A Phenomenological Exploration of Mentors' Lived Experiences Supporting Novice Principals Across Alabama

by

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Abstract

Newly appointed principals often experience feelings of isolation and insufficient preparation for new leadership responsibilities, contributing to high attrition rates of approximately 18-20 percent. While mentoring has been identified as a key support for novice principals, limited research has examined mentors' lived experiences, particularly within structured mentoring contexts. The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals across Alabama.

This study was guided by the Mentoring for Well-being Model, which integrated Kram's career and psychosocial functions, Mertz's model of intent and involvement, and Seligman's PERMA framework. Through this model, mentoring was understood as a relational and developmental process connected to leadership growth, social connectedness, mentoring structures, and well-being. The model provided a conceptual lens for interpreting how mentors made meaning of their roles, relationships, and support practices.

Participants included five experienced educational leaders with more than five years of mentoring experience in structured programs across Alabama. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using an interpretive approach consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology. Analysis included repeated engagement with the transcripts, identification of significant statements, development of meaning units, coding, and theme development through iterative movement between parts of the data and the whole. Six themes emerged: (1) intentional development of leadership capacity, (2) leadership identity formation, (3) support for well-being and

professional sustainability, (4) mentoring as a professional calling, (5) relational trust as the foundation of mentoring, and (6) reciprocal learning and growth.

These findings indicated that mentoring was experienced as growth-centered, relational, intentional, and reflective. Mentors supported novice principals not through direct advice, but through questioning, active listening, and reflective dialogue, along with timely feedback, enabling novice principals to construct their own leadership understanding and identity. These practices helped novice principals construct meaning leadership understanding, strengthen leadership identity, and develop resilience. Findings also showed that mentoring was meaningful and sustaining for mentors, contributing to purpose, professional connection, and reciprocal growth. At the same time, mentors recognized the need to regulate their own well-being by managing time, emotional energy, availability, and boundaries while remaining invested in their protégés.

The findings supported the Mentoring for Well-being Model by illustrating how career development, psychosocial support, intentional involvement, relational trust, and well-being operated together within structured mentoring relationships. Implications suggest that structured mentoring programs should emphasize relational trust, reflective practice, individualized support, mentor preparation, and sustained engagement over time. This study contributes to educational leadership literature by centering mentors' perspectives and advancing understanding of mentoring as a relational and growth-centered practice that supports novice principal development, well-being, and leadership sustainability.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure Statement

In the preparation of this dissertation, the author used the artificial intelligence (AI) tool ChatGPT to support aspects of the writing and revision process, AI assistance was used to refine language for clarity, coherence, and academic tone; edit grammar, sentence structure, and organization; and provide suggestions to improve thematic alignment and conceptual coherence across chapters. The tool was also used to assist with the development of tables, charts, and visual models, and transitions between sections, as well as supporting the synthesis and clarity of findings. ChatGPT was also used to generate the narrative vignette in Chapter 2.

The AI tool was not used to generate original data, conduct data analysis, or make interpretive decisions. All data collection, coding, theme development, and interpretation were conducted solely by the author. All AI-assisted content was critically reviewed, and revised to ensure accuracy, coherence, and alignment with the study's methodology and scholarly standards.

The author maintains full responsibility for the intellectual content, analysis, and conclusions presented in this dissertation. The use of AI was limited to supporting the writing and revision process while preserving the integrity, originality and scholarly rigor of the research.

Digital Accessibility Disclosure Statement

In the preparation of this dissertation, the following digital accessibility tools were used to ensure this document complies with federal accessibility requirements: Microsoft Word Accessibility Checker and EndNote reference management software. These tools were used to review document structure, formatting, alternative text, heading organization, and reference consistency to support accessibility standards. The author acknowledges full responsibility for the intellectual content of this work and has made a good faith effort to comply with digital accessibility requirements in publishing, wherein the nature of the content does not significantly change in order to do so. Furthermore, all content has been reviewed and revised to meet these requirements prior to final publication.

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Acknowledgments

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Newly appointed school principals in Alabama face complex leadership demands that frequently exceed their prior preparation, contributing to stress, burnout, and early attrition, conditions that have intensified the need for structured mentoring support. As an educator in Alabama for over twenty-six years, I have served in multiple roles across various school systems, working under leaders with different leadership styles. In 2016, I completed a master's degree in administration through Auburn University's Project Alabama Consortium Turnaround (PACT) program, which emphasized leadership skills required to improve low-performing schools. This experience strengthened my interest in educational leadership, inspiring me to pursue future opportunities to influence school improvement and make a meaningful impact as an educational leader.

Although shifts in state leadership and the restructuring of the Alabama Reading Initiative delayed my entry into school administration, I used this time to expand my instructional expertise and leadership perspective. Four years later, I assumed my first administrative role, stepping into leadership at a uniquely challenging time, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic. In this role, I embraced the responsibilities of assistant principal, reading coach, and Pre-K Director, responsibilities that normally would have been divided between two individuals. While demanding, this experience provided me with valuable insights into school operations, faculty support, and instructional leadership during a time of crisis.

I entered administration with a strong desire to learn and grow. Although I had not yet established a formal mentoring network, I actively sought feedback and professional collaboration whenever possible. These early leadership experiences

further emphasized just how vital structured mentoring can be, demonstrating how intentional guidance fosters confidence and resilience, along with a stronger commitment to the role.

This chapter provided an overview of the study and established the foundation for its purpose and significance of the personal and professional development of novice principals. It began with a background of why novice principals need a structured mentoring program, emphasizing the challenges faced by newly appointed principals within Alabama and across the broader educational leadership landscape. The chapter then presented the problem statement, purpose of the study, and research questions that guided the inquiry. In addition, it outlined the advancement of scientific knowledge, rationale and significance of the study, followed by an overview of the research design. The philosophical and conceptual frameworks were then discussed to situate the study within its theoretical context. Finally, the key terms, definitions, assumptions, and limitations were presented. Collectively, this chapter provided a foundation for understanding the study's scope and importance in strengthening structured mentoring practices for novice principals in Alabama.

Background of the Study

My experiences in education leadership reflected the realities faced by many newly appointed principals in Alabama and across the nation. New principals step into complex roles that require them to adapt to the emotional and relational demands of all stakeholders while addressing longstanding school improvement issues, often with little to no support (Mahfouz, 2020). Without robust systems of support, novice principals are at a greater risk of burnout, role dissatisfaction, and early departure from the profession

(Levin & Bradley, 2019). Structured, sustained mentoring grounded in best practices has consistently been identified as one of the most effective supports for novice principals, fostering confidence, professional growth, and resilience (Searby & Brondyk, 2007). The seminal works of Kathy Kram (1985) on career and psychosocial functions of mentors, and Norma Mertz (2004) on the intent and involvement demonstrate the depth of support novice principals need. Martin Seligman's development of the PERMA model of well-being further explains the necessity of supporting novice principals in all aspects of their professional and personal lives.

In Alabama, systemic approaches to mentoring have only recently been required and implemented through structured mentoring programs, including state-sponsored initiatives such as the Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program (ANPMP), established in response to the *School Principal Leadership and Mentoring Act* (Act 2023-340). Despite the promise from structured mentoring programs, limited empirical research has examined mentors' perspectives on how these programs support novice principals in Alabama.

This gap in the literature necessitates closer examination of mentors' lived experiences within structured mentoring contexts. This dissertation was informed by a state-developed conceptual framework for structured principal mentoring, illustrated through the Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program (ANPMP) as an exemplar (see Figure 1). The framework operationalized five mentoring goals: connection, competence, confidence, core values, and commitment (ALSDE, 2024b), influenced by the seminal work of Kram (1985), Mertz's (2004), and Seligman (2011). Together, these constructs provided a multidimensional understanding of mentoring that integrates

leadership skill development with the cultivation of emotional resilience, and psychological well-being.

Grounded in my professional experiences and established mentoring theory, this hermeneutic phenomenological study sought to explore the lived experiences of mentors participating in formal mentoring programs across Alabama and examined their perspectives on how mentoring supports novice principals' personal and professional growth. By focusing on mentor experiences, this study addressed critical gaps in understanding how structured mentoring programs foster leadership capacity, resilience, and retention among school leaders. The results have the potential to guide enhancements of these programs, inform mentor development, and strengthen statewide and national initiatives aimed at preparing, retaining, and supporting principals while promoting their well-being.

Problem Statement

Newly appointed school principals face a complex transition with new and unfamiliar role responsibilities and accountability measures (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Research consistently indicates that the initial years of the principalship are critical, with early experiences often shaping long-term effectiveness and career longevity. Many novice principals frequently report feelings of isolation and insufficient preparation. Often, the new principals contemplate leaving and principals that have been in the role five to ten years increasingly contemplate leaving. Attrition rates for principals nationally are 18-20 percent (Levin & Bradley, 2019), suggesting that the demands of the role intensify decisions to leave (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019).

Despite the availability of formal training programs, a gap remains in sustained, individualized support tailored to real-world leadership challenges. Structured mentoring relationships have shown promise in addressing these challenges by supporting resilience, self-efficacy, and professional identity by attending to personal and professional development of the protégé (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). Trained mentors are those equipped with skills grounded in adult learning, leadership development, and positive psychology. As a result, mentors played a central role in shaping the quality of support novice principals received during the early years of the principalship.

This phenomenological study addressed the problem of insufficient sustained support for novice principals by examining the lived experiences of trained mentors who provide support. Examining mentors' lived experiences can inform the development of more effective mentoring practices that strengthen support for novice principals.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of mentors supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama. The study was informed by programmatic mentoring goals drawn from established mentoring theory, with the Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program (ANPMP) serving as a conceptual exemplar and not as a source of participants. By interviewing mentors working within a variety of formal mentoring programs across the state, the researcher described the phenomenon of how mentors' experience supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs, emphasizing the topics of personal and professional well-being, resilience and staying power. The central research question guiding this study was "What are the lived

experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama."

Research Questions

1. What are the lived experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama?
    a. How do trained mentors describe their role in supporting the professional and personal development of new principals?
    b. How do trained mentors perceive the role of *intent* and *involvement* in shaping effective mentoring relationships?
    c. How do mentors foster positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA) in their work with novice principals?

Advancing Scientific Knowledge

By integrating mentoring theory and positive psychology, the study advances scientific knowledge within structured mentoring programs focused on leadership development. Few empirical studies have examined mentor perspectives through an integrated application of Kram's dual career and psychosocial functions, Mertz's intent and involvement model, and Seligman's PERMA framework, particularly in relation to sustained support for novice principals. By examining how mentors interpret and enact these theoretical perspectives across multiple mentoring programs in Alabama, this study offers additional insight into the literature on mentoring by offering an evidenced-based understanding of how structured mentoring relationships support leadership capacity and emotional resilience.

Significance of the Study

This study contributed to the leadership mentoring literature by centering mentors' lived experiences supporting novice principals within structured mentoring contexts. The study provided insight into how mentors described their role in supporting growth in leadership practice and individual capacity, fostering well-being and leadership resilience, and cultivating relational and developmental dimensions of mentoring. By integrating these perspectives, the study offers a more comprehensive understanding of how structured mentoring supports novice principals' growth and sustainability in leadership roles.

In addition, this study presents a conceptual and practical model that may inform state and district-level leadership initiatives. Given that fewer than half of the U.S. states provide structured mentoring for novice principals, and even fewer offer sustained support, this study contributed to positive social change by informing policies and practices aimed at strengthening leadership capacity, stability, and retention in schools.

Rationale for Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was selected for this study because the purpose was to understand how mentors make meaning of their lived experiences while supporting novice principals. Qualitative inquiry was appropriate when the goal was to explore complex human experiences that cannot be adequately captured through numerical measurement or predetermined variables (Bhattacharya, 2017). The phenomenon under investigation involved relational work, emotional labor, and professional judgment, all of which require attention to participants' perspectives and interpretations.

Hermeneutic phenomenology was chosen as the research design because it emphasized interpretation rather than description alone. This approach allowed the researcher to examine how mentors understand and construct meaning from their experiences within structured mentoring contexts. Unlike descriptive phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges that understanding is shaped through context, language, and prior experience (Peoples, 2020). This orientation was particularly appropriate for studying mentoring relationships, which are embedded in organizational expectations, professional identities, and personal values.

The use of hermeneutic phenomenology aligned with the study's focus on mentors rather than program outcomes or effectiveness measures. By engaging mentors in reflective dialogue, the study sought to interpret how they perceive their roles, how they enacted intentional support, and how they navigated the personal and professional dimensions of mentoring novice principals. This methodology supported depth of understanding and allowed for rich interpretation of meaning across mentoring contexts within Alabama.

Qualitative hermeneutic phenomenology was therefore well suited to address the research questions guiding this study, as it provided a structured yet flexible approach for examining lived experiences. The methodology allowed the researcher to explore not only what mentors do, but how they interpret their work and why it holds significance in supporting leadership development and sustainability among novice principals.

Nature of Research Design

A hermeneutic phenomenological design was selected to explore mentors' lived experiences and the meanings they ascribe to their roles. This interpretive approach

acknowledged that understanding emerged through the participants' narratives and the researcher's interpretive engagement, which was essential for examining how mentors understand their role in supporting novice principals. A purposive criterion sampling was used to identify trained mentors' who are actively supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama. In depth semi structured interviews served as the primary data source, allowing mentors to reflect on their experiences of supporting novice principals. Detailed methodological procedures were provided in Chapter 3.

Philosophical Framework

This study was grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology, a philosophical orientation that emphasizes interpretation and meaning making within lived experience. The two main theoretical frameworks that can be used to frame a phenomenological study, are the philosophies of Edmund Husserl and Matin Heidegger (Peoples, 2020, p. 29). Husserl's philosophy is called transcendental phenomenology. He believed that to completely understand a phenomenon, the researcher must 'bracket' or intentionally suspend one's biases and judgments, and position themselves as a 'stranger in a strange land' so that the researcher can get to the essence of the phenomenon (Peoples, 2020). Heidegger's philosophy is called hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenology and utilizes the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle is described "as you are analyzing data, you break down the parts and then synthesize, and you look at the whole again" (Peoples, 2021, p. 33). Each time the researcher analyzed and synthesized a new understanding was developed.

Heidegger argued that researchers cannot fully set aside their own experiences. Instead, he proposed the hermeneutic circle, which is a process of moving back and forth between parts of the text and the whole, gradually deepening one's understanding. "Analysis is not a linear process; it is circular, or a better explanation is that it is spiral since circular would mean that one's understanding does not really change since a circle gets back to the same point" (Peoples, 2021, p. 33). This approach was well suited for exploring how mentors understand and interpret their experiences supporting newly appointed principals within structured mentoring contexts. Heidegger believed an individual could not truly bracket oneself, so a researcher would make personal biases know by writing them down before analyzing any data. He believed researchers could use their pre-understanding in an appropriate manner (Peoples, 2021). I agreed with Heidegger and found this perspective compelling because it acknowledged that my prior experiences inevitably shaped how I interpreted mentors' stories. Consistent with this philosophical stance, reflexive journaling was used throughout the research process to document assumptions and support transparent interpretation.

Conceptual Framework

The foundation for this study drew from the Mentoring for Well-being Model (Reames & Mullen, 2025), which was informed by the mentoring scholarship of Kathy Kram (1985), Norma Mertz (2004), and Martin Seligman's PERMA model grounded in positive psychology (2011). The ANPMP framework was presented as a state-specific exemplar of how mentoring theory, well-being, and Alabama leadership standards could

be organized within a structured mentoring model. It is not the conceptual framework for this study, nor does it define the participant pool.

Kram's (1985) mentoring theory identifies two primary functions within developmental relationships: career functions, which focus on skill development, sponsorship, and professional development, and psychosocial functions, which foster trust, emotional support, and identity formation. This dual focus highlighted the holistic nature of mentoring, addressing both the technical competencies and personal growth necessary for effective school leadership. Kram's later work on developmental networks further expands this view, emphasizing the value of multiple mentoring relationships, called mentoring constellations, over a single dyadic relationship.

Mertz's (2004) intent and involvement model builds on this foundation by clarifying distinctions between mentoring and other supportive relationships. Her seminal work examines two critical dimensions: intent, the purpose behind the relationship and involvement, the degree of emotional and time investment. High levels of both intent and involvement characterized successful mentoring relationships and provided guidance for developing mentor selection, training, and role expectations in structured programs, with ANPMP serving as one Alabama-based example.

Seligman's (2011) PERMA model introduces a complementary lens by conceptualizing well-being through five measurable elements:

- Positive Emotion- experiencing joy, contentment, and optimism.
- Engagement- deep involvement and "flow" in meaningful tasks
- Relationships- cultivating supportive, trusting social connections.
- Meaning- aligning actions with purpose and larger goals.

- Accomplishment- achieving milestones that build efficacy and fulfillment.

PERMA's emphasis on resilience and psychological fulfillment extends mentoring theory by addressing not only career and psychosocial development but also the well-being of novice principals in demanding leadership roles.

As shown in figure 1, the conceptual framework that guided this study, approaches mentoring holistically as a learning partnership where mentor and protégé establish values and goals. Learning partnerships and social connectedness serve as the outer rim of the mentoring model. Classic scholarship conceptualizes mentoring as a collaborative learning partnership, advocating for a process whereby both parties earnestly undertake mutual personal and professional development. This approach moves beyond hierarchical mentoring by emphasizing shared experiences and reflective practice, coinciding with mutual development. Learning partnerships create a foundation of mutual respect, empowerment, and shared inquiry that enables knowledge to be con-constructed and belief systems to become known. Social connectedness is considered a fundamental human need and critical component of psychological well-being that fosters psychological safety and belonging, critical conditions for authentic mentoring. Effective mentoring practices demonstrate that social connectedness is more than a social relationship. Such practices encompass quality and depth of connection as well as network belonging. Mentoring and social connectedness surround and support three intersecting domains: psychosocial development, career development, and mentoring processes. Well-being, centered in the middle, is viewed from the perspective of PERMA (Seligman, 2011). Psychosocial development encompasses aspects such as identity formation, emotional support, and

interpersonal connection, while career development includes sponsorship, exposure, and coaching. The Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program Framework (ALSDE, 2024b) was informed by the Mentoring for Wellbeing Model (Reames & Mullen, 2025) and adapted to specifically address the requirements of the *School Leadership and Mentoring Act* (2023-340). The inner circle of the framework: 'Mentoring for Personal and Professional Development' reframed Kram's dual mentoring functions of career and psychosocial functions. The outer arrows depicting 'Reflective Practice, Continuous Improvement, Inquiry, and Problem-Solving' applied Mertz's principles of intentional involvement through a rigorous mentor selection, training, and support process, ensuring sustained and authentic engagement between mentors and protégés. The inner red circle showing "Self-Understanding, wellness, and care of self and others" incorporated PERMA's well-being elements into reflective practices, goal setting, relationship-building activities, that intentionally fosters positive emotions, engagement, meaning, and accomplishment alongside leadership standards. Finally, the Alabama Standards for School Leadership were embedded within the ANPMP framework to align mentoring practices with the expectations of the *School Leadership and Mentoring Act* (2023-340) to ensure the intended goals of increasing the effectiveness of school leaders were met, ultimately improving school climate and academic outcomes.

Together, the Mentoring for Well-being Model, Kram's mentoring functions, Mertz's intent and involvement model, and Seligman's PERMA framework provided the conceptual lens for this study. The ANPMP framework was used only as an Alabama-based exemplar to illustrate how structured mentoring could be integrate leadership development, relational support, reflective practice, and well-being. This integration

aligned with the study's purpose of exploring the lived experiences and perspectives of trained mentors who support novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama.

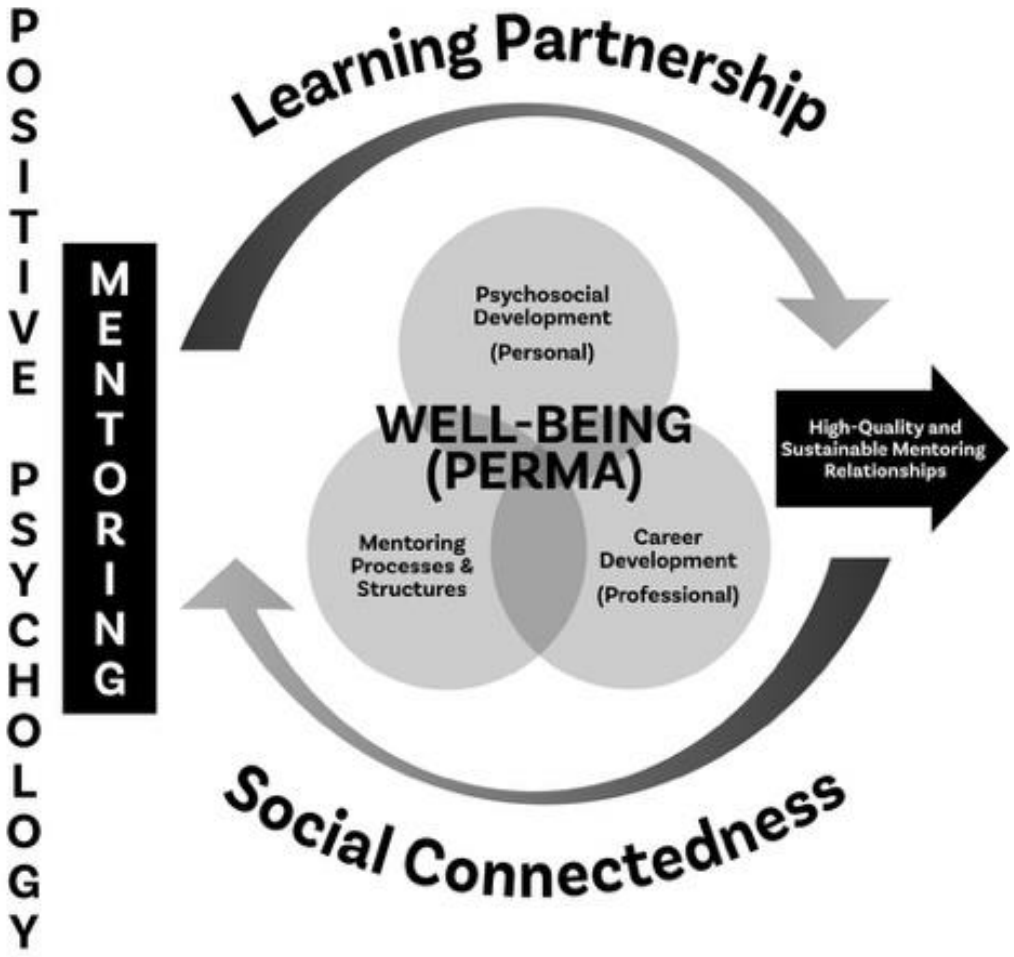

Figure 1. Circular model describing mentoring as a positive psychology, where Well-being (PERMA) at the center of learning partnerships and social connectedness, supported by psychosocial development, career development, and mentoring processes & structures.

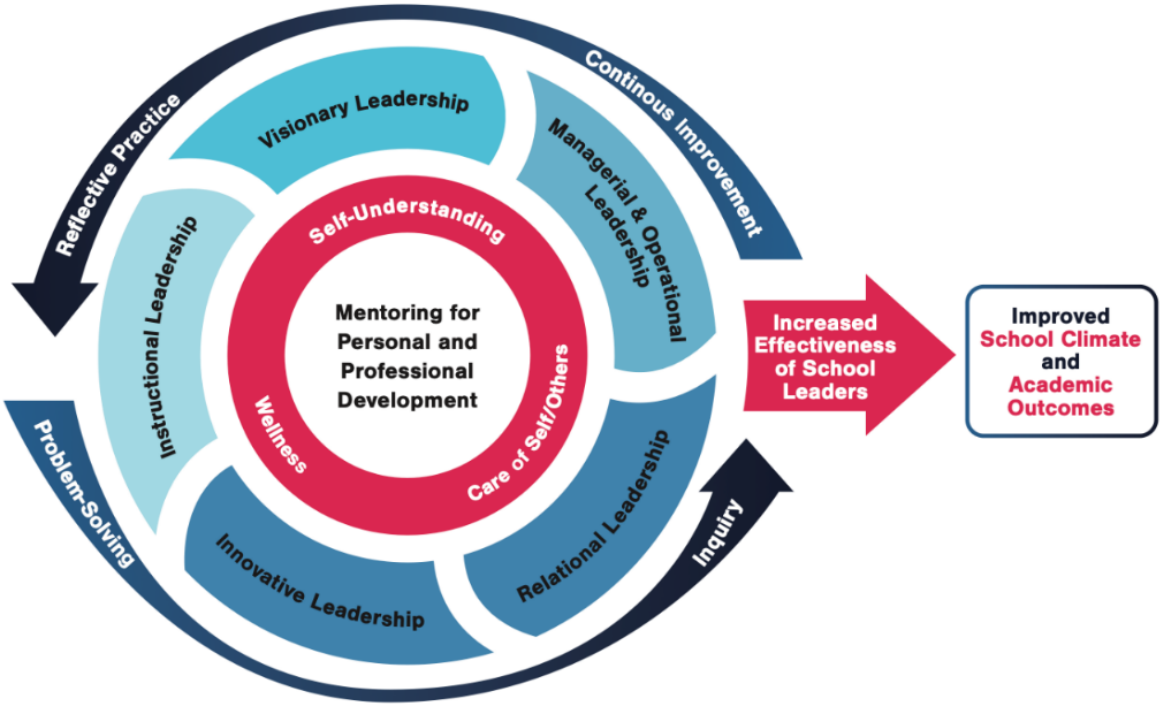

Figure 2. A circular model for the ANPMP framework: mentoring for personal and professional development surrounded by wellness, 5 domains of leadership, reflective practice, continuous improvement, and problem-solving to increase effectiveness of school leaders.

