

“WE’RE ALL DOING THE BEST THAT WE CAN”: A HERMENEUTIC
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF NOVICE PRINCIPAL’S SENSE-MAKING OF THE
TRANSITION INTO THE ROLE OF A PRINCIPAL IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

by

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Dedication

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To my boys, Blake, Hyrum, and Truman, the center of my soul. For inspiring me to be a better,
more complete, human.

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Never stop questioning.

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Abstract

Novice public-school principals face tremendous external pressures (e.g., high-stakes accountability, market forces, legitimization) and internal pressures (e.g., identity (re)construction, identity verification, authenticity) in the enactment of their role as a novice principal. These pressures converge in the dissonance of competing values, exacerbated by shifting roles and identities from teacher to leader. This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study on the lived experiences of five novice principals in southern Arizona investigates the meaning-making and sense-making processes of navigating the transition into the principalship at the tension points of neoliberal accountability regimes and social justice values. Informed by frameworks of hermeneutical phenomenology, sociological identity theory, neoliberalism, and social justice leadership, this study uses a hermeneutic phenomenological research design with methodological procedures modeled on interpretive phenomenological analysis, IPA. Additionally, a hermeneutic circle is woven throughout, charting a path of my journey and work as a researcher and participant. The five study participants, representing a variety of identities, personal histories, and lived experiences, provided experiences, values, and motivations that led to several key findings: Novice principals are largely motivated by their personal values of supporting those around them, specifically the importance of student-centered leadership and practice. Novice principals in this study held values that reflected current neoliberal accountability frameworks of monolithic student achievement over social justice leadership values. Novice principal motives, judgments, and experiences shed light on inadequacies of principal preparation programs and district mentoring efforts, which are exacerbated by neoliberal policy and practices.

Chapter I: Introduction

Principals in the first three years in their leadership position face external and internal pressures for their time, energy, and focus. These experiences are shaped by their own identities and those new identities the role requires. Often, these experiences are difficult to manage and lead to many personal and professional consequences. Tensions exist and intersect, specifically between the rigid color-blind policies of neoliberal accountability regimes and democratic equity driven education. This hermeneutic phenomenological study sought to illuminate the sense-making that novice principals employ as they enact the role of leading today's public schools at these tension points. At the heart of the study are the lived experiences of each of the novice principals who experience "reality shocks" (Spillane & Lee, 2014) of leading while simultaneously socializing into and enacting the roles as a public-school principal, especially the "shock" of shifting from the role of a teacher to the role of a principal. Unique to this study was the "shock" of the ubiquitous COVID-19 pandemic during these formative developmental experiences.

Chapter one begins with the statement of the problem, purpose statement, research questions, and definitions of key terms and keywords.

Chapter two, the literature review/conceptual and theoretical frameworks, will first, discuss, define, and explore the current and historical contexts of the tensions between social justice leadership and values and hegemonic neoliberal accountability regimes in public schools. Second, the unique contexts of leading as a novice principal within these contexts is explored. Finally, the sense-making process will be discussed, especially with leading schools and will link it with broader, and further relevant, sociological identity theory regarding validation and verification of identity personally and professionally.

Chapter three contains the methods section where the framework of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is explored. Included is an argument for the use of this method, its philosophical foundations, and how and why the method is vital to get at the heart of the sense making and meaning making processes of novice principals. Further, the use of the hermeneutic circle as an integration of the researcher into this study, both as a former novice principal and as a researcher struggling with these data and the larger circumstances of conducting dissertation research during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to the procedures for conducting the study, included is a brief discussion on the issues of validity, specifically researcher bias and reflexivity and how each will be controlled for in the data gathering and analysis of these data.

Chapters four and five consist of the findings of the data collected. Data themes were identified utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Each theme, four in chapter four, and three in chapter five, is explored across all participants; the themes are explored and woven in as part of the hermeneutic circle with my participation and experiences embedded throughout the chapters. The traditional single chapter approach to reporting findings was split due to the differences in discussing the findings related to the two research questions.

Chapter six contains the discussion of these findings with links to existing literature that were introduced in chapter two. The study ends with recommendations for further research, limitations of this study, and suggestions for further support of novice principals within principal preparation programs and local district mentoring efforts.

Statement of the Problem

Novice public-school principals face tremendous external pressures (e.g. high-stakes accountability, market forces, legitimization) and internal pressures (e.g. identity

(re)construction, identity verification, authenticity) in the enactment of their role as school leader. These pressures converge, both personally and professionally, in the tensions between social justice leadership and values and hegemonic neoliberal accountability regimes.

The far-reaching effects of neoliberal sensibilities and accountability realities on public education policy and practice have shifted the focus of public-school principals to a narrowed technocratic role that emphasizes standards, tests, and data-driven decision making, while deemphasizing, “values, beliefs, dispositions and practices designed...to develop students’ emotional as well as functional literacy and social values” (Crow et al., 2017, p. 265).

These technocratic priorities force public-school principals to prioritize finite time, effort, and resources to fulfill the narrowed mission of each school and are greatly enhanced by the hegemonic nature of actors and organizations rooted in these narrowed focuses. For example, leadership preparation programs, school districts, accreditation agencies, research organizations, and philanthropists often foster the discursive milieu of these narrowed priorities generated by Federal, State, and Local policy writing and enactment (Apple, 2014; Ball, 1990, Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Baltodano, 2012; Carpenter, Scribner, & Lindle; 2016; Pinar, 2012; Ryan & Higginbottom, 2017). Consequently, other priorities not seen as a part of neoliberal accountability regimes are pushed to the margins and face falling completely outside of the work of the school (Apple, 2014; Spillane & Lee, 2014). That is, social justice leadership and values (e.g. leadership that "fosters equitable school practices, processes, and outcomes for learners of different racial, socioeconomic, gender, cultural, disability, and sexual orientations backgrounds" (Jean-Marie et al., 2009, p. 4)) become increasingly more difficult to enact in the face of these narrowed focuses and accountability pressures (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; DeMatthews, 2018; Furman, 2012; Ryan & Higginbottom, 2017).

Novice public-school principals employ sense-making strategies (Crow et al., 2017) as they enact and navigate the role of a school principal, drawing on their own identities (both old (teacher) and new (principal) in a constant (re)creation of identity (Burke & Stets, 2009; Spillane & Lee, 2014). These sense-making strategies are an attempt to, “not just [interpret] cues in [the] environment but also [in] noticing and bracketing them. Thus, sense-making is about authoring as well as interpretation, creation as well as discovery” (Spillane & Lee, 2014, p. 437). As a result, within the person occupying and enacting this role, the narrowed neoliberal priorities of education define the roles and subsequently impact the identities (the meanings and motivations that drive role enactment) of public-school principals. Importantly, this may stifle other values that contribute to successful principals (Crow, et al., 2017; Spillane & Lee, 2014) and specifically remove, or at least de-prioritize social justice leadership and values.

Finally, novice principals face tremendous pressure as well as the dissonance of competing values, exacerbated by shifting roles from teacher to leader, that have real personal and professional consequences. These pressures directly contribute to high turnover in principals (Snodgrass-Rangel, 2018) that can lead to declines in student learning and achievement in such environments (Spillane & Lee, 2014). How novice public-school principals make sense of and work within these tensions is the focus of this hermeneutic phenomenological study.

Purpose Statement

Understanding how novice public-school principals navigate, narrate, understand, and make sense of these tensions creates a deeper picture of the public-school principalship that would, “enrich our understanding not only of what leaders do but why they do it and the values, beliefs and practices that shape, challenge and perhaps change their professional identities” (Crow et al., 2017, p. 274). The investigation into this, “provide[s] valuable information on how

preparation programs and support systems need to be developed to enable successful narratives that balance, or even hold in tension these conflicting identities” (p. 274). Furthermore, as novice principals struggle to thrive and stay at their schools, Spillane and Lee (2014) note that, “understanding the novice principals’ experience...is especially critical for retaining and better supporting them” (p. 433).

The gap this study hopes to fill is to illuminate the sense-making processes of novice principals navigating the transition from teacher to principal while leading within the tensions between neoliberal accountability regimes and social justice leadership and values. It is hoped that this study will better inform all facets of leadership development at all levels of K-12 public education.

Research Questions

- How do novice public-school principals make sense of their change in identities and roles from teacher to leader?
- How do novice public-school principals navigate maintaining their core beliefs and values under the constraints of the role of principal, especially within the tensions between social justice leadership and neoliberal accountability regimes?

Research Methods

The method of phenomenology served as the method and methodology. Phenomenology was selected as it allows a researcher to gain an understanding of how participants assign meaning to their experiences (Creswell, 2013). Uncovering these sense-making experiences can derive important data towards illuminating the effects of the tensions between neoliberal accountability regimes and social justice leadership and values on novice public-school principals’ identities and role enactment in leading schools. These perspectives are found in the

stories that one tells of themselves and were elicited within various research tools within phenomenology and were vital data points to understanding the phenomenon of role enactment.

Specifically, in this study, a phenomenological research design rooted in hermeneutic phenomenology (Suddick et al., 2020; van Manen, 2016a) was utilized. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, et.al, 2009) was also employed, which offered structure for data analysis.

Research was conducted in three school districts in southern Arizona. Participants were purposefully selected as a convenience sample based on the criteria of being a novice principal. Recruitment and research efforts were severely strained do to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Eventually, five participants were identified and participated in the study. The study consisted of a single semi-structured interview with optional journal prompt writing designed to elicit rich descriptions of leading schools today as well as how they understood their own leadership journey. Additionally, hermeneutic phenomenology includes the researcher as participant in a technique that infuses the researcher's experiences and observations throughout the data gathering and analysis process. This was done in an attempt to create a "fusion of horizons" (Suddick et al., 2020) between the participants and the researcher. Issues of validity and generalizability are addressed in chapter three.

Finally, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was utilized in which interview data were coded inductively into main themes called "meaning units" that served as frameworks of findings and analysis. The methodology, data gathering techniques, and analysis are further detailed and explained in chapter three.

Definition of Terms and Keywords

The following definitions and terms serve as primers for larger discussions in the text throughout the study. They are expanded on in this section to frame the larger questions of this study and designed to provide the reader a clearer understanding of ideas and assumptions inherent in the study described below. The definitions then are only a part of the whole answer that was explored throughout this dissertation and should be understood and read within that context.

Identity

The set of meanings and motivations that animate an individual in various roles within society. Meanings and motivations are constantly being pushed and pulled and changed by the larger society and groups with which we associate, whether willingly or unwillingly. These then shape our identity, both being and becoming who we are. (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Identity (re)creation

The author's shorthand for "identity creation and/or recreation", represents the idea of being and becoming who we are, a process that is ongoing as we encounter the social structure around us.

Educational Equity

Education policy, since No Child Left Behind in 2001, has narrowly defined equity as the achievement gap that exists due to the outcomes of test scores on high-stakes accountability measures. Many authors (Chambers, 2009; Cross, 2007; Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2006; 2020; Scheurich et al., 2017) have critiqued this narrow approach and offer their solutions which are discussed in the relevant section of chapter two. The definition that best encompasses the lived realities of marginalized students is from Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams (2019). They define equity as, "fostering more equitable learning environments

and producing equitable outcomes for children and young people furthest from opportunity” (p. 163).

Lifeworld

A phenomenological term used to describe the world around us as we experience it, as it is lived. This term was developed to differentiate phenomenological research from other more empirical human subject research of the late 1800s. The focus of hermeneutic phenomenology with the uncovering the lifeworld is, “toward illuminating details and seemingly trivial aspects within experience that may be taken for granted in our lives, with a goal of creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding” (Lavery. 2003, p. 24).

Meaning Making and Sense Making

This study blends together literature that spans empirical educational leadership research and the philosophical traditions of phenomenology and sociology. As such, it is appropriate to explain and differentiate meaning making and sense making within and between these two separate fields of thought. While recognizing the inherent academic issues of over reduction and simplification, a brief discussion and analogy is appropriate that addresses how these terms bridge the divide between empirical educational leadership studies and the philosophical traditions above.

Within phenomenology and sociology, the process of meaning making is an ontological project (Kafle, 2011; Kakkori, 2009; Lavery, 2003; Suddick et al., 2020; van Manen, 2015a; 2015b). An individual, as a part of a larger social structure, experiences the world around them and places meaning on their existence and experiences. This ontological gaze of meaning shapes and molds their ideas, behaviors, and expectations in which our lives are situated within our social structures and larger ontological questions of being. That is, it is the formulation of or

acknowledgement of an apparent road in the lifeworld, where we have come from, where we are, and where we are going; the ‘why’ and ‘what’ of existence.

Sense making is situated within meaning; it is how we navigate and indeed "make sense" of the meaning of our place in the world. To continue the road analogy, it is how to read the signs and maps of the roads, and as such, is more of an epistemological project. The empirical educational leadership studies that inform this study (Crow et al., 2017; Spillane, J. P. et al., 2015; Spillane, J.P., & Lee, L.C., 2014) focus mostly on the sense making process within an established ontology of public education. As such, they assume the “lifeworld” as foundational and set while attempting to understand the navigation, or sense making, of the established road of meaning.

Further, throughout the study, meaning making and sense making are referred to together. It is vital for the reader to remember their key differences above to illuminate the point being made. Thus, within this study, meaning making is an ontological project, and sense making is an epistemological project.

Finally, the process of meaning making and sense making is dialogic and discursive; each informs the other. In other words, meaning making informs the sense making processes and sense making informs the way meaning is made and understood. Importantly, these are linked in higher education literature (Ball’Alba & Barnacle, 2007; Fellenz,2016; Thomson, 2001) but have yet to be brought into educational leadership studies. These limitations and openings are discussed more extensively in chapters two, three and six.

Neoliberalism

A governing rationality that prioritizes individualism and market logics on all aspects of society at the expense of all other priorities. This idea originated in the 1980s in western

societies, mainly the United States and Great Britain and has since become the dominating governing rationality in some form or another in nearly every country. This societal change has had drastic effects on public education in the United States and around the world. Specifically, school level principal priorities of leading their schools (Apple, 2014; Biesta, 2004; Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2005; Lipman, 2011).

Novice Principal

A school principal in their first three years of leading a public-school. A discussion of how this time frame was chosen appears in chapter two. While all principals were once novice, this study sought to uncover the phenomenon as close to, or hopefully within, the formative times of being and becoming a principal.

Social Justice Leadership and Values

Born out of disconnects with historical, cultural, and social realities of educational opportunity and equity of marginalized groups, social justice values and subsequent leadership look to illuminate and transcend to close the “achievement gap”. According to Bell (2016), “social justice is both a goal and a process” (p. 1); this promotes, “[leaders that] have a social and moral obligation to foster equitable school practices, processes, and outcomes for learners of different racial, socioeconomic, gender, cultural, disability, and sexual orientations backgrounds” (Jean-Marie et al., 2009, p. 4). Extensive discussion and treatment of social justice leadership and values appear in the relevant sections in chapter two.

Keywords: accountability, identity, hermeneutics, meaning-making, narrative, neoliberalism, phenomenology, principals, role, social justice, sociological identity theory, sense-making, technocrat.

Chapter II: Theoretical Foundations and Literature Review

This chapter is constructed to answer the question of how we got where we are now through two distinct areas of study, one, public education and its leadership, and two, identity (re)creation and its effects on leadership. In other words, how did we arrive at the contexts of public education in the United States today and how do we understand the impact of changing social structures on individuals who serve as principals leading today's public schools.

This journey of understanding first takes us through the longitudinal policy and social structure mile markers through public education over the last century into the current era of neoliberal accountability regimes. Second, in order to understand, or rather, to have a more comprehensive understanding of how and why leaders lead, the current social structure of public schools impact leaders' ability to lead diverse students is discussed through exploring the identity (re)creation process and broader sociological identity theory.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the history of accountability regimes and education theory of the twentieth century and are then contextualized within the current frameworks of hegemonic neoliberalism in United States, generally, and public education specifically. These neoliberal contexts drive the tension points facing novice public school principals as they enact their roles, namely neoliberal accountability regimes and social justice leadership and values. A discussion on the various complexities to these tensions for leaders in southern Arizona is also included. The chapter continues with an introduction to identity theory, specifically Sociological Identity Theory, and how identity (re)construction occurs as narrated by stories of meaning-making and sense-making. The chapter ends with a discussion on identity and roles specific to novice public-school principals as well as an exploration of the idea of

sense-making, or *how* novice principals understand, navigate, and narrate their experiences while weaving in sociological identity theory to better describe the sense-making process.

As Biesta (2017) posits, "If it is granted that educational leaders should lead, then the obvious question is what they should lead for—which can also be phrased as the question what they should lead towards" (p. 15). In other words, educational leaders have tremendous impact on school priorities and culture. However, what autonomy is available to the novice principal today? What is expected of school leaders today that may inhibit this autonomy? Because of these questions, an overview of the current contexts of accountability regimes that have impacted public-school policy and practice. Next, the wider historical context is narrowed down into the current hegemony of neoliberalism while folding in literature on the critique of the systems and their limiting influence of those systems on principal leadership.

Contextualizing the Changing Role of Public-School Principals: Taylorism, Neoliberalism, and Accountability

In reviewing the literature on accountability regimes in the United States, several scholars (Apple, 2014; Berliner & Biddle, 1996; Cochran-Smith et al., 2017; Glass, 2008; Lewis & Young, 2013) point to the release and rhetoric surrounding *A Nation At Risk* (1983) as an important shift in public perception and common sense surrounding public education. The rhetoric included links the perceived lagging student performance to a decrease in the US labor force being able to compete globally, thus it causes the economy to suffer and ultimately threatening national security. Like the public reaction and subsequent reimagining of public education to Sputnik in the late 1950s (Bybee & Fuchs, 2006), the perception of the US falling behind jolted the milieu of public education policy and practice into reaction. These shifts in

public perception and reactionary policy were undergirded by the global turn to neoliberalism and its impact on economic and social policy.

While the idea of accountability in education has been a part of the discourse for over a century (Lewis & Young, 2013), the “culture of accountability” (Biesta, 2004) leaped forward with the implementation of No Child Left Behind (NLCB) in 2002 with high-stakes testing and subsequent school grading systems (Apple, 2014; Au, 2016; Cochran-Smith et al., 2017; Diamond & Spillane, 2002; Pinar, 2012; Taubman, 2010; Ylimaki, 2011). The remainder of this section will break down the relevant literature of each major area with an emphasis on the effects on public-school principals’ leadership role.

United States Foundations of Management and Leadership Theory

In the US context, management, leadership (administrative theory), and the current accountability regimes foundations can be traced, in part, to the reactions to the capitalistic industrialization of the US workforce in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Foster, 1986). Within capitalism, means of production are profitable when they operate at their most efficient use of labor and materials. As a result, studies were commissioned and undertaken to understand how efficiency could be maximized and replicated (Foster, 1986). One of the most consequential theories from this era was Taylor’s Scientific Management. Its impact is still felt today and as a “modern” project, serves as a hegemonic foundation for management and leadership theory in the United States and around the world, especially in Western nations (Apple, 2014; Foster, 1986; Ylimaki & Henderson, 2017). Simply put, this modern project was largely rooted in the concepts of the scientific method; that all phenomena are observable, measurable, and (most importantly) can be replicated. The ideas found vocal advocates across multiple disciplines and were quickly extended to systems and social interactions relevant to this

literature review inside and outside the school such as principal to teacher, teacher to student, school to parents, etc. Taylor's theories highlighted the importance efficiency procedures and measurements to the forefront of "successful" organizations. Therefore, producing and replicating these successes are brought about by standardization of procedures and practices through planning and exact execution of the plans. According to Foster (1986), although eventually subsumed by other theories, Taylorism's legacy of "scientific" standardization and measurement lives on in general management and leadership theories and practices, most importantly to this discussion- public education (e.g. content standards, testing, school day routines, evaluation, school letter grades, etc).

