

While coaching was not the main focus of Hollingworth’s (2012) study, she did note that a key role for the administrators was the importance of building in time for reflection and teacher
conversations in professional learning communities. She contended, “For sustained change, teachers need practical support in the form of time for teacher learning and collaboration” (p. 377) as well as “the mental stimulus that comes from teacher-initiated professional development activities” (p. 377). In this study, Hollingworth emphasized that “the professional learning communities could not exist without administrative support of innovation and change: specifically, time to meet, money to support new curriculum, and training” (377). As the duration of the study was eight months without follow up, it is not clear if the change initiatives were sustainable when the time and support were no longer available.

Another silence we noted was that few studies reflect the ‘voice’ and experiences of principals. While there are satisfaction surveys and other methods that survey principals’ opinions and perceptions of the value of the coaching, the studies do not reflect ‘principals’ lives,’ in their depth and complexity, as they are going through these experiences. Indeed, Smith and Engelsen (2013) found that because the principal’s role in the shift to assessment for learning is often not made visible, their role is often not sufficiently appreciated or taken into account. Further, there appears to be a lack of attention as regards principals' professional learning except insofar as they are expected to be able to enact ‘best practices’ rather than beginning with their lives and their learning in practice.

Another silence, suggestive of a possible structural gap, is the lack of attention in the literature to the ways principals may be supported in their work both during and following the coaching experience. While Smith and Engelsen (2013) and Renihan and Noonan (2012) outlined several ways that principals could support teachers, there was only brief mention of the ways principals engaged in assessment-related learning and practices may, themselves, be supported. However, these authors were the only voices in the literature we surveyed to draw
attention to the idea that, similar to teachers, principals and administrators need to be provided with time and other material and structural resources.

A fourth silence is the lack of studies that involve Canadian teachers and administrators related to assessment for learning and coaching/mentoring practices. While the U.S. and European studies we consulted provided us with valuable insights, and with the exceptions of Parker (2006) and Renihan and Noonan (2012), the experiences of principals and administrators engaged in coaching for assessment-related learning and practices in a Canadian context needs to be made more visible.

**Summary**

In our review of the literature the following points seemed particularly salient. For principals to be effective leaders in assessment reform in schools it is necessary that they engage in their own professional learning and experience support in that process of learning. Principals must become assessment literate if they are to be a support to the teachers in their schools (Renihan & Noonan, 2012). Because growth into instructional leadership is an ongoing process there are complex factors that shape and define this growth, such as: early school learning experiences, alternative experiences with leadership in sports, encounters with significant formal and/or informal mentors, and personal beliefs about teaching and learning.

Despite the few studies that describe the experiences of principals in the process of learning to be assessment literate, there are some promising practices described in the literature. One such approach is the use of coaching by an external coach who works alongside the principal as a guide in the professional learning.
A key feature of coaching is the importance of development, and maintenance, of trust as a central feature of the connection between the coaches and the principals. And, where this trust exists, in the studies we reviewed, the coaching experience is generally regarded as positive.

School leaders learn how to be assessment leaders not by becoming experts but by discovering how to be supportive of teachers in processes of change. Teachers tend to trust leaders whom they feel and observe to have the necessary pedagogical background and who are seen as supportive rather than merely evaluative. Principals learn how to be leaders through collaborative relationships with teachers and other leaders, through encounters with research literature, and through effective coaching experiences.
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