Definitions of Key Terminology

The following definitions include both general mentoring constructs and program-specific terms referenced for conceptual clarity and contextual grounding:

Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program (ANPMP)- A state developed structured mentoring model that illustrates how mentoring relationships may support the professional and personal development of newly appointed principals (ALSDE, 2024b).

Alabama Principal Leadership Development System (APLDS)- A statewide framework that outlines learning and support structures for school leadership development in Alabama.

Alabama Standards for School Leadership- The standards that define the nature, quality of work, and expectations that current research and best practices indicate that are critical to student learning and other positive school outcomes. The standards are organized around 5 Domains of Principal Effectiveness with a series of indicators which elaborate the practices that necessary to meet the Standard (ALSDE, 2024b).

Intent- The underlying purpose or motivation guiding a mentor's or protégé's engagement in the mentoring relationship (Mertz, 2004).

Involvement- The degree of time, attention, and emotional investment a mentor and protégé commit to the mentoring relationship over time (Mertz, 2004).

Leadership Capacity- A principal's ability to lead effectively through decision-making, problem-solving, and the application of leadership practices that influence school outcomes and organizational functioning, as defined by the American Psychological Association.

Leadership Identity- The evolving understanding of oneself as a leader, shaped through experience, reflection, and social interaction, which influences decision-making, values, and leadership practice.

Mentor- An experienced individual who intentionally enters a developmental relationship with a less experienced protégé, demonstrating both purposeful intent and active involvement (Kram, 1985; Mertz, 2004).

Mentoring- a purposeful developmental relationship between a more experienced mentor and a less experienced protégé, characterized by intentional involvement to support the protégé's career advancement and personal growth (Kram, 1985; Mertz, 2004; Ragins et al., 2007).

Novice principal- Used interchangeably with new principal to describe a principal that is serving in his or her first or second year as a school principal (ALSDE, 2024b).

Personal development- Ongoing learning and reflection that support emotional well-being, leadership identity, and confidence in novice principals (2023-340; Kram, 1985).

Professional development- Ongoing learning activities that strengthen leadership skills and support professional growth among novice principals (2023-340; Kram, 1985).

Protégé- A less experienced individual who intentionally participates in a developmental relationship with a more experienced mentor, demonstrating a commitment to active involvement and a shared purpose (Kram, 1985; Mertz, 2004).

Reciprocal Learning and Growth- A mutual developmental process within mentoring relationships in which both mentor and protégé engage in shared reflection, learning, and professional growth.

Relational Trust- The development of confidence, openness, and psychological safety within a mentoring relationship, built over time through consistent, authentic, and non-evaluative interactions.

Resilience- The process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands, as defined by the American Psychological Association.

Self-efficacy- An individual’s belief in their ability to successfully perform tasks and manage responsibilities associated with their role (Bandura, 1977).

Well-being- A multidimensional construct comprising five independently measurable elements: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Each element is pursued for its own intrinsic value, contributes uniquely to an individual's sense of flourishing, and, when combined, forms the overall construct of well-being (Seligman, 2011).

Assumptions and Delimitations

This study was guided by several assumptions. First it was assumed that participants would provide honest, thoughtful, and reflective responses about their lived experiences as mentors supporting novice principals. Second, it was assumed that participants had sufficient mentoring experience to describe the relational, professional, and developmental dimensions of their work. Third, it was assumed that the interview process would allow participants to share meaningful accounts of their experiences in ways that supported interpretation through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach.

This study was delimited to trained mentors who were supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama. The study focused on mentors' lived experiences rather than novice principals' perspectives, program evaluation, or measurable program outcomes. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Although the Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program served as a conceptual exemplar in the study, the population was not drawn from that program, but other structured mentoring contexts.

Summary

This chapter presented the background, purpose, and significance of the study, as well as research questions, frameworks, and methodology guiding this investigation. Collectively, these components established the foundation for understanding how trained mentors supported the personal and professional development of newly appointed principals within structured mentoring contexts. Chapter 2 provided a comprehensive review of literature addressing the challenges faced by newly appointed principals, mentoring frameworks, leadership development, and well-being.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Newly appointed principals, as well as those in their first five to ten years of service, are leaving or contemplate leaving the profession at an alarming rate of 18-20 percent (Levin & Bradley, 2019). This turnover not only disrupts school improvement initiatives but also contributes to declining faculty morale, fragmented instructional continuity, and adverse effects on student outcomes (Bastian & Fuller, 2023; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). This leadership instability is further compounded by teacher attrition. Nearly 50 percent of Alabama's first-time teachers leave the classroom within three years (ACES, 2022), compared to a national attrition rate of 37 percent (Dorn, 2024). High teacher turnover intensifies the demands placed on novice principals, who must continually recruit, mentor, and stabilize faculty while simultaneously navigating their own transition into leadership. Multiple studies attribute this attrition trend to the increased challenges of school leadership, heightened accountability pressures, and inadequate preparation for the multifaceted responsibilities of the principalship (Mahfouz, 2020; Stephenson & Bauer, 2010). Many new principals also describe feeling isolated. Without broader structured mentoring systems, this sense of being 'on their own' undermines both their resilience and their likelihood of staying in the profession. (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Spillane & Lee, 2014). This literature review examines scholarship related to principal attrition, evolving leadership demands, and structured mentoring to situate this study within existing research and identify gaps addressed by the present inquiry.

Over the past two decades, the principal's position has shifted from primarily managerial responsibilities to a broader role that includes instructional leadership,

school culture development, and community engagement (Abbamont, 2020; ALSDE, 2025). Principals are now tasked with implementing rigorous curricula, fostering evidence-based teaching practices, navigating complex operational demands, and cultivating inclusive environments that address the social-emotional needs of diverse student populations (Croy, 2024; Day et al., 2016). These evolving expectations, coupled with state mandates, such as Alabama's Literacy and Numeracy Acts, intensify pressures on novice principals to produce measurable results rapidly, often without gradual acclimation or formal structured mentoring programs. In Alabama specifically, principal turnover mirrors national trends, with novice principals reporting increased stress from constantly monitoring instructional practices and strategies, managing limited resources, and ensuring student outcomes meet legislative expectations (ALSDE, 2025), while ensuring a positive school climate. The combination of teacher shortages and principal attrition creates a cycle of instability that places many schools, especially those with high-poverty and high percentages of students of color, at risk for diminished instructional quality and fractured leadership continuity (Stephenson & Bauer, 2010).

In response to these challenges, mentoring has emerged as a promising intervention for supporting novice principals. Decades of research indicate that structured mentoring can foster professional growth and reduce burnout among novice principals, yet far less is known about how mentors experience and enact this support (Grissom et al., 2021; Kram, 1985; Searby & Brondyk, 2007). In addition, mentoring also indirectly impacts how satisfied teachers are with their working conditions and contributes to improved student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2020). However, the

design and implementation of effective state-sponsored mentoring programs remain varied across states, with significant debate regarding program structure, duration, mentor training, and alignment with leadership standards (Ongek, 2016). Few empirical studies have examined structured principal mentoring programs through mentors' perspectives, particularly across multiple formal mentoring contexts in Alabama. Accordingly, this chapter begins with the theoretical foundation and conceptual framework guiding the study, followed by literature on challenges faced by newly appointed principals, mentoring as a structured support mechanism for leadership development, theoretical and conceptual constructs informing structured principal mentoring, the mentor's role and perspective, and the Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program as an exemplar of structured mentoring in Alabama.

Theoretical Foundation and Conceptual Framework

This literature review is guided by established mentoring theory and positive psychology, which together inform the Mentoring for Well-being Model (Reames & Mullen, 2025) used as the conceptual framework for this study. The model integrates Kram's (1985) career and psychosocial mentoring functions, Mertz's (2004) concepts of intent and involvement, and Seligman's (2011) PERMA framework of well-being. Together these perspectives provide a multidimensional lens for understanding mentoring as a relational, developmental, and sustaining process that supports novice principals' professional growth, personal development, and well-being.

The Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program (ANPMP) serves as a conceptual exemplar that illustrates how structured mentoring may be operationalized within a state-level mentoring framework. In this study, the program is not the

conceptual framework, study population, or data source. Rather, it provides an example of how structured mentoring can reflect broader principles of career development, psychosocial support, intentional involvement, social connectedness, and well-being. The Mentoring for Well-being Model provides the broader conceptual leans for interpreting the lived experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals across structured mentoring programs in Alabama.

Following this discussion of the study's theoretical foundation and conceptual framework, the review turns to the challenges faced by newly appointed principals and the need for structured mentoring support during the transition into school leadership.

Challenges Faced by Newly Appointed Principals

Newly appointed school principals often face one of the most demanding shifts in educational leadership as they move from positions such as classroom teacher, instructional coach, or assistant principal into a role that requires immediate and complex decision-making authority (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Rather than easing into leadership gradually, many are thrust into situations where accountability for school outcomes is immediate, with little time for adjustment or socialization into the role (Spillane & Lee, 2014). The importance of this adjustment is magnified by research showing that leadership, second only to classroom teaching, profoundly shapes student achievement through creating shared visions, shaping school culture, strengthening instructional practices, and fostering collaborative learning communities (Day et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020). Yet, despite the significance of their role, novice principals are frequently expected to produce visible results quickly, regardless of the school's current academic performance and culture, or the leader's prior experience

(Bartanen et al., 2019). These mounting pressures are quite different from the expectations placed on principals in the past.

The role of the principal has evolved dramatically over the past two decades. Historically this position was more managerial, focusing on discipline, budgets, and daily operations (Abbamont, 2020). The position now extends beyond managerial responsibilities to include instructional leadership, school improvement, and community engagement (ALSDE, 2025). These expanded expectations also require principals to cultivate inclusive school cultures that support diverse student needs. Principals are charged with ensuring the implementation of rigorous curricula, promotion of evidence-based instructional strategies, and leading faculty through continuous professional development, all while navigating increasingly complex operational and stakeholder demands. In Alabama, these expectations are intensified by state mandates such as the Literacy and Numeracy Acts, which require principals to demonstrate measurable student growth within tight timelines (Croy, 2024), shaping the broader leadership context in which novice principals operate. For newly appointed principals, meeting these expanded responsibilities often means balancing limited financial resources against long-term instructional priorities, a challenge compounded by inadequate preparation and competing demands of their time.

The transition into the principalship is not only operationally demanding but also emotionally taxing. New principals frequently report feelings of isolation, inadequacy, and decision fatigue as they attempt to meet the relentless demands of the role (Mahfouz, 2020). National attrition rates of approximately 18-20 percent indicate that principals leave their position annually, with higher turnover rates disproportionately

concentrated in high-poverty, high-need schools (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019; Levin & Bradley, 2019). Beyond personal consequences for leaders, principal attrition disrupts school improvement efforts, undermines faculty morale, and negatively impacts student achievement, particularly in schools already facing systemic challenges (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Alabama reflects these broader leadership trends and faces additional challenges from teacher attrition, with nearly fifty percent of first-time teachers leaving the classroom within three years, compared to the national average of thirty-seven percent (ACES, 2022; Dorn, 2024). Behind these numbers are school communities that lose not only leaders and teachers, but also stability and trust, a pattern consistently noted in the leadership attrition literature (Levin & Bradley, 2019; Spillane & Lee, 2014). While Alabama does not formally report principal attrition rates, evidence suggests the state mirrors national patterns of leadership turnover, which, alongside high teacher attrition, creates instability across districts and heightens the challenge of sustaining improvement efforts (Reames, 2025).

Burnout has emerged as one of the most critical factors contributing to principal attrition and undermining leadership sustainability. (Maslach & Leiter, 2016) define burnout as “a psychological syndrome emerging from prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job,” a phenomenon particularly prevalent among school leaders, working in emotionally demanding environments (DeMatthews et al., 2021). For principals, these stressors often stem from long hours, heavy administrative workloads, and the emotional toll of mediating between district expectations and school-level realities. Because principals are responsible for the well-being of students, faculty, staff, and families, they engage in what Maslach terms ‘people work’, which frequently results

in emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and diminished personal efficacy (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Compounding these demands, principals are increasingly exposed to secondary trauma, which is emotional distress arising from hearing about the traumatic experiences of others. This phenomenon is intensified by complex school issues, such as child abuse cases, family instability, and faculty emergencies (DeMatthews et al., 2023).

For novice principals, these stressors are magnified by insufficient preparation in critical areas such as crisis management, financial oversight, conflict resolution, and self-care (Bastian & Fuller, 2023). The lack of systemic supports often leaves novice principals isolated, navigating competing demands without access to trusted advisors or external professional networks. The first two or three years of the principalship are especially formative, shaping long-term leadership confidence, resilience, and retention (Tekir, 2021). Without targeted and sustained support during this period, novice principals face an increased risk of early attrition, perpetuating cycles of instability within schools and districts.

Given the cumulative demands associated with the early years of the principalship, scholars have increasingly turned to mentoring as a means of providing sustained support. While formal training programs exist, they often fail to provide sustained, individualized support necessary to help novice principals navigate these multifaceted challenges. Research consistently highlights structured mentoring as an effective strategy for fostering resilience, strengthening self-efficacy, and supporting the development of a confident leadership identity (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018; Searby & Brondyk, 2007). Trained mentors, equipped with knowledge of adult learning principles,

leadership development, and psychological support, can provide essential guidance, affirmation, and modeling during the vulnerable early years of the principalship (Searby & Brondyk, 2007). As leadership pressures intensify, structured mentoring emerges not only as a valuable support measure, but as a strategic intervention aimed at increasing principal retention, improving school culture, and promoting student success.

Collectively, this literature highlights the need for intentional and structured support systems that promote resilience and sustainability in school leadership (Leithwood et al., 2020). These challenges underscore the relevance of mentoring frameworks that attend to both professional development and psychological support, providing a foundation for examining mentoring through theoretical lenses in this chapter.

Mentoring as a Structured Support Mechanism for Leadership Development

Mentoring is a well-established concept with origins traced to an ancient archetype found in Homer's Greek epic, *The Odyssey.* In this epic, Mentor serves as a wise and faithful advisor entrusted with the responsibility of guiding, teaching, and protecting Odysseus's son, Telemachus, during Odysseus's prolonged absence. This enduring archetype has shaped cultural understandings of mentoring as a relationship grounded in wisdom, guidance, and trust (Ragins et al., 2007).

Modern mentoring research began to formalize in the late twentieth century, particularly through Kathy Kram's (1985) seminal work, *Mentoring at Work*. Kram's research identified two core mentoring functions: career functions (e.g., skill development, sponsorship, exposure) and psychosocial functions (e.g., trust-building, emotional support, identity development), laying the foundation for contemporary

mentoring programs (Kram, 1985). These dual functions have become foundational in understanding how mentoring simultaneously supports professional skill acquisition and personal well-being, concepts central to principal training and retention. Kram's work catalyzed decades of inquiry into the meaning, structure, and outcomes of mentoring relationships across multiple sectors, including education (Ragins et al., 2007). At the time of Kram's early studies, most leadership environments, including schools, were predominantly male and hierarchical, and mentoring practices were largely informal, unstructured, and rarely guided by research-based principles (Ragins et al., 2007). Over the past four decades, shifts in organizational diversity, evolving leadership expectations, and rapid technology change have driven a transformation in formalized and structured mentoring approaches.

Building on Kram's foundation, Norma Mertz (2004) advanced mentoring theory by clarifying distinctions between mentoring and related supportive relationships. Her intent and involvement model provides two critical variables for evaluating mentoring depth: the purpose underlying the relationship (intent) and the degree of emotional and time investment (involvement). High-intent, high-involvement relationships yield the greatest developmental benefits, fostering authentic connections and sustained support. Mertz's framework highlights that only when mentoring relationships are intentionally formed and deeply invested do protégés experience transformative outcomes such as greater self-efficacy, trust, and professional growth.

Recent studies confirm that the first year of the principalship is critical in shaping a leader's long-term effectiveness, confidence, and resilience. Many novice principals report feelings of isolation, unpreparedness, and being overwhelmed by expectations

related to instructional leadership, student achievement, and operational management (Tekir, 2021). Structured mentoring programs can provide the affirmation, guidance, and professional community needed to help novice principals navigate these early career challenges. When such support is absent, these experiences often contribute to emotional strain and decisions to exit the profession, which destabilize schools and hinder sustained improvement efforts (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

The literature identifies effective mentoring programs as those characterized by intentional structure, clear goals, and alignment with the development needs of novice principals (Boswell, 2020). These programs are designed to support leadership skill development, strengthen self-efficacy, and foster professional resilience during the early stages of the principalship. When mentoring is purposefully structured, it provides a consistent and reliable source of support that compliments formal leadership preparation and addresses the multifaceted demands faced by newly appointed principals.

Anchoring these supports in well-established theoretical and conceptual foundations further strengthens their relevance. The Mentoring for Well-being Model integrates Kram's (1985) career and psychosocial mentoring functions, Mertz's (2004) concepts of intent and involvement, and Seligman's (2011) PERMA framework, to understand mentoring as a relational, developmental, and sustaining process. Kram's mentoring functions emphasize the importance of addressing both skill development and emotional support within mentoring relationships, while Mertz's model illustrates the depth of commitment and authenticity required for mentoring to be meaningful. When considered alongside PERMA- informed principles of well-being, these constructs

provide a multidimensional lens for understanding how mentors support novice principals' personal and professional growth. By fostering optimism, authentic connections, purpose, and goal achievement, mentors can help novice principals not only adapt to leadership challenges but also thrive in their roles.

State-level mentoring frameworks, such as the Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program, illustrate how these theoretical and conceptual constructs may be operationalized within structured mentoring contexts (ALSDE, 2024b). By embedding attention to professional development and well-being within mentoring practices, programs modeled on these principles position mentoring not as a supplementary support, but as a strategic investment in cultivating effective and sustainable school leadership.

Theoretical and Conceptual Constructs Informing Structured Principal Mentoring

Given the increasing challenges faced by newly appointed principals and the growing reliance on mentoring as a strategic response, there is a need for a research-based approach to mentoring design and practice. This study was guided by the Mentoring for Well-being Model, which integrates three complementary theoretical lenses: Kathy Kram's (1985) dual functions of career and psychosocial support, Norma Mertz's (2004) intent and involvement model, and Martin Seligman's PERMA (2011) model of positive psychology. Together, these constructs provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how mentoring relationships support both leadership development and the psychological well-being of novice principals.

Building upon these foundational theories, state-level mentoring frameworks have sought to operationalize mentoring research within structured contexts. One such

example is the Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program (ANPMP), which translates mentoring theory into practice through five mentoring standards: connection, confidence, competence, core values, and commitment. As a conceptual exemplar, the ANPMP illustrates how principles of adult learning, leadership development, and psychosocial support may be organized to meet the personal and professional needs of novice school leaders. From this perspective, state-level frameworks illustrate how mentoring theory may be applied to strengthen leadership capacity, resilience, and long-term retention without delimiting the context of this study.

Kram: Mentoring Functions

Kathy Kram (1985) conceptualized mentoring as a developmental relationship between a more experienced individual (mentor) and a less experienced individual (protégé) designed to foster the protégé's personal and professional growth embedded in the career context. Her seminal work identified two primary functions of mentoring: career functions and psychosocial functions. Career functions include behaviors that support the protégé in advancement within the organization, such as sponsorship, coaching, exposure, and challenging assignments. Psychosocial functions emphasize emotional support, trust, and the development of professional identity and self-efficacy (Ragins et al., 2007). Together, these functions highlight that mentoring extends beyond technical skill development to include relational and identity-based dimensions of leadership.

Kram's later scholarship expanded this model to include the concept of developmental networks, often referred to as mentoring constellations. This perspective acknowledges that a single mentor may not meet all a protégé's developmental needs

across time. Instead, individuals benefit from multiple mentoring relationships that provide diverse forms of guidance, expertise, and support (Higgins & Kram, 2001). These networks are dynamic and evolve alongside the protégé's career trajectory, offering broader access to developmental resources and perspectives.

By emphasizing both career-oriented guidance and psychosocial support, her seminal work offers a balanced approach to developing new leaders' organizational skills while nurturing their emotional well-being and leadership identity. Conceptually, professional development aligns with Kram's career functions and focuses on strengthening leadership capacity in areas such as instructional leadership, operational management, and strategic decision-making. Personal development parallels psychosocial functions and centers on well-being, emotional regulation, and leadership identity (Reames & Mullen, 2025). This reframing illustrates how mentoring theory may be applied within structured systems to provide comprehensive support for novice principals without restricting analysis to a single program context.

By integrating Kram's dual function framework, structured mentoring models emphasize both skill development and relational support. This dual emphasis enables novice principals to address the immediate operational and managerial demands of their role while also cultivating resilience and sustained engagement, which are critical factors in leadership longevity and effectiveness. Building on this foundation, Mertz (2004) further clarified what distinguishes mentoring from other supportive relationships by shifting from what mentors do to how purposefully and deeply they engage with protégés through intent and involvement.

Mertz: Mentoring's Intent and Involvement

Building on Kram's conceptualization of mentoring as both career and psychosocial support process, Norma Mertz (2004) further distinguishes mentoring from other professional support relationships by introducing two defining variables: intent and involvement. These variables provide a framework for differentiating mentoring based on the purpose of the relationship and the depth of engagement between mentor and protégé. Intent refers to the shared purpose, goals, and values that guide entry into the mentoring relationship. Involvement reflects the degree of physical, emotional, and temporal investment each participant contributes, as well as the intensity or interaction over time (Mertz, 2004). Together, these dimensions clarify why mentoring relationships differ fundamentally from coaching, advising or supervision, which are often task focused, time limited, or evaluative in nature.

Mertz's research emphasizes that mentoring relationships characterized by high intent and high involvement are more likely to be authentic, sustained, and developmentally impactful. Such relationships are grounded in trust and mutual commitment, allowing mentors to provide guidance that extends beyond technical problem solving to include emotional support and identity development. When mentors engage purposefully and with sustained involvement, protégés report increased self-efficacy and greater confidence in navigating complex professional challenges (Mertz, 2004). This relational depth positions mentoring as a holistic partnership that supports both professional competence and personal growth.

Conceptually, structured mentoring frameworks often draw on Mertz's model to guide mentor selection, preparation, and role expectations. State level mentoring

frameworks, such as the ANPMP, illustrate how intent and involvement may be embedded into mentoring standards that emphasize purposeful connection, sustained engagement, and relational trust. When viewed as an exemplar, such frameworks demonstrate how mentoring theory can be operationalized to support both the technical and psychosocial dimensions of novice principal development without delimiting the context of inquiry.

Together, Kram's dual functions and Mertz's intent and involvement model underscore that mentoring must be both functionally supportive and intentionally relational. While Kram explains what mentoring provides, Mertz clarifies how mentoring relationships achieve depth and impact. Building on this relational foundation, Seligman's PERMA model further extends the discussion by introducing a psychological lens that highlights how mentors can foster resilience, optimism, and long-term well-being in novice principals.

Seligman's PERMA Model and Mentor Support for Novice Principals

Martin Seligman's work in positive psychology advanced a strengths-based approach to understanding human flourishing and well-being, with particular attention to resilience and optimism (Seligman, 2011). This work culminated in the PERMA model, which identifies five domains of well-being: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). PERMA offers a psychological lens for examining mentoring relationships that sustain professional growth and leadership resilience over time.

The relevance of PERMA to novice principal mentoring is evident in persistent patterns of principal attrition, which are frequently linked to burnout and emotional

exhaustion during the early years of leadership (Levin & Bradley, 2019; Wheeler, 2024). Newly appointed principals often encounter competing instructional, managerial, and relational demands while simultaneously developing their leadership identity. While Kram's (1985) dual mentoring functions address career and psychosocial support and Mertz's (Mertz, 2004) intent and involvement model explains relational depth, PERMA extends these frameworks further by explicitly centering psychological well-being as foundational to leadership sustainability.

Seligman's model identifies five domains that contribute to well-being and resilience in professional contexts. Positive emotion refers to experiences of joy, satisfaction, and optimism, support psychological safety and adaptive coping. Engagement involves deep involvement in meaningful work, often described as a state of flow that enhances motivation and persistence. Relationships emphasize the importance of supportive, trusting social connections, which, within mentoring relationships, buffer stress and reduce isolation. Meaning reflects a sense of purpose derived from aligning professional work with broader goals, such as improving student outcomes and strengthening school communities. Accomplishment involves goal attainment and progress, reenforcing self-efficacy and confidence in one's leadership capacity. Each element contributes independently to well-being and can be intentionally supported through mentoring interactions (Seligman, 2011). When mentors attend to well-being alongside professional development, mentoring relationships move beyond technical problem solving to support sustained engagement and adaptability in demanding leadership roles (Adair & Reames, 2025).

State-level mentoring frameworks, such as the ANPMP, illustrate how well-being concepts may be integrated into structured mentoring contexts. When viewed as an exemplar, such frameworks demonstrate how mentoring practices can intentionally incorporate reflection, goal setting, and relational support to foster positive emotion, meaning, and accomplishment while strengthening leadership competence. Conceptually, the Mentoring for Well-being Model integrates Kram's mentoring functions, Mertz's intent and involvement model, and Seligman's PERMA framework into a coherent structure that supports leadership capacity, resilience, social connectedness, and retention. Because structured mentoring depends not only on program design but also how mentors interpret and enact their role, the next section examines the mentor's role and perspective within principal mentoring relationships.