While Taylor was not an education theorist, his ideas were appropriated by educational theorists and policy makers and are best summed up in the debates of John Dewey and Edward Thorndike (Tomlinson, 1997). While both Dewey and Thorndike advocated for the need of scientific systematic inquiry into how to best educate U.S. students, their visions varied widely. The former studying a deeper understanding of the educative process and the latter a more standardized and efficient one. John Dewey advocated for much more broad understanding and implementation of the educative experience as a democratic process driven by teachers through their student's experiences. Thorndike on the other hand, advocated a top down elitism of technocratic teacher experts, "implementing research findings under the gaze of administrators and standardized measures of student performance" (p. 367). While John Dewey was influential, his frameworks largely went underground in its influence on policy and practice until the 1960s, (Pinar, 2012; Tomlinson, 1997) Thorndike's work:

Provided the psychological basis for the social efficiency movement associated with...Taylor in sociology, business, and professionalization...the story scripted by

Thorndike became so pervasive, so taken for granted, as the only valid story, that we call it a 'grand narrative' of social science inquiry. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxv)

According to Foster (1986), it was this foundation of administrative theory that dominated educational leadership theory and preparation, stripped of much of the values, ethics, and morality inherent in the human experience. While Taylor's theories were replaced by others, the foundations of his work were alive and well. To illustrate, Ryan (2007) notes that, "for a while in the 1950s and well into the 1980s, in the field of educational administration, the idea of role and its determining qualities fit quite nicely into a scheme that promised predictability and control" (p. 347). After a brief era of humanism in the 1960s and 1970s that pushed against dominant hegemony, the "scheme that promised predictability and control" was reengaged and expanded significantly, culminating with the hegemonic impact of NCLB and various accountability regimes (e.g. high-stakes testing, A-F school grades) since the beginning of this millennium. The literature review and discussion of the impacts of NCLB is included after a review and discussion of the literature regarding neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism and the Reframing of Public Education

Public education in the United States, and in many parts of the world, is governed under practices and priorities of neoliberalism (Apple, 2014; Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Biesta, 2004; Koyama, 2014; Lipman, 2011; Pinar, 2012; Ylimaki, 2011). At its core, neoliberalism is "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free markets and free trade" (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). On the ground, it has the effect of "...an ideological project to reconstruct values, social relations, and social identities to produce a new social imaginary" (Lipman, 2011, p. 10). In

other words, it is a complete reconstruction of a society where " the role of government is to create a good business climate rather than look to the needs and well-being of the population at large" (Harvey, 2005, p. 48). These priorities are pervasive in U.S. society (e.g. medical care, housing, and public education) and have come to hegemonically dominate all areas of schooling.

For example, under neoliberalism, public education is subject to the realities of marketization. These shifts include competition for students (i.e. monies) through open enrollment and charter schools (both online and in person) with testing, and the school grades they produce, as a market metric for parent's "choice".

These forces seek to, "force schools to be more responsive to the needs and preferences of consumers...[and assumes that]...schools will respond to competitive pressures [to improve performance] by reorienting their attention toward educational consumers" (Lubienski, 2005, p. 464). Unfortunately, this reorientation has left many students, communities, teachers, and leaders, behind.

To illustrate the comprehensive and foundational societal changes wrought by neoliberal policy and governance, I expand the discussion of the social reorientation and its effects on public education. Importantly, Biesta (2004) notes that neoliberalism fundamentally changed the relationship between the state and its citizens. He asserts that:

This relationship has become less a political relationship — that is, a relationship between government and citizens who, together, are concerned about the common good — and more an economic relationship — that is, a relationship between the state as provider and the taxpayer as consumer of public services (most significantly, health care, education, and social and economic security and safety). The reconfiguration of the relationship between the state and its citizens should not be understood as simply a

different way of relating. The new relationship has fundamentally changed the role and identity of the two parties as well as the terms on which they relate. (p. 237)

This change in the relationship between citizens and their government is at the heart of Apple's (2014) argument that this new relationship has profound effect on societal discourse and governance:

Disarticulation and rearticulation...[of words]...such as 'democracy' and 'justice' ...chang[ing] their origins in progressive movements, emptied of their previous meanings, and then filled with new meanings... [previously] 'thick' meanings of democracy grounded in full collective participation are replaced by 'thin' understandings where democracy is reduced to a choice on a market. (p. xix)

These "rearticulations" are pervasive and discussed more specifically below in the discussion of social justice, equity, and leadership later in this chapter. Continuing with this new economic language, Biesta (2004) observes that the neoliberal language used is:

An economic language that positions the government as provider and citizen as consumer. Choice has become the key word in this discourse. Yet 'choice' is about the behavior of consumers in a market where their aim is to satisfy their needs...[not]...about public deliberation and contestation regarding the common good. (p. 237)

These themes get to the matter of the hegemonic nature of neoliberalism-that is, the fundamental shift of "common sense" to a hyper-individualized ideal over larger societal needs. This, of course, extends into the discourse surrounding public-education. For example, Koyama and Cofield (2013) assert that the current realities:

...are a result of a neoliberal movement that infiltrates public education with business-like, market-based reforms all in the name of maintaining the country's position in the

global economic structure while ignoring the pernicious social inequities within the US that undergird the need for educational reform. (p. 277)

These inequalities continue to be propagated and replicated within various social structures and systems throughout the United States and other western nations. Under neoliberalism, public education is subject to the realities of marketization. Instead of providing the educational environment where ‘no child [is] left behind’, Lubienski (2005) found that:

...organizations often react to these competitive pressures by instead adopting behaviors at other levels of the organization. In particular, many educational organizations engage to a remarkable and somewhat unexpected degree in marketing and other promotional activities having to do with symbolic management of a school’s image rather than substantive changes in its educational processes. (p. 465)

In other words, when pushed into marketization, the intended effect of school improvement was largely unsuccessful with other consequences on principal leadership within such realities.

Further, this phenomenon has created an environment of survival of the fittest as competition and market forces prioritize time, money, and effort in already strapped budgets. For instance, Koyama (2014) found that, “[neoliberal priorities] guides, if not determines, resource allocation, reorganizes and creates institutional instruments and practices, promotes new rituals of verification, and prioritizes particular knowledge in schooling” (p. 280). These prioritizations are embedded not only in the on the ground jobs of leading a school, but are:

...found in policy standards and training and development documents...[that]...prioritize technocratic leadership skills and competencies which define effectiveness as the production of high student test scores over values, beliefs, dispositions and practices

designed also to develop students' emotional as well as functional literacy and social values (Lumby & English, 2009, p. 265).

These types of standards and training create an environment of socialization that have had a profound impact on leading in today's public schools. The next section delves deeper into the impact of specific neoliberal policies that more fully implement the Taylor-ism push for efficient and replicable educational outcomes.

Accountability Regimes

In the lead up to the passing and implementation of NCLB, Waite, Boone, and McGhee (2001) noted that, "[the word] accountability stands on the verge of becoming an iconic metaphor...when people write or speak of accountability in public education the denotation, the meaning, is often ambiguous" (p. 183). Biesta (2004) called accountability, "a slippery rhetorical term...in general discourse, accountability has to do with responsibility and carries connotations of being answerable to" and took on a new meaning as a "system of governance" (pp. 234, 235). However, "accountability" in education was not always thought of in this manner. As Biesta (2004) notes:

Accountability in the late 1970s and early 1980s were strongly focused on a professional interpretation of accountability — that is, one in which the responsibility of teachers to themselves as professionals, to their colleagues and professional associates, and to pupils, parents, and society at large, was seen as an integral part of educational professionalism, rather than as merely an external demand. (p. 235)

Additionally, Cochran-Smith et al. (2017) note that, accountability was not a new phenomenon in the US in education [in the 1990s]...rather the emerging era of accountability was part of a larger societal change which cut across education levels...and across professions" (p. 574).

Importantly, Waite et al. (2001) explain that, “most accountability measures in the United States have been imposed on students, teachers, schools, and school districts and were developed and implemented without their consent or involvement” (p. 183). This “deprofessionalization” of education (Pinar, 2012), has had a profound effect on the identities of teachers and principals. This will be explored further below in the section on sense-making and meaning-making.

With the ushering in of NCLB in 2001, accountability did indeed take on “cultural metaphor” status. This shift is reflected in the explicit coupling of accountability with testing, emphasizing on inputs (resources, educational processes) to outputs (test scores, graduation rates) (Apple, 2014; Au, 2016; Cochran-Smith et al., 2017; Diamond & Spillane, 2002; Taubman, 2009). I discuss this more extensively in the section on educational equity later in the chapter. Not only were these changes implemented from the top down (Federal government to the states, then to the local school districts), but included substantial penalties for “failure” within this new system. This is illustrated by Au (2016) who states that:

NCLB amounted to a federal mandate to require standardized testing in every U.S. state, with the threat that if test scores were not raised...schools and districts would face a variety of possible punishments including loss of control of federal education monies, the complete reconstitution of a school’s staff, takeover by a charter management organization, or school closures. (p. 49)

These mandates and punishments have only increased since 2001 with further federal mandates, such as Race to The Top and Common Core Standards (Apple, 2014; Au, 2016; Cochran-Smith et al., 2017; Pinar, 2012). Specifically, increasing the prevalence and public usage of the simplistic and narrow A-F accountability labels for schools. These policies have had real impacts on communities and the schools who serve them and have come to mean far

more than an indicator of a narrow band of testing data. For example, while the Arizona Department of Education attempted to dampen the expectations of A-F accountability labels to overall school quality (The Arizona a-f accountability system, 2014), Figlio and Lucas (2004) observe that the housing market responds strongly to the assignment of school letter grades” (p. 593) causing upheaval in the communities whom the schools serve. As Au (2016) noted, “The high-stakes, standardized tests provide the data on which student, teacher, and school value are measured, [and] establish the basis for viewing education as a market where consumers [parents] can make choices about where to send their children to school” (p. 40). These choices have real consequences for schools, school leaders, and communities and can be seen being played out in communities across the United States (Henry, 2016; Lipman, 2011).

Equal Educational Opportunity?

Neoliberal policies, such as No Child Left Behind and myriad state level policies, have also fundamentally shifted the definition of educational equity to one mostly focused on test scores and the problematic term, the “achievement gap” (Chambers, 2009; Cross, 2007; Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2006; 2020; Scheurich et al., 2017). Specifically, Scheurich et al. (2017), note that, “to a substantial degree, this is a function of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which defined equity and inequity in terms of state accountability test score gaps” (p. 508). These score gaps are disproportionately seen in minority communities throughout the United States and are represented in demonstrably less opportunities and more punishments than their White counterparts (Cross, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2020).

Chambers (2009), in an acknowledgement of the inherent problems with measuring the “achievement gap”, which focuses on the outputs, instead reframes the gap as a “receiving gap” to, “refocus and challenge the deficit model of thinking” (p. 418). Chambers continues, “the

term ‘receiving gap’ is useful because it focuses attention on educational inputs- what the students receive on their educational journey, instead of outputs- their performance on a standardized test”. Further, as Cross (2007) notes, “the failures in many urban schools have been perversely twisted from critiquing the roles of schools and institutions to question the innate intelligence and academic potential of particular students” (p. 248). Further still, “We have reached a point where those disadvantaged by the social lottery of educational opportunity are blamed for the gap that the social lottery produced” (p. 248). These effects and outcomes are still in effect today and have been exacerbated by the large disparities in educational equity and opportunity gaps laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. internet and device access, parent involvement, sibling care during instruction). Gloria Ladson-Billings (2021) calls for a hard reset rather than a “return to normal” as schools reopened nationwide in 2021. Ladson-Billings laments:

If we consider what normal has been for Black children, it is easy to see why “getting back to normal” does not seem like a good idea. Black children have lower achievement performance (as measured by standardized tests), are more likely to have less experienced or under-prepared teachers, suffer disproportionately from school discipline policies, have less access to advanced courses, are less likely to be selected for gifted and talented classes, be assigned to special education, and experience grade level retention. (p. 69)

Although these problems are not new, they are not improving despite availability of pedagogy that has been developed to address the inputs of education. Unfortunately, as Ladson-Billings, the originator of one of the most prolific and substantive pedagogy to combat the “achievement gaps”- culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), notes, “For many years, educators

have given lip service to the notion of leveraging students' culture to teach them well" (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 76) and that, "unfortunately, what happens in many of our classrooms is that teachers include superficial aspects of diverse cultures interrupting mainstream, hegemonic norms and practices" (p. 72) which only serves to widen the "reivement gap" as well as the "achievement gap". Ladson-Billings calls for a re-set of teaching as well, a deliberate acknowledgement of the failure of real implementation of culturally responsive teaching. Discussion specific to leadership issues continues a few sections further in this chapter with the broader discussion of social justice leadership and values.

Defining Equity

Scheurich et al. (2017), ask the important question, "If educational equity cannot be defined as the achievement gap, how ought educational equity be defined?" (pp. 521-522). The authors argue that the definition should be inductively defined by communities themselves. Although they acknowledge that, "this is not simple and that various urban communities of color may disagree and may change over time. Nonetheless, it is our contention that each community should wrestle with and define this for its students, families, and other community members" (p. 522). To guide this process, they offer four categories to explore for communities to create their own definitions. They are community-based, democracy-based, context-based, and time-based. These would require significant support, training, and guidance and would be extremely difficult to implement as support for communities of color continues to deteriorate in our present milieu. That, of course, does not mean these efforts should be abandoned, rather, it serves as a reminder of the systemic and political realities facing these communities across the United States.

Other scholars frame their standard definitions in ways to encompass the critiques cited above. For example, Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams (2019) define equity in education as,

“fostering more equitable learning environments and producing equitable outcomes for children and young people furthest from opportunity” (p. 163). Regardless of the definition, as Gloria Ladson-Billings reminds us, “No matter how good the curriculum content, the curriculum cannot teach itself” (p. 74). Instead, teachers must be deeply trained in culturally relevant pedagogy and strive to deeply understand and embrace the complicated conversation of curriculum (Pinar, 2012) in order have a chance at real equity in education.

The Changing Role of the Public-School Principal Under Neoliberal Accountability Regimes

These myriad changes have had a direct impact on public-school principal leadership. According to Dulude, Spillane, and Dumay (2017) principals’ actions shifted into areas of resource allocation for, “curriculum and assessments, professional development, and data-driven decision making “(p. 365) in order to ensure the best changes for improvement often at the expense of other programs and priorities. Additionally, Kelchtermans, Piot, & Ballet (2011) note that the principal acts as a gatekeeper, “balancing on the threshold between inside and outside” (p. 96). Similarly, Koyama (2014) noted, “Principals occupy a unique place in educational organizations, often negotiating multiple internal and external accountability policies, and mediating the actions of diverse actors, both in and out of schools” (p. 282). This unique placement within the organization further pressures principals to conform to the prevailing neoliberal headwinds.

Within this context of high-stakes accountability regimes, public-school principals’ roles have become highly technocratic (Apple, 2014; Crow & Scribner, 2014; Crow & Moller, 2017; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Lumby & English, 2009; Pinar, 2012; Scribner & Crow, 2012; Ylimaki & Henderson, 2017), with training, preparation, and research highlighting narrowed

competencies and skills of leadership over other aspects of leadership, specifically values, beliefs, and identities of leaders as discussed more fully below in the section of leadership tensions.

According to Hargreaves and Shirley (2009), this broader technocracy, “has converted moral issues of inequality and social justice that should be a shared social responsibility into technical calculations of student progress targets and achievement gaps that are confined to the school” (p. 29). Additionally, As Apple (2014) noted, “educational policy and practice are not simply technical issues but are inherently political and valiative. They involve competing definitions of ethics and social justice” (p. xxviii). These competing values converge in the priorities and role enactment of principals firmly within the tensions that exist between historical democratic values of public education and value-free neoliberalism.

Several scholars note the impacts of these hegemonic policies on the various actors within the increasingly volatile social structure. To illustrate, I include only two of many here. As McGhee and Nelson (2005) lament:

Perhaps this culture of educational accountability, created by well-intended policy makers aiming to improve schools, has instead become a culture of fear, driven by unanticipated consequences of the system. For example, school leaders, whose performance was once assessed using a variety of indicators that reflected the complexity of the job, are now finding their effectiveness determined in much narrower terms. (p. 368).

Importantly, when effectiveness is narrowed, so is the evaluation process, which creates a feedback loop of narrowed measures and performance of job priorities.

Finally, and rather bleakly, Biesta (2004) states:

The inevitable conclusion is that the culture of accountability has dramatically changed the relationships in the educational landscape, and by the very same process, it has changed the identities and, more important, the self-perceptions of the parties involved. There are, as I have suggested, powerful psychological "mechanisms" at work in this process. By taking on the role of the consumers of educational provision, parents and students may gain a feeling of power that may be difficult to resist.... The culture of accountability makes it very difficult for the relations between parents/students and educators/ institutions to develop into mutual, reciprocal, and democratic relationships, relationships that are based on a shared concern for the common educational good. (p. 249)

These types of strained relationships between communities and their schools are explored in the stories told by the participants of the study and are highlighted in chapters four and five. In addition, these phenomena will be further explored throughout the study in their relationship to role enactment of novice principals, especially in their transition into leadership. As this study takes place in Arizona, I have included a discussion of Arizona specific examples of the themes above.

The Arizona Neoliberal Context: Charters, Marketization, and Open Enrollment

Arizona is at the forefront of neoliberal educational reforms. Since 1994, the state has been one of the most prolific supporters of school choice programs, such as open enrollment and charter schools (Chingos & West, 2015). In 2013, there were 530 charter schools operating in Arizona which, "accounted for nearly a quarter of all public schools in the state" (p. 120). However, test scores over the period of time from 2005 to 2012 showed that charter school produced test scores that, "...have been modestly less effective than TPS (traditional public

schools) in raising student achievement in some subjects” (p. 120). Despite this, charter schools continue to thrive in Arizona and are top priorities of the conservative majority in the state legislature. (Charter News, 2020).

These movements have changed the lived realities of leading in public schools. For example, as described earlier in this chapter, the implementation of A-F accountability grading system has greatly exacerbated the marketization of the educational system in Arizona with marketing now seen as a vital part of school and school districts’ budgets and staffing. DiMartino and Jessen (2018) observe that, “issues like branding and image management are not only being used in education but are also seen as crucial to the effective operation of educational organizations” (p. viii). With nearly one quarter of all public schools in Arizona operative under a charter (Chingos & West, 2015), the competition for limited dollars per student is fierce. This is further hampered by the tension points discussed throughout this chapter. The next section details the impact of these policies on principal retention with the clashing of personal and professional priorities impacting principal leadership.

Impact on Principal Retention

Snodgrass-Rangel (2018) conducted an exhaustive review of the literature on principal turnover. Snodgrass-Rangel found that studies grouped under the label of “accountability policy” did show that there were higher principal turnover rates at schools that did not meet or were lower on the scale of the accountability measures with standardized test scores being the main measure for each formula. Additionally, other studies grouped under “characteristics of the job”, Snodgrass-Rangel notes that these studies point to, “three characteristics of the principalship itself as predictors of principal turnover: the degree of autonomy, relationships, and the changing nature of the position” (p. 103). Each of these characteristics showed that

principals who experience low degrees of autonomy, strained relationships, and constant change are more likely to have higher turnover than those who do not.

Several other scholars have noted the high turnover of principals, especially in areas of high poverty, usually associated with low test scores (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2009; Goldring & Taie, 2014). Further still, schools with a new principal every year or two are rarely in a position to improve test scores as it usually takes 5-7 years to improve a school with a consistent leader at the helm (Fullan, 2001). We can see the fundamental paradox of even the most benign implications of accountability regimes: If test scores must increase, principals need to be leaders of their schools for longer periods of time than most serve. However, principal retention rates have only decreased since the implementation of No Child Left Behind.

These changing priorities and further widening the gap between democratic leadership and neoliberal policies have profound implications on role identities of principals. The next section looks at this impact before a deeper dive into identity and social structures as another vital angle to understanding leading in today's public schools.

Impact on Principal Identity

These constraints on the role of the principal subsequently put limitations on the identities (meanings and motivations) brought to the role of principal, thus creating potentially highly volatile interactions between individuals within these social constructs, especially those who bring values, beliefs, and dispositions (e.g. social justice, equity, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy) beyond the post-NCLB institutionalized neoliberal competencies. This has a notable impact on the identity verification process, especially within the transition from teacher to principal. Newly developed group identities then create standards of behavior and practice that can be in conflict with deeply held personal beliefs, leading to higher levels of the stress and

lower self-esteem leading to issues of withdrawal, banal compliance, or leaving the job all together (Burke & Stets, 2009; Snodgrass-Rangel, 2018). A larger, wide-ranging discussion on identity, roles, and social structures, and their impact on principal leadership appears further in this chapter.