The Mentor's Role and Perspective

Understanding the mentor's perspective is essential to capturing the full dynamics and outcomes of effective mentoring relationships in educational leadership. While much of the literature documents the benefits of mentoring for novice school leaders, including improved retention, confidence, and instructional capacity (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018; Searby & Brondyk, 2007), scholars increasingly emphasize that these outcomes are shaped by mentors' own experiences, motivations, and approaches to the role. Mentoring extends beyond the transmission of knowledge or technical skills, to include the cultivation of professional identity, the modeling of ethical leadership, and the provision of emotional and strategic support during early stages of leadership transition (Kram, 1985; Lunsford, 2021). This section examines mentors' roles, motivations, identity, and challenges, as well as reciprocal learning processes, drawing

on mentoring theory and positive psychology to illuminate mentors' contributions to leadership development and sustainability.

Mentors often serve as key agents of professional socialization, particularly as newly appointed principals learn to navigate organizational culture, stakeholder expectations, and the emotional demands of school leadership (Mertz, 2004; Searby, 2014). The motivation to become a mentor often stems from a desire to cultivate long-lasting relationships based on trust, mutual respect, and growth. Effective mentors provide honest feedback, encourage reflective dialogue, and create safe spaces that support protégés' leadership learning (Brewer, 2012). Such relationships, however, demand considerable time and emotional investment from both the mentor and protégé.

Mertz's (2004) intent and involvement model provides a useful lens for understanding the depth of the mentor's role. According to this framework, mentoring is distinguished from other forms of professional support by the presence of a shared purpose and a high level of emotional and temporal commitment. At the higher levels of intent and involvement, mentors assume multifaceted roles that may include coaching, advising, and emotional support, allowing them to respond flexibly to protégés' evolving needs. This relational depth enables mentors to tailor their guidance based on a rich understanding of the protégé's strengths, challenges, and leadership environment.

The literature indicates that structured mentoring frameworks often seek to prepare mentors for these complex responsibilities by emphasizing relational skill development, reflective practice, ethical leadership and strategies for fostering resilience and well-being (Allen et al., 2005; Bertrand et al., 2018; Ensher & Murphy, 2005; Hayes, 2019). In practice, these frameworks highlight the importance of mentor

preparation, ongoing professional learning, and opportunities for collaborative reflection among mentors, further strengthening program consistency, effectiveness, and responsiveness to the protégé. Across state and district initiatives mentors are commonly described as experienced school leaders with demonstrated instructional expertise, credibility among peers, and the capacity to support novice leaders through authentic, experience-based guidance (ALSDE, 2024b).

Some mentoring frameworks also recognize the value of engaging experienced or recently retired school leaders as mentors, allowing them to contribute to the profession while drawing on extensive leadership experience (Connery & Frick, 2021). Within such relationships, mentoring is often reciprocal. Mentors report professional renewal through reflection, dialogue, and exposure to new perspectives, which can strengthen their own leadership identity and sense of purpose (Daresh & Playko, 1990; Lunsford, 2021). These reciprocal processes underscore mentoring as a developmental experience for both participants, rather than a one-directional transfer of expertise.

Despite its benefits, mentoring is not without challenges. Common barriers include scheduling conflicts inherent to school leadership roles (Gumus, 2019), limited readiness or engagement on the part of protégés (Searby, 2020), mismatched expectations, and insufficient mentor preparation (Swaminathan & Reed, 2020). The literature suggests that mentoring frameworks can mitigate these challenges by emphasizing careful mentor selection, shared expectations, ongoing learning opportunities, and mechanisms for reflection and feedback that support relationship quality and sustainability.

Positive psychology further contextualizes the mentor's role by highlighting those emotional and psychological dimensions of leadership development. Seligman's PERMA model emphasizes positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment as key contributors to well-being (Seligman, 2011). When applied to mentoring, these elements complement Kram's career and psychosocial functions and Mertz's intent and involvement model by foregrounding resilience and sustained engagement. Through affirmation, meaningful leadership work, relational trust, purpose-driven reflection, and goal attainment, mentors can support protégés in managing stress, countering isolation, and maintaining commitment to leadership in demanding environments (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

These frameworks suggest integrating these theoretical insights by organizing mentoring practices around core goals, such as connection, confidence, competence, core values, and commitment documented in the Alabama New Principals Mentoring Program (ANPMP), which is used as an exemplar (ALSDE, 2024b). These goals translate mentoring theory into coherent practices that address both leadership development and personal resilience. By aligning relational depth, purposeful engagement, and attention to well-being, such frameworks position mentoring as a holistic support system that contributes to leadership retention and long-term effectiveness without delimiting participation to a single program context.

Key Domains of Leadership and Mentoring Support

For newly appointed principals to develop into effective and sustainable leaders, mentoring must align with established leadership expectations articulated in both state and national leadership frameworks. Nationally, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure

Consortium standards, now known as the Professional Standards for Educational Leadership (PSEL), outline core leadership expectations related to vision, culture, management, collaboration, and ethical practice. These standards function not only as benchmarks for leadership effectiveness but also ethical and professional reference points that guide leadership practice and evaluation over time.

In Alabama, leadership expectations were further refined through the enactment of the *School Principal Leadership and Mentoring Act* (2023-340), which articulates the Standards for School Leadership across five domains: visionary, instructional, managerial/operational, relational, and innovative leadership. These domains reflect national leadership standards while responding to the specific contextual demands faced by school leaders in the state. Within the literature, structured mentoring is frequently described as a mechanism through which leadership standards can be translated into practice, particularly for novice principals navigating the transition into complex leadership roles.

Each leadership domain supported through mentoring can be understood as an intersection of mentoring theory and leadership practice. Kram's (1985) career and psychosocial functions provide a foundation for distinguishing between skill development and relational support. Mertz's (2004) intent and involvement model clarifies the depth and purpose of mentoring relationships, while Seligman's PERMA framework (2011) emphasizes the psychological conditions necessary for leadership sustainability. Within the Mentoring for Well-being Model (Reames & Mullen, 2025), these constructs offer a holistic lens doe examining how mentoring supports

professional competence, personal resilience, social connectedness, and leadership sustainability.

Visionary leadership is supported through mentoring that helps novice principals articulate shared goals, interpret student and school data, and connect daily leadership decisions to broader purposes. Mentors often facilitate reflective conversations that foster meaning and purpose, aligning with PERMA's emphasis on meaning while reinforcing high-intent mentoring relationships. This support strengthens principals' confidence in leading change and sustaining improvement efforts.

Instructional leadership mentoring focuses on developing principals' capacity to guide teaching and learning through data-informed decision making, professional learning, and instructional coherence. These mentoring interactions align closely with Kram's career functions by emphasizing skill development and feedback while also supporting engagement and accomplishment as principals observe tangible improvements in instructional practice.

Managerial and operational leadership presents distinct challenges for novice principals, particularly in areas related to scheduling, resource allocation, and personal management. Mentoring in this domain often involves collaborative problem solving and real-time guidance, reinforcing a sense of accomplishment and efficacy. Such support addresses both the technical demands of leadership and the emotional strain associated with managing complex school systems.

Relational leadership is central to mentoring relationships themselves. Through trust-building, communication, and modeling, mentors support principals in cultivating positive school cultures and productive relationships with faculty, families, and

community stakeholders. This domain aligns strongly with PERMA's relational component and with Mertz's emphasis on sustained involvement, helping mitigate isolation and stress commonly experienced by new principals.

Innovative leadership is fostered when mentors encourage reflective practice, inquiry, and continuous learning. Through guided reflection and exploration of new approaches, principals develop engagement and adaptability, key components of leadership resilience. Mentoring that supports innovation reinforces long-term commitment by helping principals see themselves as evolving leaders rather than static role holders.

State-level frameworks, such as the Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program, provide an illustrative example of how leadership domains and mentoring theory may be conceptually aligned. As an exemplar, the framework organizes mentoring practice around goals related to connection, confidence, competence, core values, and commitment (ALSDE, 2024b). These goals align with Mentoring for Well-being Model by reflecting attention to career development, psychosocial support, intentional involvement, social connectedness, and well-being, offering a structured way to link leadership development with personal sustainability without delimiting the scope of inquiry to a single program.

Within the literature, reflective self-assessment is frequently identified as a mechanism through which mentoring supports leadership growth. Guided reflection prompts focused on current capacity, desired growth, and pathways forward anchor mentoring conversations and align leadership development with individual needs. These reflective practices support skill acquisition while reinforcing engagement, meaning, and

accomplishment, which are critical for mitigating burnout and sustaining leadership over time.

Taken together, the integration of leadership domains with mentoring theory illustrates how structured mentoring extends beyond procedural guidance to address the complex professional and emotional dimensions of principal preparation. By aligning leadership expectations with relational support and psychological well-being, mentoring emerges as a strategic approach to strengthening leadership capacity, resilience, and longevity in the principalship.

Table 1. Framework mapping, Kram, Mertz, PERMA, illustrative mentoring goals & leadership domains

Leadership Domains	Kram's Mentoring Functions (1985)	Mertz's Intent and Involvement (2004)	PERMA Elements (Seligman, 2011)	Illustrative Mentoring Goals*
Visionary Leadership	Career support through goal clarification and strategic guidance	High intent focused on vision coherence	Meaning	Connection; Core Values
Instructional Leadership	Career support through skill development and feedback	Moderate-to-high intent centered on instructional growth	Engagement; Accomplishment	Competence; Confidence
Managerial/ Operational Leadership	Career support through organizational navigation and problem solving	High involvement addressing complex leadership demands	Accomplishment; Positive Emotion	Competence; Commitment
Relational Leadership	Psychosocial support through trust, role modeling, and affirmation	High intent and involvement emphasizing rational depth	Relationships; Positive Emotion	Connection; Confidence
Innovative Leadership	Integrated career and psychosocial support through reflection and learning	Sustained involvement supporting adaptive practice	Engagement; Meaning	Commitment; Core Values

*Illustrative mentoring goals reflect conceptual alignment with the Mentoring for Well-being Model, including leadership development, relational support, and well-being, and are presented as an exemplar rather than as participant-based program features.

Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program: An Exemplar of Structured Mentoring

Fewer than half of the U.S. states currently provide state-sponsored, mentoring for newly appointed school leaders. Alabama joined this limited group with the passage of the *School Leadership and Mentoring Act (2023-340)*, which established the Alabama Principal Leadership Development System (APLDS) and the Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program (ANPMP) for novice principals. At the time of its enactment, Alabama became one of only six states offering a two-year, state-supported mentoring model intended to strengthen leadership development, promote school stability, and support long-term retention (Reames, 2025). Figure 2 illustrates the Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program framework, which is presented here as a conceptual exemplar to demonstrate how mentoring theory, leadership standards, and well-being constructs many be integrated within a structured mentoring model. The framework is discussed as an exemplar because it was informed by the Mentoring for Well-being Model and illustrates how the model's emphasis on leadership development, psychosocial support, intentional mentoring structures, social connectedness, and well-being may be operationalized within a structured mentoring program.

The urgency of this legislation reflects broader workforce challenges within the state. Alabama continues to experience significant teacher shortages and elevated levels of educator stress burnout, with nearly half of first-time teachers leave the classroom within three years, a rate notably higher than the national average (ACES, 2022; Dorn, 2024; Matlach, 2024; Review, 2025). Although principal attrition is not

formally tracked at the state level, existing evidence suggests that leadership instability is most pronounced in high-need districts, underscoring the importance of strengthening leadership pipelines and providing structured support during the early years of the principalship (ALSDE, 2025)

The ANPMP mentoring framework reflects the intent of the *School Leadership and Mentoring Act* (2023-340), by integrating statutory language, mentoring scholarship, leadership development research into a coherent model (ALSDE, 2024b). At the center of the framework is mentoring for personal and professional development, reflecting Kram's (1985) dual mentoring functions and emphasizing the interconnected nature of leadership skill development and identity formation. Surrounding this core is an explicit focus on well-being, highlighting self-care and care for others as essential components of sustainable leadership, an emphasis aligned with research on principal stress and burnout (Mahfouz, 2020; Ray et al., 2020).

The framework further incorporates the Alabama Standards for School Leadership (ALSDE, 2024a), situating mentoring within established leadership expectations while maintaining a developmental rather than evaluative orientation. A continuous improvement cycle of action research/inquiry, problem-solving, and reflection forms the outer structure of the model, reinforcing Mertz's (2004) emphasis on intentional involvement and sustained relational engagement (Schmuck, 2006). Collectively, these elements position the ANPMP as a useful exemplar of how structured mentoring frameworks can integrate technical leadership development with psychological resilience in response to contemporary leadership challenges.

The framework illustrates how established mentoring theories may be translated into practice without delimiting the context of this study. The Kram's dual mentoring functions are reflected through the distinction between professional and personal development, Mertz's intent and involvement model informs the depth and purpose mentoring relationships, and Seligman's PERMA framework provides a lens for understanding how mentoring can support well-being, optimism, and leadership sustainability. Together, these constructs demonstrate how mentoring may extend beyond surface-level guidance to address the full scope of leadership development demands.

As an illustrative model, the ANPMP highlights the evolving expectations placed on mentors within structured mentoring contexts. The mentor role is conceptualized as developmental rather than supervisory, requiring not only professional expertise but also emotional intelligence, reflective capacity, and sustained commitment to relational growth (Lunsford, 2021; Searby, 2020). Within this framework, mentor preparation emphasizes intentional engagement, responsiveness to individual leadership contexts, and alignment with broader leadership standards, reinforcing mentoring as a relational process grounded in trust and purpose rather than compliance.

The ANPMP further demonstrates how mentoring goals may be articulated to support leadership development holistically. Concepts such as connection, confidence, competence, core values, and commitment function as organizing principles that align mentoring theory with leadership practice. Connection emphasizes relational trust and psychological safety; confidence reflects the development of self-efficacy and optimism; competence addresses leadership skill development; core values ground decision-

making in ethical purpose; and commitment reinforces long-term engagement in the principalship. When viewed collectively, these goals illustrate how structured mentoring frameworks can integrate leadership capacity, well-being, and retention within a coherent conceptual model.

In this way, the APNMP framework functions as an applied exemplar informed by the Mentoring for Well-being Model (Reames & Mullen, 2025) illustrating how structured mentoring can translate mentoring theory, positive psychology, and leadership standards into practice without limiting the scope of this study to one program. Its framework provides conceptual clarity for this study while allowing findings to remain transferable across divers mentoring contexts.

As depicted in Figure 2, the Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program framework illustrates how mentoring theory, positive psychology, and leadership standards may be integrated within a structured leadership mentoring model. The ANPMP framework was informed by the Mentoring for Well-being Model and reflects the convergence of three foundational constructs. Kram's (1985) dual functions are reflected through the emphasis of professional and personal development, highlighting the interconnected nature of leadership skill acquisition and identity formation. Mertz's (2004) intent and involvement model is reflected in the emphasis on purposeful, sustained, and non-evaluative mentoring relationships. Seligman's (2011) PERMA model further informs the framework's attention to well-being, optimism, and leadership sustainability.

Taken together, these constructs demonstrate how structured mentoring frameworks may extend beyond technical guidance to address the broader

developmental needs of novice principals. The mentor role, as conceptualized within such frameworks, requires professional expertise alongside emotional intelligence, reflective capacity, and a sustained development orientation (Lunsford, 2021; Searby, 2020). In this way, ANPMP framework functions as an applied exemplar informed by the Mentoring for Well-being Model, illustrating how mentoring theory can be translated into practice without delimiting the context of inquiry to a single program.

Mentor Preparation and Relational Design in Structured Mentoring Frameworks

Within structured mentoring models, mentor preparation is often informed by Mertz's principle of intentional involvement. Conceptually, this involves selecting experienced school leaders with demonstrated capacity for instructional leadership, school improvement, and relational practice. Rather than emphasizing positional authority, such frameworks prioritize mentors' ability to engage reflectively, respond to context, and sustain non-evaluative relationships over time (Mertz, 2004).

Mentor development within structured frameworks commonly emphasizes the "science" of mentoring, including relational communication, reflective questions, goal alignment, and adaptive feedback (ALSDE, 2024b). These elements mirror Kram's career and psychosocial mentoring functions while also embedding PERMA-aligned practices that support engagement, meaning, and accomplishment. Viewed conceptually, ongoing mentor learning and reflection strengthen relational quality and mitigate burnout, reinforcing mentoring as a reciprocal developmental process rather than a one-way transfer of expertise.

Mentoring Goals as Conceptual Pathways for Leadership Development

Structured mentoring frameworks frequently articulate mentoring goals to operationalize theory into practice. Within the ANPMP framework, these goals include connection, confidence, competence, core values, and commitment. When interpreted conceptually, these goals provide a coherent structure for aligning mentoring theory with leadership development.

Connection emphasizes trust, psychological safety, and relational presence, creating conditions for authentic dialogue and reflective growth. Confidence reflects the development of self-efficacy through affirmation, guided reflection, and recognition of progress. Competence addresses leadership skill development through contextualized learning and problem solving aligned with leadership standards. Core values ground leadership practice in ethical purpose and personal meaning, supporting principled decision-making(ALSDE, 2024b). Commitment reflects the development of professional longevity and sustained engagement in leadership roles, particularly in contexts marked by instability and attrition.

Narrative Vignette: Conceptual Illustration of Structured Mentoring

The following vignette is presented as a hypothetical illustration of practices commonly described in the literature on structured principal mentoring. It is offered to demonstrate how mentoring theory, and positive psychology may be integrated through the Mentoring for Well-being Model within formal mentoring contexts. The vignette is not drawn from study participants or from a specific program.

Sarah, a newly appointed principal, was paired with Mr. Jones, a retired school leader recognized for his experience in instructional leadership and school

improvement. Their mentoring relationship reflected practices commonly associated with structured mentoring frameworks, with the Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program (ANPMP) serving as a conceptual exemplar of intentional mentoring design informed by the Mentoring for Well-being Model.

During their initial meetings, Mr. Jones established expectations for communication, confidentiality, and shared purpose, reflecting Mertz's (2004) emphasis on intentional involvement. He invited Sarah to describe her leadership vision and reflect on early challenges, fostering relational trust and reducing the sense of isolation often reported by novice principals. This early emphasis on connection supported positive emotion, easing anxiety and normalizing the uncertainties of leadership transition.

As their work progressed, Mr. Jones supported Sarah's professional development through practices associated with Kram's career mentoring functions. Together, they examined instructional practices, engaged in collaborative data analysis, and explored school improvement strategies aligned with Sarah's goals. These activities promoted engagement by immersing Sarah in meaningful leadership work connected to both school needs and personal purpose.

When Sarah encountered emotionally complex challenges, including staff turnover and community conflict, Mr. Jones drew on practices associated with Kram's psychosocial mentoring functions. Through reflective dialogue, he encouraged Sarah to examine her value, and leadership identity, fostering meaning and ethical clarity. Over time, Sarah reported increased confidence and a stronger sense of professional belonging. Mr. Jones also encouraged connections with other leaders, supporting the

development of a broader mentoring network consistent with Kram's concept of developmental constellations (Higgins & Kram, 2001). These extended relationships, combined with clearly defined goals, reflective milestones, and recognition of progress, reinforced accomplishment and deepened Sarah's commitment to remaining in the principal position.

This vignette illustrates how structured mentoring relationships may reflect the Mentoring for Well-being Model by integrating career development, psychosocial support, intentional involvement, social connectedness, and well-being. The ANPMP is referenced here as a conceptual exemplar, demonstrating how mentoring theory and positive psychology may be operationalized within structured frameworks. This framing aligns with the study's focus on mentors' lived experiences across formal mentoring programs in Alabama, rather than participation in a single program.

National Comparison

While the preceding vignette illustrates how mentoring theory may be enacted at the relational level, situating Alabama's approach within a national context provides additional insight into how structured principal mentoring is conceptualized across states. In this review, the Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program (ANPMP) is referenced as a state-level exemplar of how mentoring theory can be systematically integrated into policy and practice, rather than as a source of participants or data.

As of July 1, 2024, all newly employed, first-time principals in Alabama are required to engage in a two-year, state-sponsored mentoring experience (Mackey, 2024). Alabama is one of only six states, alongside California, Hawaii, Missouri, Vermont, and New Jersey, that mandate two years of mentoring for novice principals,

with Delaware extending support beyond this timeframe (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of state-level principal mentoring requirements across the United States. Although these initiatives share a common goal of supporting novice principals, they vary considerably in structure, scope, and theoretical grounding.

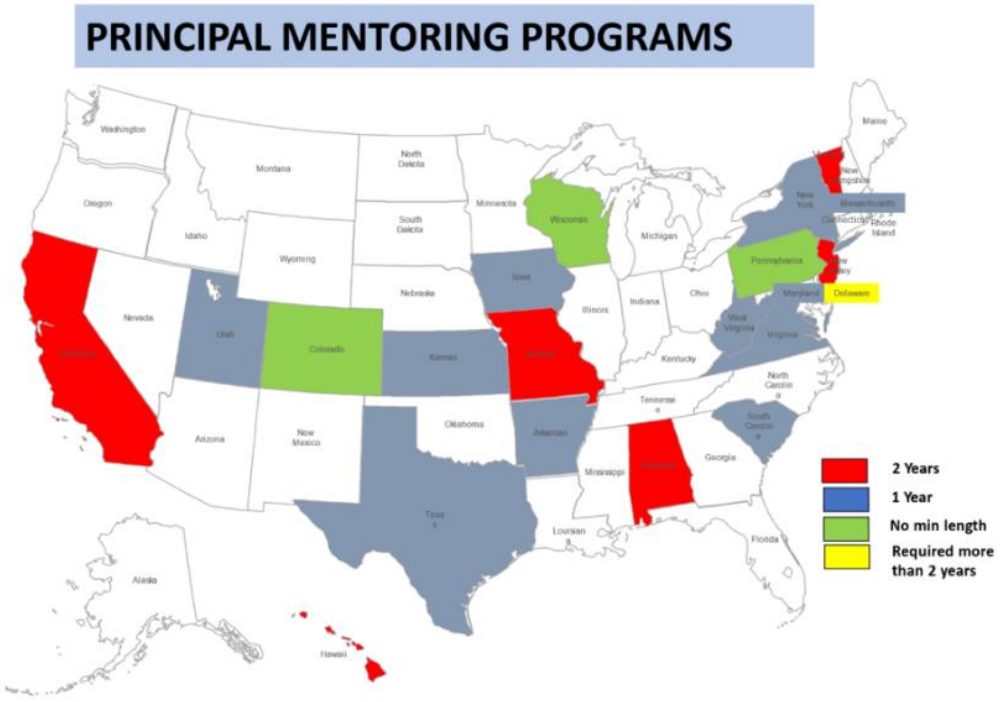

Figure 3. Map of the U.S. showing which states have a mentoring program. Red are those with 2-year programs, Blue have 1-year programs, Green have no minimum length, and Yellow require more than 2 years.

Comparative analysis reveals notable distinctions in mentoring design. Missouri's Leadership Development System employs a two-year model aligned with leadership domains similar to Alabama's Five Domains of Leadership (MSDSEE, 2024). However, Missouri's framework does not explicitly articulate mentoring goals grounded in positive psychology or emphasize psychosocial well-being as a central program component. Vermont's mentoring approach includes a short, mentor-focused professional development experience, with mentor and protégé matching managed locally by district

leadership (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). This decentralized model contrasts with more centralized frameworks that emphasize sustained mentor preparation and ongoing relational support. California's administrative residency model fulfills licensure requirements through mentored field experience, yet it primarily emphasizes certification and instructional leadership rather than an integrated focus on personal development or well-being (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018).

When viewed comparatively, Alabama's framework reflects a more integrative conceptual design, combining leadership development with intentional attention to relational depth and psychological resilience. Informed by the Mentoring for Well-being Model (Reames & Mullen, 2025), the ANPMP illustrates how mentoring structures may integrate Kram's career and psychosocial mentoring functions, Mertz's emphasis on intent and involvement, and Seligman's PERMA framework to address both technical leadership capacity and leadership sustainability. This alignment is particularly significant in contexts experiencing persistent teacher attrition and leadership instability, where novice principals face compounded professional and emotional demands.

Taken together, these national comparisons indicate that while many states acknowledge mentoring as a critical support for novice principals, the extent to which mentoring programs intentionally integrate leadership development, psychosocial support, and well-being varies widely. Within this review, the ANPMP is positioned as a theoretically informed exemplar, that demonstrates one-way mentoring structures may align research-based constructs within a state-sponsored framework. This broader national context reinforces the focus of the present study on mentors' lived experiences

across structured mentoring programs in Alabama, rather than on participation in any single program model.

Summary

Despite broad recognition of mentoring's critical role in novice principal development and retention, significant gaps remain in the literature. First, research seldom explores the lived experiences and perspectives of mentors who support newly appointed principals within structured, state-aligned mentoring programs. Second, few studies explicitly examine the integration of positive psychology frameworks, such as Seligman's PERMA model, within principal mentoring, resulting in limited understanding of how well-being elements are intentionally fostered alongside professional growth. Third, minimal scholarship examines how Kram's dual career and psychosocial mentoring functions, Mertz's intent and involvement model, and PERMA's well-being principles are integrated within the Mentoring for Well-being Model. Finally, comparative analyses of state-level mentoring initiatives aligned with leadership standards remain scarce, limiting insights into how theoretical integration and program design influence mentoring effectiveness and leadership sustainability.

This review of literature highlights the persistent challenges novice principals face, including burnout, isolation, and heightened accountability, and positions structured mentoring as a strategic response for strengthening leadership capacity, resilience, and retention. Drawing on established mentoring and well-being theory, this chapter presents the Mentoring for Well-being Model as the conceptual framework for this study. The model integrates Kram's (1985) dual mentoring functions of career/professional and psychosocial/personal support, Mertz's (2004) model of intent

and involvement, and Seligman's PERMA (2011) framework. The Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program (ANPMP) is examined as an illustrative exemplar of how these theories may be operationalized within a structured state-sponsored context to support both professional competence and personal well-being.

By synthesizing mentoring theory, positive psychology, and leadership standards, this chapter establishes a coherent framework for examining mentoring as a holistic developmental process rather than a solely technical intervention. Building on this foundation, the present phenomenological study focuses on the lived experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama. This alignment between the literature, conceptual framework, and study purpose provides a clear rationale for the methodological approach detailed in Chapter 3, where mentor perspectives are explored to deepen understanding of how mentoring relationships foster leadership development, resilience, and sustained commitment to the principalship.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter 3 presents the methodological foundation for this qualitative dissertation study, including the rationale for the selected approach, the procedures used to recruit and protect participants, and the processes for collecting, managing, and analyzing data. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that the design of the study is conceptually coherent, ethically responsible, and methodologically rigorous, with clear alignment among the problem, the research questions, the phenomenon under investigation, and the selected research procedures. Consistent with Auburn University dissertation expectations, the chapter also provides sufficient detail for transparency and reproducibility, including how instruments were developed, how data quality will be supported, and how participant confidentiality will be maintained in compliance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements.

The study responds to a documented problem in educational leadership. Newly appointed principals face an intense transition into leadership that is frequently characterized by role overload, isolation, and heightened accountability demands (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Contemporary leadership expectations require novice principals to move beyond operational oversight and enact visionary instructional leadership. Including data-informed improvement efforts, community engagement, and inclusive culture building (Abbamont, 2020). In Alabama, these pressures are intensified by state mandates such as the Literacy and Numeracy Acts, which increase the urgency for measurable academic growth within compressed timelines (Croy, 2024). These conditions, combined with the emotional demands of school leadership, contribute to stress, burnout, and attrition, particularly within the formative first years of the

principalship (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Tekir, 2021). For this reason, structured mentoring has been widely positioned as a strategic support for novice principals, strengthening self-efficacy, resilience, leadership identity, and professional sustainability (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018; Searby & Brondyk, 2007). Yet, even as mentoring expands through state and district-sponsored initiatives, limited research examines the mentoring experience from the mentor's perspective, particularly how trained mentors understand and enact their role in supporting novice principals' professional development, personal well-being, and leadership sustainability.

Accordingly, the phenomenon under investigation in this study was the lived experiences of trained mentors who actively support newly appointed principals through structured mentoring programs in Alabama. While the Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program (ANPMP) is used as an exemplar of a comprehensive, structured mentoring model, the participant criteria for this study extend beyond any single program. Participants include trained mentors working within state or district-sponsored structured mentoring initiatives who are actively mentoring at least one novice principal. This broadened inclusion criterion preserves conceptual integrity by retaining the defining features necessary for the phenomenon, formal mentor preparation, active mentoring practice, and structured program expectations, while addressing access limitations associated with a single program context.

This chapter is organized to reflect the logical progression of the study's design. It begins with the statement of the problem and research questions to establish the rationale and boundaries of the inquiry. The central research question asks: What are the lived experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals through structured

mentoring programs across Alabama? The sub-questions then examine three essential dimensions of that experience. First, the study explores how mentors describe their role in supporting both professional development and personal development. Second, it examines how mentors perceive intent and involvement as shaping effective mentoring relationships, drawing directly on mentoring theory that differentiates mentoring from less intensive forms of support (Mertz, 2004). Third, it explores how mentors intentionally foster positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment through mentoring, reflecting a well-being-oriented lens aligned with Seligman's PERMA framework (Seligman, 2011). Together, these questions are designed to elicit mentors' meaning-making, interpretations, and enacted practices within mentoring relationships rather than surface-level descriptions of program activities.

The chapter then details the research methodology and research design, explaining why a qualitative approach is most appropriate for addressing the research questions and examining the phenomenon. Qualitative methodology is well suited for studies that seek to understand how individuals interpret and make meaning of experiences within real-world contexts (Bloomberg, 2022). Because the intent of this study was not to measure mentoring outcomes statistically but to interpret mentors' lived experiences and meaning-making, quantitative or mixed methods designs are not appropriate. This study was grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology, an interpretive approach that seeks to understand how meaning is constructed through experience, language, and context (Bhattacharya, 2017). Hermeneutic phenomenology aligns with this study because mentoring is relational, emotionally complex, and context sensitive. It

also aligns because the researcher's interpretive engagement is understood as part of the analytic process rather than something that can be entirely bracketed away (Peoples, 2020). The hermeneutic circle, moving between parts of participants' accounts and the developing whole of interpretation, provides a disciplined analytic structure to support depth, coherence, and credibility.

Following methodology and design, the chapter specifies the participant population and sampling procedures. The sampling strategy is purposive criterion sampling, which involves intentionally selecting participants who have direct experience with the phenomenon and can provide rich, relevant data (Bloomberg, 2022). Eligibility requires that mentors have formal training as principal mentors, are actively mentoring at least one newly appointed principal, and participate in a structured mentoring program aligned with leadership development expectations. In alignment with phenomenological standards, the goal of sampling is not representational breadth; rather, it is depth of experience and interpretive richness, supported by variation in mentoring contexts, backgrounds, and settings to strengthen the interpretive value of the findings (Bhattacharya, 2017; Peoples, 2020).

The chapter also describes instrumentation or sources of data and clarifies how each instrument supports the research questions. Data are generated primarily through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews using standardized open-ended questions with probes. This structure is consistent with phenomenological inquiry, which requires participants to provide detailed descriptions and reflective meaning-making in their own words (Bhattacharya, 2017). The interview protocol is aligned to the research questions and informed by the study's conceptual and theoretical framing, including mentoring

functions, intentionality and involvement, and well-being-oriented mentoring practices (Kram, 1985; Mertz, 2004; Seligman, 2011). A brief follow-up survey administered through Qualtrics collects demographic and contextual information to support interpretive analysis and to contextualize participants' narratives. In addition, the researcher maintains a reflexive journal to document evolving interpretations, assumptions, and analytic decisions as part of the hermeneutic process (Peoples, 2020).

Given the professional contexts of participants and the importance of protecting identities, the chapter provides a detailed plan for validity and reliability, data collection and management, and ethical considerations. In qualitative research, trustworthiness is established through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability rather that statistical indices (Bloomberg, 2022). Credibility is supported through in-depth interviewing, member checking of transcripts, iterative coding, and peer reviewing or peer debriefing (Peoples, 2020). Confirmability is supported through reflexive journaling and an audit trail of analytic decisions, ensuring interpretations are grounded in participant data rather than researcher assumptions. Transferability is supported through rich description so readers can assess applicability to other mentoring contexts. Data security and confidentiality procedures are addressed explicitly, including de-identification, pseudonym assignment, restricted access, and secure storage in AUBox in compliance with IRM expectations.

Finally, the chapter concludes with limitations and delimitations and a summary that prepares readers for the analytic and reporting approach used in the findings chapter. Limitations acknowledge constraints such as reliance on self-reported data,

variability across structured mentoring programs, and the interpretive nature of hermeneutic analysis. Delimitations clarify intentional boundaries, including the focus on mentors rather than protégés or program administrators, and the focus on mentoring experiences related to professional development, well-being, resilience, and leadership sustainability rather than program evaluation or student outcomes. Together, these sections reinforce the coherence of the design and confirm that the methodological choices are appropriate for the phenomenon and research questions.

Statement of the Problem

Newly appointed principals experience a rapid and overwhelming transition from prior roles, such as classroom teacher, instructional coach, or assistant principal into positions that require immediate decision-making authority, navigation of organizational politics, and leadership of resistant or ineffective staff, frequently resulting in feelings of isolation and role strain (Spillane & Lee, 2014). This transition is further compounded by expanded leadership expectations that extend beyond operational management to include visionary instructional leadership, data-driven school improvement, community engagement, and the cultivation of inclusive school cultures (Abbamont, 2020). Federal and state mandates, including Alabama's Literacy and Numeracy Acts, intensify pressure on novice principals to demonstrate measurable gains in student achievement within compressed timelines, often without sufficient opportunity for gradual role socialization or sustained support (Croy, 2024). Collectively, these demands render newly appointed principals vulnerable to stress, burnout, and early attrition, despite prior preparation and leadership experience (Spillane & Lee, 2014).

In addition to operational pressures, novice principals face significant emotional demands associated with ‘people work’, including managing conflict, supporting staff well-being, and responding to secondary traumatic stress within school communities (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Many principals do not enter the role immediately following completion of leadership preparation programs, further increasing vulnerability when adequate, ongoing support structures are present. The first two to three years in the role are formative, shaping leadership confidence, resilience, and retention (Tekir, 2021). During this period, principals’ capacity to influence the school community can help build teacher capacity and implement continuous school improvement efforts (DeMatthews et al., 2021). These challenges highlight the need for structured mentoring programs to develop the personal and professional development needed for resilience and leadership capacity (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Research consistently identifies structured mentoring as a powerful strategy for supporting novice principals by fostering resilience, strengthening self-efficacy, and supporting the development of a confident leadership identity (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018; Searby & Brondyk, 2007). Trained mentors, equipped with knowledge of adult learning principles, leadership development, and psychological support, can provide essential guidance, affirmation, and modeling during the vulnerable early years of the principalship (Searby & Brondyk, 2007). As leadership pressures intensify nationwide, structured mentoring has emerged not only as a valuable support measure, but as a strategic intervention aimed at increasing principal retention, improving school culture, and promoting student success.

Despite growing recognition of mentoring's importance, limited research has examined how mentors themselves experience and enact their roles within structured mentoring programs, particularly in relation to intentional involvement, relational depth, and the promotion of well-being alongside leadership development. (Leithwood et al., 2020). In Alabama, state-sponsored and district-level mentoring initiatives, including state and district-sponsored initiatives such as the Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program, have been designed to address these challenges by establishing professional growth, personal development, and leadership sustainability (ALSDE, 2024b). However, the perspectives of mentors operating within these structured programs remain underexplored. Understanding mentors' lived experiences is essential for strengthening mentoring design, enhancing mentor preparation, and ensuring that structured mentoring programs effectively support novice principals' resilience, leadership capacity, and retention.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of trained mentors who support newly appointed principals within structured principal mentoring programs in Alabama, with the Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program (ANPMP) serving as an exemplar. The phenomenon under investigation is how mentors perceive, interpret, and enact their mentoring role in supporting novice principals' professional development, personal well-being, and leadership sustainability. Data for this study are generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to elicit mentors' reflective accounts for their experiences and meaning-making processes within mentoring relationships.

Guided by this purpose, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

Primary Research Question

1. What are the lived experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama?

Sub-Questions

   a. How do trained mentors describe their role in supporting the professional and personal development needs of new principals?
   b. How do trained mentors perceive the role of *intent* and *involvement* in shaping effective mentoring relationships?
   c. How do mentors purposely foster positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA) in their work with novice principals?

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the lived experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate when the purpose of the study is to understand how individuals interpret and make meaning of their experiences within a specific context (Bloomberg, 2022). Unlike quantitative methods, which emphasize measurement, prediction, and generalization, qualitative methodology prioritizes depth, meaning, and interpretation. Mixed methods design, while valuable for integrating numerical trends with narrative data, are not suited to the present study's focus on capturing the essence and meaning of mentors' lived experiences.

Accordingly, a qualitative approach provides the most appropriate methodological foundation for this inquiry.

Within qualitative traditions, this study was grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology, which seeks to interpret the meanings individuals ascribe to their lived experiences rather than merely describing surface-level phenomena (Peoples, 2020). Phenomenology is particularly well suited to research questions that ask how individuals experience a phenomenon and what meaning they derive from that experience. In this study, the phenomenon under investigation is mentors' lived experiences of supporting newly appointed principals, including how mentors perceive their roles, relationships, and practices within structured mentoring contexts.

Hermeneutic phenomenology differs from transcendental or descriptive phenomenology in its explicit acknowledgment that interpretation is inseparable from understanding. Drawing from Martin Heidegger, hermeneutic phenomenology recognizes that researchers cannot fully bracket their prior knowledge or experiences. Instead, meaning emerges through an iterative process of interpretation, often described as the hermeneutic circle, in which understanding moves back and forth between individual parts of the data and the whole (Bhattacharya, 2017). This interpretive stance is particularly appropriate for this study, as a researcher brings professional knowledge of educational leadership and mentoring that informs, rather than invalidates, the interpretive process.

The choice of hermeneutic phenomenology is further justified by the study's emphasis on relationships, meaning making, and context. Mentoring relationships are complex, relational, and deeply embedded in professional and emotional dimensions of

leadership practice. Hermeneutic phenomenology allows for rich, narrative accounts of these experiences while also supporting interpretive analysis that situates individual stories within broader conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Prior qualitative studies in educational leadership have demonstrated the effectiveness of phenomenological approaches for examining leadership identity, mentoring relationships, and professional resilience (Bloomberg, 2022).

By employing a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, this study aligns its methodological approach with its purpose, research questions, and conceptual framework. This methodology enables a nuanced exploration of mentors' perspectives, honoring the complexity of their experiences while generating interpretive development, and principal retention. The methodological choice therefore supports both the rigor and coherence of the study and ensures alignment with the phenomenon under investigation.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological research design to address the research questions guiding this inquiry. Hermeneutic phenomenology is appropriate because the purpose of this study was to investigate and interpret the 'meaning of the lived experience of people to identify the core essence of human experience or phenomena' (Bhattacharya, 2017) as they support newly appointed principals within structured mentoring programs in Alabama. Rather than examining mentoring as a cultural system, institutional case, or narrative artifact, this study seeks to understand how mentors experience, interpret, and make meaning of their mentoring relationships over time (Bloomberg, 2022).

Mentoring relationships, if not structured correctly, can be a hierarchical and inequitable relationship, especially if the mentor does not have the intent and desired involvement needed to develop the protégé's leadership capacity, resilience, and retention (Mertz, 2004; Reames, 2025). Educators could also be considered a specific social group with the similar challenges and successes. When studying mentors participating in the New Alabama Principal Mentoring Program as a group with common interests, ethnography was considered. 'Ethnographers study the meaning of the behavior, interaction, and communication among members of the group, and the goal is to analyze the group's view as a whole over time along with the researcher's view' (Bloomberg, 2022). "The purpose of phenomenological research to investigate the meaning of the lived experiences people to identify the core essence of human experience or phenomena as described by the research participants" (Bloomberg, 2022). 'Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience the phenomena' (Bloomberg, 2022). Once the decision was made to study each mentor's lived experiences individually, the phenomenological approach is more suited for exploring how mentors in the Alabama New Principals Mentoring Program (ANPMP) perceive and enact their roles, as it recognizes that meaning emerges through both the participants' narratives and the researcher's interpretive engagement with those narratives.

Once phenomenology was determined to be the appropriate research approach, the researcher determined transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenology. There are two main theoretical frameworks used to frame a phenomenological study, which are the philosophies of Edmund Husserl, transcendental, and Martin Heidegger,

hermeneutic (Peoples, 2020). Edmund Husserl believed that nothing should be assumed or taken for granted when trying to understand a phenomenon (Peoples, 2020). Husserl believed that the researcher should intentionally suspend their judgments or biases to focus on the studied phenomenon, called bracketing (Peoples, 2020). Martin Heidegger believed that one could not completely suspend or bracket one's judgments or biases, therefore his solution was the hermeneutic circle. 'The hermeneutic circle refers to starting with an idea and developing the idea with depth and understanding to create even deeper and more amplified understanding of the original idea, thereby coming to a full circle' (Bhattacharya, 2017). When using the hermeneutic circle, the researcher must make their biases or judgments known explicitly and up front stating them in the dissertation and journaling before analyzing the data (Peoples, 2020). As the researcher analyzes the data, they break down information into parts and categorize them into themes, then synthesize, and back to the whole to create new understandings. This continues in a circular fashion until the researcher can increase their own understanding of new data (Peoples, 2020). I agree with Heidegger's belief that one cannot truly separate themselves from their own biases, and that as I analyze new data, my understandings can change based on that data. Also, having a pre-conceived understanding of an effective mentor relationship, hermeneutic phenomenology is the best approach for this study.

Participant Population and Sample

This study utilizes purposive criterion sampling to select participants who can provide rich, relevant insight into the phenomenon under investigation. Purposive sampling involves the intentional selection of individuals who possess direct experience

with the phenomenon and can meaningfully contribute to understanding it (Bloomberg, 2022).

Participants include trained mentors within a range of state or district-sponsored structured mentoring initiatives across Alabama, independent of any single program. Eligibility criteria require that participants (a) have formal training as principal mentors, (b) are actively mentoring at least one novice principal, and (c) participate in a structured mentoring program aligned with leadership development standards. This revised criterion reflects the study's broadened scope while maintaining conceptual alignment with mentoring theory and practice.

Efforts will be made to include mentors with varied professional backgrounds, years of experience, and demographic characteristics. Diversity among participants' mentoring contexts, including rural and urban school settings and varying socioeconomic and school improvement conditions, will support a richer understanding of the phenomenon (Peoples, 2020). This sampling strategy ensures that participants meet the predetermined needs of the study while remaining consistent with phenomenological depth rather than representational breadth (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Instrumentation or Sources of Data

Data for this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study will be collected using two primary instruments: semi-structured, one-on-one interview protocols and a brief demographic and descriptive survey administered electronically. Together, these instruments are designed to capture rich, in-depth accounts of mentors' lived experiences while also providing contextual information to support interpretation of the findings.

The primary source of data will be individual, semi-structured interviews conducted with trained mentors supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama. The interview protocol (see Appendix D) consists of standardized open-ended questions aligned with the study's research questions and conceptual framework, drawing on Kram's (1985) mentoring functions, Mertz's (2004) intent and involvement model, and Seligman's PERMA framework (2011). Open-ended questions are used to encourage participants to describe their experiences in their own words, while follow-up probes allow the researcher to clarify meanings, explore emerging themes, and deepen understanding of participants' perspectives.

The structure of the interview protocol is organized around three domains: mentors' perceptions of their role and responsibilities, relational processes and intentional involvement within mentoring relationships, and strategies used to support novice principals' professional development, well-being, and leadership sustainability. This structure is consistent with best practices in phenomenological research, which emphasize eliciting detailed descriptions of experience rather than brief or surface-level responses (Bloomberg, 2022). Follow-up interviews may be conducted as needed to clarify responses, confirm interpretations, or explore areas that emerge during initial data analysis.

The interview protocol was developed specifically for this study, informed by existing qualitative mentoring research and prior instruments used in studies examining leadership mentoring and principal development (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018; Searby & Brondyk, 2007). To enhance content validity, interview questions were reviewed to

ensure alignment with the research questions and conceptual framework and redefined to avoid leading or evaluative language.

To supplement interview data, participants will complete a brief demographic and descriptive survey administered through Qualtrics. This survey will collect background information about mentors, such as years of leadership experience, mentoring experience, type id mentoring program, and general characteristics of the novice principals they support. The survey also includes Likert-type items and open-ended questions designed to provide contextual insights that support interpretation of interview findings. Survey items are descriptive in nature and are not intended for statistical generalization.

Research Procedures

Participants were purposefully selected based on their experience mentoring novice principals within structured mentoring programs in Alabama. An IRB application was submitted and approved prior to data collection (see Appendix A). Initial recruitment focused on individuals participating in the Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program; however, following an approved modification, the participant pool was expanded to include mentors engaged in other structured mentoring programs across the state. Potential participants were contacted via phone or email using a standardized recruitment message (see Appendix C). Informed consent was obtained prior to participation through an information letter provided to all participants (see Appendix B).

The study was informed by existing literature on the challenges faced by novice principals, the psychosocial and career functions of mentoring, and the role of intentionality in effective mentoring relationships. This literature guided the development

of the conceptual framework, which integrated Kram's mentoring theory, Mertz's model for intent and involvement, and Seligman's PERMA framework of well-being. These frameworks informed the design of the interview protocol and guided the focus of the data collection process.

The study design and data collection procedures were informed by this conceptual foundation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews via Zoom and recorded on a password-protected device. Semi-structured interviews allowed for a balance of guided questions and flexibility to explore participants' lived experiences in depth (Bloomberg, 2022). Following each interview, participants completed a demographic survey that was distributed through Qualtrics to provide contextual information. All interviews were transcribed, and pseudonyms were assigned to protect participant confidentiality.

Data analysis followed an iterative process consistent with the hermeneutic circle (Peoples, 2020). The researcher engaged in repeated readings of the transcripts to identify meaning units, which were then condensed into codes. These codes were examined across participants to identify patterns and develop themes that reflected shared meanings within the data. Throughout the process, reflective journaling was used to document insights and support interpretation (Bloomberg, 2020). While the analysis remained interpretive in nature, elements of Creswell and Poth's (2016) phenomenological structure were used to organize findings for clarity and coherence. This interpretive process emphasized participants' meaning-making and supported the identification of themes reflecting growth-oriented, relational, and intentional mentoring practices.

Validity and Reliability

In qualitative research, validity and reliability are addressed through strategies that establish trustworthiness rather than statistical generalizability. To ensure that the findings of this study accurately represent participants' lived experiences and that interpretations are ethically and methodologically sound, multiple procedures will be employed to enhance credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Bloomberg, 2022). These strategies align with Auburn University dissertation expectations and Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards for protecting human subjects and ensuring responsible qualitative inquiry.

Consistent with a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the researcher acknowledges that interpretation is shaped by prior experiences and professional knowledge. Rather than attempting full bracketing, researcher reflexivity will be addressed through transparent documentation of assumptions and positionality. Reflexive journals, field notes, and analytic memos will be maintained throughout data collection and analysis to record evolving interpretations and decision-making processes (Peoples, 2020). This practice supports confirmability by making the researcher's interpretive stance explicit and ensures ethical transparency, as required by IRB standards.

Credibility will be established through the use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit rich descriptions of mentors' lived experiences. Member checking will be used to ensure accurate representation of participant perspectives. Each participant will be given the opportunity to review their interview transcript for accuracy and confirm that the interpretations and conclusions reflect their intended

meaning (Peoples, 2020). This process safeguards participant voice and aligns with IRB expectations for respectful and accurate portrayal of research participants.

Peer review will also be incorporated as a credibility strategy. The researcher will consult with a neutral colleague experienced in qualitative research to examine the research design, analytic procedures, and emerging themes. This peer reviewer will provided critical feedback on methodological decisions and interpretive coherence, strengthening analytic rigor (Peoples, 2020).

Dependability will be supported through consistent implementation of the interview protocol and systematic documentation of data collection and analysis procedures. All interviews will follow a standardized open-ended question format with probes used to ensure depth and clarity. Interview transcripts will be coded multiple times using an iterative analytic process, allowing themes to be refined across coding cycles. Peer review of coding decisions will further support analytic consistency (Bloomberg, 2022). An audit trail documenting methodological decisions, analytic revisions, and theme development will be maintained throughout the study.

Transferability will be addressed through the use of rich, descriptions that situate participants' experiences within the context of principal mentoring in Alabama. Detailed narrative accounts will allow readers to determine the applicability of findings to other mentoring contexts or leadership development programs. While phenomenological research does aim for generalization, these contextualized descriptions enhance the study's relevance and usefulness for practitioners and researchers (Peoples, 2020).

Confirmability will be enhanced through triangulation of data sources, including interview transcripts, reflexive journals, and demographic survey responses. These

multiple sources ensure that findings are grounded in participant data rather than researcher assumptions. Member checking and peer review further support confirmability by incorporating external verification of interpretations and conclusions (Bloomberg, 2022).

All data will be stored securely in accordance with IRB requirements, and participant confidentiality will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms and de-identified records. Participation will be voluntary, and participants may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Data Collection and Management

Primary data will be collected through individual, semi-structured interviews with trained and experienced principal mentors who meet the study's inclusion criteria. Semi-structured interviews are appropriate for phenomenological inquiry because they allow participants to describe their experiences in their own words while enabling the researcher to probe for depth, clarification, and meaning (Bhattacharya, 2017).

An interview protocol consisting of standardized, open-ended questions aligned with the study's theoretical and conceptual frameworks will be used to guide each interview. Probing questions will be employed as needed to elicit detailed descriptions of mentoring practices, perceptions, and interpretations. Interviews will be conducted virtually using a secure video-conferencing platform and are expected to last approximately 30-45 minutes, depending on participant responses.

To enhance depth and clarity, follow-up communication may occur via email when clarification or elaboration is needed. In addition, participants will be invited to complete a brief follow-up survey administered electronically through Qualtrics. This

survey will collect demographic information and supplemental reflections related to mentoring practices and experiences, providing contextual support for the interview.

Prior to participation, all prospective participants will receive an informed consent form approved by the Auburn University Institutional Review Board. The consent form will clearly explain the purpose of the study, procedures for participation, time commitment, potential risks and benefits, voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants will provide electronic consent before scheduling interviews. Consent will also be verbally confirmed at the beginning of each interview. No data will be collected until informed consent has been obtained.

Consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher will maintain a reflexive research journal throughout data collection, analysis, and synthesis. The journal will be used to document the researcher's assumptions, positionality, and evolving interpretations, as well as emerging patterns, questions, and analytic insights. This reflexive practice supports transparency, rigor, and adherence to the hermeneutic circle by explicitly acknowledging how meaning is co-constructed through participant narratives and researcher interpretation.

Participant confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study. Pseudonyms will be assigned to all participants, and any identifying information will be removed from transcripts, field notes, and reports. Only the researcher will have access to identifiable data. Findings will be reported in aggregate form or using anonymized quotations to prevent identification of individuals or school districts. The study poses minimal risk to participants, as it involves professional reflections on mentoring experiences.

Participants may decline to answer any question or discontinue participation at any point.

All digital data, including audio recordings, interview transcripts, survey responses, consent forms, and analytic memos, will be stored securely using AUBox, Auburn University's encrypted, secure cloud-based storage system. Audio recordings will be transferred to AUBOx immediately following each interview and deleted from local devices. Transcripts will be de-identified prior to analysis. Physical documents, if any, will be stored in a locked file accessible only to the researcher. Data will be retained in accordance with Auburn University IRB requirements and then permanently deleted after the required retention period. By implementing these procedures, the study ensures ethical data collection, participant protection, and secure data management while maintaining methodological rigor consistent with hermeneutic phenomenological research.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis followed an iterative process consistent with the hermeneutic circle (Peoples, 2020). The researcher engaged in repeated readings of the transcripts to identify meaning units, which were then condensed into codes. These codes were examined across participants to identify patterns and develop themes that reflected shared meanings within the data. Through this iterative process, themes were developed and interpreted in relation to the research questions and conceptual framework.

Research Question

This study was guided by the following research question and sub-questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals across Alabama?
    a. How do trained mentors describe their role in supporting the professional and personal development needs of novice principals?
    b. How do mentors perceive their role in fostering novice principals' professional growth, well-being, and leadership resilience?
    c. How do mentors interpret the relational, emotional and developmental dimensions of mentoring within structured mentoring contexts?

Data sources include:

- Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with trained principal mentors
- Follow-up electronic survey responses collected via Qualtrics to provide demographic context and supplemental reflections
- Researcher reflexive journal entries documenting analytic decisions, assumptions, and evolving interpretations.

Interview data serve as the primary source for addressing all three research questions by capturing detailed descriptions of mentors' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations. Survey data provide contextual support, while reflexive journaling supports analytic transparency and interpretive rigor. All interviews will be audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts will be reviewed for accuracy and de-identification prior to analysis. Digital files, including transcripts, analytic memos, and survey data, will be stored securely in AUBox, Auburn University's encrypted cloud-based system. Data will be organized using systematic file-naming conventions and version control to ensure traceability throughout analysis.

Data analysis will proceed through the following stages:

1. Initial Reading and Immersion: The researcher will read and reread each interview transcript in its entirety to gain a holistic understanding of the mentor's experience.
2. Preliminary Coding and Thematic Identification: Irrelevant or off-topic content will be removed. Meaningful units of text related to the research questions will be identified, and preliminary themes will be developed across transcripts.
3. Theme Refinement and Finalization: Preliminary themes will be compared across participants, refined, merged, or clarified to ensure consistency and depth.
4. Situated Narrative Construction: For each research question, situated narrative will be constructed to represent participants' experiences within their specific mentoring contexts.
5. General Narrative Development: Situated narratives will be synthesized into general narratives that capture shared meanings across participants.
6. Essence Description: A final, integrative description will be developed to unite the major themes into a coherent representation of the phenomenon under study (Peoples, 2020).

Each stage of analysis is intentionally aligned with the research questions. Initial coding and theme development address Research Question 1 by identifying common experiences. Narrative construction supports Research Question 2 by illustrating how mentors interpret their role in fostering growth and resilience. The final synthesis

addresses Research Question 3 by articulating the relational and emotional dimensions of mentoring across contexts.

Data quality and analytic rigor will be ensured through multiple strategies, including prolonged engagement with the data, iterative coding, reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and member checking. Transcripts will be coded multiple times to confirm consistency and depth of interpretation. These strategies enhance credibility, dependability, and confirmability of findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the design and implementation of this qualitative phenomenological study, particularly given the professional roles of the participants and the relational nature of mentoring. This study involves trained educational leaders reflecting on their professional experiences mentoring newly appointed principals; therefore, careful attention was given to issues of voluntary participation, confidentiality, power dynamics, and data protection.

The primary ethical issue in this study involves the potential risk associated with participants sharing candid reflections about mentoring relationships, leadership challenges, and professional contexts. Because participants are experienced mentors working within structured mentoring programs in Alabama, there is a possibility that disclosures could indirectly identify individuals, schools, or districts if not adequately protected. Additionally, as participants hold professional leadership roles, it was essential to ensure that participation did not create perceived obligations, evaluative consequences, or professional risk. To mitigate these concerns, the study was designed as non-evaluative and focused on mentors' lived experiences rather than performance

or program compliance. Participants were informed that the study sought to understand experiences and meanings, not to assess effectiveness or adherence to program expectations.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Prior to data collection, each participant received an informed consent document outlining the purpose of the study, procedures, potential risks and benefits, time commitment, and data use. Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any interview question and could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Consent was obtained electronically before interviews were scheduled and reaffirmed verbally at the beginning of each interview.

Multiple strategies were employed to protect participant anonymity and confidentiality. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and any identifying information related to individuals, schools, districts, or mentoring programs were removed from interview transcripts and analytic documents. Direct quotations used in reporting were carefully reviewed to ensure they could not reasonably lead to participation identification. Only the researcher had access to identifiable data. No identifying information was shared with external parties, mentors' supervisors, program administrators, or institutions. Findings are reported in aggregate form or through de-identified excerpts to preserve confidentiality while maintaining analytic depth.

All data were managed in accordance with Auburn University IRB requirements. Interview audio recordings were stored temporarily on a password-protected device and transferred to AUBox, Auburn University's secure, encrypted cloud-based storage system. Transcripts, survey data, analytic memos, and reflexive journals were also

stored in AUBox and organized using systematic file-naming conventions. Audio recordings were deleted after transcription accuracy was verified. Data will be retained for the period required by Auburn University policy and then permanently deleted. No data were stored on personal cloud services or unsecured devices.

The researcher acknowledges prior professional experience with educational leadership and mentoring, which could influence interpretation. To address this ethical consideration, reflexive journaling was maintained throughout data collection and analysis to document assumptions, monitor bias, and ensure that participants' meanings remained central. This reflexive practice supports transparency, credibility, and ethical integrity.

This study posed minimal risk to participants. Risks were limited to potential emotional discomfort when reflecting on challenging professional experiences. Participants were informed that they could pause or discontinue interviews at any time. No physical, legal, or professional risks were anticipated. This study was conducted in accordance with Auburn University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) policies. All procedures related to participant recruitment, consent, data collection, and data storage were reviewed and approved prior to implementation.

Limitations and Delimitations

This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was designed to explore the lived experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama. As with all qualitative research, the study includes inherent limitations and intentional delimitations that shape the scope, interpretation, and transferability of the findings.

Limitations refer to conditions outside the researcher's control that may influence the study's findings. First, the study relies primarily on self-reported data collection through semi-structured interviews and a follow-up survey. Participants' accounts may be influenced by memory, personal interpretation, or social desirability. While strategies such as probing interview questions, reflexive journaling, and member checking were used to enhance credibility, the findings reflect participants' subjective interpretations of their mentoring experiences. Second, the diversity of mentoring programs represented in the sample introduces variability in program design, training requirements, duration, and expectations. Although all participants serve in structured, state- or district-sponsored mentoring programs, differences among programs may influence mentoring practices and experiences. This variability may affect the comparability of experiences across participants. Third, the researcher's positionality represents a potential limitation. The researcher's background in educational leadership and mentoring informs interpretation and meaning making. Consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology, reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and transparent documentation of assumptions were employed to address this limitation; however, complete bracketing of prior knowledge is neither assumed nor claimed. Finally, the study captures mentoring experiences with the context of Alabama's educational system, including state leadership standards and accountability structures. Findings may not fully reflect mentoring experiences in other states or policy environments.

Delimitations are intentional boundaries established by the researcher to define the scope of the study. First, the study is deliberately delimited to mentors, rather than novice principals, district leaders, or program administrators. This focus addresses a

documented gap in the literature regarding mentors' lived experiences and interpretations of their role in supporting novice principals. Second, participation was limited to trained mentors supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama. Mentors involved exclusively in informal, unstructured, or privately arranged mentoring relationships were excluded to maintain conceptual consistency. Third, the study was delimited to structured mentoring programs within Alabama, regardless of whether the program was state- or district-sponsored. While the Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program (ANPMP) serves as a conceptual exemplar, it is neither the source of participants nor a site of data collection. Fifth, the scope of inquiry was intentionally focused on mentoring experiences related to leadership development, well-being, resilience, and retention, rather than on direct measures of student achievement, program effectiveness, or mentor performance evaluation. Finally, the study was delimited to mentoring relationships involving newly appointed principals in the early years of leadership, consistent with the study's theoretical grounding and focus on leadership transition.

Summary

Chapter 3 established the methodological foundation for this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study examining the lived experiences of trained mentors who support novice principals through structured mentoring programs in Alabama. The chapter demonstrated alignment among the problem statement, phenomenon under investigation, research questions, and study procedures, while also detailing ethical protections and methodological rigor, including data collection, data management, and interpretive analysis.

The chapter began by restating the problem driving the study. Newly appointed principals often enter the principalship under conditions that require immediate leadership performance, complex decision-making, and navigation of organizational dynamics that can result in role strain and isolation (Spillane & Lee, 2014). These challenges are intensified by contemporary expectations for instructional leadership, data-driven improvement, community engagement, and inclusive school cultures (Abbamont, 2020), as well as state mandates that increase pressure for measurable outcomes (Croy, 2024). In addition to operational demands, novice principals experience emotional labor associated with managing conflict and supporting school communities (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Because the early years of the principalship are closely connected to leadership confidence, resilience, and retention (Tekir, 2021), structured mentoring is widely recognized as a critical support for leadership development and sustainability (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018; Searby & Brondyk, 2007). However, mentors' perspectives remain underexplored, particularly in relation to how they interpret and enact their roles.

The chapter then clarified the purpose, phenomenon, and research questions guiding the study. The purpose was to explore mentors' lived experiences supporting novice principals within structured mentoring contexts in Alabama, with the ANPMP serving as an exemplar rather than a participant limitation. The central research question examined these lived experiences, while sub-questions focused on mentors' role in supporting development, perceptions of intent and involvement, and efforts to foster well-being through PERMA-informed practices (Mertz, 2004; Seligman, 2011).

Next, the chapter justified the use of a qualitative methodology and hermeneutic phenomenological design. This approach was selected to support the interpretation of meaning rather than measurement, recognizing mentoring as a relational, contextual, and emotionally complex phenomenon (Bloomberg, 2022; Peoples, 2020). The hermeneutic circle guided analysis through iterative movement between individual experiences and the broader interpretation (Bhattacharya, 2017).

The population and sampling approach were defined as purposive criterion sampling to ensure participants had direct experience with the phenomenon (Bloomberg, 2022). Participants were required to be trained mentors, actively supporting at least one novice principal within structured mentoring programs. Variation in mentoring contexts supported depth and interpretive richness rather than representational breadth (Bhattacharya, 2017; Bloomberg, 2022).

Instrumentation and sources data were aligned with the research questions. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source, supported by a demographic survey and a reflexive journal. These sources allowed for in-depth exploration of mentors' experiences while providing contextual support for interpretation (Kram, 1985; Mertz, 2004; Seligman, 2011).

The chapter also outlined strategies to ensure trustworthiness. Credibility was supported through in-depth interviewing, member checking, peer debriefing, and iterative coding. Dependability and confirmability were established through consistent procedures, reflexive journaling, and an audit trail, while transferability was supported through rich description (Bloomberg, 2022; Peoples, 2020).

Ethical considerations were addressed to ensure participant protection and compliance with IRB requirements. Procedures included informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality through pseudonyms, and secure data storage using AUBox. The study was designed as non-evaluative to minimize professional risk and support open participant reflection.

Finally, the chapter described the data analysis procedures used to generate findings. Analysis followed an iterative hermeneutic process, including immersion, coding, theme development, and synthesis into an integrated description of the phenomenon (Peoples, 2020). Limitations included reliance on self-reporting data, variation across mentoring contexts, and the interpretive nature of analysis. Delimitations included the focus on mentors, structured mentoring programs, and the early-career principal experiences.

In summary, Chapter 3 established a methodologically rigorous and ethically grounded approach aligned with the study's purpose and research questions. With these procedures defined, the study proceeds to Chapter 4, where findings are presented through themes representing mentors' lived experiences.

Chapter 4: Findings

As described in previous chapters, newly appointed principals frequently encounter significant professional and personal challenges during the early years of the principalship, including role overload, emotional strain, and heightened accountability demands (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Spillane & Lee, 2014). These challenges contribute to elevated levels of stress, burnout, and attrition among school leaders (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Structured mentoring had emerged as a promising strategy for addressing these challenges by supporting novice principals' leadership development, professional confidence, and long-term sustainability in the profession (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018; Searby & Brondyk, 2007). While prior research had examined the benefits of mentoring for novice principals, limited empirical attention had been given to the perspectives of mentors themselves, particularly within the context of Alabama, and to how mentors interpreted and enacted their role within structured mentoring relationships (Leithwood et al., 2020). Understanding mentors' lived experiences provided important insight into the relational and developmental processes that shaped mentoring effectiveness and leadership sustainability.

Guided by hermeneutic phenomenology, this study interpreted the meaning mentors attributed to their lived experiences supporting novice principals within structured mentoring environments, as described in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 presents the findings derived from interviews with trained mentors supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama. These findings are organized into themes that reflect how mentors experienced mentoring as a relational and sustained that supported leadership development, well-being and professional growth.

The following sections provide context for the participants and present the thematic findings that emerged through the interpretive analytic process. The findings are grounded in participants' narratives and reflect shared patterns in how mentors experienced and interpreted their work supporting novice principals. Each theme is supported by representative participant quotations that illustrate mentors' lived experiences and provide insight into how mentoring relationships supported leadership development, reflection, and well-being within structured mentoring contexts.

The themes are presented in relation to the study's research questions. Specifically, the findings examined how mentors described their role in supporting the professional and personal development of novice principals, how mentors perceived intentional involvement in shaping effective mentoring relationships, and how mentors supported well-being through relational connection, engagement, meaning, and accomplishment. These dimensions aligned with the study's Mentoring for Well-being Model, which framed mentoring as a structured, relational, and developmental process that supports leadership growth, psychosocial development, and well-being. The findings also showed how mentors made meaning of their role through intentional engagement, reflective dialogue, and sustained relational support.

The chapter concludes with a general summary of the findings that integrates the themes and provided a transition to Chapter 5. In the subsequent chapter, these findings will be interpreted in relation to existing literature, mentoring theory, and positive psychology frameworks introduced in earlier chapters, along with implications for mentoring practice, leadership development, and future research.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to address the gap in the literature of integrating mentoring theory and positive psychology within the context of structured mentoring relationships aimed at leadership development, retention, and emotional resilience. This study explored the lived experiences of mentors supporting novice principals. The results of this study were intended to improve leadership capacity and retention among novice principals. This information was also intended to inform the decisions of the state and local leaders to maintain funding for structured mentoring programs to positively affect the well-being and retention of novice principals.

Research Questions

1. What are the lived experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama?
    a. How do trained mentors describe their role in supporting the professional and personal development of new principals?
    b. How do trained mentors perceive the role of *intent* and *involvement* in shaping effective mentoring relationships?
    c. How do mentors foster positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA) in their work with novice principals?

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of five experienced educational leaders with diverse professional backgrounds in K-12 education and leadership. All participants had received formal mentoring training through district-level, state-sponsored, university-

affiliated, or national mentoring contexts and were actively engaged in mentoring novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama. Each participant brought unique experiences and perspectives shaped by their leadership roles and mentoring practices. Table 2 showed the general demographics of each participant.

Steve is a 50-year-old, multiracial male with 16-20 years of K-12 experience in education, including 11-15 years in educational leadership. His leadership experience includes serving as a high school assistant principal and high school principal. He currently serves as a clinical professor in an educational leadership program at a university in the southeastern United States. Steve currently mentors novice high school principals through a district-sponsored and a university affiliated structured mentoring program and has more than five years of mentoring experience.

Jeremy is a 57-year-old White male with over 21 years in K-12 education and more than 20 years in educational leadership. His leadership roles include serving as a high school assistant principal, high school principal, superintendent, and executive director of a prominent leadership association in Alabama. He currently serves as an assistant professor of clinical practice at a university in the southeastern United States. Jeremy also contributed to the development of the Alabama New Principal Mentoring Program (ANPMP). He mentors novice high school principals through a state-sponsored and university affiliated structured mentoring program and has more than five years of mentoring experience.

Valerie is a 70-year-old White female, with over 21 years of experience in K-12 education and 10-16 years of experience in educational leadership. She served as a middle school assistant principal and later as an elementary school principal. She is

currently retired and continues to mentor novice elementary school principals through a state-sponsored and university affiliated structured mentoring program, with more than five years of mentoring experience.

Kelly is a 68-year-old White female with over 21 years of experience in K-12 education and 16-20 years of experience in educational leadership, including roles as a middle school assistant principal and elementary school principal. She currently serves as an associate professor and director of doctoral programs at a university in the southeastern United States. Kelly currently mentors novice elementary school principals through district-sponsored, state-sponsored, and university affiliated structured mentoring programs and has more than five years of mentoring experience.

Jessica is a 73-year-old White female, with over 21 years in K-12 education and 6-10 years of experience in educational leadership. She transitioned directly from the classroom to the principalship role and later served as an associate professor at several universities in southeastern United States. Jessica has published multiple articles in peer-reviewed journals and book chapters related to mentoring and leadership. She is currently retired and continues to mentor novice principals through state-sponsored and university-affiliated structured mentoring program and has more than five years of mentoring experience.

Table 2. Participants demographics

Participant	Gender	Age	Race	Yrs in K-12 Ed	Mentoring Experience	Current Position	Mentoring Program Participation	Protégé School Setting	Protégé School Level
Steve	M	50	2 or more	16-20	>5yrs	Clinical Professor	District Sponsored / University Affiliated	suburban	HS
Jeremy	M	57	W	21+	>5yrs	Clinical Professor	State-Sponsored	suburban	HS
Valerie	F	70	W	21+	>5yrs	Retired School Leader	State-Sponsored / University Affiliated	suburban	Elem
Kelly	F	68	W	21+	>5yrs	Clinical Professor	District &State Sponsored /University Affiliated	Urban	Elem
Jessica	F	73	W	21+	>5yrs	Retired School Leader	State-Sponsored / University Affiliated	suburban	MS

Interviews and Data Analysis

Once the data were collected and transcribed, analysis began. The analytic process followed sequential phases consistent with phenomenological research (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Data were analyzed using an interpretive process consistent with the hermeneutic circle, including the identification of meaning units, condensation into codes, and development of themes.

Following transcription, the researcher immersed herself in the data by reading the transcripts multiple times to gain a holistic understanding before breaking the data into parts. During this process, meaningful phrases were highlighted, and notes were

recorded to capture participants' intended meanings. A reflective journal was maintained to document insights and emerging interpretations throughout the analysis process. As Bloomberg (2022) noted, recording insights during analysis supports deeper interpretation and reduces reliance on memory in later stages of the research process.

Meaningful units were then organized and sorted based on similarities, allowing for the development of themes grounded in the data. Key terms and representative quotations were identified and retained to support the emerging themes. Through this iterative process, themes emerged across participants' lived experiences. This process involved iterative movement between parts and the whole, consistent with the hermeneutic circle (Peoples, 2020).

Trustworthiness was supported through multiple strategies, including the use of an approved interview protocol, alignment of interview questions with established literature, and peer review of the coding process and theme development. The following section presents the key themes and their relationship to the overarching research question exploring the lived experiences of mentors supporting novice principals in Alabama.

Analysis of the five participants' interview data revealed several commonalities, which were organized into thematic categories. A theme was considered salient when it was reflected across at least three participants. A total of six themes emerged through an iterative coding process involving multiple rounds of analysis. Notes, coding charts, and reflective journaling were used to support the development and refinement of themes, along with member checking to enhance credibility. Representative quotations,

key words, and recurring phrases were identified to further support the thematic structure.

Each of the six phenomenological themes were represented across all participants, indicating strong thematic saturation and consistency in mentors' lived experiences. Participants consistently described mentoring as a professional responsibility grounded in service, emphasized the importance of relational trust, and highlighted the intentional nature of leadership development. Additionally, all participants reflected on mentoring as a reciprocal process that contributed to their own growth, while also emphasizing the importance of supporting novice principals' well-being and long-term sustainability in leadership roles. To provide clarity and alignment with the research sub-questions, the themes were presented in the order in which they were discussed in this chapter. Table 3 illustrated the distribution of themes across participants.

Table 3. Phenomenological themes across participants

Themes	Steve	Jeremy	Valerie	Kelly	Jessica
RQ1a (Professional & Personal Development)					
1. Intentional Development of Leadership Capacity	X	X	X	X	X
2. Leadership Identity Formation	X	X	X	X	X
RQ1b (Growth, Well-being & Resilience)					
3. Mentoring as Support for Well-being and Leadership Retention	X	X	X	X	X
4. Mentoring as a Professional Calling	X	X	X	X	X
RQ1c (Relational, Emotional & Developmental Dimensions)					
5. Relational Trust as the Foundation of Mentoring	X	X	X	X	X
6. Reciprocal Learning and Growth	X	X	X	X	X

Research Question 1a (Professional and Personal Development)

1. What are the lived experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals

within structured mentoring programs across Alabama?

a. How do trained mentors describe their role in supporting the professional and personal development of novice principals?

Theme 1: Intentional Development of Leadership Capacity

Participants consistently described their role as mentors as one of intentionally supporting the development of novice principals' leadership capacity through structured, purposeful, and individualized practices. Mentors framed their role not as providing answers, but as facilitating growth through questions, reflective dialogue, and timely feedback. Jeremy explains, *"We're not just wandering through the forest…we've got a plan."* Therefore, rather than directing decisions, mentors engaged protégés in thinking critically about their leadership practice and developing their own solutions.

Intentionality was central to how mentors guided professional development. Steve explained this clearly, stating, "*Let's be intentional…always think about the activities, the services, etc., everything you do with your mentee must have meaning and purpose."* Participants explained beginning the mentoring process by using intentional questioning and reflective conversations to guide the protégé in analyzing their experiences and determining next steps. Jessica reinforced this approach, explaining, *"We would rehearse…what they wanted to say,"* allowing the protégé to construct and refine their own responses to challenging situations. Jeremy further described mentoring as a guided process, noting that mentors must guide protégés to "*put the puzzle pieces together and help guide them in developing plans."*

Mentors also emphasized individual goal setting and needs assessment. Steve explained, *"What are their areas of strengths and what do they perceive are areas that*

they want to grow?" Kelly similarly noted that mentoring is "*very personalized and individualized. None of them needed the same thing*," focusing on identifying strengths and areas for development. These practices supported professional growth while encouraging protégés to take ownership of their development.

Participants also highlighted the importance of structured mentoring processes in guiding professional development. Jessica described mentoring as requiring clear expectations and organization, stating that effective mentoring includes "*setting goals, boundaries, expectations, timelines, and norms*." These structured elements helped ensure consistency and accountability while allowing flexibility to address immediate concerns.

In addition to goal setting and individualized support, participants further described how, through questioning, modeling, and reflective dialogue, mentors supported the development of instructional leadership and decision-making capacity. Steve stated, "*As an administrator, you should know best teaching practices and what quality teaching looks like."* However, rather than prescribing actions, mentors encouraged protégés to analyze their own practices and refine their leadership through reflection. Valerie highlighted the importance of goal setting and support, noting that mentors must help their protégés to "*establish your goals, beliefs, and support the faculty, with your actions and your words."* Participants engaged protégés in conversations about real-world challenges, using probing questions to help them analyze situations and determine next steps. Similarly, Steve described using "*one-on-one conversations*" and modeling behaviors to support professional growth. These

strategies provided protégés with opportunities to apply leadership skills in a supportive environment before implementing them in their schools.

Participants also recognized that leadership development was a gradual process that requires time and sustained support. Mentors noted that meaningful growth does not occur immediately but developed over time through ongoing engagement and reflection. Steve reflected this perspective, stating, *"You can see things within the first year, but…measurable growth really starts that second year because you've had time for them to truly make it their own."* This perspective highlighted the importance of long-term mentoring relationships in fostering meaningful development.

In addition to professional skill development, mentors described their role in supporting personal growth by fostering confidence, decision-making, and self-efficacy. Jessica emphasized empowering protégés to take ownership of their decisions, stating, "*This is your life, you are making decisions for yourself, and I'm empowering you to become that decision maker."* and Jeremy similarly described mentoring as '*affirming and encouraging*" protégés as they navigate the complexities of leadership. Together, these comments reflected how mentors balanced guidance with autonomy, helping protégés build confidence while developing independence. Jeremy further emphasized that mentoring involved *"affirming and encouraging"* protégés as they navigated increasingly complex leadership decisions, reinforcing confidence alongside skill development.