To sum up, the accountability era's focus and demands on predictability and replicability are anathema to social justice leadership and values. As a result, the open, fluid, dynamic nature of identity (re)creation can lead to highly volatile play between shifting identities and roles. The nature of governance under neoliberal accountability regimes have fundamentally changed public education. Technocratic public-school leadership masks the complexities inherent to public-school leadership which has profound limiting effects on how leaders understand, navigate, and build identities. The next section of the paper looks closer at the tension point between social justice leadership and values during the current neoliberal accountability milieu by starting with a discussion on social justice itself.

Social Justice, Equity and Leadership

The concept of social justice continues to be celebrated or derided in public discourse, political speech, and the larger societal milieu with current foment with Critical Race Theory and LGBTQ inclusive curriculum. Bell (2016) gives us a full and thoughtful way to frame the discussion of social justice by referring to social justice as, "both a goal and a process". She continues:

The goal of social justice is full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. The process for attaining the goal of social justice should also be democratic and participatory, respectful

of human diversity and group differences, and inclusive and affirming of human agency and capacity for working collaboratively with others to create change. (Bell, 2016, p. 1)

In other words, it is not just a social imaginary, but social societal action. Societal action that works to eliminate injustices brought on by embedded power structures (Bell, 2016). A process that plays out in communities all over the world, with decidedly mixed results. Further, Brown (2004) adds that, “more than simply acknowledging ‘others’ and analyzing stereotypes; more fundamentally it means understanding, engaging, and transforming the diverse institutions that produce racism and other forms of discrimination” (p. 333). As we have seen in recent years in the United States, issues of race and equality have fomented deeper and wider than since perhaps the 1960s. Education sits at the intersection of societal strife, the battleground of ideas and social shaping. Therefore, social justice values, as Brown discusses above, move beyond the acknowledgement of these social issues, they demand action.

School principals who display social justice leadership and values believe and practice that “[they] have a social and moral obligation to foster equitable school practices, processes, and outcomes for learners of different racial, socioeconomic, gender, cultural, disability, and sexual orientations backgrounds” (Jean-Marie et al., 2009, p. 4). This stands in stark contrast to the supposed value-less nature of neoliberal accountability regimes that dominate leadership practice today which are focused, at the expense of all other priorities, on “school improvement, standardization and performativity” (Grimaldi, 2012, p. 1132).

Within this study I utilize social justice leadership and values as an umbrella term that includes several movements and frameworks within public education that move leaders to enact the kind of leadership that addresses the areas stated above. These include Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014), Ethical Leadership (Bass, Frick & Young, 2018), and

Hermeneutic Leadership (Ylimaki & Henderson, 2017). While my treatment of this area does not highlight these important areas directly, they belong to the same foundations of thought in education; that is that leaders have an ethical and moral obligation where:

the work [of leading public schools] is about “human completion” (Freire, 1970/2003, p. 47) achieved through inquiring relational practice that embraces equitable goals, public organizing actions, and deliberative democratic methods through community (Strike, 2007), while simultaneously seeking out and responding in ways that support the best interests of students. (Frick, Bass & Young, 2018, p. xvi)

Increasingly, this is becoming more difficult and is discussed in the section below.

Lived Realities of Leading Schools

While some principals have found success blending these two disparate views, most have not, and have instead become subsumed in the narrowed role of the technocrat (Crow et al., 2017; DeMatthews, 2018) with core identities being altered or changed. Not surprising then DeMatthews (2018) notes that many school principals have been socialized to:

believe they must always remain neutral, keep politics out of their school and out of their decisions [while leading] in ways that promote student achievement as measured by state assessments and continuous improvement goals...they are often driven by compliance, competition with other principals in their district, and a desire to ensure each day runs smoothly and without controversy. (p. DeMatthews, 2018, pp. 1-2)

Other researchers have noted that this attitude is pervasive in the preparation programs that these leaders are trained in. They note that, “educational leaders are not adequately prepared to lead public schools toward a greater understanding of diversity. These aspiring leaders claimed little

responsibility for promoting social justice, especially when social change challenged local norms [emphasis added]” (Jean-Marie et al., 2015, p. 307).

This mindset, of serious hesitation towards challenging local norms, reinforces the earlier discussion on group identity and validation. For example, the identity standard for many contemporary school districts is one of neoliberal accountability language and symbols of standardization and compliance. Going against this identity standard creates friction that is difficult to maintain for long periods of time for anyone.

DeMatthews (2018) acknowledges that, “the truth is that community engaged leadership for social justice often gritty and political, slow-paced when confronted with resistance, and physically and mentally exhausting” (p. 177).

These tensions, while sometimes catalysts for positive change, often serve as reinforcement of walls of acceptable behaviors and practices, limiting the principal’s ability to enact real leadership for change. Or, and most alarming, Social justice leadership and values expectations can be appropriated, curtailed, and marginalized to an “acceptable” checklist within the hegemony (Apple, 2014). For example, Grimaldi (2012) found that while:

issues related to social justice, equity and inclusion continue to appear in the education policy documents...what we are witnessing is neither a coexistence nor a combination but the marginalizing and subjugation of the commitment with social justice and inclusive education by the hegemonic neoliberal discourse. (p. 1133)

Further, Ryan and Higginbottom (2017) assert that actual Social Justice leadership cannot be practiced without activism. They acknowledge however that, “activism can be risky for educators. If the cause they advocate does not coincide with official or sanctioned organizational values, practices or policies, then educators may be penalized for partaking in oppositional

activities” (p. 112). Additionally, they caution, “Strategic action is crucial; social justice may well fail if leaders do not carefully consider and weigh their options” (p. 113). They then suggest that educators practice “strategic activism”. Like other skills, this must be learned and practiced regularly.

Shifting of Working Conditions Under Neoliberalism. Leaders then face three main areas of difficulties in enacting Social Justice Leadership. One, a lack of an installation of Social Justice values as part of their leadership preparation. Two, district socialization into the dominant hegemony of standards and compliance bereft of Social Justice values. Three, a version of “Social Justice Leadership” that is reduced to a checklist, or professional development training in order to “do” Social Justice leadership.

Furthering the Arizona Context: Border Politics and Desegregation

In addition to the general tensions and contexts above, the participants in this study are school leaders in unique tensions and contexts of southern Arizona. Pointedly, Ylimaki, Bennett, Fan and Villasenor (2012) note that:

Today’s Southern Arizona principals must lead with and through legacies of colonialism, including English-only instruction laws, community pressures to teach traditional “American” values, disputes over mascot symbolism, immigration debates, and numerous other border issues in the everyday lives of children and their parents. Current educational policies reflect broader (conservative) cultural political shifts that have only heightened postcolonial subjugation in Southern Arizona schools. (p. 171)

Since the publication of their paper, volatile federal policies on border walls, family migration/separation, immigration raids and restrictions can be added to the context. It does not take long to see issues of social justice within southern Arizona schools.

Why Novice Principals?

Returning to the larger questions of principal leadership, this study focused on novice principals. This was done in hopes to elicit rich data of those close to, and hopefully, still in the processes of transition and change as a new principal. The importance of novice principals in understanding the effects of leading through these tensions are exemplified by Spillane and Lee (2014) who postulate five areas of “transition challenges” for new principals in their empirical literature review on novice principals. They are: First, novice principals experience a sense of professional isolation and loneliness. Second, they struggle managing the legacy, practice, and style of the principal that they are replacing. Third, are concerns that novices experience due to the multifaceted nature of the tasks they are expected to perform. Fourth, involves concerns in dealing with ineffective and resistant staff. Fifth, involves issues with managing the budget and facility issues. Other scholars found similar challenges for novice principals in urban schools alike (James-Ward, 2013), rural (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018), large, and small (Ewington, et al., 2008).

While these issues are present in most principalships, they are particularly acute in the role enactment of novice principals as they transition from teaching to leading and present fertile opportunities for research into the sense-making process.

Specifically, Spillane and Lee (2014) note “New principals often struggle with feelings of professional isolation and loneliness as they transition into a role that carries ultimate responsibility and decision-making powers” (p. 433). Still further, “those who become principals in large, urban districts in this era of accountability likely face an especially daunting transition. Poverty and racial dynamics, along with expectations for instructional leadership and

accountability for school performance, greatly complexify the experience of the novice urban school principal” (p. 433).

Finally, Spillane and Lee note the importance of studying this subset of school principals in particular by stating that, “with such large numbers of low-performing students and the high turnover in leadership in these environments, understanding the novice principals’ experience in these contexts is especially critical for retaining and better supporting them” (p. 433). This finding is crucial to understanding ways forward for better support for novice principals as they establish behaviors and skills early in their career.

Definition of Novice Principals

Definitions of what constitutes a “novice” principal vary widely in the literature. Some definitions revolve around novice as a concept (i.e. new and thus, inexperienced), but always within three years of experience (Crawford, 2012; Creasap, 2003; Ewington et al., 2008; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Others encompass “novice” as a time period of service in their studies: one to two years (James-Ward, 2013), and finally, “novice” principals in their first year only (Spillane, Harris, Jones, and Mertz, 2015; Weiner, 2016).

Therefore, for the purposes of this study, and in line with the ranges of “novice” that I encountered in the literature, I will define the “novice” principal as one within their first three years of experience in leading their school.

Meaning Making and Sense Making: Bringing Empirical Education Research into

Conversation with the Philosophical Traditions of Phenomenology and Sociology¹

¹ This section is reproduced almost entirely verbatim from the definitions in chapter one before additions relevant to this chapter. The beginning is replicated here as this is where the content should be within the main context of the study, especially if a reader had skipped over the definitions earlier, for the reader to have a firm grasp on these important terms.

This study blends together literature that spans empirical educational leadership research and the philosophical traditions of phenomenology and sociology. As such, it is appropriate to explain and differentiate meaning making and sense making within and between these two separate fields of thought. While recognizing the inherent academic issues of over reduction and simplification, I will briefly discuss and analogize the way I think of these terms bridging the divide between empirical educational leadership studies and the philosophical traditions above.

Within phenomenology and sociology, the process of meaning making is an ontological project (Kafle, 2011; Kakkori, 2009; Lavery, 2003; Suddick et al., 2020; van Manen, 2015a; 2015b). An individual, as a part of a larger social structure, experiences the world around them and places meaning on their existence and experiences. This ontological gaze of meaning shapes and molds their ideas, behaviors, and expectations in which our lives are situated within our social structures and larger ontological questions of being. That is, it is the formulation of or acknowledgement of an apparent road in the lifeworld, where we have come from, where we are, and where we are going; the ‘why’ and ‘what’ of existence.

Sense making is situated within meaning; it is how we navigate and indeed "make sense" of the meaning of our place in the world. To continue the road analogy, it is how to read the signs and maps of the roads, and as such, is more of an epistemological project. The empirical educational leadership studies that inform this study (Crow et al., 2017; Spillane, J. P. et al., 2015; Spillane, J.P., & Lee, L.C., 2014) focus mostly on the sense making process within an established ontology of public education. As such, they assume the “lifeworld” as foundational and set while attempting to understand the navigation, or sense making, of the established road of meaning.

Further, throughout the study, I refer to meaning making and sense making together. It is vital for the reader to remember their key differences above to illuminate the point being made. Thus, within this study, meaning making is an ontological project, and sense making is an epistemological project.

Finally, the process of meaning making and sense making is dialogic and discursive; each informs the other. In other words, meaning making informs the sense making processes and sense making informs the way meaning is made and understood. Importantly, these are linked in higher education literature (Ball'Alba & Barnacle, 2007; Fellenz,2016; Thomson, 2001) but have yet to be brought into educational leadership studies broadly. As higher education theorists, Dall'Alba and Barnacle (2007) note:

ontology and epistemology are inseparable...our very 'being in the world' [ontology] is shaped by the knowledge we pursue, uncover, and embody. There is a troubling sense in which it seems that we cannot help practicing what we know, since we are 'always ready' implicitly shaped by our guiding metaphysical presuppositions" (p. 682).

This presents both a problem and an opening. If educational leadership research as become unmoored from its philosophical ontological roots, as espoused by early educational theorists (e.g., Dewey, Heidegger), researchers, and most importantly practitioners, are receiving only part of the relevant information and understandings that are inherent to the realities of leading today's public schools. Importantly, these issues in education are addressed in other areas of educational research, especially in teacher education (curriculum theory, democratic leadership, social justice leadership). However, they have yet to be dealt with in earnest in educational leadership research. This need for inclusion is apparent from the issues raised in the problem statement of this study. That is, principals are prepared to lead in today's neoliberal accountability systems

with its emphasis on technocratic skills and competencies which eschews ontological embodiment questions of being and becoming a school leader. Thus, leaving the ontological questions to be decided from the shadows rather than a deliberate overt action of embodiment of the journey of being and becoming a school principal.

While sense-making provides understanding of what happens when an individual encounters challenges and difficulties within the ontological meaning-making process, not much is known about how ontological identity is constructed within educational leadership. In that spirit, the following section delves deeper into the ontological construction of identity as a reaction to social structures and norms in hopes to further understand the experiences of a novice principal.

Identity Theory

The previous sections focused on the large societal and political trends that have shaped public policy, including public education. The final half of this chapter will explore identity. Through the theoretical lens of sociological identity theory, I will explain various impacts and consequences of neoliberal accountability regimes on school leaders, not just as a role being performed, but as a human being, with independent thoughts, ideas, values, and priorities. As explained in the introduction, these learnings would “enrich our understanding not only of what leaders do but why they do it and the values, beliefs and practices that shape, challenge and perhaps change their professional identities” (Crow et al., 2017, p. 274). And that would, “provide valuable information on how preparation programs and support systems need to be developed to enable successful narratives that balance, or even hold in tension these conflicting identities” (p. 274). Further, as novice principals struggle to thrive and stay at their schools, Spillane and Lee (2014) note that, “understanding the novice principals’ experience...is

especially critical for retaining and better supporting them” (p. 433). It is in this spirit that I explore frameworks for understanding identity.

The literature on identity, while vast, can be separated into a few broad notable areas relevant to this literature review and my overall study. Broadly, understanding identity has been an ages old question of philosophers (e.g., Plato, Kant, Hegel, Foucault), as well as the study of psychologists (Freud, Jung, Erikson), and sociologists (James, Mead, Cooley) (Burke & Stets, 2009; Crow et al., 2017). Indeed, the question of “what does it mean to be who you are?” or even the declarative statement of Rene Descartes, “I think, therefore I am” drive scholars and researchers to understand who we are.

While this study utilizes a sociological approach to understanding identity, a few lines regarding psychological identity theory and its general differences are warranted. To put it simply, sociological identity theory is focused on the macro aspects of identity (re)creation (e.g., how individuals and society inform one another), whereas psychological identity theory is primarily focused on how identity is created at the “intrapsychic level” as a part of a continuum of identity statuses (Côté & Schwartz, 2002) and deals purely within the micro level of an individual. Criticisms of the latter theory generally refer to the narrowness of the scope of study (i.e., the individual) bereft of society/social group contexts (Côté & Schwartz, 2002). In spite of the criticisms however, the micro analysis and understandings of psychological identity theory have crept into sociological identity theory in looking at the roles of emotions, stress, and self-esteem to identity (re)creation and salience (Burke and Stets, 2009). The remainder of this section will discuss the sociological approach to understanding identity.

Sociological Identity Theory

In reviewing the immense landscape of work on identity within sociology, Hoover (2004) postulates that three frameworks dominate the study on identity across multiple disciplines. First, *constructivist* theories, “where identity is seen as an artefact of power, or more broadly, as the work of social forces” (p. 1). Second, *essentialist* theories, “for whom identities are fixed by gender, race, and sometimes class...[with] each person is tied to their social and/or genetic origins”. Third, *individualist* theories in which, “identity is seen as self-created, as choses, or as a matter of ‘affinity’” (p. 2). Hoover’s main criticism in each of these frameworks derive from their isolation, or their “inner-reliance” at the expense of the others. He sees the need for a more unified and broad approach that bridges the divides he exposes.

Crow et al (2017) see the broad frameworks on identity as a duality rooted in the philosophical debates of Kant (1781) (“free to choose a set of identities”) and Hegel (1806) (“culturally and historically determined” identities) (p. 267). Crow et al. take the perspective of Hegel. As the work of Crow et al was my gateway into this area of research, the remainder of the paper will be from this perspective. According to Crow et al., Hegel’s identity philosophy reflects, “that our mind interprets things in relation to the other; that we cannot know ourselves in isolation because our thoughts, values, and beliefs are derived from the cultures in which we live” (p. 267). These sets of beliefs and meanings associated with them in relation to our contexts then become the basis for understanding and interpretation of who we are internally, identity as meaning and motivation, and externally, with the enactment of roles.

Much of the literature specifically focused on identity in education (teachers and/or leaders) is derived from a socially constructed model of identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Bradbury & Gunter, 2006; Crow et al., 2017; Day et al., 2000; Hargreaves, 1998; Helstad & Moller, 2013; Lumby & English, 2009; Moller, 2005a, 2005b; Real & Botía, 2018; Scribner &

Crow, 2012; Tubin, 2017; Wenger, 1998). The most influential theorists in this socially constructed view of identity are sociologists Peter Burke and Jan Stets (2009) with their book titled *Identity Theory*. The ideas presented in their influential book drive the remainder of this section of the literature review.

Identity Defined. As previously shown, there are several definitions of identity, rooted in various epistemological and ontological perspectives. Depending on which broad discipline one's scholarship derives, the definition of identity shifts (Harris, 1995). Below I focus the literature review on socially constructed views of identity which are largely based on ideas rooted in sociologist William James' scholarship on identity of self within society (Burke & Stets, 2009; Harris, 1995; Hoover, 2004; Leary & Tangney, 2003; Levita, 1963) which has given rise to the specific literature relevant to my study on public-school principal leadership as discussed above.

The following is a sample of definitions of identity as a reference and as a guide to the discussion as I fold in ideas of public-school principal leadership sense-making within neoliberal accountability regimes, as a synthesis and as a framework to this study. After each quote, I will pull out relevant ideas that will inform the remainder of the study. In his meta-analysis of identity theory at the time, Levita (1963) defines identity as:

The way in which a person establishes himself in the world. The way in which he...chooses the constancies and predictabilities under the protection of which he dares to accept changes and unpredictabilities and even to change unpredictably [as such] identity also changes and, in fact, constantly. (p. 155)

Here Levita describes the changeable nature of identity and the role of the self ("he", in this instance) in interacting with the predictable and unpredictable. This interaction is key to

understanding how public-school principals understand, navigate, and negotiate their identities. Additionally, Hoover (2004) describes identity in that it, “provides one with a sense of well-being—a sense of being at home in one’s body, a sense of direction to one’s life, and a sense of mattering to those who count” (p. 63). This “mattering” brings meaning into the definition an important part of creating stable identities. Further, and firmly into the realm of sociological theory, Burke and Stets (2009) first simple definition of identity that appears in their book describes identity as, “the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person” (p. 3). According to Burke and Stets, the interaction of these with the surrounding social constructs and contexts serves as a basis for answering the original question of “what does it mean to be who you are?” and ultimately can help us understand how public-school principals understand their identities and roles. Finally, Ritacco and Bolivar (2018) note that:

the concept of identity is complex because it is not an objective reality, but rather a discursive and mental construction that individuals use to express a certain way of seeing themselves and feeling in relation to their representation and practice spaces. (p. 23)

This final definition gives important voice to the larger idea of theory of identity, these ideas are constructs and frameworks designed to help scholars explain and the public to understand. Further and for example, Burke and Stets (2009) break down identities into three specific categories: person identity, social identity, and role identity. While each identity serves a unique function in providing meaning and motivations to the enactment of roles, the three identity types are intertwined with the person identity serving as the “master identity” (p. 126). According to Burke and Stets, the person identity provides the “core self... who one is as a person across

situations, across time, across relationships”, while the social identity is a group identity that shares an, “interrelated set of perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behavior” that distinguish an “in group” from an “out group” (more on this below). Religious and alumni organizations serve as examples of social identity. Role identity is defined below and is a large focus of this study in the relationship between person identity of school principals and the roles they inhabit.

Roles. Ryan (2007) provides an important definition and discussion of role. Crow, et al. (2017) utilize the work of Ryan (2007) to differentiate between role and identity in that they occupy different elements. They state that:

Roles are scripted, deterministic and static, whereas identities are improvisational, emphasize human agency and are dynamic. The static and more uniform nature of roles are contrasted with identities which can be contradictory in different social contexts and are constantly being negotiated as individuals interact with various contexts” (p. 266).

In other words, roles and identities are not the same. Roles are what one does, identity is how one performs those roles. Similarly, Wenger (1998) states that:

One can design roles, but one cannot design the identities that will be constructed through these roles; institutions define roles, qualifications, and the distribution of authority—but unless institutional roles can find a realization as identities in practice, they are unlikely to connect with the conduct of everyday life. (p. 229)

To put it another way, identity itself is fluid, capable of change, and is impacted by the effects of social pressures and hegemonies. Further, the role merely provides the direction, allowing one’s identity to harness and embody the mode of the direction. Crow et al. (2017) offer up another definition of identity that is helpful here to this discussion—that is that identity, “provides motivation for an individual to take on and enact a role. It is, ‘The energy, motivation, drive that

makes roles actually work, require that individuals identify with, internalize, and become the role” (p. 266). Finally, Burke and Stets (2009) note that, “a role identity is the internalized meanings of a role that individuals apply themselves...[and]...acquire meaning through the reaction of others” (pp. 114-115) and that, “individuals are socialized into what it means to be a [principal]...importantly, they learn the meanings of a role identity in interaction with others in which others act toward the self as if the person had the identity appropriate to their role behavior” (pp. 114-115). A further discussion of these interactions within social structures continues below.

Social Structure. Foundational to our further discussion on identity and role, Burke and Stets (2009) discuss social structure as an important theorized context to frame the interplay of identities and roles. According to Burke and Stets, it is important to understand social structure, “its forms and patterns, the ways it develops and transforms itself” (p. 4) in order to understand identity (re)creation. For example, at its highest level, although actions are being taken by individuals (public-school principals in this case), over time, patterns of behaviors emerge into observable phenomena that can be named (e.g. distributed leadership (Spillane, Harris, Jones & Mertz, 2015)) that creates an identity standard. Note however that while this is one behavior (or set of behaviors) within a social structure, it is not the entire social structure (e.g. leadership style vs. school leadership). The section below describes the relationship and interactions between the individual and society which create meaning and understanding.

Structural Symbolic Interaction. Understanding the basic concepts of identity and role are helpful, but the real work comes from understanding the interactions, relationships, limitations, and barriers that exist between identity and role. In order to get at the heart of the

matter of how novice public-school principals understand, navigate, and negotiate their identities and roles, I include a brief discussion below of the work of identity theory in this regard.

Burke and Stets (2009) utilize the framework of Stryker's (1980, 2002) Structural Symbolic Interaction to, "refer to a set of ideas about the nature of the individual and the relationship between the individual and society (within social structures)" (p. 9). These include the self, language, and interaction. It is important to note that while the following discussion is vast, these concepts serve as the foundation for a framework of understanding the process of navigating and understanding (finding meaning) identities.

Essentially, Burke and Stets (2009) theorize that we each have multiple selves and each of these selves act as identities (e.g. self as father is an identity, as is self as colleague, self as a principal, self as graduate student) which give meaning and motivation to enact the roles one plays within the social structure. Specifically, individuals (or agents) utilize language, signs, and symbols to "make sense" of the world by creating a, "shared world view...to provide names...and meanings" (p. 15) that eventually create an identity standard, or an understanding of the behaviors that constitute verifying the identity. The process and sense-making of identity verification is the well-spring of data from which I will be studying. I will explore this verification process and sense-making further below. Finally, interaction with other individuals serve as the place for learning language, signs, and symbols that create the social structure construct. Vital to the discussion of public-school principals understanding, navigating, and building identities, Burke and Stets emphasize:

To the extent that these meanings are shared, such flow of symbols and meanings serves to validate and reinforce existing symbols and names in the situation. Because there is never perfect agreement between agents about the meanings of behaviors, the flow of

symbols and meanings also can shift and alter existing names and meanings, so that, to some extent, they are constantly being negotiated. Commonality of meanings and understandings is always being developed and verified. Where the consensus is high, the resulting structure is more stable and rigid; when the consensus is low, the structure is more fluid and changing. (pp. 16-17)

To say it another way, within the context of this paper, the meanings attached to what it means to be a principal in the current accountability era are constantly being negotiated and the identity standard becoming more narrowly defined. This constant negotiation, especially with novice principals, serves as the entry point for my study as these theoretical interactions provide an important construct to understanding the fluidity of identity. Finally, central to these ideas is that identity is not an artefact, a statement of what simply is, but rather, as Crow et al. (2017) explain while discussing Wenger's (1998) work, articulate that identity in a state of "constant becoming" and that, "identity is neither a fixed course nor a destination. Instead, identity becomes a work in progress that is shaped by our efforts, our past, future, and present, and is negotiated...a lived experience" (p. 267). This "constant becoming" of identity as articulated by Wenger describes well the relationship between the identity standard and the verification process as theorized by Burke and Stets (2009).

Identity Standard and Verification. To restate, according to Burke and Stets, identities (meanings and motivations) enact roles through a confluence of self and interaction with others through language, signs, and symbols. This interaction creates an identity standard within social structures in which individuals undergo a constant process of identity verification against the perceived standard. Successful verification of the individual against the standard will therefore result in a status quo and a high salience between their identity and the standard. Repeated,

unsuccessful verification results in the individual either making changes to the individuals' identity to meet the standard (path of least resistance) or changing the standard (most resistance) based on the needs of the identity to verify to a standard. Indeed, the entirety of, "...identity theory focuses on the degree to which individuals are able to achieve a match between an identity goal or 'ideal' (the identity standard) and perceptions of the meanings in the environment of the 'actual' performance of the self" (p. 80).

Several factors inherent to the human experience (e.g. emotions, self-esteem, and stress) become the variables that change the perceptions of various socially constructed identity standards through the verification process. These variables serve as important data points that my proposed research will study in order to understand the navigation and negotiation of principals' identities and roles. A discussion of these variables will follow later in the paper. The following section delves specifically into a discussion of the socially constructed nature of public-school principals' identities and roles.

Principal Identity. Much of the literature on principal identity focuses on professional (role) identity of the principal (Crow et al., 2017; Day et al., 2007; Gee, 2001; Helstad & Moller, 2013; Lumby & English, 2009; Moller, 2005a; Scribner & Crow, 2012; Real & Botía, 2018; Spillane et al., 2015; Tubin, 2017; Ylimaki & Henderson, 2017), rather than their social or person identity. However, scholars acknowledge that other identities impact their professional identities (Burke & Stets, 2009; Crow et al, 2017; Real & Botía, 2018). These other identities come into play within the socially constructed nature of identity theory. For example, ; Real & Botía (2018) state that:

Professional identities are established as a reciprocal transition (objective and subjective) between the attributed identity for others and the assumed identity. Both are binding, as

they are the result of a long socialization process, with three interacting factors: sociocultural, work context, and personal factors. (p. 22)

This process of reciprocal transition is carried out in real time and is played out across three areas, personal, relational, and collective. Tubin (2017) states that at the:

Personal level, principals have to develop their self-concept by reconciling the identity of a leader with their other identities, and by enriching self-reflection for querying their actions and reactions vis-a-vis outcomes and the responses of others. On the relational level, the principal has to create reciprocal role identities for him/herself as a leader and the others as followers. On the collective level, the principal has to gain the endorsement of the broader social environment as the leader of a particular school. (p. 791)

While these processes are difficult in the best of time by an experienced school principal, this is especially apparent in novice principals (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Experiences within these frames shape the professional identity standard of the leader, creates legitimacy (or de-legitimacy) which has significant impact on the tenure of the school principal. The identity verification process then becomes an inherently important part of the socializing process. To take it further, if the verification process is not successful, for whatever reason, this would stand to impact the meanings and motivations (identities) that help enact the role that is needed to verify against the standard. What impact does this have on a novice principal's identity (re)creation? How does it impact their ability to lead a school if their person identity (values, core-self from which derive their meanings and motivations) does not verify against the identity standard of the role identity of a public-school principal? These questions are explored in chapter six.

To sum up, these multi-layered interactions between individuals and across social structures, as outlined in the above frameworks, provide areas for meaning making and sense-making (identity verification) which help to solidify the expectations and functions of the roles principals play (identity standard).

Sense-Making, Identity, Role Enactment, and the Novice School Principal

As described above, sense-making and meaning-making are an important part of the identity validation process. Spillane and Lee (2014) describe sense-making as, “fundamentally about meaning making, not just interpreting cues in our environment but also noticing and bracketing them. Thus, “sense-making is about authoring as well as interpretation, creation as well as discovery” (p. 437). By placing themselves (i.e. their own values, meanings, and motivations (identities)) into the movements, moments, and tensions, novice public-school principals actively participate and position themselves to create narratives of leadership.

Spillane and Lee go on to note that, “sense-making is triggered when ongoing flows of experience are interrupted and/or automatic processing fails because existing scripts or schemas no longer work” (p. 437). The contexts and tensions highlighted in the previous section provide ample opportunities for sense-making strategies to be enacted. Finally, and important to the driving question of *how* novice principals navigate and narrate their role enactment, is that novice principals use, “situations of change, contrast, surprise, discrepancy, ambiguity, and uncertainty...to prompt puzzling clues from their environment in an effort to reconstruct their understanding of their situation” (p. 437). This reconstruction of understanding are efforts at identity verification (Burke & Stets, 2009) are present in the stories, or narratives, a person and/or organization tell about themselves (Crow et al, p. 271). These stories, “include our ability and our inability, our willingness and our lack of willingness, our capacity and our lack of

capacity to believe that we can shape the meanings that define our communities and our forms of belongings” (Crow et al, p. 271). In other words, embedded within narrative are the struggles and limitations, as well as openings and triumphs that capture the sense-making process.

Coming to an understanding of how meaning is made, Crow et al. (2017) add to the conversation by introducing a tentative analytical framework for understanding principal identity (re)creation and development. This framework consists of five dimensions of inquiry (The epistemic dimension; the emotional dimension; the narrative dimension; the historical and cultural dimension; and the political dimension) designed to build a deeper understanding of how school principal identity is constructed. While these frameworks are meant to guide researchers inquiring about how principal identity is constructed, they are valuable to the discussion on how principals understand and navigate their identities and roles and are the focus of my interview question framework. Relevant to this discussion, I will focus on the impact of the narrative dimension, which is vital to the hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry method employed for this study, before concluding this section.

The Narrative Dimension

Key to understanding how leaders understand themselves are in the stories they tell-the sense-making, the interpretations of events, the meanings attached, the artifacts highlighted. Stories give a window into, “how they [school leaders] interpret experiences and make their meanings explicit...[and] how they come to understand themselves and how they act as embodied beings in the world” (Crow et al., 2017, p. 271). Additionally, Lambert et al. (2002) state that, “story or narrative is essential to the process of self-knowledge and self-invention...to talk meaningfully about how life experiences shape one’s work as a school leader requires a

storied approach that is descriptive, personal, and concrete” (p. 117). Finally, Crow et al. (2017) note:

These stories influence the individuals who hear them and respond to them. In the case of school principals, teachers, parents, students, community members and supervisors hear the narratives that principals construct and respond to them in a variety of ways. They may affirm them, reject them, revise them or any number of other alternatives; and how they respond may, to a greater or lesser extent, in turn influence principals’ existing sense of identity. (p. 272)

This discursive process creates meaning-making through negotiations as they construct and reconstruct individual identities. Studying the narratives school principals tell, and others tell about them offer researchers a window into the school leaders’ identity (re)creation.

As evidenced by the myriad constraints and pressures placed on not only their identities and roles, but their livelihoods, understanding these processes at play and tension points will give the novice public-school principal a much better stage by which to enact their professional identity in ways that they can be both stable and successful.

Conclusion

Novice public-school principals face tremendous pressures of performance at the tension points between social justice leadership and values and neoliberal accountability regimes as they navigate the transition between teaching and leading. Leadership within southern Arizona provides unique contexts (e.g., desegregation, history of colonization, border issues) and examples of the larger contexts in which to ascertain the sense-making process of leading schools.

Sociological Identity Theory offers explanation and implication of identity shifts through changing roles and changing contexts. In order to make sense and lead within this environment, novice principals practice sense-making, which allows them to contextualize and deal with issues that clash with the identity standards that they have (teacher), and those that they have been newly socialized to (principal). Finally, these sense-making strategies are expressed through the narratives that the leader tells others and themselves. It is the aim of this study was to capture the sense-making narratives that novice public-school principals tell to better understand early leadership to inform preparation programs and early socialization efforts of school districts.

Chapter III: Research Methods and Design

In this chapter, I introduce the larger method of phenomenology, how it relates to my study, and restate the research questions that guided the study. Next, I describe the hermeneutic phenomenological research design for this study, detail how it connected to the purpose of the study and the theoretical framework described in chapter two. I include a discussion on phenomenology, hermeneutics, and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), their relevance to my study, and the methodological frameworks that were utilized. I also include descriptions and rationales for selection of sites and participants, data collection, and data analysis procedures. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of validity, trustworthiness, and a statement on positionality.

Methodological Introduction

I researched a phenomenon I once lived. I have spent my entire professional educational career firmly within the milieu of post-No Child Left Behind neoliberal policy and practice as a teacher, a principal, and now as a teacher again in high schools. My lived experience as an educator was firmly grounded in “value free” neoliberal sensibilities within district in which I was a principal and my principal preparation program before I ended into the graduate program at the University of Arizona. It was not until my PhD program, well into my tenure as a high school principal, that I was thrust into the issues surrounding social justice leadership and values through a critical lens. Through the process of enacting the role of principal while working deeply within these issues, my identity as a leader changed, which in turn, changed my core person identity. The space in which that change occurred is what this study proposed to illuminate. To put it another way, I studied the identity (re)creation process of novice principals as they navigate these tensions while enacting their role of school leader.

In the previous chapter, I introduced the identity (re)creation process of sociological identity theory to school leadership generally and novice principal school leadership specifically to illuminate the sense-making and meaning-making processes individuals undertake while enacting roles. While sociological identity theory can help us know more about the sense-making process, it is limited in eliciting data on meaning-making. Hermeneutic phenomenology was utilized to open this space of sense-making and meaning-making.

The method of phenomenology allows a researcher to gain an understanding of how participants assign meaning to their experiences (Creswell, 2013). These sense-making experiences can derive important data towards illuminating the effects of the tensions between neoliberal accountability regimes and social justice leadership and values on novice public-school principals' identities and role enactment in leading schools to better inform all facets of leadership development at all levels. These perspectives are found in the stories that one tells of themselves and were elicited within the research tools within phenomenology and were vital data points to understanding the phenomenon of role enactment.

Specifically, in this study, I utilized a phenomenological research design rooted in hermeneutic phenomenology (Suddick et al., 2020; van Manen, 2016a) and with Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, et.al, 2009) which offered structure for data analysis. Each of these are explained and explored below following the research questions.

Research Questions

- How do novice public-school principals make sense of their change in identities and roles from teacher to leader?
- How do novice public-school principals navigate maintaining their core beliefs and values under the constraints of the role of principal?

Why Phenomenology and Which Phenomenology?

The use of hermeneutic phenomenology as methodology in this study served two purposes. First, hermeneutic phenomenology offered an intentional space of exploration of lived experiences that offer key insights into identity (re)creation of novice principals as explored through sociological identity theory. This allowed for explorations of multiple interpretations of the same phenomenon and helped to illuminate part of the sense-making and meaning-making processes involved in role enactment of novice school principals. Second, as the intentionalities of leadership are often masked behind the policy actors' public face and persona (Moller, 2012), hermeneutic phenomenology offered a framework for a deeper uncovering of, "embodied ontology, epistemology, and axiology" (van Manen, 2016b) of lived experiences. Eliciting deeper data collection was key to illuminating identity (re)creation beyond the surface level by adding richness and layers that created strong sense-making and meaning-making narrative for analysis.

Philosophic Foundations and Phenomenology

Phenomenology is both a philosophy and a method of inquiry that aims to explain and study lived experience (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2011, Kafle, 2011, Kakkori, 2009, Lavery, 2003, Moustakas, 1994, Suddick et al., 2020, van Manen, 2016a; 2016b). Developed in the mid-1890s in Germany by Edmund Husserl, phenomenology aimed to, "supply a new foundation for both philosophy and science" (Kakkori, p. 20) by extracting an observable "essence" of lived experience that, ultimately, could be replicated and studied. Pure phenomenology then is a positivistic method of discovery for what Husserl believed was an observable universal truth, in contrast to what he saw were natural science methods and philosophy in the human sciences, especially psychology.

In contrast to natural science approaches in human science and as a rejection of Cartesian dualism, “Husserl rejected the belief that objects in the external world exist independently and that the information about objects is reliable (Groenewald, 2004, p. 43). Husserl instead, “argued that people can be certain about how things appear in, or present themselves to, their consciousness” (p. 43). By engaging with this consciousness, Husserl believed he could “see things as they are” (Lavery p. 23) by utilizing methods of reduction to observe the essences (the unique experiences that make up structures of consciousness) to unlock a, “realm of being which presented itself with absolute certainty” (p. 23). To this point, Husserl believed that to be able to observe this “reduction” of experience as close to the “Truth” as possible, one must completely extricate themselves as the researcher from the studied phenomenon to find a “pure starting point for [the] investigations” (Kakkori, p. 21). Husserl worried that the pure knowledge of understanding he was seeking would be tainted by research biases and previous experience of the inquirer. To combat this, he developed the idea of bracketing, or consciously removing the researcher out of the phenomena being studied to get to the pure, absolute knowledge of the essence. However, much critique of pure phenomenology surrounds this assumption (Kafle, 2011, Kakkori, 2009, Lavery, 2003, van Manen, 2016a; 2016b) as a research technique to ascertain pure knowledge of an essence towards a discovery of a universal observable truth. This version of phenomenology, that is Husserl’s vision, is decidedly epistemological as it attempts to see what is, what is reducible, what is knowable. This stands in stark contrast to later Heidegger/Gadamer’s phenomenology, which is more ontological as we see a movement away from the universal to the interpretive nature of experience described below. While there are more than two critiques, I will focus on two that are relevant to my discussion. The first group who were critical of phenomenology were psychologists who led the new human science efforts

of the time in Western Europe. They ridiculed Husserl's methods as esoteric and non-generalizable in his search for absolute truth through these inquiries and set phenomenology in the outsider group of methodologies in that time period.

Second, contemporary new human science philosophers, which is best exemplified in Heidegger, a student of Husserl, who rejected Husserl's use of phenomenology as a search for absolute truth. Instead, this new branch moved phenomenology away from Husserl's vision of phenomenology as a new philosophy and science of essences into using phenomenology as an interpretive process of the study of lived experience. This alternative use of phenomenology focuses on how individuals interpret the world (essences) around them rather than individuals revealing universal truth for those researchers tuned in enough to discover it.

Finally, this turn is best embodied in Heidegger's student Gadamer, who further developed this new emphasis as hermeneutic phenomenology. Gadamer blended the inquiry of phenomenology with interpretivism inherent in hermeneutics. This methodology is exemplified today in the writing and research of Max van Manen (2016a, 2016b) and serves, in part, as the philosophical basis for my research and is explored below.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics derives its name from the Greek god Hermes who, according to Greek myth, was a divine messenger and interpreter for the other Greek gods (Kakkori, 2009). Early hermeneutic efforts at understanding truth were tied to the desire for a "correct" reading of "sacred texts". Specifically, hermeneutics practiced an exegesis, or, "the interpretation of Holy Scripture, such as the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, the Talmud, the Koran, etc" (Kakkori, p. 23) These close readings were an attempt to bring oneself closer to the "truth" contained in these texts. This "drawing out" of meaning through close observation to language

and context lead to the wider field of hermeneutics being developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Western Europe and applied broadly, far beyond exegesis of religious texts. For example, hermeneutics developed as an, “art of understanding [and an] art of hearing” (Kakkori, p 23) in the growing field of human science. Over time hermeneutics moved away from textual analysis of language and context into an analysis of human experience through language and context to ascertain a more holistic understanding of whatever was being studied.