Overall, Theme 1 showed that mentors experienced leadership development as a gradual process shaped by intentional engagement, reflective questioning, and individualized support. This finding aligned with the Mentoring for Well-being Model by

showing how career development, psychosocial support, and mentoring structures worked together to support novice principals' growth.

Theme 2: Leadership Identity Formation

In addition to intentionally developing leadership capacity, participants described their role as mentors as supporting the formation of novice principals' leadership identity. Mentors described becoming effective school leaders as more than acquiring technical skills; rather it was an evolving process grounded in reflection, self-awareness, and experience. Leadership identity was not imposed by the mentor but developed through guided reflection and personal meaning-making.

Participants framed leadership identity formation as a gradual and evolving process shaped through experience, reflection, and guided support. Steve further emphasized creating opportunities for conversations with protégés to shape their leadership identity, stating, "*let's help them craft that,"* highlighting the mentor's role in guiding how novice principals understood themselves as leaders. Valerie similarly emphasized the individualized nature of leadership development, explaining that mentoring involved helping novice principals *"discover your management style"* and align their leadership with their beliefs and actions. These perspectives reflected that leadership identity was not predetermined but developed through intentional support and self-exploration rather than imitation.

A key aspect of this process involved helping novice principals navigate the transition from prior roles, such as classroom teacher, instructional coach, or assistant principal, into the principalship. Participants described the transition into the principalship as both professionally and personally demanding, often requiring a

significant shift in thinking and self-perception. Mentors emphasized that novice principals must move beyond task-oriented roles to develop a broader leadership perspective. Jeremy captured this shift, explaining that mentors help novice principals *"see the map in their head that this is all falling into place,"* supporting their understanding of leadership as a complex and evolving process. Kelly further noted that novice principals often being the role feeling overwhelmed but, through guided support and reflection, begin to gain clarity and confidence in their leadership. Together, these perspectives illustrate that mentors support identity formation by helping novice principals reinterpret their experiences, shift their mindset, and gradually develop a coherent sense of themselves as leaders.

Mentors also emphasized the importance of developing confidence and self-efficacy as part of leadership identity formation. Participants explained how novice principals frequently question their abilities, particularly in the early stages of the role. Mentors addressed this by offering affirmation, encouragement, and constructive feedback. Jessica highlighted the importance of affirmation, stating that mentors must help protégés *"believe that they can do the work and that they are capable of leading."* Similarly, Kelly emphasized reinforcing progress and mindset, noting the importance of *"the power of YET,"* encouraging novice principals to recognize that growth occurs over time. Valerie also reinforced this idea, explaining that mentoring involves *"helping others feel good about themselves"* while continuing to grow professionally. These practices supported the internalization of a leadership identity grounded in confidence and growth. Kelly reflected on how her protégé's felt stating, *"She was very frustrated and overwhelmed… but by the end of the year, she was very good at what she did."* This

progression illustrated not only skill development but a shift in how novice principals understood themselves as capable leaders, reflecting the internalization of a developing leadership identity.

Identity development was supported through reflective questioning and dialogue. Mentors engaged protégés in ongoing conversations about their decisions, challenges, and successes, encouraging them to think critically about their leadership actions. Steve described these reflective conversations as essential, noting that mentoring involves helping principals "*process what they're experiencing and understand why they made certain decisions,"* emphasizing reflection over direction. Jessica similarly emphasized reflective and self-awareness practices, stating the *"importance of helping protégés understand their strengths, communication styles, and decision-making processes."* Mentors framed challenges as opportunities for growth, encouraging protégés to examine their thinking and develop confidence through reflection rather than relying on mentor-driven answers. Through reflection, novice principals were able to make meaning of their experiences and refine their leadership approach over time.

Participants also highlighted the role of mentoring in helping novice principals align their leadership practices with a focus on instructional leadership and student outcomes. Mentors encouraged protégés to connect their decisions to broader goals, values, and the needs of their school community. Kelly emphasized that leadership decisions should align with purpose, noting the importance of understanding *"what your values are as a leader"* and ensuring decisions reflect those values. This alignment contributed to the development of a leadership identity grounded in purpose and impact.

Finally, mentors described leadership identity formation as a relational process influenced by ongoing interactions with mentors, staff, and the larger school community. Through consistent support, feedback, and dialogue, mentors helped novice principals develop a sense of belonging within the leadership role. Jeremy highlighted the importance of relational understanding, explaining that mentors must *"get to know my mentee and know what makes them tick inside and outside of school."* Kelly further emphasized that mentoring relationships provide a space where novice principals can "*grow into the role with support*," reinforcing the importance of relational context in shaping leadership identity.

Overall, these findings reflected that leadership identity formation was not a singular event, but an evolving process shaped through questioning, reflection, and guided experience across all participants. By helping novice principals develop confidence, navigate role transitions, and align their practices with core leadership values, mentors contributed to novice principals' growth as they defined their leadership identity, reinforcing a growth mindset grounded in self-awareness and continuous development.

Table 4 presents the alignment of Themes 1 and 2 with Kram's career functions and illustrates how these functions supported both professional and personal development within the mentoring relationship. Although the table is organized around Kram's career mentoring functions, the findings also reflect the broader dialogue, and developmental support contributed to novice principals' growth, confidence, and emerging leadership identity. In this way, the table demonstrates how career development was not limited to technical skill building, but was also centered to the

personal dimensions of leading, learning and becoming more confident in the principal role.

Table 4. Alignment of themes 1 and 2 with Kram's career functions, mentoring for well-being, and professional and personal development in mentoring

Kram's Career Function	Description	Evidence from Themes 1-2	Professional Development	Personal Development
Sponsorship	Mentor advocated for advancement opportunities	Mentors provided access to networks and encouraged leadership opportunities (Theme 1)	Expanded leadership opportunities and career pathways	Built confidence and sense of capability
Coaching	Mentor provided feedback, guidance, and skill development	Mentors engaged in reflective dialogue, modeling, and skill-building conversations (Theme 1)	Developed instructional leadership, decision-making, problem-solving skills	Enhanced self-awareness and reflective practices
Protection	Mentor helped protégé navigate challenges and avoid pitfalls	Mentors supported novice principals through difficult situations and decision-making (Themes 1 & 2)	Reduced errors in leadership practice and improves effectiveness	Reduced anxiety and builds emotional security
Exposure and Visibility	Mentor increased protégé's visibility and professional recognition	Mentors engaged protégé in broader leadership networks and professional communities (Theme 1)	Strengthened professional identity and leadership presence	Reinforced confidence and validation
Challenging Assignments	Mentor provided opportunities that stretch protégé's abilities	Mentors encouraged novice principals take on leadership challenges and reflect on experiences (Theme 2)	Built leadership capacity through applied experience	Promoted a growth mindset and resilience

Note: Mentoring for Well-being is reflected across the table through the integration of career development, psychosocial development, mentoring processes and structures, well-being, and social connectedness. Themes 1 and 2 show how mentors supported novice principals' professional growth while also fostering confidence, reflection, identity development, and sustained engagement.

As shown in Table 4, Themes 1 and 2 reflected the ways mentors supported novice principals through intentional guidance, reflective questioning, problem-solving, and identity development. These findings aligned with Kram's career functions while also extending into the well-being dimensions of mentoring, particularly as mentors helped protégés develop confidence, purpose, and a stronger sense of leadership capacity. The table supports the interpretation that professional and personal development were intertwined within the mentoring experience, rather than operating as separate forms of support.

Research Question 1b (Growth, Well-Being, and Resilience)

1. What are the lived experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama?
    b. How do trained mentors perceive the role of *intent* and *involvement* in shaping effective mentoring relationships?

Theme 3: Support for Well-Being and Professional Sustainability

As mentors supported leadership development, they also recognized the emotional demands of the principalship and the importance of sustaining well-being over time. Participants framed their role as extending beyond professional guidance to include emotional support, resilience-building, and reflective processing of leadership challenges. Mentors emphasized that supporting well-being was not separate from leadership development, but essential to sustaining effectiveness in the role.

Participants first highlighted the emotional intensity associated with transitioning into the principalship. Mentors described novice principals as frequently experiencing stress, self-doubt, and feelings of being overwhelmed, particularly during the early

stages of the role. Kelly acknowledged the emotional weight of leadership, stating *"It's okay to feel overwhelmed. We all feel overwhelmed. It's an overwhelming position."* Valerie similarly described how mentors engaged in conversations that address *"emotional strain and burnout*," emphasizing the importance of creating space for principals to process their experiences. This emphasis highlighted the mentor's role in facilitating emotional processing, rather than simply offering reassurance but helping protégés make sense of their experiences in ways that supported resilience. These perspectives illustrate that mentors normalized the emotional challenges of leadership, helping novice principals recognize that these experiences are expected and manageable rather than signs of inadequacy.

Building on this understanding, participants emphasized fostering resilience through reflection, questioning, and reframing experiences. Mentors described resilience as developing over time through guided reflection rather than immediate problem-solving. Steve highlighted the importance of perspective and emotional regulation, noting that leaders must recognize that *"there's so many things out of our control, but one of the things we do have control over is our own emotions."* Valerie further reinforced that mentoring involves helping protégés move through challenges thoughtfully, encouraging reflection and forward movement rather than avoidance. Together, these perspectives illustrated that mentors supported resilience by helping novice principals regulate emotions, interpret challenges constructively, and develop adaptive responses to complex situations.

Participants also highlighted the importance of intentional encouragement and mindset development in sustaining well-being. Jessica emphasized that one of the

mentor's primary responsibilities is encouragement, stating, *"The biggest job as a mentor is affirming and encouraging."* She further explained that mentors should *"remind them how far they have come,"* helping protégés recognize their progress and build confidence. Jeremy reinforced this mindset-oriented approach, explaining, *"Focus on what you can control…it's far better to do that with a positive mindset,"* emphasizing the importance of directing attention toward manageable aspects of leadership. Kelly extended this idea by encouraging mentors to *"celebrate small wins"* and maintain a focus on *"progress over perfection."* These practices illustrated how mentors fostered resilience by reinforcing growth, promoting positive thinking, and supporting reflective decision-making rather than providing direct solutions.

In addition to emotional and cognitive support, participants emphasized the importance of maintaining balance and preventing burnout. Mentors recognized that the demands of leadership can become overwhelming without intentional boundaries. Steve described the need to manage time and emotional investment, noting that mentoring requires *"100% to 120%- time commitment,"* but emphasized the need to *"find a way to turn it off so it's not on my mind 24/7."* Kelly similarly reflected on the importance of managing time and energy, explaining that leadership responsibilities can become *"all-consuming"* without intentional effort to maintain balance. These insights highlighted that sustaining well-being required both commitment and boundary-setting to remain effective over time.

Participants also described the role of mentoring in reducing isolation and fostering relational support. Mentors emphasized that novice principals often feel alone in their roles and benefit from having consistent support. Jeremy noted that mentoring

helps principals realize they are not alone, explaining that *"people have someone in their corner…and they're not doing the work alone."* Valerie similarly emphasized the importance of providing *"encouragement while maintaining accountability,"* reinforcing that mentoring relationships support both emotional stability and professional growth. These relationships contributed to a sense of connection and belonging, which is critical to sustaining well-being in leadership roles.

Finally, participants interpreted their role as supporting long-term retention and sustainability in leadership. Mentors recognized that without support, novice principals are at risk of burnout and attrition. Steve emphasized the impact of mentoring on retention, stating that without a mentor, novice principals may *"burnout within 2 years,"* whereas mentoring provides the guidance needed to persist. Jessica reinforced this connection by highlighting the *"sense of purpose and accomplishment"* that emerges through mentoring relationships, explaining supporting others contributes to both professional fulfillment and sustained engagement in leadership. These findings indicate that mentoring plays a critical role in promoting lone-term commitment to the principalship.

Overall, these findings aligned with the Mentoring for Well-being Model by showing how mentors supported novice principals through relational connection, reflective processing, emotional encouragement, and attention to long-term professional sustainability. Participants described well-being as inseparable from leadership development, suggesting that effective mentoring requires both professional guidance and care for the personal demands of the principalship. These findings also reflected Mertz's emphasis on involvement, as mentors demonstrated sustained availability,

emotional investment, and purposeful engagement throughout the mentoring relationship. In this way, Theme 3 illustrated how mentoring for well-being operates as an intentional, relational, and sustaining practice.

Theme 4: Mentoring as a Professional Calling

Beyond supporting well-being, mentors described their role as grounded in professional calling, service, and continued connection to the field. Participants viewed mentoring not simply as a professional responsibility, but as meaningful work that allowed them to give back, support future leaders, and remain engaged in educational leadership. This sense of calling contributed to their own professional fulfillment, engagement, and sustained commitment to mentoring.

A central aspect of this theme was the idea of mentoring as service to others. Participants expressed a strong belief that mentoring is rooted in giving back to the profession. Participants described their calling not as telling others what to do, but as creating conditions for growth. Steve articulated this perspective clearly, stating, *"Mentoring is always about giving back… to us that are given; we must give back as well,"* which participants enacted through guiding, listening, and questioning rather than directing. Valerie similarly described mentoring as an intrinsic motivation, explaining, *"I have always been interested in helping someone else better themselves and move forward."* This sense of calling was expressed through intentional support that helped protégés think independently, reflect on decisions, and grow into the principal role.

Participants also emphasized that mentoring provided a strong sense of purpose and meaning in their professional lives. Jessica explicitly connected mentoring to purpose, stating, *"What better purpose than to help someone else become leaders,"*

reinforcing her contribution to developing effective school leaders. She further described mentoring as one of the most meaningful aspects of her career, noting that even after retirement, it continues to provide *"one of the most meaningful aspects of her life."* Kelly echoed this sentiment, explaining that mentoring allows her to *"pour into the next generation,"* reinforcing her commitment to leadership development and her continued engagement in the profession. These perspectives aligned with the concept of mentoring as a source of meaning and fulfillment.

Mentors also explained mentoring as a source of professional satisfaction and accomplishment. Participants expressed a sense of pride in supporting novice principals and contributing to their growth. Steve reflected on the emotional rewards of mentoring, stating that it provides *"a sense of satisfaction"* and fulfillment in being *"a part of someone else's journey."* Jessica similarly emphasized the sense of accomplishment derived from mentoring, noting that it is rewarding to help novice principals succeed and *"support someone from burning out and quitting."* Valerie reinforced this idea by describing mentoring as *"worth every minute,"* highlighting the personal and professional satisfaction gained through supporting others.

Another important aspect of this theme was the idea that mentoring sustained mentors' own professional growth and connection to the field. Participants framed mentoring as a reciprocal process that allowed them to continue learning and remain engaged in educational leadership. Jeremy emphasized this reciprocal nature of mentoring, noting that he was *"enjoying learning as much from the protégé as the protégé was from him,"* highlighting that mentoring contributes to his own development. Kelly similarly noted that mentoring helps her stay *"grounded in the field,"* allowing her

to remain connected to current practices and experiences. These experiences demonstrated that mentoring supported novice principals while also sustaining mentors' own engagement, sense of purpose, and connection to the profession.

Participants further emphasized that mentoring requires commitment, time, and emotional investment, reinforcing its nature as a calling rather than a task. Mentors described being deeply invested in their protégés and prioritizing the relationship. Jeremy explained that once he commits to mentoring, *"I'm invested,"* emphasizing the level of dedication required. Jessica similarly described mentoring as requiring significant time and energy, noting that she is available to her protégés *"weekends, evenings, whatever,"* reflecting the depth of her commitment. Steve also highlighted the importance of commitment, describing mentoring as requiring a *"willingness to give time and be intentional"* in supporting protégés.

Participants also described the need to regulate their own well-being while remaining deeply invested in their protégés. Mentoring was experienced as meaningful and purpose-driven, yet participants recognized that the time and emotional energy required of the role needed to be managed with care. Jessica's reflection revealed this tension. She explained, "I would say the time and emotional energy I give is extensive when someone asks me to mentor them," while also acknowledging that "there probably were sometimes that I didn't balance it very well because I consider it an honor" to be their mentor. Kelly's description further illustrated how mentors managed this tension in practice, as she explained, "I scheduled myself where I wasn't overwhelmed and I could take the time, when needed, and invest in others." Together, these accounts suggested that mentoring as a professional calling required both deep commitment and ongoing

self-regulation. Mentors sustained their capacity to support protégés by managing availability, setting boundaries, and remaining attentive to their own well-being.

Finally, participants connected mentoring to broader outcomes related to leadership sustainability and retention. Mentors viewed their role as essential in helping novice principals remain in the profession and succeed over time. Jeremy emphasized the importance of mentoring for leadership development, noting that mentoring is a *"hallmark"* of effective leadership support. Steve similarly highlighted its impact on retention, explaining that *"mentoring provides the support necessary to prevent burnout and isolation."* These perspectives reinforced mentoring as a critical component of sustaining the principalship.

Overall, the findings indicated that mentors experience their role as a professional calling characterized by purpose, service, fulfillment, and sustained commitment. Through mentoring, participants supported the development and well-being of novice principals while also experiencing meaning, accomplishment, and continued professional engagement themselves. At the same time, mentors recognized the importance of regulating their own well-being as they invested deeply in their protégés. This theme reflected that mentoring was not merely a function of leadership development, but a purposeful and sustaining practice that required both relational commitment and attention to balance.

These findings aligned with the Mentoring for Well-being Model by showing how mentoring functioned as a source of meaning, accomplishment, and sustained professional engagement for mentors. Participants' descriptions also reflected Mertz's concepts of intent and involvement, as mentors articulated a clear sense of purpose for

mentoring, and demonstrated commitment through time, emotional investment, and continued support. In this theme, mentoring functioned not only as support for novice principals, but also as a sustaining practice that reinforced mentors' own professional identity, connection, and fulfillment.

Table 5 extends the discussion of the conceptual framework by aligning Themes 3 and 4 with Mertz's model of intent and involvement and the Mentoring for Well-being Model, highlighting the purpose, presence, and relational investment mentors brought to their work. These findings showed that mentors did not simply provide technical guidance; they intentionally supported novice principals' well-being, resilience, and professional sustainability through ongoing engagement.

Table 5. Alignment of themes 3 and 4 with Mertz's intent and involvement and the mentoring for well-being model

Mertz's Mentoring Dimensions	Description	Evidence from Themes 3 and 4	Mentoring for Well-being Alignment	Interpretation
Intent	The purpose and direction of the mentoring relationship	Mentors intentionally supported novice principals' well-being, resilience, confidence, and professional sustainability	Mentoring was connected through encouragement, reflection, emotional support, and meaning	Mentoring was not accidental or informal support; it was purposeful work aimed at helping novice principals remain grounded and sustained in the role
Involvement	The mentor's level of engagement, availability, and investment	Mentors described being present, responsive, and emotionally invested in the needs of novice principals	Sustained engagement supported social connectedness, reassurance, and stability	Mentoring required more than program structure; it depended on the mentor's active presence and relational commitment

Intent + Involvement	The combined depth of purpose and engagement in mentoring	Themes 3 and 4 showed that mentors supported both the emotional demands of leadership and their own sense of purpose and well-being	The Mentoring for Well-being Model reflected mentoring as relational, sustaining, and connected to both professional and personal development	Mentoring emerged as a sustained relational practice that supported leadership well-being while also reinforcing mentors' purpose and professional identity

As shown in Table 5, Mertz's dimensions of intent and involvement helped explain how mentors experienced their work as both purposeful and relationally engaged. Intent was reflected in mentors' desire to support novice principals beyond immediate problem-solving, while involvement was reflected in their sustained availability, encouragement, and emotional investment. When viewed through the Mentoring for Well-being Model, these themes suggest that mentoring supported well-being through connection, meaning, reflection, and professional sustainability. Together, Themes 3 and 4 demonstrated that mentoring was experienced as a relational practice that sustained both novice principals and the mentors who supported them.

Research Question 1c (Relational, Emotional, and Developmental Dimensions)

1. What are the lived experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama?
    c. How do mentors foster positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA) in their work with novice principals?

Theme 5: Relational Trust as the Foundation of Mentoring

This sense of purpose was enacted through deeply relational practices, where trust served as the foundation of mentoring relationships. Participants consistently

described relational trust as the foundation upon which effective mentoring relationships were built. Mentors emphasized that without trust, effective mentoring cannot fully support the emotional, professional, and developmental needs of novice principals. Trust was not viewed as automatic, but as something intentionally developed through consistent interaction, authenticity, and mutual respect.

A central component of this theme was the importance of building authentic relationships. Participants further explained the need to establish genuine connections, and trust was built through active listening and non-evaluative dialogue. Jeremy emphasized this relational foundation, explaining, *"I have to get to know my mentee and know what makes them tick inside and outside of school,"* highlighting the importance of listening to understand. This perspective reflected the belief that mentoring extends beyond professional guidance to understanding the mentee as a whole person. Kelly similarly highlighted the importance of relational connection, noting that effective mentoring required developing relationships where protégés *"feel safe to share their experiences honestly and openly."* Valerie reinforced this idea, explaining that mentoring is grounded in *"helping others grow through supportive and caring relationships, where they feel encouraged and valued."*

Participants also emphasized consistency and presence as essential elements in building trust. Mentors described the importance of being available, reliable, and engaged over time. Jessica highlighted this level of commitment, stating, *"I'm available to my mentees whenever they need me- weekends, evenings, whatever it takes."* These practices reflected active listening and relational presence. Steve similarly emphasized the importance if consistent engagement, explaining that *"mentoring involves ongoing*

conversations and intentional time spent supporting the mentee's development." These consistent interactions helped establish a sense of reliability and strengthened the relational bond between mentor and protégé.

Another key aspect of relational trust involved creating a safe space for vulnerability and honest communication. Participants suggested that novice principals must feel comfortable sharing uncertainties, challenges, and mistakes without fear of judgment, strengthening both trust and growth. Jessica explained that mentoring involves creating an environment where mentees can *"be honest about difficult situations and receive guidance without feeling judged."* Valerie similarly described providing a *"listening ear"* for protégés experiencing stress or burnout, emphasizing that trust allows protégés to openly discuss their struggles. These experiences highlight the importance of emotional safety in fostering meaningful mentoring relationships.

Participants further explained how relational trust often extended beyond professional mentoring relationships and developed into lasting personal connections. Mentors emphasized that as trust deepens, relationships frequently evolved into friendship that persist beyond the formal mentoring structure. These relationships deepened not only through shared professional experiences, but also through navigating significant personal challenges together.

Jessica described the depth of these relationships, explaining, *"You build relationships that last far beyond the mentoring program…those relationships don't just end."* She emphasized that mentoring often created enduring connections rooted in trust, shared experiences, and ongoing support. Similarly, Kelly highlighted the personal

nature of these relationships, noting that *“mentors and mentees often remain connected because of the meaningful experiences we shared throughout the mentoring process.”*

Participants also described how trust is strengthened through support during difficult life circumstances. Valerie reflected on mentoring relationships that extended into personal hardship, explaining that *“I am there for my mentee not only for the hard times at school, but also for the tough times they go through at home.”* Jessica echoed this as she reflected on a time *“when my mentee unexpectedly lost her husband. My role changed from being the mentor to being a grief counselor,”* further demonstrating how mentors were present not only for professional challenges but also during significant life events, including loss and grief. Jeremy similarly emphasized that mentoring often extended beyond the role itself, noting that mentors support protégé through *“life experiences that go beyond the job,”* reinforcing the depth of connection that developed over time. Steve also highlighted the relational depth that emerges through shared experiences, explaining that *“mentoring relationships are built through being present and supportive when it matters most.”* These shared experiences, particularly during challenging times, contributed to the development of trust that extend beyond the professional context.

Mentors also framed trust as being built through mutual respect and non-evaluative support. Participants emphasized that mentoring differs from supervision because it is not tied to formal evaluation. Steve explained that *“mentors must approach the relationship as supportive partners rather than evaluators, allowing mentees to reflect and explore their leadership decisions.”* Jeremy reinforced this distinction, noting that *“trust is strengthened when mentees understand that the mentor’s role is to guide*

and support rather than assess performance." Kelly further emphasized that this non-evaluative relationship creates *"space for growth, allows the mentee to take risks and learn from their experiences."*

Trust was strengthened through listening, questioning, and creating space for reflection. Participants described how mentoring relationships often evolved into lasting personal connections, through shared experiences and life challenges. Steve emphasized that trust is built through *"consistency and intentional engagement,"* while Jeremy noted that *"relationships strengthen as mentors and mentees work through challenges together."* Kelly stated that *"trust is something that develops gradually, that it grows throughout the mentee's journey."*

Finally, these findings suggested relational trust as essential for supporting both professional and personal development. When trust was established, protégés were more willing to seek guidance, accept feedback, and engage in reflective practices. Valerie emphasized that trust allows mentors to *"provide honest feedback while still maintaining that supportive relationship,"* reinforcing both growth and confidence. Jeremy further explained that *"strong mentoring relationships ensure that novice principals feel supported and not isolated,"* strengthening both their effectiveness and their commitment to leadership.

Overall, these findings indicated that mentors interpreted relational trust as the cornerstone of effective mentoring. Through authenticity, consistency, emotional support, and non-evaluative engagement, mentors created relationships that enabled open communication, reflective growth, and sustained development. Relational trust not only supported the immediate needs of novice principals but also fostered deeper,

enduring relationships that extend beyond professional boundaries and supported long-term personal and professional success.