Heidegger introduced hermeneutics to phenomenology in an attempt to more fully know not only the essence of a lived experience, but how a person or persons come to interpret that experience. Heidegger believed that to know human experience was to acknowledge that humans are Dasein, which is, “a being that has the ability to question its own being” (Kakkori, p 22) and therefore take the study of phenomenology into the realm of understanding not only the phenomenon, but it’s context, how it is interpreted, and changes based on who is observing it. To put it simply, Heidegger believed that lived experience is more than the moment-it is everything before it that gives it its meaning, and therefore, its importance of a more holistic view of human experience.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Hermeneutic phenomenology, rather than focusing on a universal truth or “pure essence” of experience of traditional phenomenology, it is embodied in the process of interpretation of lived experience as one of many interpretations of existence, rather than a universal one. In other words, hermeneutic phenomenology is, “focused on subjective experience of individuals and groups. It is an attempt to unveil the world as experienced by the subject through their life world stories” (Kafle, p. 186). Importantly, it centers inquiry away from a universal truth reduced from essences of life experience to an inquiry that focuses on, “the situated meaning of a human in the

world...[or] the mode of being human [known as] Dasein” (Lavery, p. 24). In other words, the phenomenon being studied is as much about the world an individual finds themselves and how they make sense of their place in the world. As such, hermeneutical phenomenology explores endless interpretations of lived experience and opens the space for exploration of the phenomenon for each participant to determine their own narratives, which is vital to uncovering the individual experience of the phenomenon of leading public schools as a novice principal.

The centering of phenomenology on lived experience is expressed as van Manen (2016b) notes that:

Lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research. The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence-in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience. (p. 36)

This animation is accomplished through interpretation that Gadamer saw as, “a fusion of horizons, a dialectical interaction between the expectation of the interpreter and the meaning [of the experience for the person being studied]” (Lavery, p. 25). In other words, an embracing of shared meaning making in the interpretation process between researcher and participant(s) and is well suited for exploration of interpretivist meaning making of role enactment as a novice principal.

Further, this fusion of horizons is the crystallization of the functions of hermeneutic circle, dialog (between researcher and participant) and interpretation and creates spaces for exploration of sense making and meaning making. Importantly, it, “offers a gateway to ‘extend

meaning from what is directly given', to discover something more; a new perspective and shared understanding of the subject matter" (Suddick et al., p. 3).

Finally, as Suddick et al. explain:

Hermeneutic phenomenology means working with part and whole in a cyclical, open and interrogative way to understand the [person] who produced the text, the person doing the hermeneutic phenomenological work, and ultimately, the phenomenon that is brought to awareness and made manifest as a result of the work. (p. 12)

In other words, my past experiences, contemporaneous notes, and reflections after the interviews are all part of the larger study-the intersection of myself and the participants towards uncovering and understanding the phenomenon of leading today's public schools.

The central role of interpretation of lived experiences through hermeneutic phenomenology as a fusion of horizons intersects and expands with the identity (re)creation process of sociological identity theory that drive part of the theoretical framework of this study and is linked in the next section.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Sociological Identity Theory

The search for the question of being and its interpretation, or how a person employs meaning-making and sense-making to their place in the world, is the core pursuit of sociological identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009). Hermeneutic phenomenology offered a grounding as method into this deliberative process through eliciting stories and providing analysis of rich narrative focused on the act of sense-making and meaning-making of the studied phenomenon. Further, the (re)creation of identity of a novice principal, and therefore, how they make sense of their interactions with role enactment was explored within this paradigm. As Gadamer explained:

Understanding is always more than merely re-creating someone else's meaning. Questioning opens up possibilities of meaning, and thus what is meaningful passes into one's own thinking on the subject...To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were. (Lavery, p. 25).

Gadamer here touches on the idea of shared meaning-making and sense-making that occurs between identities when any individual enacts a role. This (re)creation of identity through the enactment process is core to hermeneutic phenomenology in that phenomenologists maintain that, "meaning is found as we are constructed by the world while at the same time we are constructing this world from our own background and experiences" (Lavery p. 24). This construction experience is the identity (re)creation process in sociological identity theory. The method of hermeneutic phenomenology provided a complementary way to interpret these experiences and is employed in the discussion of these larger issues.

Hermeneutic phenomenology offered a "dialectical interaction" between researcher and participant by way of a hermeneutic circle, a technique of open-ended questions and follow ups within interviews and member checks, that focused on elicitation of meaning-making descriptions between researcher and participant. This circle simply refers to the deliberate interaction between the participant and researcher, as one pays particular attention to the processes of story in role enactment to come to the perceived truth of whatever the inquiry uncovers. The circle continues as through analysis of the transcripts with the researcher asking questions of the process that flows back and forth in search of a fusion of horizons.

Laverty (2003) noted that central to hermeneutic inquiry, openness is critical in getting at the lived experience of participants, “with few direct questions asked” (p. 29), rather with allowing the participant to explore open ended questions that get to the heart of the tensions and experiences through this deliberate hermeneutic circle of understanding and are embedded within the research methods below. Further, Laverty points out that van Manen (2016a) also emphasized and supported, “the importance of paying attention to silence, the absence of speaking, the silence of the unspeakable and the silence of being or life itself, as it is herein that one may find the taken for granted or the self-evident” (p. 29) as a way of approaching rigorous data engagement. The interview questions that I have created were designed to elicit such data of rich answers while the methods of analyzing these data through Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, explained below, took these frameworks of understanding into account. Specific details and the stories elicited through this process are contained in the relevant section below.

To sum up, as it postulates an interpretivist ontological gaze, hermeneutic phenomenology as a method was well suited to illuminate the sense-making and meaning-making processes of novice principals leading within the tensions around the intersection of neoliberal accountability regimes and social justice leadership and values.

Uncovering the “Public Face” Through Hermeneutic Phenomenology

One of the challenges of studying the identity (re)creation process is in separating of the person identity from the role enactment to uncover and analyze how identity and role ultimately interact and inform one another. For example, in acknowledging the various discourses that dominate public school leadership (e.g. neoliberal accountability, social justice leadership) Moller (2012) notes that:

These discourses offer different scripts for school principals and for the construction of their public self when they engage in public performance. The purposive construction of self as a leader includes a public face. It does not mean hiding behind a fake image, but represents the part of oneself that a leader chooses to make public in the act of leading people in different situations. (p. 453)

It is incumbent on the researcher then to employ methods that allow for a peeling away of the public face to get at foundational identities that inform the public face and ultimately how they enmesh in the meaning-making processes of leading a school as a novice principal.

Narrative: Sense-making, Meaning-Making and Interpretation

With this study's emphasis on understanding how novice public-school principals navigate, narrate, and make sense of their identities (the meanings and motivations which drive their roles), an understanding of the sense-making process is of paramount importance. Central to this inquiry then are the stories the principals tell themselves and others. Importantly, Crow et. al note that, "narrative [how we tell our stories] is at the core of identity" and that, "the idea of identity involves growing and sustaining a narrative" (Crow et al, 2017, p. 271). Further:

How school principals experience their jobs, how they interpret their positions, what they understand about what they do and what they know and do not know are neither individual choices nor simply only the result of belonging to the social role category 'school principals'. They are a matter of their position and the position of their communities within broader social structures. (p. 271)

As novice public-school principals work to negotiate their places within the larger social structures, they make sense through the narratives they tell. The importance in studying the stories that are told in order to gain access to the sense-making process is described by Riessman

(2008) “Narratives do not mirror, they refract the past...[they] are useful in research precisely because storytellers interpret the past rather than reproduce it as it was” (p. 6). In this way, narratives provide germane interpretive experiences that benefit from hermeneutic processes and analysis. Further, storytelling allows individuals to, “include our ability and our inability, our willingness and our lack of willingness, our capacity and our lack of capacity to believe that we can shape the meanings that define our communities and our forms of belongings” (Crow et al, p. 271). In other words, embedded within narrative are the struggles and limitations, as well as openings and triumphs that capture the sense-making process.

These sense-making narratives will be elicited through the interview questions, reflective journals, and in the follow up interview with each participant.

Exploring Limitations to the Theoretical Framework: Being and Becoming-The Construction of a Leader

While these sense-making frameworks offer helpful entry points for exploration of the phenomenon of leading in today’s public schools, as part of the fusion of horizons, I utilize two additional methodologies to further inform on what it entails to be a leader through the individuals themselves. Other methods are designed to elicit these data (e.g., autoethnography and currere (Pinar, 1975)), and are utilized in various ways in the study. Instead, as part of the hermeneutic circle, I will engage in a sort of currere to better contextualize my own experiences with the phenomenon. However, it would be valuable in the future to include a currere experience of each participant in the data gathering process to gain a more detailed and longitudinal insight into the journey of understanding of being and becoming a novice principal leading in today’s public schools.

Evocative Autoethnography. Evocative Autoethnography is a method that was utilized to fill the space described above. Bochner and Ellis (2016) describe autoethnography as:

Inhabit[ing] a space between science and art; between epistemology and ontology; between facts and meanings; between experience and language; between the highly stylized conventions of fact-based reporting and the unfixed alternatives of literary, poetic, and dramatic exposition; between cold and rational objectivity and a hot and visceral emotionality; between a commitment to document the reality of what actually happened and a desire to make readers feel that truth coursing through their blood and guts” (p. 66)

In other words, it brings the story of our history to life in a visceral, memorable way. Evocative autoethnography offers a space to explore my own journey that I have not been able to explore previously in my proto-academic life. I include an evocative autoethnographic account of my own leadership journey in Appendix D.

While my own narrative appears within the findings chapter, it takes elements of evocative autoethnography and blends it with curriculum theorizing in the form of *currere* to capture more context into the fusion of horizons.

Currere. William Pinar (1975; 2012) developed the method of *currere* to better understand the, “lived experience of curriculum, embodied potentially educational experience that is structured by the past while focused on the future” (Wearing, J. et. al., p. 50, 2019).

Together, these methods help flesh out the journey into and through leadership of today’s public schools. While useful, they were only utilized in my own discussion and not the participants, beyond my own thoughts as part of the hermeneutic circle and broader fusion of horizons. Additional exploration of principal’s lived experiences as *Currere* in a future study would be

helpful to our overall understanding of *how* principals think about their enactment of the role of principal.

Crossroads of Phenomenological Methodological Arguments

While hermeneutic phenomenology offers a crucial shift away from positivist Husserlian phenomenology towards an interpretive dialectical experience, some scholars deliberately avoid any formal, generalizable analysis and conclusions (van Manen, 2016a, 2016b) and rely on engaging the experience of the inquiry as the ultimate goal. Critics argue that this limits its usefulness to the broader body of knowledge in the subject matter phenomenon being studied (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2011; Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004; Moustakas, 1994). Several offshoots of phenomenology offer various methods of inquiry and analysis and fall along the lines of traditional human science research positivists (Moustakas) and post-positivist interpretive research (van Manen). For example, Moustakas advocates for an updated Husserlian transcendental phenomenology, in part, as an attempt to draw out vital aspects of phenomenology and shoring up analysis to bring in techniques from modern human science research that he saw lacking from various post-positivist human science research. While he does not reject hermeneutic phenomenology (as its research aims are entirely different from mainline phenomenology), Moustakas tightens the method of phenomenology that utilizes data analysis techniques that are overtly outside of the esoteric nature of data analysis in van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology.

Finally, I have attempted to briefly explore the history of phenomenology and hermeneutics to show their similarities and important differences as an introduction to the research techniques of this hermeneutic phenomenology study. This study is much more in line with hermeneutic phenomenological philosophically, as it situates the life world and lived

experiences firmly inside the identity (re)creation process of sociological identity theory with its emphasis on the interpretive nature of how a person(s) makes sense of the world around them and the stories they tell. However, I recognize the difficult nature of a wide-open process of hermeneutical phenomenology, specifically through van Manen (2016a, 2016b), that lacks specific analytic methods for working with data. Therefore, this study will straddle the methodological divide by incorporating elements of hermeneutic phenomenological interpretivism (with the fusion of horizons of dialectical interaction of the hermeneutic circle) and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (themes, meaning units) to illuminate the role enactment process of novice principals leading in today's environment.

Research Framework

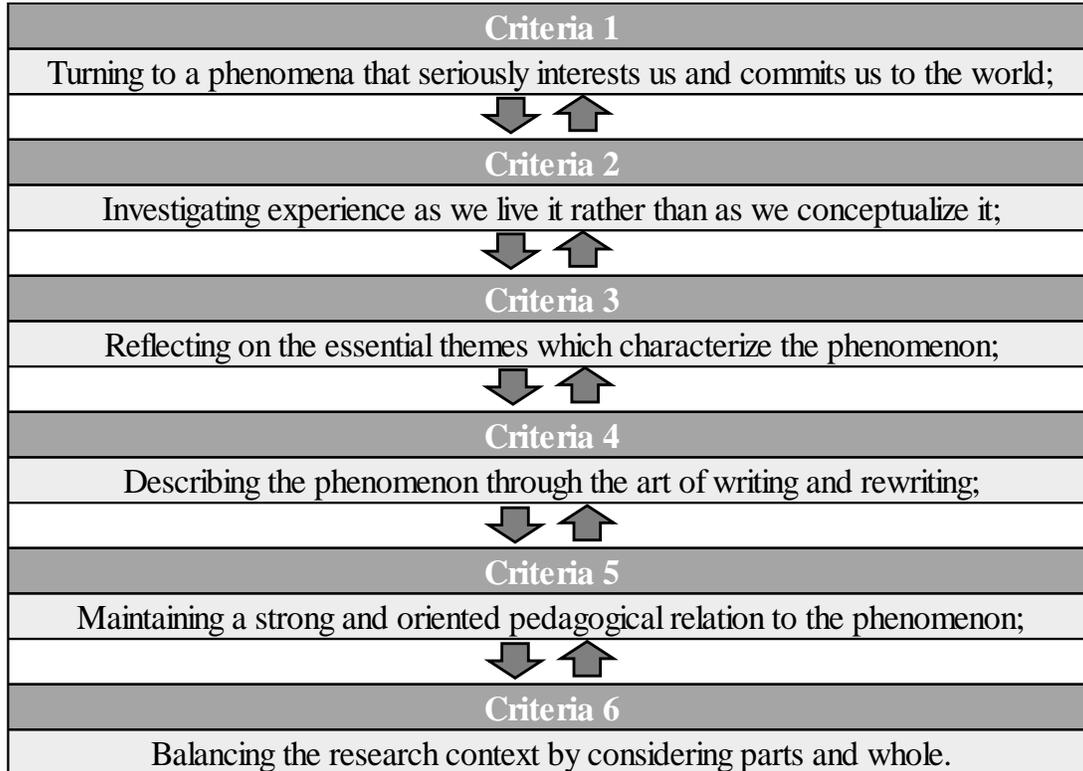
Hermeneutic phenomenology was utilized as a framework for data gathering processes through interviews and the reflexive journal writing of the researcher. This was done to elicit sense-making and meaning-making narratives of the role enactment process of novice principals leading today's public schools. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was then used for analysis of these data into larger meaning units and themes for analysis and discussion.

Researcher's Mindset: Dialectical Interactions Framework

Throughout this study, I utilized a research framework mindset proposed by van Manen (2016b) that can be, "considered as a set of guides and recommendations for a principled form of inquiry...that may be helpful in doing hermeneutic phenomenological human science research" (p. 30). While the six areas of inquiry below are helpful, van Manen is careful to point out that, "The paths (i.e. methods) cannot be determined by fixed signposts. They need to be discovered...as a response to the question at hand" (p. 29). van Manen's framework include:

Figure 3.1

van Manen's Phenomenological Research Framework



Importantly, and in the spirit of phenomenological inquiry, these six activities are not considered linear, but are interconnected. These activities are woven throughout the remaining areas of this inquiry as serve as a basis for the reflection journal and for areas of discussion and analysis as a fusion of horizons. A similar conceptual technique that flips back and forth within a set of four steps proposed by Suddick et al. (2020) was used and described in figure 3.3 below.

Sampling and Participants

This research was conducted in the Desert River School District which is located in the State of Arizona in the United States Southwest as well as the Copper Hills School District and the Cotton Farms School District, both of which border the larger Desert River School District. The Desert River School District has over 80 schools and a wide range of diversity of students, which number just under 50,000. The Copper Hills School District is a medium-sized rural

district with more than 5,000 students at less than 10 schools. The Cotton Farms School District, also a medium-sized rural district, has just under 15,000 students with over 15 schools. A more comprehensive discussion of the three participant districts is found the relevant section in chapter four. The five direct participants are novice public-school principals who lead public schools within their district.

Participants were purposefully selected as a convenience sample based on the criteria of being a novice principal (within the first three years of their school principal leadership), and within the Desert River School District or other local district as approval was granted by the district. Participants were recruited in two ways once the research was fully approved. First, I solicited a list of potential participants through the research office of the Desert River School District and reached out with a recruitment email and follow-up phone call. Second, using a snowball approach, I asked my initial participants if they knew any additional individuals who fit the criteria that I could reach out to in case I was still in need of participants. I did not find additional candidates this way, however, I was alerted to three additional participants in additional districts after discussing my study requirements with educators who were aware of the study requirements and those they ultimately recommended. Two of the districts that contained the recommended participants agreed to participate in this study, while a third declined due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 3.1 Participant Demographics

Participant Pseudonym	School	District	Years as NP	Age/Gender/Ethnicity
Roberto Martín	Vantage High School	Desert River School District	3 years	54/M/Latino.

Megan Hunter	Jackrabbit High School	Copper Hills School District	1 month	31/F/White.
Marcia Manning	Anna Gardens, K-8	Desert River School District	3 years	51/F/White.
Kimberly Bryan	Gladden Farms Elementary School	Cotton Farms School District	2 years	36/F/White.
Barbara Marlowe	Sloan Station School, K-8	Desert River School District	1 month	52/F/White.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic presented several challenges to conducting research. Specifically, my research request was denied by four school districts in the wider region. The stated reason was that they (the districts) would not be participating in regular research until the COVID-19 pandemic had passed. Additionally, two potential participants had to withdraw from the study before we had a chance to meet for the interview due to a COVID-19 caused death with those close to them personally or professionally. Larger effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the research process and leadership of the participants in discussed extensively throughout the findings and discussion.

Ethics and IRB

Due to the nature of this study, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the University of Arizona was obtained before participant recruitment. The consent form was made available before the initial interviews took place. Participants were required to have signed the form and returned it to me (four through email as the interviews were conducted remotely over Zoom, and the final one signed in person before our in-person interview). A copy of the consent

form can be found in Appendix C. A copy of the recruitment email is provided and can be found in Appendix D.

Data Sources and Collection

Interview as a Hermeneutic Circle

An in-person, or over the internet, semi-structured interview was conducted with the five novice public-school principal participants. Interview questions were derived from the framework developed by Crow et. al (2017) (provided in Appendix A) for inquiry into principal sense-making and identity (re)creation through role enactment. They were also structured to elicit the conversational aspects of the hermeneutical circle as described by van Manen (2016a, 2016b) and Suddick et al. (2020). This enhanced the framing of context which was vital to the hermeneutic nature of understanding how the individual engages with the phenomenon of leading public schools.

This clarifying framework encompasses personal context, community context, institutional context, and historical and social contexts of leading in public schools and was developed specifically to provide:

A collective framework for research into identity formation that may contribute to the generation of more nuanced understandings of how school leadership develops and is practiced. We anticipate that this more nuanced view would enrich our understanding not only of what leaders do but why they do it and the values, beliefs and practices that shape, challenge and perhaps change their professional identities” (p. 274).

These spaces of inquiry dovetail well into the conversational aspects of the hermeneutic circle and provided rich data for discussion and analysis.

The interview (45-60 minutes) was designed to elicit data relevant to the research questions stretched across each of the four contexts. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Specific use of the transcriptions is provided below in the discussion on data analysis. Participants completed the informed consent forms prior to any data being collected. All data (e.g. audio files, transcripts, etc.) is stored behind password protected firewalls on my phone and computer, specifically a secure folder only accessible by a biometric signature only available to myself.

Follow-Up Interview or Participant Reflexive Writing Journal

At the end of the interview participants were asked to reflect further on the themes of leadership, social justice, and accountability mandates through a short follow-up interview (thirty (30) minutes or less) within a week, or a reflective journal prompt that was to be completed within seven (7) days of the interview. The prompt for the interview or journal (Appendix B) was written to elicit participants to focus on their meaning-making processes within the contexts provided as additional insight outside of the confines of the initial timed interview. If the reflective journal was chosen, the prompt was emailed to them within a few hours of the conclusion of the interview with a specific process of returning these data within seven (7) days. If a follow-up interview or reflective journal prompt are not conducted at the request of the participant, their original interview would have still been utilized in the data analysis section.

These writing exercises provide an important data collection point of deliberative sense-making, as participants are able to present a ‘final product’ for analysis that may read differently to interview transcripts of the same sense-making experiences and will serve to triangulate these data and provide another area of discussion and analysis.

Unfortunately, none of the participants, all of which opted for the emailed journal prompt with one question, returned their answers. Even after two additional email and phone messages for each participant, none were returned. Although the lack of engagement with the follow-up question could be for myriad reasons, the ongoing difficulties with the COVID-19 pandemic, upcoming state assessments, and the pending end of the school year were likely culprits.

Researcher Reflexive Writing/Journal

Hermeneutic phenomenology relies on overt acknowledgement and analysis of the phenomenon as lived and perceived by the researcher in addition to the perceptions of the participant. As such, I engaged in various reflexive journal experiences before, during, and after interviewing the participants as part of the hermeneutic circle. I acknowledge that this can cause difficulties and bring questions of validity for those pure phenomenologists and other traditionalist qualitative researchers who are used to the process of removal of the researcher from data collection and analysis. I address this more completely in the section on validity below and further in the introduction to the findings in chapter four.

The steps for this writing exercise are as follows:

1. Reflexive pre-writing: I engaged in a self-reflexive writing activity in which I wrote, or recorded, my thoughts on the phenomenon I am studied to be included as a snapshot of my own understandings before I engaged my research participants directly.
2. Reflexive research journal: I wrote, or recorded, an ongoing reflexive journal before and after every interview and subsequent interaction with research participants to capture my ongoing thoughts.
3. Final reflexive writing: I engaged in a final reflexive journal activity after the interview data were analyzed through the IPA framework detailed below.

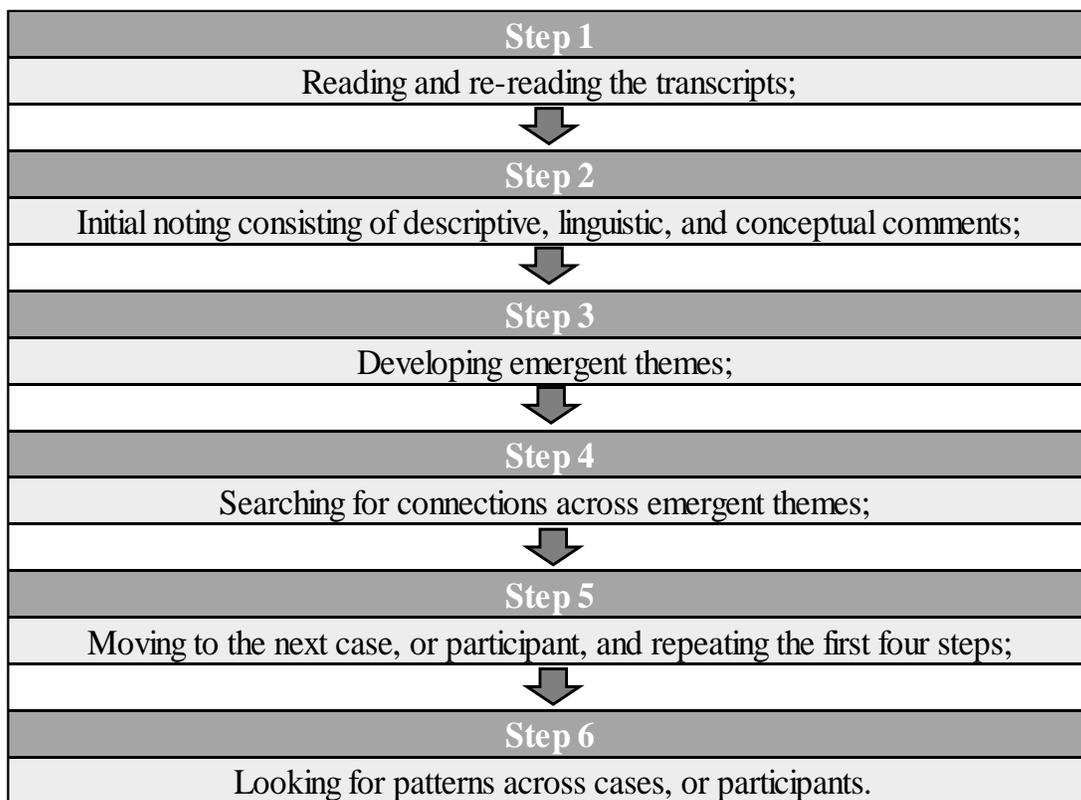
These writings were utilized in the fusions of horizon and IPA analysis contained in chapters four and five and discussion of the study in chapter six.

Data Analysis: Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Data analysis of interviews and reflective journals were conducted as recommended by Smith et al. (2009) in *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method, and Research*. Smith et al. outline six steps to Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) outlines six steps for data analysis outlined in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.2

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis Steps



Finally, the analysis and discussion also explored specific themes established by the literature review (e.g., neoliberalism, social justice leadership, meaning-making, identity

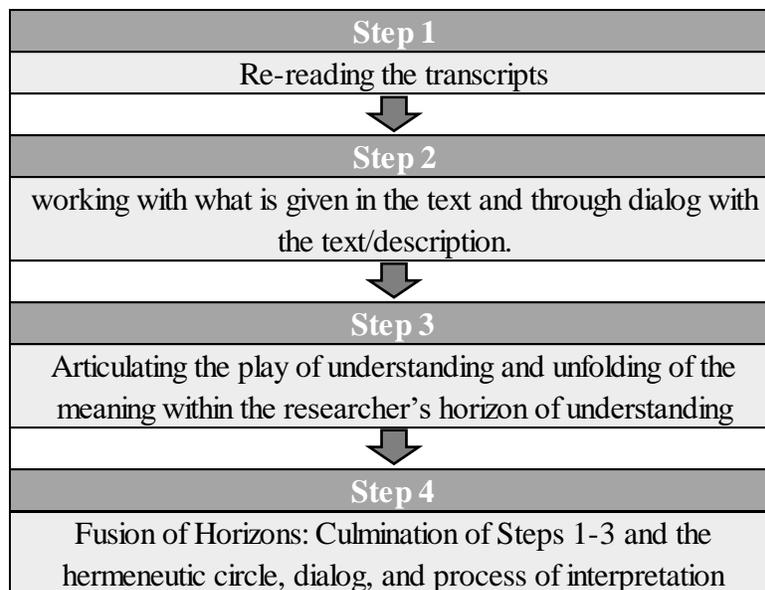
(re)creation) as well as inductive themes that presented in the IPA coding/theme analysis of interview transcripts and journals.

Data Analysis: Going to Work on Understanding each Persons' Meaningful Experience Towards a Fusion of Horizons

In addition to the helpful process of IPA, a similar in conceptual design to van Manen (2016b), data were again analyzed utilizing a framework designed to get at the heart of the meaningful experiences as another way to work with these data. This additional analysis was implemented to ensure additional views of the same data and are utilized to further crystalize the validity of the findings as discussed below. Suddick et al. (2020) describe a four-step process that includes the following:

Figure 3.3

Going to Work on Understanding each Persons' Meaningful Experience



This process was utilized after the themes were identified through IPA and is woven throughout the findings presented below in the form of dialog from my own accounts, through the reflective journals, and post IPA thoughts, discussions, and analysis into a fusion of horizons.

Validity

Within hermeneutic phenomenology and IPA, issues of reliability and validity are addressed as issues of rigor of process as well as triangulation. That is, “the multiple stages of interpretation that allow patterns to emerge, the discussion of how interpretations arise from these data, and the interpretive process [itself]” (Laverty, p. 31) are explicit, thoroughly examined, and explained. Importantly:

The biases and assumptions of the researcher are not bracketed or set aside, but rather are embedded and essential to interpretive process. The researcher is called, on an ongoing basis, to give considerable thought to their own experience and to explicitly claim the ways in which their position or experience relates to the issues being researched. (p. 28)

This “ongoing basis” comes in the form of a reflective journal, as described above, (both oral recording and written) that is referred to throughout the process of engaging with the participants and the elicited data as the hermeneutic circle between researcher and participant. Laverty (2003) explains:

Hermeneutics as a process of co-creation between the researcher and participant, in which the very production of meaning occurs through a circle of readings, reflective writing and interpretations. Through this process, the search is toward understanding of the experience from a particular philosophical perspective... as well as the horizons of participants and researcher. (p. 30)

This co-creation is vital to understand the meaning-making process as novice principals enact their roles leading schools. This process of meaning-making as part of the identity (re)creation process is the heart of what is being studied and as such, this hermeneutic process is an important part of the discussion. However, it is important for the researcher to be explicit with the required

self-reflexivity as they, “actively constructing interpretations of the experience and questioning how those interpretations came about” (p. 30). Thus, it falls upon me as the researcher to show the rigor of the process throughout as a cyclical process of meaning-making.

Finally, themes and analysis were triangulated through rigorous analysis, dissertation advisor feedback, and member checks between the researcher and participants. Member checks happen both within the interview itself, as described above as the hermeneutic circle. These techniques have been utilized in an attempt to tighten the interpretive nature of phenomenology into a more coherent and reliable analysis.

Statement of Position

My positionality towards this research is complicated. I occupy a dual-position of knowledge and access as a former high school principal who left the public-schools as a school leader in the last five years to pursue my doctorate degree in educational leadership. While my previous experience leading a public school offers me an insider view of some of the tensions of leading in today’s contexts, I have been away for almost five years and contexts continue to evolve. Further, as a White, cisgendered male, my inherent privilege creates gaps in my own understanding and analysis of the issues presented.

Finally, my own leadership journey is detailed as a currere-type narrative in a first-person auto-ethnographic account at the beginning of the findings chapter. Additionally, these narratives are also woven throughout the participants data findings and analysis in an attempt to bring out the, “hermeneutic circle of understanding that...consider[s] the movement and interplay between [myself as] interpreter, [my] fore-understanding and enabling function of prejudices as ‘brought into play’” (Suddick et al., p. 3) which leads to a fusion of horizons

between participants and the researcher. These and other positions will be explored as part of the findings, discussion, and analysis.

Chapter IV: Research Question One Findings

Introduction

Integral to hermeneutic phenomenology is the dialectic and discursive process of the hermeneutic circle to create a fusion of horizons of understanding regarding the phenomenon being studied. As a new researcher, working with these data stretched my still growing sense of self as researcher with the added intensity and pressure of the culmination of the PhD process. Long hours sitting with these sometimes seemingly meager and limited data, my own background as a struggling novice principal weaving throughout my findings and analysis, I found the process overwhelming, but exhilarating. Nearly every step of reading and analysis seemed to lay bare my inadequacies and neuroses. In time, I learned to just write, sitting firmly within these data and my own experiences, which produced the findings and analysis that appear below. I discuss the limitations of these discussions more formally in the final chapter but should mention them here briefly before my final thoughts on this process here.

Conducting research is difficult in the best circumstances, but the COVID-19 pandemic hindered an already small availability of research candidates, with four school districts' outright denying my research proposal request due to the pandemic. Further, the racial and ethnic background of my participants is woefully inadequate to the overall racial and ethnic makeup of the leadership of the districts I was allowed to conduct research as all the participants were White women with the exception of one Latino male. Finally, the research project was designed with a short follow-up interview or email response in order to elicit further specific data to the transition into the principalship in addition to the original interview. This also fell victim to the twin issues of the end of the school year and the continuing fallout from the Omicron variant of the COVID-19 virus in the Spring of 2022. Each participant agreed at the end of their initial interviews to

further participate, however none of them responded to my repeated requests with the exception of one participant who did schedule a follow-up but cancelled due to an emergency meeting with district leadership due to the pandemic.

Despite these severe limitations, this study offers a small glimpse into this important inquiry and serves as a jumping off point for my young career in educational leadership research where I look forward to continuing to improve my techniques, talents, and skills.

Findings

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to explore and interpret the transition of novice principals from teacher to the principalship to create a fusion of horizons. That is, crystalize understanding through hermeneutic circle, dialog, and the process of interpretation (Suddick et al. p. 3). In order to explore this, the intent is to answer the following research questions:

Research Questions

- How do novice public-school principals make sense of their change in identities and roles from teacher to leader?
- How do novice public-school principals navigate maintaining their core beliefs and values under the constraints of the role of principal, especially within the tensions between social justice leadership and neoliberal accountability regimes?

This chapter is designed to reporting findings pertaining to the first research question. While some themes are present in both research questions, clear themes relevant to transitioning from the classroom to the principalship warrant a separate treatment. Chapter five will report findings pertaining to the second research question and the crossover themes impacting both questions.

Short biographies of each participant, the schools they lead, and the districts they work for will begin the chapter before data are reported.

Four of the five interviews were conducted remotely over Zoom due to shifting restrictions and personal preferences of participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. These circumstances will be discussed in chapter six and are woven throughout the reporting and analysis of these data. Interviews with each participant, as well as my reflection journals, produced data that were analyzed utilizing the framework of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. This initial round of data analysis produced four theme categories that pertained to the first research question. These themes are: (a) preparation, both informal and formal, (b) transition to administration (social and practical), (c) personal values influencing leadership styles and roles, and (d) roadblocks to effective leadership. In general, there was agreement among participants of the difficult nature of social changes while transitioning to administration. However, there were some differences within the participants based on their life experiences up to the point of transitioning to administration, their perceptions of levels of support through the transition, and differing experiences leading during the COVID-19 pandemic, all of which are reported below. This chapter concludes with a general description and summary of the findings.

Researcher as Participant Within the Hermeneutic Circle of Understanding

As previously discussed, hermeneutic phenomenological methodology includes not only the data derived from the study participants, but that of the researcher as well. Suddick et al. (2020) explain, "the theory of meaning and interpretation thereby considered the movement and interplay between interpreter [myself as researcher], their fore-understanding and enabling function of prejudices as 'brought into play'. Play that carries forwards the hermeneutic work" (p. 3) working within and through participant stories. My own leadership story is told below to

further uncover my own positionality to be “brought into play” and serves as basis for my reporting of the findings and analysis of the phenomenon studied. This telling of my leadership journey is firmly rooted in the currere method (Pinar, 1975) and situates my own meaning-making and sense-making as a novice public school principal.

My Leadership Story

This research topic is intensely personal to me. I was a young public high school principal who struggled immensely personally and professionally without adequate language to describe why or how I was experiencing the intense struggles within the context I found myself. I was doing my best but found myself at the mercy of technocratic realities of leading a public-school in the “value free”, and indeed “colorblind”, post No Child Left Behind world. My personal identity clashed repeatedly with my professional one. I was deeply unhappy, depressed, anxious, and confused as how to move forward to help my students and staff see success, or at the very least, want to be there.

My professional life was mired in the technocratic priorities of increasing test scores, marketing for student attendance, and implementing standardized curriculum while attempting to create a more inclusive atmosphere for my students and faculty.

My family life suffered greatly, as a husband, and father of three young boys, I was absent or just simply exhausted when I was present. As a political conservative at the time, I was finding myself at odds with my upbringing as I expressed progressive ideas outside the norms of conservatism. As a Mormon at the time, I was finding myself at odds with my upbringing as well attempting to reconcile the desire to understand and assist my LGBTQ students and faculty with the rigid socially conservative norms of mainline Mormonism. All of this led to deeply

difficult times. And throughout the first three years of my principalship experience, I felt I was completely alone in my struggles. I now know that I was not.

My mentoring had been mishandled; my previous principal was “old school”. He berated me for my “feelings” and generally prepared me for leadership of a large public high school little beyond myriad somewhat creative ways to discipline employees and students. When I took over after he was escorted out of the building, I was under the leadership of a new assistant superintendent. My mentoring was scattershot. My leadership was stagnant, despite my best efforts and time...so much time. I was under constant pressure to increase our school’s letter grade, which had hovered at a ‘C’ for my first few years.²

After three years of little progress, I was given my opportunity for a breakthrough as I was introduced to the AZiLDR professional development project for schools in danger of failing. The program was developed and facilitated by educational leadership professors Dr. Lynnette Brunderman and Dr. Rose Ylimaki from the University of Arizona. It was my turning point. I learned pragmatic empirical based understandings and theoretical frameworks that gave me the feeling of and confidence in the type of leadership I could rely on and wield...and it worked.

It was through participation in the AZiLDR group that I was recruited into the PhD program for Educational Leadership at the University of Arizona. Almost immediately at the commencement of the program, I was empowered with the language of critique that leads to emancipation (Leonardo, 2004) and understanding of my place within a system that was both the

² Appendix E contains an evocative autoethnographic retelling of this time in my life and was presented as a paper presentation at the Bergamo Conference on Curriculum Theory and Classroom Practice in 2017 entitled “Wearing the Scarlet Letter: An Autoethnographic Journey of a High School Principal Navigating Neoliberal Curriculum Adoption”. I include it in the Appendix in its entirety as I feel it is relevant to more deeply understanding my positionality as researcher and participant as I undertook this dissertation project and in my analysis as part of the larger hermeneutic circle and fusion of horizons of this study.

symptom of and manifestation of various culture wars of the last thirty plus years in the United States (Apple, 2014; Pinar, 2012).

Energized and empowered with my new knowledge, I was able to effectively lead the faculty and staff to help pull up our school letter grade into the “B” range, but most importantly to me, our school was awarded the A+ School of Excellence Award which is given to a small number of schools who exemplify strong inclusive culture and high performance of variables decidedly outside those measured by school grades.

At the end of my sixth year as a high school principal, I was satisfied with my leadership and the overall direction of the school and left the principalship to pursue the PhD program full time and try to save my marriage and religious belief structure. Both did not survive. As of this writing, I am just over ten years removed from my ascendency into the principalship and five years removed from when I left it. I am a passionate advocate for reforms in principal preparation and mentoring programs, especially those new to the principalship. This study then reflects my deepest meanings and motivations of who I am and serve as my signposts in my lifeworld as my personal and professional journey continues to unfold.

The next two sections detail the research locations (districts and specific schools) as well as the participants. In the spirit of the fusion of horizons, I have interjected my observations of each participant as I saw them at the time of the interviews, captured in my contemporaneous notes and reflective journals.

Research Locations

Five novice principals participated in this study. Names of participants, districts, and schools are referred to by pseudonyms created for this study. Three of the participants were from the large Desert River School District, with over 80 schools and almost 50,000 students.

The other two participants were from two medium-sized rural districts, Copper Hills School District, with more than 5,000 students, and Cotton Farms School District with less than 15,000 students. Each of these districts borders the much larger Desert River School District.

The Desert River School District is a racially and culturally diverse comprehensive district. A high population of minority students attend the schools with over 60% of Latino decent, almost 10% Black and less than 20% White. Around 70% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. The district has been shrinking in enrollment for years from a combination of “White flight” and the proliferation of charter schools within its borders. However, district level administration and teachers and student support systems are vast with a large number of financial and personnel resources available for bolstering student opportunities through extensive magnet programs and career and technical education.

The Cotton Farms School District is a large district that serves the established and growing communities outside the Desert River School District. The student population that attends the district is over 50% White and under 40% Latino with around 40% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. The number of students attending the district has been steady over the last fifteen years, however the overall population has increased showing the effects of and growth of charter schools within their borders. The district has stayed close to their rural roots with extensive career and technical education programs focused on mining and farming as well as newer programs in medicine and healthcare.

The smallest district in this study, the Copper Hills School District, serves the bedroom communities and rural areas that lay outside the much larger Desert River School District and has seen their enrollment more than double in the last fifteen years. High growth and new schools dominate the priorities of the district with various burgeoning career and technical

education programs replacing the traditional vocational education that had dominated previously. The district demographic breakdown is just under 60% Latino and over 30% White with around a 35% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch.

Participant Biographies

Roberto Martín was the principal of Vantage High School, with less than 2,000 students, in the Desert River School District for a year and a half. The student population of Vantage High School is almost 90% Latino, nearly 6% Native American, and less than 2% White with over a 70% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. Currently for the last year, he is the principal of a small rural high school, Sewel High School. Before becoming a principal at Vantage, Mr. Martín taught high school social studies and was subsequently a school counselor, an assistant principal, and an interim principal before being appointed the permanent principal of Vantage High School. He is 54 years old Latino man and has adult children and grandchildren working and attending in the Desert River School District.