Theme 6: Reciprocal Learning and Growth

Within these trusting relationships, mentoring evolved into a reciprocal process characterized by shared learning and mutual growth. Participants consistently described mentoring as a reciprocal process in which both mentor and protégé experienced growth and development. Rather than viewing mentoring as a one-directional transfer of knowledge, mentors emphasized that learning occurs through shared experiences, dialogue, and reflection. This reciprocal dynamic contributed to both professional development and personal fulfillment, reinforcing mentoring as a mutually beneficial relationship.

A central component of this theme was the recognition that mentors continued to learn alongside their protégés. Participants described gaining new perspectives, insights, and understanding through their interactions with novice principals. Jeremy explicitly acknowledged this reciprocal nature, stating, *"I'm enjoying learning as much from you as you learn from me,"* reflecting mutual inquiry. This statement reflected the idea that mentoring was not hierarchical, but instead a shared learning experience where both individuals contributed to the process. Kelly similarly emphasized that *"mentoring allows me to remain connected to current practices and helps me stay grounded in what is going on in schools today."*

Participants also suggested how reciprocal learning occurs through reflective dialogue and shared problem-solving. Mentors engaged in conversations that allowed both parties to explore challenges, consider multiple perspectives, and co-construct

solutions. Steve emphasized the importance of these interactions, explaining that *“mentoring involves conversations where we reflect on what happened that week, discuss how they handled the situation, and what could have been done differently or was it a win based on a strategy we had been working on.”* Jessica similarly described how discussions with protégés often led to new insights, stating, *“mentoring conversations are opportunities for both of us to think differently and grow.”* These shared exchanges contributed to deeper understanding and professional growth for both mentors and protégés.

Another key aspect of reciprocal learning involved mentors reflecting on their own leadership practices as a result of mentoring. Participants explained how working with novice principals prompted them to revisit their own experiences, decisions, and approaches to leadership. Valerie reflected on her own growth through mentoring, explaining that the process helped her *“learn to be a better leader”* by thinking more intentionally about her actions and decisions. This reflection highlighted that mentoring served as a form of professional renewal, allowing mentors to continue evolving in their practice.

Participants further emphasized that reciprocal learning strengthened the mentoring relationship itself. As mentors and protégés engaged in shared learning, trust deepened, and the relationship became more collaborative. Mentors described reciprocal learning as a partnership in which both individuals contributed to the learning process and supported one another’s growth. Kelly reinforced this idea, noting that *“mentoring relationships become stronger when both parties are open to learning from*

each other and valuing each other's perspectives." This mutual respect and shared growth contributed to the relational depth of mentoring.

In addition to professional growth, participants described reciprocal learning as contributing to personal fulfillment and renewed purpose. Mentors expressed that learning from their protégés brought energy and engagement to their work. Jessica highlighted this sense of fulfillment, explaining, *"Mentoring allows me to continue growing while supporting others,"* creating a meaningful and dynamic professional experience. Steve similarly noted that *"mentoring provides opportunities to reflect on one's journey and continue learning, reinforcing a sense of purpose and engagement in the field."*

Finally, participants emphasized that reciprocal learning was sustained through continuous questioning, feedback, and reflection, reinforcing a shared commitment to growth. Jeremy highlighted this process, explaining, *"being a great listener and questioner is critical"* in effective mentoring. These findings suggested how this shared learning approach modeled the importance of reflection, adaptability, and lifelong learning for novice principals. By engaging in reciprocal learning, mentors not only supported the development of their protégés but also demonstrated the value of a growth mindset within leadership practice.

This process also reinforced a sense of accomplishment, as mentors and protégés recognized growth over time and the successful application of leadership practices. Overall, these findings indicated that mentors interpreted mentoring as a reciprocal and dynamic process characterized by shared learning and mutual growth. Through reflective dialogue, collaborative problem-solving, and ongoing engagement,

both mentors and protégés contributed to and benefited from the mentoring relationship. This reciprocity reinforced mentoring as a relational and developmental experience that supported continuous professional and personal growth for all involved. These findings aligned with mentoring theory emphasizing mutuality and shared growth, reinforcing that mentoring relationships are not unidirectional but co-constructed through ongoing interaction.

The relational, emotional, and developmental dimensions of mentoring described in RQ1c aligned closely with Seligman's PERMA framework of well-being. As illustrated in Table 6, Themes 5 and 6 reflected multiple elements of PERMA, highlighting the interconnected role of relationships, engagement, meaning, and accomplishment within mentoring experiences.

Table 6. Alignment of themes 5 and 6 with the PERMA framework

Theme	PERMA Element	Description of Mentoring Experience	Evidence from Participants	Connection to Relational, Emotional, and Developmental Dimensions
Theme 5: Relational Trust as the Foundation of Mentoring	Relationships (Primary)	Mentors build trust through authenticity, active listening, and consistency	Participants described knowing protégés personally and creating safe spaces	Strengthens relational bonds and emotional safety
	Positive Emotion	Mentors provide encouragement and emotional support	Participants described reassurance and normalization of challenges	Promotes confidence and emotional stability

Theme 6: Reciprocal Learning and Growth	Engagement	Mentors and protégés engage in reflective dialogue and shared problem-solving	Participants described ongoing conversations and collaborative reflection	Encourages engagement in leadership development
	Accomplishment	Mentors support recognition of growth and success	Participants described celebrating progress and reflecting on achievements	Builds self-efficacy, and leadership competence
	Meaning	Mentors experience fulfillment through contribution and shared learning	Participants described mentoring as purposeful and rewarding	Enhances professional purpose and fulfillment
	Relationships (Secondary)	Reciprocal learning strengthens relational depth	Participants described mutual respect and shared growth	Reinforces trust and collaboration

These findings suggested that mentoring relationships supported well-being not only through individual elements of PERMA, but through their combined and interconnected influence on mentors' experiences.

Synthesis of Findings for Research Question 1

1. What are the lived experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama?

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama. Across the findings, mentors described their work as purposeful, and relationship

based. Their support moved beyond technical skills and included professional guidance, emotional encouragement, trust-building, reflective dialogue, and reciprocal learning.

These findings reflected the study's conceptual framework, the Mentoring for Well-being Model, which positioned mentoring as a learning partnership shaped by social connectedness, positive psychology, career development, psychosocial development, and mentoring structures. Within this model, mentoring was understood as a process that supported both leadership growth and well-being. Mentors helped novice principals build confidence, develop resilience, feel connected, and make sense of their leadership roles. Kram's mentoring functions, Mertz's model of intent and involvement, and Seligman's PERMA framework informed the model and guided interpretation of the findings. Kram's work helped explain the career-related and psychosocial dimensions of mentoring. Mertz's work clarified the importance of purpose and sustained involvement. Seligman's PERMA framework supported interpretation of how mentoring contributed to positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment.

Collectively, the findings indicated that mentoring was not experienced as a directive or advice-giving process. Mentors described their role as one of guiding, listening, questioning, and helping novice principals think through decisions. This reflected the career development dimensions of the Mentoring for Well-being Model because mentors helped novice principals strengthen leadership skills, navigate role expectations, and build professional confidence. At the same time, mentors' emphasis on encouragement, trust, and leadership identity reflected the psychosocial dimensions of the model.

The lived experiences of mentoring were also shaped by purpose and sustained engagement. Mentors described their work as responsive to the needs of each novice principal. They supported goal setting, remained available during challenging situations, and adjusted their support as protégés encountered new leadership demands. This pattern was consistent with Mertz's model of intent and involvement, which helped explain how effective mentoring required both a clear developmental purpose and meaningful relational investment. Within the Mentoring for Well-being Model, this was reflected in the mentoring structures and processes that supported high-quality mentoring relationships.

Mentoring was also experienced as emotionally engaged and deeply relational. Mentors recognized that novice principals often faced stress, uncertainty, isolation, and role strain. Through active listening, encouragement, and reflective dialogue, mentors created space for protégés to process challenges, manage stress, and develop resilience. These findings reflected the well-being dimension of the Mentoring for Well-being Model and several elements of PERMA. Positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment appeared as connected parts of the mentoring experience rather than separate outcomes.

Relational trust emerged as a central component of the mentoring experience, serving as the foundation for all developmental and emotional support. Mentors emphasized that trust was built through authenticity, consistency, and non-evaluative support. As trust deepened, novice principals were more willing to reflect honestly, ask questions, and discuss difficult leadership experiences. This finding reflected the social connectedness component of the Mentoring for Well-being Model. Trust functioned not

only as a condition for effective mentoring, but also as an outcome of sustained engagement.

Finally, mentors described mentoring as a shared learning process. Participants reflected on how mentoring contributed to their own growth as leaders and practitioners. Mentors also described their work as a professional calling, emphasizing service, purpose, and continued commitment to supporting the next generation of school leaders. At the same time, they recognized the need to regulate their own well-being by managing time, emotional energy, availability, and boundaries while remaining deeply invested in their protégés. These findings aligned with the learning partnership dimension of the Mentoring for Well-being Model because mentoring was not experienced as a one-directional transfer of knowledge. Instead, both mentor and protégé contributed to the relationship and learned through ongoing dialogue. This shared learning also reflected the PERMA elements of engagement, meaning, and accomplishment, as mentors found purpose and fulfillment in supporting novice principals.

Taken together, the findings indicated that mentoring novice principals involved professional guidance, emotional support, trust, reflection, and mutual learning. Through the Mentoring for Well-being Model, mentoring was understood as a learning partnership that supported leadership development, social connectedness, well-being, and sustained professional growth. Rather than a simple transfer of knowledge from mentor to protégé, mentoring emerged as a reflective practice through which mentors helped novice principals develop confidence, resilience, leadership identity, and a sense of belonging. To further illustrate the alignment among the research questions,

emergent themes, and the Mentoring for Well-being Model, Table 7 provides an integrated overview of the findings.

Table 7. Integration of research questions, themes, and conceptual framework

Research Question	Themes	Mentoring for Well-being Model Alignment	Interpretation of Experience
RQ1a: How do trained mentors describe their role in supporting the professional and personal development of new principals?	Theme 1: Intentional Development of Leadership Capacity	Career & Psychosocial Development	Mentors facilitate growth through questioning, reflection, and feedback, supporting both skill development and identity formation
	Theme 2: Leadership Identity Formation		
RQ1b: How do trained mentors perceive the role of *intent* and *involvement* in shaping effective mentoring relationships?	Theme 3: Support for Well-being and Professional Sustainability	Mentoring Processes and Structures	Mentors intentionally and actively support resilience, emotional well-being, and sustained leadership engagement
	Theme 4: Mentoring as a Calling	Well-being through PERMA	
RQ1c. How do mentors foster positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA) in their work with novice principals?	Theme 5: Relational Trust as the Foundation of Mentoring	Well-being through PERMA	Mentoring is experienced as a deeply relational and reciprocal process grounded in trust and shared learning
	Theme 6: Reciprocal Learning and Growth	Mentoring Processes and Structures	
Overarching RQ1: What are the lived experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama?	All Themes	Learning Partnerships and Social Connectedness	Mentoring is a growth-centered, relational, and intentional practice supporting leadership development, well-being, and mutual growth

Summary

This chapter presented the findings of the study exploring the lived experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama. Using the hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the data were analyzed through iterative coding procedures that resulted in six themes: Intentional Development of Leadership Capacity, Leadership Identity Formation, Support for Well-being and Professional Sustainability, Mentoring as a Professional Calling, Relational Trust as the Foundation of Mentoring, and Reciprocal Learning and Growth. These themes were organized in relation to the three sub-questions and then synthesized to address the overarching research question. These themes also demonstrated clear alignment with the study's conceptual framework, reflecting Kram's career and psychosocial mentoring functions, Mertz's emphasis on intent and involvement, and Seligman's PERMA framework of well-being.

Overall, the findings revealed that mentors experience their role as growth-centered, relational, and intentional. Across the six themes, mentoring was understood as a practice that supported novice principals' leadership growth while also contributing to mentors' own professional meaning, continued development, and ongoing attention to balance. The findings also demonstrated alignment with the study's conceptual framework, including Kram's mentoring functions, Mertz's model of intent and involvement, and Seligman's PERMA framework. Chapter 5 will extend these findings by interpreting them in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks, and by examining their implications for mentoring practice, leadership development, and future research.

Chapter 5: Summary, Recommendations, and Conclusions

This chapter presents an interpretation of the findings from this hermeneutic phenomenological study exploring the lived experiences of mentors supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama. While Chapter 4 presented the findings through six phenomenological themes, this chapter situates those findings within the broader scholarly literature and conceptual framework introduced in Chapter 2. Specifically, this discussion draws upon Kram's (1985) mentoring functions, Mertz's (2004) model of intent and involvement, and Seligman's (2011) PERMA framework of well-being to interpret how mentoring supports leadership development, emotional resilience, and sustainability.

This chapter includes a comprehensive summary of the study, a restatement of the research questions, a review of the methodology, and a discussion of limitations. The major findings are then interpreted in relation to the literature, the research problem, and the overarching research question and each sub-question. The chapter concludes with implications for practice and policy, recommendations for future research, and final reflections on the significance of mentoring in supporting novice principals.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama. This study addressed a gap identified in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 by examining mentoring from the perspective of mentors and integrating mentoring theory with positive psychology to better understand how mentoring supports leadership

development, well-being, and sustainability. While prior research has consistently documented the challenges novice principals face, including role overload, emotional strain, and attrition (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Spillane & Lee, 2014), less attention has been given to how mentors interpret and enact their role in addressing these challenges.

Guided by a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this study focused on interpreting how mentors made meaning of their experiences as they supported novice principals through the early stages of leadership. This interpretive lens allowed for a deeper examination of mentoring as a relational and developmental process shaped by the context and experiences of protégés and their interactions with their mentor. The conceptual framework for this study integrated Kram's (1985) mentoring functions, which distinguish between career and psychosocial support; Mertz's (2004) model of intent and involvement, which emphasizes purposeful engagement and relational depth; and Seligman's (2011) PERMA framework, which conceptualizes well-being as a multidimensional construct grounded in positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five experienced mentors engaged in structured mentoring programs across Alabama. Participants represented diverse leadership backgrounds and brought extensive experience to their mentoring roles. Data were analyzed using an interpretive process consistent with the hermeneutic circle, involving the identification of meaning units, condensation into codes, and development of themes.

Six themes developed through the hermeneutic analytic process that reflected how mentors understood their work within structured mentoring relationships. Rather than centering on isolated practices, the findings indicate that mentoring functioned as an ongoing process shaped through interaction and reflection, which influenced how mentors responded to the evolving needs of novice principals. Mentors' experiences point to the importance of sustained engagement in helping novice principals interpret their experiences and navigate the demands of leadership. In this way, mentoring supported the development of confidence and professional judgment while contributing to a sense of stability during the early stages of the principalship. Taken together, this study offers an integrated perspective on mentoring that connects leadership development with relational engagement and professional sustainability.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following overarching research question and three sub-questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama?
    a. How do trained mentors describe their role in supporting the professional and personal development of new principals?
    b. How do trained mentors perceive the role of *intent* and *involvement* in shaping effective mentoring relationships?
    c. How do mentors foster positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA) in their work with novice principals?

Review of Methodology

This study employed a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological design to explore mentors' lived experiences and interpret the meaning they attributed to those experiences. As outlined in Chapter 3, hermeneutic phenomenology was selected to move beyond surface-level description and engage in interpretive analysis of participants' narratives (Bhattacharya, 2017; Peoples, 2020).

Participants were selected using a purposive criterion sampling based on their experience mentoring novice principals within structured programs across Alabama. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom, allowing consistency across participants and flexibility to explore individual experiences in depth (Bloomberg, 2022). Interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed through an iterative process involving repeated readings, identification of meaning units, and thematic clustering.

Consistent with Creswell and Poth (2016), the analytic process moved between parts and the whole to develop themes that represented shared meanings across participants. Reflective journaling supported interpretation, and trustworthiness was established through alignment with the conceptual framework, consistent interview protocols, and peer review of coding and theme development.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this hermeneutic phenomenological study. The study included five participants, which is consistent for phenomenological inquiry, but may limit transferability to broader contexts. Participants were drawn from structured mentoring programs across Alabama;

therefore, the findings may not reflect mentoring practices in other states, informal mentoring arrangements, or other leadership development contexts.

Additionally, because this study used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, findings were shaped by the researcher's interpretive perspective. Although reflective journaling and alignment with established frameworks were used to support credibility, interpretation remained part of the meaning-making process. Finally, the reliance on self-reported interview data reflected participants' perceptions of mentoring rather than direct observation of mentoring interactions or measurable program outcomes.

Major Findings Related to Literature and Interpretations

The findings of this study both align and extend existing literature on mentoring by illustrating how professional development, relational engagement, and well-being are experienced as interconnected rather than discrete components of mentoring practice. While prior research has often examined these elements independently, the findings of this study suggest that mentors experience them simultaneously within the context of ongoing relationships with novice principals. This integration provides a more nuanced understanding of mentoring as a dynamic and evolving process that supports leadership development over time.

Consistent with Kram's (1985) mentoring framework, the findings reflected both career and psychosocial functions. However, participants did not describe these functions as separate or sequential. Instead, mentors experienced career development and psychosocial support as occurring together through reflective dialogue and relational interaction. For example, when mentors engaged protégés in conversations

about decision-making or instructional leadership, they were not only supporting skill development but also contributing to the protégés' leadership identity formation and self-efficacy. This suggests that career and psychosocial functions are not easily distinguishable in practice but rather are embedded within the same mentoring interactions.

Participants' descriptions of mentoring practices provide further insight into how these functions are enacted. Mentors emphasized the importance of questioning, reflection, and guided conversation as central to their role. These practices align with Kram's conceptualization of coaching and counseling, yet the findings extend this framework by illustrating how these functions are experienced as relational processes rather than discrete mentoring tasks. For instance, Jessica's description of rehearsing conversations with protégés, reflects not only the development of communication skills but also the building of confidence and the reinforcement of professional identity. Similarly, Valerie's emphasis on helping protégés discover their management style highlights the importance of self-awareness as a component of leadership development. These examples suggest that mentoring supports growth by engaging both the technical and personal dimensions of leadership simultaneously.

These findings also align with Mertz's (2004) model of intent and involvement, which emphasizes the importance of purposeful mentoring actions combined with relational engagement. Participants demonstrated a clear sense of intent in how they approached mentoring. They described setting goals and adapting their support based on the needs of the protégé through structured conversations. This intentionality reflects a deliberate approach to mentoring in which actions are guided by purpose rather than

occurring incidentally. At the same time, mentors described high levels of involvement, characterized by emotional presence and their ability to be accessible and engaged over time.

What is particularly notable in the findings is how intent and involvement were experienced as mutually reinforcing. Mentors did not simply plan mentoring activities; they remained actively engaged in the relationship, adjusting their approach as the protégé developed. Jeremy's description of helping novice principals *"*see the map in their head that is all falling into place*"* illustrates how mentors guided meaning-making while remaining responsive to the protégé's evolving understanding. Kelly's emphasis on creating space for growth further reflects the balance between providing structure and allowing autonomy. These findings extend Mertz's model by demonstrating that effective mentoring requires not only intentional design, but also the ability to remain relationally attuned throughout the mentoring process.

The findings also provide strong support for Seligman's (2011) PERMA framework, particularly in relation to how mentoring contributes to well-being. Participants described mentoring as a context in which positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment were actively cultivated. Encouragement and affirmation supported positive emotion, while reflective dialogue and problem-solving fostered engagement. Relationships were central to the mentoring experience, with trust and connection serving as the foundation for all other aspects of development.

Meaning emerged as a particularly significant element in the findings. Mentors consistently described their work as purposeful, often framing mentoring as a way to contribute to the profession and support future leaders. This sense of purpose aligns

directly with the PERMA framework and suggests that mentoring contributes to well-being not only for protégés, but also for mentors themselves. Accomplishment was reflected in the recognition of growth over time, both in terms of skill development and increased confidence. Rather than focusing solely on measurable outcomes, mentors emphasized progress and the gradual development of leadership capacity.

While the findings align with PERMA, they also extend the framework by illustrating how well-being is embedded within relational processes. Rather than being experienced as an individual outcome, well-being was described as something that developed during interactions with the protégé, through reflection conversations and shared experiences. This suggests that mentoring relationships function as a context in which well-being is co-constructed, rather than solely achieved by individuals.

Another important contribution of this study is the emphasis on mentoring as a reciprocal process. Traditional mentoring models often position the mentor as the primary source of knowledge, with the protégé as the recipient. However, participants in this study consistently described mentoring as a mutual learning experience. Mentors reflected on how their interactions with novice principals prompted them to reconsider their own practices, remain connected to current challenges in schools, and continue their own professional growth.

Jeremy's reflection that he was "enjoying learning as much" as the protégé highlights this reciprocal dynamic. Valerie's observation that mentoring contributed to her continued development reinforces this idea. Kelly's emphasis on staying grounded in current practice illustrates how mentoring allows experienced leaders to remain connected to the realities of contemporary educational settings. These findings align

with more recent mentoring literature that emphasizes mutuality and shared learning, suggesting that mentoring relationships are more collaborative than hierarchical.

The reciprocal nature of mentoring also has implications for how mentoring is conceptualized within leadership development. Rather than viewing mentoring as a unidirectional transfer of knowledge, the findings suggest that it should be understood as a process of co-construction, where both mentor and protégé contribute to and benefit from the relationship. This perspective extends traditional mentoring frameworks by highlighting the dynamic and evolving nature of mentoring interactions.

Taken together, the findings of this study contribute to the literature by offering an integrated understanding of mentoring that connects professional development, relational engagement, and well-being. By demonstrating how these elements are experienced simultaneously, the study provides a more comprehensive view of mentoring as a complex and multifaceted practice. This perspective has implications for both theory and practice, suggesting that mentoring programs should be designed to support not only skill development, but also relational connection and sustained engagement over time.

Findings Related to the Research Problem

The research problem identified in Chapter 1 emphasized the complex challenges faced by newly appointed principals, including role overload, emotional strain, and high rates of attrition (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Levin & Bradley, 2019; Spillane & Lee, 2014). The findings of this study provided a direct response to this problem by illustrating how mentoring can be understood as a critical support system that addresses both the professional and emotional demands of the principalship.

These findings suggest that the transition into leadership is characterized by significant responsibility and limited structured support, contributing to early-career strain.

The findings extend existing literature by demonstrating that these challenges are not experienced in isolation but are interconnected within the daily realities of leadership. Navigating competing demands while developing leadership capacity places significant strain on novice principals, reinforcing the need for structured support. The findings point to mentoring as a stabilizing influence during this transition. Rather than focusing solely on task completion or procedural knowledge, mentors emphasized the need to support principals to process challenges in ways that contributed to both confidence and clarity.

The prominence of emotional demands within the findings suggests that leadership stress is closely tied to uncertainty and decision-making responsibility. In this context, mentoring mitigates leadership stress by creating space for reflection and interpretation. Valerie's emphasis on supporting protégés through difficult experiences reflects the importance of relational presence in mitigating the effects of stress. Similarly, Steve's observation that principals may experience burnout within the first two years without adequate support underscores the urgency of addressing these challenges early in a principal's career. These insights align with prior research suggesting that the absence of structured support contributes to attrition, particularly during the initial transition into leadership roles (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

The findings also suggest that mentoring addresses the research problem by supporting the development of resilience. Rather than eliminating challenges, mentors helped novice principals reframe their experiences and develop strategies for navigating

complexity. This process involved guiding principals to focus on aspects of leadership within their control while maintaining a broader perspective on their role. Through this approach, mentoring supported emotional regulation and contributed to a more stable sense of self-efficacy. These findings reinforce the idea that resilience is not an inherent trait, but a capacity that can be developed through supportive relationships and reflective practice.

In addition to addressing emotional strain, the findings highlight the role of mentoring in reducing isolation. Participants described mentoring relationships as providing a consistent point of connection in what is often an isolating role. This relational support allowed novice principals to engage in open dialogue about their experiences without fear of evaluation. As a result, mentoring created conditions in which principals could reflect honestly on their practice and seek guidance when needed. This aligns with research that identifies isolation as a significant factor contributing to principal attrition (Spillane & Lee, 2014), suggesting that mentoring may serve as a protective factor that supports retention.

The findings further indicate that mentoring contributes to leadership sustainability by supporting both confidence and competence. As novice principals engaged in reflective dialogue with their mentors, they developed a greater confidence in their decision-making and a stronger sense of ownership over their leadership actions. This growth was not immediate but occurred over time as principals gained experience and reflected on their practice. Mentors described this process as gradual, reinforcing the importance of sustained engagement rather than short-term intervention.

This perspective aligns with literature emphasizing the importance of ongoing support in developing effective school leaders (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018).

Taken together, these findings suggest that mentoring addresses the research problem by providing a comprehensive form of support that integrates professional development with emotional and relational engagement. By supporting novice principals in navigating the complexities of leadership, mentoring contributes to resilience, reduces feelings of isolation, and fosters a sense of confidence that supports long-term retention. These results extend the literature by illustrating how mentoring operates in practice as a mechanism for addressing the multifaceted challenges associated with the principalship.

Findings Related to the Research Questions

RQ1a: Professional and Personal Development

Themes 1 and 2 revealed that mentors approached personal and professional development as an intentional and evolving process rather than a fixed set of practices. This suggests that mentoring serves as a reflective space in which novice principals develop the capacity to critically examine their leadership decisions. This continuous reflection practice allows novice principals to gradually assume ownership of their growth. Instead of positioning themselves as experts providing direct solutions, mentors created opportunities for guided reflection that allowed protégés to construct meaning from their own experiences. Rather than relying on directive support, mentoring shifted toward developmental facilitation, where learning emerged through inquiry and dialogue and was applied through guided practice.