Roberto's interview was the first one I conducted and was interrupted briefly (20 minutes) by an incident that needed his attention as building principal. Our conversation was wide ranging and difficult to navigate at times. I had conducted a pilot study interview to practice and hone my questions, but I was not prepared for how nervous I was at "getting it right". My reflection journal writings that were worked on right after the interview reflected my frustration with myself and my concerns as the usefulness of the data. Upon reviewing the transcript later for analysis, I was surprised at how much rich descriptions there were in our conversation. I came away with a greater appreciation for the process and was much more comfortable in the subsequent interviews.

Roberto was deeply affected by the way he felt he was treated when he was asked to lead Vantage High School. It didn't go well, and he talked extensively of his frustrations with district leadership and himself. I really felt that he considered himself a failure for how his tenure ended. From my own experiences as a new leader, I could empathize as I felt like I was drowning. I saw much of my own story in his, although I was afforded time and development which led to notable improvement both professionally and personally. I wonder what he could have accomplished had he been given similar resources.

Megan Hunter is the principal of Jackrabbit High School, with around 1,000 students, in the Copper Hills School District. The student population of Jackrabbit High School is just over 50% Latino and nearly 40% White with less than 40% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. She has taught high school science and was an assistant principal for the last year and a half before being recently appointed principal at Jackrabbit High School. Before her appointment, she has served as interim principal for the last few months after her previous principal retired mid-year. Megan is a 31-year-old White woman, and newly married. Her entire career has been spent at Jackrabbit High School starting as a science teacher, Student Council advisor, and an assistant principal for the last year and a half previous to her recent appointment as principal. Megan grew up in the Mid-West of the United States and moved to Arizona to begin her teaching career upon completion of college. She comes from a highly religious and conservative family and often spoke of her parents as major role models in her personal and professional lives.

I found her very welcoming and forthcoming during our conversation with our interview lasting the longest at almost an hour and a half. I noted that as the interview continued to develop, she began asking me more about myself and my experiences as a new principal. At

times it felt like she was really happy to be able to speak candidly with an experienced school leader and took advantage of the time to glean stories “from the trenches”.

Marcia Manning is the principal of Anna Gardens Alternative K-8 school, with a little less than 100 students, in the Desert River School District. The student population of Anna Gardens K-8 School is just over 60% Latino, under 20% White, over 5% Black, and 3% Native American with just over 70% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. Marcia is a former behavioral health professional. Her entrance into education came through special education as a one-on-one aide for students with profound special needs. Ms. Manning’s experiences are well suited for Anna Gardens as it is a school designed for students with severe behavioral issues from throughout the district. Marcia is a White woman, and 51 years old. She has worked at Anna Gardens for the last three years as principal. Her previous education experience was as a teacher in special education classrooms teaching mathematics.

I found Marcia to be both guarded and loquacious. It was apparent in the short amount of time that I was in conversation with her that she likes working with the young alternative school children and revels in being able to handle the unique situations that come to her daily. Much of our conversation centered on her unapologetic opinions of social issues, school leadership, and disdain for most directives. The word “maverick” came to mind many times while I was with her in her busy office. If she herself would not identify as one, I felt she would be proud to be categorized as such, if only in her own mind.

Kimberly Bryan is the newly appointed principal of Cotton Farm High School in the Cotton Farms School District. The student population of Cotton Farm High School is just under 55% White and under 35% Latino with just over 40% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. She was previously the principal at Gladden Elementary School, serving a little more

than 700 students, for two years prior to her recent appointment to the high school (over 2,000 students). She has always wanted to be a principal since her first year as a teacher. Her previous experience was as a high school science classroom teacher, school counselor, dropout prevention specialist, assistant principal, and interim principal at Gladden Elementary. She is a White woman, 36 years old, and recently married with a small child at home.

Kimberly was the most guarded in our conversations when compared to the other participants. Her answers came easily with little to no hesitation and left very little openings for follow-up. I asked additional questions about her upbringing and home life, but most of those questions were redirected in adjacent, but not personal areas with a few exceptions that are noted below in the findings. As a result, her interview was the shortest. I came away from the interview feeling that she was very sure of herself, her ability to lead, and her ability to mold her staff. Her extensive quasi-administrative experiences served as foundations for many of her answers. I never felt that we were having a real conversation, more as a task to perform in a long list of tasks on her agenda for the day.

Barbara Marlowe is the newly appointed principal of Sloan Station School K-8, with just over 1,000 students, where she served as an assistant principal for the last six years to the newly retired principal. The student population of Sloan Station is just over 90% Latino and under 5% White with over 70% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. Previously, Barbara was a middle school science teacher, instructional coach, assistant principal, and interim principal. She is a White 52-year-old woman.

Barbara's interview was the tale of two interviews. Early in the interview, her answers to the questions were quick and shallow. In order to illicit better conversation, and selfishly in hope of more rich data, I shared some of my own experiences based on some of her answers and it got

a little better. However, about twenty minutes into the interview she paused after a follow-up question about a disconnect with district leadership when she was a finalist before for the principalship. Her whole demeanor changed, she shifted forward towards the camera, we were on Zoom, and she said, “you know, this shit really bugs me (issues with district leadership)” and then she started to unload. I sensed this was a catharsis for her. We exchanged stories as school leaders, and she really opened up. Some of the richest content came from her interview and I was incredibly grateful for that, having finished my restrained and seemingly less than fruitful interview with Ms. Bryan earlier in the day.

General Description of The Four Themes

The hermeneutic phenomenological gaze focuses on the lived experience of novice principals transitioning into the principalship. These lived experiences are revealed through the stories told of sense-making and meaning-making of the novice principals. This section includes meaning units that were identified through the analytical processes described in chapter three. Specifically, utilizing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, these four themes emerged from close reading and re-reading of the interviews with the five participants. Emergent data were categorized into meaning units, that is, themes that were observed inhabiting the space given to the sense-making and meaning-making process of the transition into administration and leading today’s public schools. Data is presented here across participants within the identified themes. My own experiences and reflection journal writings are woven throughout as appropriate to create the hermeneutic circle leading to the fusion of horizons to uncover the phenomenon studied. I do this in an attempt to work toward a unified understanding of what was meaningful across all participants. I also end each theme section with my own narrative, my own understandings and experiences within the themes. As a reminder, I am working to uncover the

phenomenon of the transition into leadership while, “articulating the play of understanding and unfolding of meaning within [my] horizon of understanding” (Suddick et al., p. 6). It is also important to note that these themes were developed inductively through IPA. These are not the themes I pre-determined, although they do match closely with what I would have thought would emerge, having experienced these things myself. Themes touching on mental health, or social justice, that I would have included had I been a direct participant, are absent from the narratives analyzed. I speak on those themes in the next chapter and the final chapter as an important silence in these data.

Finally, where appropriate, additional context is given to give the reader a better sense of voice of these sense-making and meaning-making processes. Analysis of these data with links to the literature appear in Chapter six.

Theme One: Informal and Formal Principal Preparation

Each participant described various levels of preparation, both informal and formal, as important to their development as school leaders. Four of the participants told stories of feeling inadequate and never intending initially to be an administrator. For example, Megan Hunter stated that she has happy being a science teacher, running Student Council. She, “...never saw myself as an admin...it was just a lot of people encouraging me to like, hey, you’d be good at this! And so, I was like, okay, educational leadership it is, like that might be fun, right?”. Megan comes across as an eager learner with a lot of confidence that belies her limited administrative experience and her limited experience in schools, having worked at the same school her entire career. She liked to be involved in vital functions of the school as a teacher (leading Student Council, running teaching workshops), and this part of her journey as a principal seemed to stay on the same path.

Roberto Martin described a similar sentiment regarding his rise as a leader, although his was a much more reluctant foray into school leadership:

I taught for a long time, so kind of becoming a principal wasn't in the back of my mind, after 20 years, almost, in education, that's when boom, I kind of became a principal after 20 years. It wasn't something I expected. But, you know, the opportunities came about, and I had prepared in terms of getting a credential and the opportunities came, and I said, Okay, why not, I liked the challenges...but it wasn't easy.

Roberto's experiences seemed to always have a disconnected quality to them, by that I mean that he seemed resigned that he just wasn't what he considered a "good" leader, he would set up an ideal, like later when he speaks about the expectations from the district that were very different from his own ideas, and judge himself harshly that he was not up to the task, or at the very least, he had a different vision of leadership.

Barbara Marlowe shared a similar statement about her journey into school leadership when she stated:

I never even thought about leadership. But leadership always seemed to find me. Like, I don't know how or why it always just did. So, this was the first time I ever went out to go, okay, I think I want to be this [a principal]. And so, I went and got my degree. And it is this journey to become a principal. It has been exceedingly humbling. I had between 50 and 60 interviews, and it took three years to really get one [principalship] that somebody would go okay, I'll take a chance on that one.

Barbara's journey to becoming a full principal was much longer than the other participants or my own. Her answer above was early in the interview before she really opened up. He later

answers, of her frustration with district leadership especially in the hiring process, really comes out and is reported in a later theme on frustrations as a school leader.

Marcia Manning also felt that leadership found her although she remembered that, as a public-school student, she, "...struggled with the traditional expectations of school" and that, "I am not the person that people think would be a principal". However, after perceiving leadership had failed to meet her expectations of preparing their staff to work with difficult students, she stated:

That's when and why I decided to become a principal, because they're gonna be great teachers out there with all this information [lesson plan creation, bulletin board skills] and they aren't going to survive because they don't know how to deal with people. And I thought the only way I can impact that is if I become principal.

Throughout Marcia's interview, she often spoke of this view she ascribed to others as not being regular principal material and was proud of proving them wrong. Also, I felt she knew she acted as a gatekeeper of her school and students. She decided who was ready to work with them and who was not. She often cast herself as the expert, uniquely qualified, to lead her school, albeit one with which her own background in mental healthcare gave her practical advantages over traditional school principal preparation.

These four participants expressed similar feelings about being, at least, somewhat reluctant to enter into the sphere of educational leadership. Conversely, Kimberly Bryan described knowing early on she wanted to be an administrator. She stated that she, "knew from my first teaching assignment that I was going to be a principal. I have always had confidence and it didn't look too hard [laughs]...after my second year of teaching I signed up for my master's degree program and never looked back". She became an instructional coach, district

trainer, dean of students, then assistant principal three years after deciding to pursue her master's degree in Educational Leadership. I felt that what was most meaningful for Kimberly was her role in her own story as stalwart task-oriented, successful individual, wherever her path took her, always looking forward to the goal of school leadership.

My Narrative. I have always been a leader. Throughout my childhood and youth, I was a leader in Boy Scouts and various church youth groups. As a Mormon missionary, I was appointed as a top leader. Leadership always seemed to find me. As I started my teaching career, I was selected as department chair in my third year with five veteran teachers rounding out the department. That endeavor led to exposure to district leadership subsequently serving on various committees and other leadership opportunities that put me front and center as a candidate for assistant principal upon completion of my master's degree in educational leadership.

As mentioned above, my informal preparation, learning from my principal while serving as an assistant, was woefully inadequate. I was left alone to 'figure it out' rather than being meaningfully mentored. It was not until my participation in the AZiLDR program that I saw any formal mentoring, and that was three years into being principal.

It was interesting to hear similar stories from my research participants. Although certainly unique to their own story, feelings of being ill-prepared dominated the narrative, with Kimberly Bryan being the notable exception.

Formal Principal Preparation/Master's Program. Some of the participants reflected on their principal preparation master's degree programs. All the participants who commented on their preparation programs found it lacking in areas that directly impacted them as novice principals. For example, Megan Hunter focused on the importance of the internship aspect of her master's degree when she noted that:

I think the most useful part of all of those classes is when they said, alright, go and do like 10 hours of admin work at your school, watch something, right. Like, I think in a way, that was the most beneficial part of those. Yeah, the theory or the court cases, those are good, but you can always reference those, but just getting down and dirty with the work.

Ms. Hunter, as a new principal of just a few days, was flooded with new experiences daily. While her previous experiences as a teacher gave her access to the inner workings of the front office and administration, she was surprised at how much was still locked behind the walls of the administrative team. Even her time as an assistant principal was vastly different than the short time she had assumed duties of the principal. Her attitude of getting “down and dirty with the work” to survive as a new principal was similar to Marcia Manning’s more experienced attitude. Marcia, in her third year as principal, lamented that:

...[new principals] are not prepared for what they might walk into. And you can't get that from a textbook. You can't get that from a discussion. You get it because you're sitting in your internship, which is only one semester, which is not enough time if this is going to be a lifetime profession...because that's just gonna happen when you take an admin job. Things really hit the fan and [new principals] handle it and you get to go okay, what was that? but then now it's on to the next thing. How are you prepared for that?

Marcia, as the principal of an alternative K-8 school, saw some intense situations come across her desk that are reported below. Her previous work in the mental health field continued to be cited throughout, which seemed to add to her near disdain for her formal principal training in her master’s degree program. She talked a lot about the absolute need for on-the-job immersion, both as a teacher and an administrator. This on-the-job immersion was also noted by

Roberto Martin when he stated that his internship was the most beneficial but that he, “realized very quickly that I would have to learn on the job, no one really prepared me for the politics of it all...I was overwhelmed”. For Roberto, this was the foundation for his somewhat tragic story as a novice principal. I found myself sympathizing and empathizing throughout my conversation with Roberto and shared a lot of my own frustrations as part of our time together.

Each participant discussed their preparation for the role of principal informally and formally. Four of the five had various levels of trepidation taking on and pursuing the role of principal. One participant, Kimberly Bryan, spoke confidently throughout the stories she told with her desire and ability to lead as a principal. Their individual stories illustrate their own background and identity work that informed this topic and will be included in the discussion in chapter six.

My Narrative. I pursued and received my master’s degree in educational leadership from Northern Arizona University from 2008-2009. My classes were a hybrid of in-person (local night classes in Tucson, AZ) and online options. The classes focused heavily on being a successful principal firmly under the neoliberal regimes of the still young No Child Left Behind act. Very little learning or working with social justice or critique of systems was available. Due to this, I was not prepared for the larger questions I have dealt with here in this study. I was not prepared for the toll it would take on my identity, more importantly, I was not given the tools to work on my mental health when I needed it. Instead, I was socialized into a compliance mindset as a leader with a strong risk aversion (one project I was assigned during my Master’s Degree program was actually titled, ‘how to stay out of the superintendent’s office’).

Although I did receive excellent instruction on school law and special education compliance, which I leaned on heavily as I began my career, I felt stripped of my uniqueness, or

at least those parts of my identity that would pop up later as I felt empowered enough to be me in my leadership.

Fusion of Horizons for Theme One: Informal and Formal Principal Preparation.

Each principal received their administrative certificate through a formal master's degree program. Four of the participants, as well as myself, felt inadequate at the assumption of the duties, but for various reasons. All spoke about the importance of preparation and the hope for better availability of learning and resources in preparation programs.

Theme Two: Transition to the Principalship

All participants focused on the transition to the role of a full building principal. Four of the five participants had previous administrative experience as an assistant principal, Marcia Manning being the exception. Each of the four focused on different aspects of the differences between being an assistant principal and the full principal. For example, Kimberly Bryan noted that she had been working as the assistant principal to a retiring principal, assuming the interim title in early 2020. She remembered that, "I was hired, and I signed my contract the same day we had our first COVID meeting. And so, I signed my contract on a Friday and the whole world shut down on Tuesday...I didn't get the normal transition, you know, into being a principal". She continued later in the interview that her, "...transition to principal was very different than most other people's just given the situation in the world [COVID-19]. I haven't had a normal year as a principal yet". The theme of the pervasive and political nature of the COVID-19 pandemic will be addressed in the data reporting in the final theme of this chapter as well as more broad contextual analysis in chapter six.

Megan Hunter, newly appointed principal and interim for the previous six weeks before her interview, noticed relationships with staff members changed as she transitioned from her

assistant principal role to the full principal. She stated, “There’s a whole lot of things that you do not know” and “Right now I am just trying to survive”. She noted that she realized that, “moving into the principal role you lose a lot of people who were friends...the level of friendship changes. It’s hard to adjust to not being invited to go out anymore with my previous work friends”. Although she noted those changes in relationships, she did see that, “more people come to me, bring me their problems, or vent, or whatever, and like I am glad to develop more relationships with people on staff who I never really interacted with before I became the principal”. She also spoke of feeling almost relief when she was fully appointed as principal, having served as acting principal during the previous semester while her principal was dealing with some personal issues. She felt that she was just a placeholder, always differing to the previous principal.

These changing relationships, as noted here by Megan, had a large impact on the transition of each principal, with each person dealing with it in their own way.

Roberto Martin similarly acknowledged changes in relationships with students and staff. He noted that while he was a successful teacher, and was an assistant principal for a short time, “themes that come along with being a principal, like discipline investigations, human evaluation of personnel, there was nothing in my teaching background that prepared me for those challenges”. Roberto reported several stories of employee discipline that left him saddened and demoralized. After relating these stories, he stated that, “...having a place in one’s heart for students is really important” before explaining how the personnel issues impacted his ability to put his focus on what was most important to him – the students. Roberto found a lot of difficulty in the transition and often throughout the interview when discussing more difficult situations like these, he would stop and gather himself before proceeding-I often found myself filling the gaps

of silence that would occur as I felt immense empathy for him retelling stories that were hauntingly similar to mine. Upon reviewing the interview afterwards, I realized I was not letting him sit with the silences, thus truncating his responses and possibly missing out on additional rich meaning and sense making. These data and observations will be reported more extensively in the section of the fourth theme of roadblocks to leadership below.

Barbara Harlowe noted the change in focus that accompanied her move into the principalship. She stated, "...as I transition from [being assistant principal] to the principal, the principalship is the focus. The focus is the whole school, managing people so that they're helping kids, and really overseeing that component, versus being the one running around taking care of everything". Further she stated that she is also focused on, "...really trying to understand the budget situation, coming in mid-year and trying to figure out our funds, Title 1 funds...trying to work with the finance department and make the deadlines [for hiring] has been a real focus and challenge". Similar here to Megan, Barbara's own leadership had been muted while she served as acting principal to a retiring principal. Although the circumstances were different, she expressed narratives that placed her firmly in the driver's seat of leading her school.

The myriad of challenges expressed by the participants above represent very real obstacles personally and professionally. Marcia Manning personalized her response to the transition by recalling her thoughts seeing her name on the door of her office for the first time. She recalled:

I saw my name on the door, sitting on this side of the desk, I was like wow, this is weird, [and now] I'm dealing with more adults initially than children. That was the shift. But it also helped me really remember that this job isn't about you, or even the adults, it's about the kids. The adults are just kind of avenues to help see some things come to fruition.

Often Marcia would come back to her overarching theme of the difficult nature of her particular school, her particular students when answering an interview question or follow up. Her unique qualifications with the unique student population of her school comes up throughout her interview.

The interconnected nature in schools of adults to kids, staff to students, was a reoccurring theme throughout the interviews of all participants and is reported below in the next theme.

In summary, the transition to the principalship was difficult for most of the participants. Their own personal struggles with confidence come through in each participant's answers and attitudes. COVID-19 itself presented an existential crisis to various leadership situations and will be further reported in the fourth theme below.

My Narrative. I entered administration in my fifth year as a teacher in education. I was thrust into leadership through my work with various district level committees and was the presumptive candidate for administration at my school when an opening occurred. Having been at the school as a popular teacher, I was surprised by the changes in relationships from former work friends, but it wasn't until I was appointed principal than I started to really understand the somewhat lonely nature of the position. My transition was not smooth, with my principal being put on home assignment early in my second year in administration. The other assistant principal having left a month before for a parallel position in another state, left a large void, and I was left standing as 'acting' principal. A few months later, I was given the title interim principal, then finally appointed permanent principal in the spring of that school year.

Fusion of Horizons for Theme Two: Transition to the Principalship. Those participants who focused on this actual transition to the principalship focused their feelings of

inadequacy, their desire to have some legitimacy, and their vision for being a leader people wanted to follow.

Theme Three: Personal Values/Motivations Influencing Leadership Styles and Roles

The interview questions, provided in appendix A, were crafted to elicit data that manifest specifically in the last two identified themes below. As a result of these deliberate questions, a larger amount of data was found within these last few themes. As before, these data are reported here with larger discussions and analysis linking to the literature and theoretical frameworks appearing in chapter six.