Mentors emphasized that development was not limited to technical skill acquisition. Instead, growth was closely tied to how novice principals came to understand themselves as leaders, reflecting both the refinement of leadership practice and the development of professional identity. These findings suggest that leadership identity unfolded over time through experience, interaction, and reflection. Mentors supported this process by helping protégés examine their values and consider how those values shape decision-making and responses to challenges. This aligns with Kram's psychosocial mentoring function, particularly in relation to identity formation and self-concept development. Through this process, novice principals were not simply learning how to lead; they were developing a clearer sense of who they were as leaders within complex school environments.

Participants also noted that development required intentional structure. Effective mentoring was organized through ongoing goal-setting processes that evolved with the protégé's needs, reinforcing that growth was shaped through purposeful engagement rather than occurring incidentally. Development, therefore, emerged as both individualized and dynamic, reflecting the interaction between mentor guidance and the protégé's increasing confidence and independence in practice.

RQ1b: Growth, Well-being, and Resilience

Themes 3 and 4 revealed that intent and involvement shaped mentoring through sustained attention to novice principals' well-being, resilience, and professional sustainability, as well as mentors' own sense of purpose and commitment. Attention to well-being and resilience emerged as central to mentoring practice, highlighting the importance of supporting novice principals beyond technical aspects of leadership.

These findings suggest that uncertainty is a common feature of early leadership experiences and requires support beyond routine preparation. Mentoring supported resilience by shaping how novice principals interpreted and responded to challenges. This process supported emotional regulation and contributed to a more stable sense of self-efficacy. In this way, mentoring functioned as a stabilizing influence during the early years of the principalship, when uncertainty and stress are often most pronounced.

Mentoring was also experienced as a source of meaning for the mentors themselves. Their involvement extended beyond professional obligation and reflected a deeper commitment to supporting the next generation of leaders. This sense of purpose aligns with the “meaning” component of Seligman’s PERMA framework and suggested that mentoring contributed to the well-being of both mentors and protégés. However, the findings also showed that mentors’ deep investment required ongoing self-regulation. Mentors described the need to manage time, emotional energy, availability, and boundaries so they could remain present and supportive without becoming overwhelmed. This added dimension suggested that mentoring as a professional calling was both sustaining and demanding. The relationship was not one-sided; instead, it created a shared space in which both individuals experienced growth and professional fulfillment.

RQ1c: Relational, Emotional, and Developmental Dimensions

Relational trust and reciprocal learning shaped how mentoring relationships developed over time, as reflected in Themes 5 and 6. The development of trust showed that relational depth is foundational as a foundational element of effective mentoring, enabling meaningful reflection and open dialogue. Creating an environment in which

novice principals feel comfortable discussing challenges without judgment supported deeper reflection and more honest engagement, which in turn contributed to meaningful development.

Mentoring relationships often extended beyond formal interactions as trust strengthened over time. As these relationships became more personal, mentors gained a deeper understanding of the contexts in which their protégés were working, allowing support to become more responsive and relevant. The relational dimension of mentoring, therefore, was not separate from development; rather, it served as the condition that made development possible.

Reciprocal learning further reinforced mentoring as a collaborative process. This reciprocity indicates that mentoring serves as a co-constructive process in which learning occurs through reflection and interaction. This mutual engagement contributed to a deeper sense of connection and reinforced the idea that mentoring is not simply a transfer of knowledge, but a shared process of meaning-making. This aligns with Mertz's emphasis on involvement and highlights the dynamic nature of mentoring relationships.

Implications and Future Research

The findings of this study have important implications for practice and leadership development, as well as broader policy considerations within educational leadership. At the practice level, mentoring is best understood as a relational and developmental process rather than a simple transmission of knowledge. Effective mentor preparation requires attention to reflective questioning and active listening, as well as their ability to support emotional processing. This suggests that mentors must be prepared not only in

leadership content, but also in how to engage dialogue that promotes reflection and growth. The effectiveness of mentoring effectiveness appears to be shaped more by the quality of relational engagement, than the structure of the program alone.

Implications for program design point to the need for flexibility that accommodates the evolving needs of novice principals. Mentoring relationships were most effective when support was responsive to individual circumstances and grounded in ongoing interaction. Rigid structures may limit the responsiveness, whereas programs that allow for adaptation and sustained engagement over time are better positioned to support leadership development, including attention to well-being and resilience.

From a policy perspective, the study reinforces the importance of continued investment in structured mentoring programs. Mentoring plays a significant role in supporting novice principals during a critical period of transition, suggesting that policies supporting multi-year mentoring models may provide the continuity needed to foster long-term development and retention. Additionally, attention should be given to how mentors are selected and supported, as the relational and developmental aspects of mentoring require specific dispositions and skills that extend beyond administrative experience.

The study also points to several directions for future research. Examining the experiences of novice principals could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how mentoring relationships are perceived from both perspectives. Longitudinal research may further clarify how mentoring influences leadership development over time. Exploring mentoring across varied contexts and program structures could also reveal how mentoring practices can be adapted to meet the needs of different

educational environments. Future research could also explore how mentors regulate their own well-being, manage boundaries, and sustain their capacity to support protégés over time.

Final Thoughts and Conclusions

This study explored the lived experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals within structured mentoring programs across Alabama. The findings suggested that mentoring was experienced as more than technical guidance or role-based support. Instead, mentoring emerged as a relational, reflective, and developmental process through which mentors supported novice principals as they navigated the personal and professional demands of early school leadership.

The Mentoring for Well-being Model (Reames & Mullen, 2025) served as the conceptual framework for this study. This model integrated Kram's (1985) career and psychosocial mentoring functions, Mertz's concepts of intent and involvement, and Seligman's PERMA framework to interpret mentoring as a process connected to leadership development, relational support, social connectedness, and well-being. Through this framework, mentoring was understood as an integrated practice rather than a set of separate mentoring functions or isolated well-being outcomes.

Across the study, mentors described their work as purposeful, intentional, and deeply relational. They supported novice principals through reflective questioning, active listening, encouragement feedback, and sustained engagement. These mentoring practices helped novice principals develop confidence, strengthen leadership identity, process challenges, and build resilience in the principalship.

The findings also showed that mentoring was meaningful for the mentors themselves. Participants described mentoring as a professional calling that allowed them to give back, remain connected to the field, and experience continued professional fulfillment. At the same time, mentors recognized that deep investment in protégés required attention to their own well-being. They described the need to manage time, emotional energy, availability, and boundaries so they could remain present and supportive without becoming overwhelmed.

Ultimately, this study positions mentoring as a purposeful and sustaining practice that supports novice principals' leadership growth and well0being while also shaping mentors' own professional meaning and continued development. Mentoring was not experienced as a one-directional transfer of knowledge, but as a reciprocal relationship grounded in trust, reflection, and shared learning. As schools continue to face challenges related to principal preparation, retention, and well-being, this study affirms the importance of structured mentoring relationships that attend to both leadership development and the human dimensions of the principalship.

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Appendix A: Exempt Research Protocol: HRP-503a

AUBURN UNIVERSITY
Institutional Review Board

EXEMPT RESEARCH PROTOCOL

Exempt Categories

Please select the exempt category that best describes your research:

	Exempt Category	Criteria
☒	Exempt 1: Normal Educational Practices	Research, conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings that specifically involves normal educational practices that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn required educational content or the assessment of educators who provide instruction. This includes most research on regular and special education instructional strategies, and research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.
☒	Exempt 2: Educational Tests, Surveys or Interviews, or Public Observation	Research that only includes interactions (*may not include interventions*) involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) ***if at least one of the following criteria is met***: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7). *Children may participate in Exemption 2 (i) and (ii) if the research is limited to educational tests or the investigator(s) do not participate in the activities being observed during observation of public behavior.*
☐	Exempt 3: Benign Behavioral Intervention	Research involving benign behavioral interventions in conjunction with the collection of information from an adult subject through verbal or written responses (including data entry) or audiovisual recording if the subject prospectively agrees to the intervention and information collection ***and at least one of the following criteria is met***: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7). The benign behavioral interventions ***must be*** brief in duration, harmless, painless, not physically invasive, not likely to have a significant adverse lasting impact on the subjects, and the investigator has no reason to think the subjects will find the interventions offensive or embarrassing.

		NOTE: If the research involves deceiving the subjects regarding the nature or purposes of the research, this exemption is not applicable unless the subject authorizes the deception through a prospective agreement to participate in research in circumstances in which the subject is informed that he or she will be unaware of or misled regarding the nature or purposes of the research. *Children are not eligible for Exempt 3 research.*
☐	Exempt 4: Secondary Use of Data or Specimens	Secondary research for which consent is not required: Secondary research uses of identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens, if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens are publicly available; (ii) Information, which may include information about biospecimens, is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, the investigator does not contact the subjects, and the investigator will not re-identify subjects; For criteria (iii) and (iv), please visit https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/regulations/45-cfr-46/common-rule-subpart-a-46104/index.html **If your research ONLY involves secondary use of data, please complete HRP 900 – APPENDIX – SECONDARY USE OF DATA. However, if your research involves any activities other than secondary use of data, documents, records, or specimens, continue with this form.
☐	Exempt 5: Federal Research and Demonstration Projects	Research and demonstration projects that are conducted or supported by a Federal department or agency, or otherwise subject to the approval of department or agency heads (or the approval of the heads of bureaus or other subordinate agencies that have been delegated authority to conduct the research and demonstration projects), and that are designed to study, evaluate, improve, or otherwise examine public benefit or service programs, including procedures for obtaining benefits or services under those programs, possible changes in or alternatives to those programs or procedures, or possible changes in methods or levels of payment for benefits or services under those programs. For additional criteria please visit https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/regulations/45-cfr-46/common-rule-subpart-a-46104/index.html
☐	Exempt 6: Taste and Food Quality	Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies: (i) If wholesome foods without additives are consumed, or (ii) If a food is consumed that contains a food ingredient at or below the level and for a use found to be safe, or agricultural chemical or environmental contaminant at or below the level found to be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.
☐	Exempt 7: Storage or Maintenance of Secondary Research	Storage or maintenance for secondary research for which broad consent is required: Storage or maintenance of identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens for potential secondary research use if an IRB conducts limited IRB review (see HRP-319 - WORKSHEET - Limited IRB Review and Broad Consent). For research involving secondary use of data, documents, records, or specimens, please attach the completed HRP-900 - APPENDIX – Secondary Use of Data under 'Local Site Documents'. Please note that at this time, AU does not have the institutional infrastructure to support this category of research.
☐	Exempt 8: Secondary	Secondary research for which broad consent is required: Research involving the use of identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens for secondary

	Research	research use (see HRP-319 - WORKSHEET - Limited IRB Review and Broad Consent). For research involving secondary use of data, documents, records, or specimens, please complete and attach HRP-900 under 'Local Site Documents'. Please note that at this time, AU does not have the institutional infrastructure to support this category of research.

NOTES:

- Prisoners may not be included in exempt research, except for research aimed at involving a broader subject population that only incidentally includes prisoners.
- Exemption categories 7 and 8 require broad consent. The AU IRB has determined the regulatory requirements for legally effective broad consent are not feasible within the current institutional infrastructure. Exempt categories 7 and 8 will not be implemented at this time.

PROTOCOL TITLE: Exempt 1: Normal Educational Practices

VERSION DATE: August 2025

ANTICIPATED START DATE: January 2026

ANTICIPATED END DATE: April 2026

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:

Name: Dr. Ellen Hahn
Department: College of Education
Email address: reameseh@auburn.edu
☒ PI is not a student.
☒ I have read the PI eligibility statement in HRP 103 – INVESTIGATOR MANUAL and confirm that the above named PI meets criteria to be a PI on an IRB protocol at AU.

DEPARTMENT HEAD/CHAIR:

Name: Dr. William (Hank) Murrah
Email address: wmm0017@auburn.edu

Please Note: Undergraduate and graduate students are not allowed to be the Principal Investigator on a research study. For further information on who is eligible to serve as a Principal Investigator, see HRP-103 – INVESTIGATOR MANUAL.

Is this study part of a dissertation or thesis?	☒ Yes	☐ No
Is this study part of a capstone project?	☐ Yes	☒ No

FUNDING INFORMATION:

Check all that apply.

☒ Not funded by any source.
☐ Internal funding. Provide the source/mechanism of internal support:
☐ U.S. Federal government funding (i.e., DoD, NIH, NSF, etc.) via one or more direct awards or a sub-award. Provide the source of federal support:
☐ Other sources of funding (please specify):

Please complete the table below and identify all the study procedures that will be conducted in this study:

Check any **applicable** boxes:	
☒ Normal Educational Practices	☐ Taste and Food Quality
☒ Surveys	☐ Educational Tests
☒ Interviews	☐ Benign Behavioral Interventions
☐ Observation of Public Behavior	☐ Secondary Use of Data or Specimens
☐ Deception	☐ Other (specify):

1. Purpose and rationale of the study: The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study is to examine the lived experiences of mentors supporting novice principals. This research is designed to better understand how mentors perceive their role in supporting novice principals' professional development, personal well-being, and resilience during the early years of leadership.

The rationale for this study is grounded in the growing concern regarding principal attrition, with national turnover rates at 18-20% annually (Levin & Bradley, 2019; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). In Alabama, these challenges mirror national trends and have prompted school systems to develop or employ trained mentors to support novice principals. While mentoring to support novice principals, little research has been done to learn about these mentors' experiences and interpret their role in Alabama. This study will contribute to closing the gap by providing insights that may inform improvements to mentoring practices and leadership support systems in Alabama and beyond.

2. Study procedures: Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom, phone, or in person, depending on participant preference. Each interview is expected to last 30-45 minutes. Interviews will be recorded with participant consent and transcribed for analysis. After the initial interview, participants will complete a short 5-10 minute Qualtrics survey via email to collect demographic information on each participant and the school settings of their protégé(s).

3. Study population: Mentors who are currently mentoring novice principals.

a) **How many participants will be enrolled?** 10-15 or until saturation is achieved.
b) **How many subject records will be obtained or received?**
c) **How many subject specimens will you receive?**

Does the study target any of these special populations (check all that apply):

☐ Pregnant people/fetuses	☐ Known interpersonal relationships	☐ At risk for/Experiencing substance use disorder	☐ LBGTQIA+
☐ Minors	☐ At risk of/Experiencing homelessness	☐ Refugees	☐ American Indian/Alaskan Native
☐ Prisoners/Justice-Involved	☐ Persons with economic disadvantages	☐ Disabled people/People with disabilities	☐ AU faculty, staff, students
☐ Persons with educational disadvantages	☐ Decisionally or intellectually impaired	☐ Unauthorized immigrants	☐ Non-AU Students

4. Recruitment: The study team will use purposeful sampling to recruit participants via email. The email addresses will be obtained through researcher's personal and professional network of educators.

5. Study Location(s): Auburn, Alabama

Will this research occur at an external or non-AU entity? ☐ Yes ☒ No

If your research involves AU students' records, do you have permission from the AU Registrar to conduct the research?

☒ This research does not include AU students' records
☐ Yes
☐ No

6. Potential Risks to Participants: Risks are minimal and primarily involve the possibility of participants feeling uncomfortable when reflecting on challenges in mentoring. The potential for breach of confidentiality is a risk, therefore all data will be stored on AU Box to ensure confidentiality. Participants may stop at any time.

7. Benefits to Participants: There are no direct benefits from participating in this study. By participating in this study, participants will be contributing to the improvement of principal mentoring practices in Alabama and nationally.

8. Consent Process:

Will participants be asked to sign the consent document?	☐ Yes	☒ No
Will you use an electronic consent document?	☒ Yes	☐ No

☐	Waiver of Consent (Including existing de-identified data)
☒	Waiver of Documentation of Consent (Use of Information Letter, rather than consent form requiring signatures)
☐	Waiver of Parental Permission (in Alabama, 18 years-olds may be considered adults for research purposes)

Provide the rationale for the waiver request:

9. Participant Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for their participation in this study.

10. Personally Identifiable Information

Identify all personally identifiable information (PII) or protected health information (PHI) you will receive, collect, or record ***even if you plan to anonymize the data or specimens***. Check any **applicable** boxes.	
☐ None	☐ IP addresses
☒ Names	☐ Date of births
☒ Email addresses	☐ Zip Codes
☒ Phone numbers	☐ Social security numbers
☐ Medical record numbers	☐ Student or employee numbers
☐ PHI	☐ Web URL
☐ Other:	

11. Provisions to Protect Participant Privacy and Data Confidentiality: All interview recordings and transcripts will be stored on a password-protected computer and backed up on AU Box. Only the researcher will have access. Identifiable information will be removed, and participants will be assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. The data and identifiers will be stored and maintained until this dissertation is successfully defended.

12. Describe how the results of this study will be used.
The results of this study will be used to contribute to scholarly research on leadership mentoring, and provide recommendations for supporting principal retention and well-being, with all findings reported in a confidential and de-identified manner.

As a reminder, please upload all additional materials supporting your protocol to 'Local Site Documents' in Endeavor. This may include, but is not limited to:

- Data collection instruments
- Letters of support/permission
- Debriefing forms
- Vendor vetting documentation
- Scripts
- Data use agreements
- Conflict of Interest (COI) management plans
- Referral lists
- Emergency Action Plans (EAPs)
- Data Safety Monitoring Board (DSMB) plans
- Data security plans
- Recruitment materials (i.e., flyers, social media posts, etc.)
- Additional training certificates that are external to CITI (i.e., phlebotomy certificates, youth protection training, etc.)
- Clinical trial registration confirmation
- Relevant appendices (i.e., mental health safety plan, MRI appendix (HRP-901), anonymous data collection assurance (HRP-902), etc.)

Appendix B: Information Letter

AUBURN UNIVERSITY
College of Education

INFORMATION LETTER

Title of research study: *'A Phenomenological Exploration of Mentors' Lived Experiences Supporting Novice Principals in Alabama'*

Investigator: Dr. Ellen Hahn and Callie Causey
Sponsor: none

You are invited to participate in a research study examing the lived experiences of trained mentors who support novice principals in Alabama. The study is being conducted by Callie Causey, PhD candidate under the direction of Dr. Ellen Hahn, in the Auburn University Department of Education. You were selected as a possible participant because you are currently a mentor of a novice principal.

What will be involved if you participate? If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in one audio recorded interview via phone, Zoom, or in-person. You may also be contacted for brief follow-up questions for clarification, if needed. In addition, you will be asked to complete a brief demographic survey administered through Qualtrics, via email.
Your total time commitment will be approximately one hour.

Are there any risks or discomforts? Potential risks are no greater than those encountered in everyday professional reflection. You may experience mid discomfort when discussing challenging professional experiences. You may skip any question or stop participation at any time.

Are there any benefits to yourself or others? There may be no direct benefit to you for participating. However, your participation may benefit others by contributing to a deeper understanding of how structured mentoring supports novice principals' professional development, wellbeing, and retention in Alabama.

Will you receive any compensation for participating? At this time, there will be no compensation for participating in this study.

Are there any costs? There are no costs associated with participating in this study.

If you change your mind about participating, you can withdraw at any time during the study. Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, your data may be removed from the study as it remains identifiable. Your decision to participate or withdraw will not affect your relationship with Auburn University, the Department of Education, or the Alabama State Department of Education.

Any Data obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. To protect your privacy, each participant will be assigned a pseudonym, and identifying information will be removed from transcripts and reports. Data will be stored in a password-protected device and on Auburn University's secure and encrypted online database, AUBox, accessible only by the researcher. Information collected during this study may be used to fulfil an educational requirement, published in professional journals, or presented at professional conferences. Any quotations used will be de-identified to protect participant anonymity.

If you have questions about this study, please ask them now or contact Callie Causey at sck0019@auburn.edu or Dr. Ellen Hahn at reamesh@auburn.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Auburn University Office of Research Compliance or the Institutional review Board by phone (334) 844-5966 or email at IRBadmin@auburn.edu or IRBchair@auburn.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE IF YOU WANT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT. IF YOU DECIDE TO PARTICIPATE, THE DATA YOU PROVIDE WILL SERVE AS YOUR AGREEMENT TO DO SO. THIS LETTER IS YOURS TO KEEP.

Appendix C: Email Recruitment Letter

Recruitment email

Dear Participants:

My name is Callie Causey, and I am a doctoral candidate at Auburn University, conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Ellen Reames Hahn. You are invited to participate in a research study titled: **"A Phenomenological Exploration of Mentors' Lived Experiences Supporting Novice Principals in Alabama."**

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of mentors who support newly appointed principals through structured mentoring programs, across Alabama. Your perspective as a trained mentor is valuable in helping understand how mentoring supports novice principals' professional growth, well-being, and leadership resilience.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in a one-on-one interview conducted via Zoom, phone, or in-person. The interview will last **30-45 minutes** and will be scheduled at a time convenient for you. You will also be asked to complete a brief follow-up demographic survey.

Your participation is completely voluntary. All information will remain confidential, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

This research has been approved by the **Institutional review Board (IRB)** at Auburn University. Participation poses no known risks and may contribute valuable insights into strengthening mentoring practices in Alabama and beyond.

If you are interested in participating or would like additional information, please reply to this email or contact me directly at **sck0019@auburn.edu or (256)-872-5184**. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you for considering this invitation. Your experience and perspective as a mentor are greatly appreciated and will make a meaningful contribution to understanding how mentoring supports and sustains school leaders.

Warm regards,
Callie Causey
Doctoral Candidate, PhD Admin Elem & Secondary Ed
Email: sck0019@auburn.edu
Phone: (256)-872-5184

Recruitment Follow-up email:

Dear Participant,

I hope this this message finds you well. I am writing to follow up on my previous email inviting you to participate in my doctoral research study titled: **"A Phenomenological Exploration of Mentors' Lived Experiences Supporting Novice Principals in Alabama."**

Your experience as a mentor may offer important insight into how mentoring supports novice principals' professional growth, well-being, and resilience.

Participation involves a one-on-one interview approximately **30-45** minutes, conducted via Zoom, phone, or in person, at a time convenient for you. You will also be invited to complete a brief demographic survey. Participation is voluntary, your responses will remain **confidential**, and you may withdraw at any time without penalty.

If you are interested in participating or have any questions, please reply to this email or contact me directly at sck0019@auburn.edu or (256)-872-5184. I would be happy to provide additional information or schedule a time that works best for you.

Thank you for considering this opportunity to contribute to research that supports leadership development and mentoring. I sincerely appreciate your time and dedication to mentoring new school leaders.

Warm regards,

Callie Causey
Doctoral Candidate, PhD Admin Elem & Secondary Ed
Auburn University
Email: sck0019@auburn.edu
Phone: (256)-872-5184

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Appendix

Interview Protocol for Mentors Supporting Novice Principals

Study Title:

A Phenomenological Exploration of Mentors' Lived Experiences Supporting Novice Principals in Alabama

Researcher:

Callie Causey, Doctoral Candidate Admin Elem and Secondary Ed
Auburn University
Department of Education
(256)-872-5184
sck0019@auburn.edu

Introduction Script

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. My name is **Callie Causey**, and I am a doctoral candidate at Auburn University. The purpose of this interview is to explore your experiences as a mentor supporting novice principals. Specifically, I am interested in understanding how you perceive your role in supporting newly appointed principals' professional development, emotional well-being, and leadership growth within the framework of the program.

This interview is part of my dissertation research and has been approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The interview will take approximately **30-45 minutes**. With your permission, I will record this session for accuracy in transcription.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. All responses will be kept confidential, and your identity will not be disclosed in any reports or publications resulting from this research. Your name and any identifying information will be replaced with pseudonyms.

Before we begin, do you have any questions about the study or the interview process?

[Pause and respond to any questions.]

Do I have permission to record this interview?

[Wait for verbal consent before proceeding]

Interview Questions

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of trained mentors supporting novice principals?

1. Can you tell a little about your professional background and how you became involved as a mentor?
2. What motivated you to become a mentor for newly appointed principals?
3. How would you describe your initial expectations of the mentoring process when you began?

RQ1a: How do mentors describe their role in supporting the professional development and personal development needs of new principals?

4. How do you support your protégé's professional growth in areas such as instructional leadership or school improvement?
5. In what ways do you help protégés navigate challenges related to school management, accountability, or state initiatives (e.g., Literacy and Numeracy Acts)?
6. Can you describe a time when observed measurable growth in your protégé's leadership skills or decision-making abilities?

RQ1b: How do mentors perceive the role of *intent* and *involvement* in shaping effective mentoring relationships?

7. How do you establish trust and rapport with your protégé?
8. What strategies do you use to provide emotional support or encouragement when protégés experience stress, burnout, and self-doubt?
9. How has your relationship with your protégé evolved over time?
10. How intentional were you and your protégé in setting goals and expectations at the beginning of the mentoring relationship?
11. How much time and emotional energy do you invest in supporting your protégé, and how do you balance that commitment with other responsibilities?

RQ1c: How do mentors purposely foster positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA) in their work with novice principals?

12. In what ways has the mentoring relationship contributed to your own sense of engagement, purpose, or professional satisfaction?
13. How do you help protégés maintain a positive outlook and sense of accomplishment during challenging times?
14. What kinds of activities or discussions help protégés find meaning and purpose in their leadership role?
15. In what ways has the mentoring relationship contributed to your own sense of engagement, purpose, or professional satisfaction?