All participants noted one of their main driving values/motivations was keeping the students (often referred to as “kids”) at the center of their leadership and at the center of decisions of hiring and even firing. For example, Kimberly Bryan stated that, “...you’re always educating kids, and you’re always educating and not losing sight of that...remembering that it’s all about the kids is the most important part of my journey”. Unfortunately, with her interview being so brief and seemingly guarded, Kimberly never expressed examples of why she felt that way, or how she saw it manifest inside schools other than helping students prepare for their standardized tests or other important assessments. Again, throughout her interview I had the feeling that she was giving answers she had given many times before, my attempts at asking deeper versions of the questions elicited similar results. It was frustrating.

Roberto Martin, on the opposite end of being open, similarly noted that he has a:

...heart for students who are not on track to graduate...I really advocated for those students, both with the current programs and the credit recovery option I brought in.

Working with students and getting them what they need has always been at the heart of what I do, now that I was principal, I did what I could.

Roberto talked a lot about helping students throughout his career, this was also where I saw him get the most agitated, he would juxtapose his personal righteous (as he saw it) desire to put students above everything with district policy, mandates, and expectations that got in the way. I report on some of those specifics in the next chapter.

Megan Hunter moved the conversation of student-centered leadership towards discussing how she talked about ways to utilize the students at her school as the way to inspire them:

And so going into admin, that was my number one [goal], that's my motivation, is to support the teachers and the staff so that they can support the kids. Yes, it's ultimately about the kids. Like, I'm never gonna go against that. But you have to support your teachers, first and foremost, because they're the ones that get to reach the students.

Megan had been heavily involved as a teacher with afterschool student activities. At times, it seemed as if she was frustrated that more of her teachers did not have that same passion, although she never said it explicitly, it was there in the way she would relay some of her story.

Kimberly Bryan also linked the motivation of working with students with working with the staff when she stated that:

...as you move into the role of administration, you're teaching kids, you're coaching kids, you're supporting kids, but you're also supporting teachers and staff, any staff member and in helping them find their love of education, continue their love of education and grow as an educator, or decide that education isn't for them. And I think there's beauty and all of that.

While students can provide staff with motivation, Marcia Manning noted the difficult nature of working with students at times. She talked about difficult situations with her unique

student population, supports they needed, and the difficulty in finding staff who would work with difficult students that attended her school for the long run. She observed:

When you're in it nine hours a day, and some of the stuff these students are dealing with, I was going to never deal with my entire life. These kids are 9, 10, 11 years old, dealing stuff they should never have to deal. But I heard about it, I learned about it, I've lived it with them to some degree [being at school everyday with them], because that's why they were there. Right? So that's my goal here, like how can I help support my teachers to want to stay in a place where sometimes they're a punching bag? Right? Not take it personal and have this really crazy conversation where I say I need you [the teacher] to depersonalize these wonderful interpersonal relationships...So I gotta figure that out. Because otherwise, these kids aren't gonna have anybody...and that's my little niche of being a principal. And that doesn't actually happen in other schools surface level, and you have the benefit of, you know, you're a fantastic athlete, or you're a student or whatever, I don't get that [kind of student here]. If you don't have the worst problems in the world you're not here. So, we're surrounded by everybody that is dealing with something so as a principal, I feel it's kind of my role to help find that balance for my adults and help them want to keep doing what they are drawn to do.

It was clear from our conversation, that Marcia cares a great deal about her students at her school. With her extensive background working in behavioral health before embarking in a career in education, her affinity for the needs of her students and her acting as gatekeeper of knowledge for her staff to be successful came through throughout the interview.

Importance of Building Relationships with Staff. Participants noted the importance of developing healthy professional relationships with staff. For example, Kimberly Bryan said:

I also really love working with staff and really, truly, genuinely developing relationships. Because I think education is hard. And there are hard times of the year, and there are hard situations, and I really thrive on anything like that. It's my counseling background, but I really thrive on building genuine relationships.

Again, when pressed for specific examples, Kimberly would redirect the question and talk about an adjacent topic, for example, when pressed for an example of this, she continued to talk about the importance of building relationships and the type of relationships that should be built instead of a specific example of it.

Marcia Manning also focused on the importance of relationships leading the staff when she stated, "I believe a lot in relationships. And when those aren't where [a teacher] wants them to really be, I believe in taking on the work to try to figure that out". She went on further to discuss the importance of hard conversations if there is an incompatibility of staff to students, "I also believe that can't be the only thing we do is to make somebody else feel comfortable. Sometimes we help them feel uncomfortable enough to realize this isn't for them. That's hard, because people don't really want to do that, they want to keep everybody". She relayed a part of a story (we were interrupted by a student and never came back to the full story) of a teacher who wanted to be hired at her school but was shocked by what she saw while waiting for her interview in the front office. We did not get to the actual incident, but I can imagine it involved a student having a difficult time.

Marcia's experiences reminded me of my time as principal working with our special education team to better train our regular education teachers and the reactions some of them had to the sometimes extreme behaviors.

Megan Hunter also spoke building relationships through supporting her staff as a new principal. She noted that she:

...always asks [the teachers] what they need, what support do they need? Like what are the problems that you see? Because in the teaching world, you know, like, we're only looking at our classroom, maybe our department like, but it's so small. And so their problems are so big to them, right? But when you look at the whole school, it's just like a little thing that I could probably fix. So, asking them all the time, what's the problems? Let's come up with creative solutions.

She continued later in the interview:

Especially today, teachers are just getting bogged down with so many things. And I know I can't put in grades for everyone. I know I can't make the lessons for them, I can't do those things. But the little things I can do, like why not take something off their plate for a little bit. And that will make them happier or want to do more in the long run. Like it's a give and take for sure.

As a new principal, Megan seemed particularly focused on building solid relationships with her staff and was always looking for ways to serve her teachers, to lighten their personal load.

Megan used the phrase "to serve" or their derivatives often throughout our long conversation.

Her religious upbringing and her parents' work with others was a strong influence and permeates her narratives throughout the interview.

Barbara Marlowe, as a more experienced educator similarly spoke of supporting her teachers, but she focused more on herself as a mentor and cheerleader. She commented that:

I really want to help people get excited about the job and try to break down barriers so that they can do the job and get excited and not be afraid to take risks, and to fail forward.

I've been around [school leaders] where it's stifling, and you can't do that. And there was always the opposite of what I felt like we as teachers should be able to do, we should be able to try new things and not be afraid to fail, not be penalized or, or pushed in a way that shuts down creative and innovative thinking and teaching.

Near the end of the interview, Ms. Marlowe spoke of her mantra, "let's find a way to say, yes" as a driving force in her work with teachers. She stated that, "it's important that I find a way to explain in normal-speak what barriers might be there...but I am always looking for a way to say, yes". In spite of her efforts, barriers were present. She spoke extensively about them later in the interview and are discussed in the section on roadblocks to leadership below.

Recruiting and Retaining Teachers. Four participants furthered the discussion of the importance and impact of staff on students with a discussion of recruitment and retention of quality staff. Megan Hunter spoke of the importance of recruiting staff that are the kind of individuals she wants working with her students. She noted, "...talking about filing positions, like that's the kind of person [student centered teachers and staff] I would like to also get into my team. Like, they are not in this for the title, for the accolades, because that always ends in disaster". Earlier in the interview, Megan spoke about a former fellow assistant principal while she was still a teacher who created a lot of problems at the school, including splitting loyalties among staff between various administrators, while making no secret of their desire to lead the school someday. This led to the discussion that generated the quote above.

Kimberly Bryan also spoke of the need for recruiting good teachers. She noted that:
Something that's really important to me as a principal is ensuring that recruitment and retention is one of my number one things and so I am on there [job recruitment site] all

the time moving and shaking and making things happen as quickly as possible to set everyone up for success. It's so challenging, but so important!

Kimberly's interview centered on her vision of "success". This success was narrowly defined as measurable with test scores. She rarely spoke of attributes that were not directly related to that.

Barbara Marlowe added to the discussion regarding staff. She stated, "I just kind of do what I can for teachers, because I don't believe teachers are here to not do their best. I think there's a lot in the way sometimes. And sometimes people don't have the personal capacity, but then we either coach them up or coach them out". Barbara had seen lots of teachers come through while an assistant principal and dwelled a lot on this "coach them up or coach them out" mantra. While it seemed that she did genuinely care about the teachers as people, she was quick to move people on if she didn't see that desire to improve.

Marcia Manning noted that her role as principal was to help her staff and as she spent more time in the role she, "...became more cognizant of what teacher's need, and oftentimes it has nothing to do with teaching...and that's what I realized, understanding the importance of really needing to understand better the needs of teachers...I can see where some principals miss the boat on that".

My Narrative. I was a student-centered teacher, or more accurately, I cared about my students and learned over time to leverage that into student success in my classroom. When I became a principal, I was amazed that my underlying love of my students was not universal. As a teacher, our faculty meetings were rife with deficit thinking and defeatist attitudes about "these kids" or "those types of students". One of my biggest tasks was working with my faculty to change their mindset. With the help of AZiLDR in my third year, we did just that. Culminating

in our school-wide vision being updated and simplified to center on student support, not the ubiquitous NCLB term “success”, but support.

In the same vein, hiring the right people was paramount to seeing those desires manifest. In my mind, the most important thing a principal can do is make sure they hire the right people. I was lucky in that I was able to do that for the most part. For those not able to do that, I would work hard to, in the words of Barbara Marlowe, “coach them up or coach them out”.

Finally, much of my work in the last few years of my leadership centered around building more deep and profound professional relationships with and between staff members. One of the findings of the A+ award noted how in sync and congruent our staff were at supporting our students.

Fusion of Horizons for Theme Three: Personal Values/Motivations Influencing Leadership Styles and Roles. Improving inputs and outcomes for students and teachers was a focus of all participants. Various levels of frustration with or involvement with each group made each story unique, but overall, each participant expressed the desire to improve experiences for students and teachers.

Many motivations and values were discussed by the participants. However, the students, and their success, were paramount in response to questions within this theme. The importance of staffing for student success then was discussed as an extension of the driving motivation of the needs of students. Throughout the discussion, students were spoken about as a monolithic group with systems in place to help all students. At no time during the interviews were students discussed in an individualized or contextual way outside of Marcia Manning, with her differentiation coming from the discipline issues her students had which brought them to her particular school. Discussion of these findings will be included in chapter six.

Theme Four: Roadblocks to Leadership

All participants shared various stories that have been categorized as “roadblocks to leadership”. There are two subthemes, personal life and work/life balance, and the COVID-19 pandemic, that will be reported after a more general discussion of roadblocks. The discussions of roadblocks to leadership below, recorded during their interview, were accompanied by an increase in obvious levels of frustration. These were observed in body language, such as crossing arms, a furrowed brow, raised voice, and other behaviors. This section starts with the meaning-making and sense-making of Roberto Martin. His extensive statements below set the tone for this theme and are germane to the larger analyses of themes in chapter six.

Roberto Martin increasingly acted agitated as he spoke of his experiences as a novice principal. He noted his confusion and clash over the priorities of the district and his own priorities and needs at the school that ultimately led to his departure after one and a half years at Vantage High School. He noted that:

I was perceived as a very young principal, not young in terms of age, but young in terms of experience. I think what was frustrating for me was to understand the direction that the district wanted to pursue. My vision as being one of okay, you're a business competing for enrollment. And you have in the periphery, charter schools and other institutions that are competing for your students. So, my energy was focused on any student that wanted to exit Vantage, I wanted to have an interview with them and their parents, to see what we could do differently, to maintain that student to keep that student. What was frustrating is that I wanted to give it that personal touch. But there were so many other issues that got in the way, there were obviously if I used to do operations, and then I passed on that hat to somebody else. And then we didn't pass our inspections. So that was

frustrating, because now I have, I had a deficiency in my school. And ultimately, I was responsible for that. loss as some student issues where I didn't handle well between faculty, and, and students. And so that was another thing that okay, now I'm supposed to retain students, and I'm supposed to have my heart and soul trying to keep my enrollment, but yet all these issues keep getting in the way.

This quote encapsulates the reality many public-school principals lead in today. Themes of frustration with leadership, neoliberal competition for students, operations failures are interwoven in one densely packed narrative. An extensive discussion of these themes with connections to the literature will be explored in the discussions and recommendations at the end of this study. Roberto drilled down further on his frustrations with district leadership. He continued:

And so that was very frustrating. And maybe it was my weakness, obviously, was of not perceiving and not saying, Okay, here's what the district really wants, versus what I perceive to be the goal of the district. And that's where there was a disconnect. And that was very frustrating for me because I felt that I was keeping students in school...I was reaching out to different social agencies to help me with that. And yet, the district wasn't really keen on saying, hey, you know, this guy's going to bat for us and trying and that was that was very frustrating.

The speed of the words increased during this portion of the interview. The timbre of Roberto's voice reflected deep frustration at the lack of acknowledgement from the district with the things that were most important to him on a personal level. Like the other quotes in this section, Roberto's ability to verify his core identity was consistently interrupted, causing severe psychological pain.

Ultimately, Roberto was given a mentor, but he found himself being guided out of the principalship instead of getting the help and direction he thought he was finally receiving. He remembered:

The assistant superintendent at that time told me, you know, you're not very strong in curriculum, here's, here's your strengths. This is what you do well, you need to grow in curriculum, and why don't you step down from the principal role and go somewhere else? And hone your skills. And then you'll come back and be a principal in the Desert River School District again, and I should have said, No, you know, this is my school, you want to put me on a plan of improvement, go for it. Right. And so that was also very frustrating for me because I thought I was doing what the district wanted me to do yet. They felt that that it wasn't you know, if you go through the evidence, my schools were clean, you know, discipline was there.

He lamented that, “they threw me in without knowing what the district expected from me and not having the mentorship for a long time, and okay, here you go, figure it out, but I never had visits from folks. You know, maybe once or twice they could have come and tell me, you need to focus on this, you need to do this, but that never happened...but I trusted the leadership...”. He concluded the string of thought by noting that:

No one ever told me, hey, you know, you got to delegate to other folks, you need to focus on the big picture. I thought if I took care of the little things [clean classrooms, student retention], the big things would take care of themselves. But no one ever said, hey, here's a primer on [running a school], no, it was just, hey, here it is, figure it out.

Roberto seemed crestfallen at his perceived failure and being pushed out of his first principalship. He is thriving in his new role as principal of a small school in a different district

but harbors a lot of anger and resentment in how he perceived his treatment at Vantage High School.

Roberto Martin was the only participant who had experienced the loss of his first principalship before getting another opportunity elsewhere, and in this small data set, was an outlier. However, in his new job as principal of a small rural school in a different district, Roberto seemed to be experiencing the support and direction he craved at this previous school. These themes will be closely discussed in chapter six under in relation to sociological identity theory.

Personal Life and Work/Life Balance. Personal life and work/life balance were another theme that presented itself throughout the interviews. Each participant talked about it in terms of the balance between their work as a principal and their personal life. Although each participant has their own circumstances in their personal life, each discussed frustration with issues surrounding this topic. For example, Marcia Manning noted the effect of her role as principal and its impact on her personal life:

I think there has to be an acknowledgement that the hardest part of being a principal is surviving as a person, because you can be berated, you can be low, you can be hated, parents, kids, adults you don't even have contact with feel like they have a say over what's happening and questioning every decision you make...it gets very difficult and really messes with you if you're not careful.

Megan Hunter expanded the conversation to include trying to have balance as a new principal having just recently married. She recalled a situation in which her new husband and she had a discussion that highlighted the difficulties of principals in balancing their personal lives with their work lives. She said:

This education thing is just weird. My husband's not in education, he's in business. He's like shocked when I say certain things that goes on, like negotiations (for salary, comp time, etc). It's like, we don't have negotiations like that or other things that are normal outside of education, like lunch breaks [laughs]. And you do things like, just because it's for the kids, like you do it for the kids, and you're here for 16-18 hours a day...and he [her husband] says, you're not getting paid overtime, right? You just do it. My husband is like, just take a day off with me, and I'm like, okay, well this day in two weeks, I only have one meeting scheduled and maybe I can move it, then the day before something pops up for him and he asks if we can change it and I'm like, nope, this is it, and he doesn't really understand [audible sigh].

Ms. Hunter's struggles with work/life balance were similarly noted by Kimberly Bryan, a new mom and recently married as well. She noted her own struggle with perceptions of work/life balance when she commented:

I feel very, very, very strongly as, as a leader, as an educator, that my family comes first. And I told my boss this morning, I said, you're probably sick of hearing me say that. And she's like, Oh, I'm really proud of you for that. That's an example I set for my staff. That's, you know, and I'm walking into a school with an administrative team that works 12 hours a day, and I don't want them to, because I think that's how we burn out. And I don't ever want to lose sight of the fact that my son and my husband are the most important things in my life. And my school is right behind that. But not everyone agrees with that. And sometimes, like I get emotional talking about it, because I feel very passionately about it. I think you can be a phenomenal principal, and still be a phenomenal parent and spouse and all of those things. And so that's something that I've

really preached I've really, but again, sometimes there are people that don't agree I've had bosses that don't agree and that's hard because, you know, I will put in the work, I will work at home, I will do all the things but if my son has swim lessons and I need to take him to swim lessons, I'm going to do that, I need to be with him. I'm going to be with him.

Ms. Bryan clearly values clearly defined lines between her personal life and her work life. As she acknowledged, not all district level leaders are understanding of this attitude, and she notes a past leader who was not supportive. Although issues of work/life balance are not unique to education, the overall impact of these norms are meaningful and impactful to the persons leading and their ability to perform at a high level.

These conversations, such as the ones above from Megan Hunter and Kimberly Bryan, illustrate the ongoing discussion of work/life balance among principals. One participant, Marcia Manning, even openly laughed at the notion of work/life balance before her contribution above.

School Leadership During the COVID-19 Pandemic. Three participants spoke extensively about the leadership difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically the effect of mask mandates on the public and mask and vaccine mandates on the staff. The two other participants noted aspects of the pandemic indirectly, using phrases such as “in these difficult times” or “now-a-days with everything going on”. As these phrases were used more in passing, those quotes are not included here. Although not the focus of the study, the following stories illustrate how challenging the disruptive and pervasive nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has been on top of the previously reported difficulties of school leadership today.

For example, Kimberly Bryan, who was hired as a principal officially a few days before everything shut down in 2020 due to COVID-19 noted this challenge:

I really started to realize how challenging this [the COVID-19 pandemic] was going to be that it wasn't going to be this easy transition where we just took what they did before and I continued that and then learned about it. And so just thinking about, like, mask wearing and you know, people being upset with me immediately and we didn't know each other, we had no relationship at all in so that was, it was really that summer where I already started to see this is going to be really tough and I'm not the assistant principal anymore, I have to lead.

Later in the interview she continued:

I think COVID is really challenging. I have a very split community, a very split school staff. And I really felt like we all are, we are all doing the best that we can. And some people felt like that wasn't the right choice, and you're just like, everyone's doing the best they can. And I really tried to keep that mentality. I think that's one of the times, multiple times throughout the last two years, where it's been contentious with parents or teachers, because they don't agree. And again, it's maybe not my personal philosophy [of dealing with COVID-19], but my personal philosophy [of leadership] through this whole thing has been we're all doing the best that we can. We're learning and growing with each passing day.

The quote, “we’re all doing the best we can” illustrates much of the frustration among the participants when it came to discussions around COVID-19. Although relevant to general issues of running a school, the added element of hostile actors both within the school (staff and students) and those outside the school (with community members and activists) has made COVID-19 issues top of mind to these educators. No more top of mind that from Megan Hunter below.

This concern about the controversy of the impact of COVID-19 is also present in a story remembered by Megan Hunter. While she was an assistant principal in the previous semester, she remembered a particularly difficult situation with community members and COVID-19 mitigation efforts at her school. She recalled:

We had an incident, I'm sure you heard, with parents and community members coming in and demanding that we stop requiring masks. It was pretty scary, [the previous principal] called the police, and like the people were yelling and screaming about their rights being violated and a bunch of stuff like that. We tried to talk them into leaving, or at least address their concerns, like, less publicly, but they were determined I guess to make a scene. The police finally had to escort them off campus...it was really scary, and like, really rattled us. I'll be glad when this is all over.

While the above incident was not typical, it was important in Ms. Hunter's young administrative career.

Barbara Marlowe's challenges were more longstanding. Her stories focused on the disruptions to staffing due to the vaccine mandates that had become required the previous semester. She noted that:

This whole thing with COVID. You know, we were put into this place where we had to discipline if they didn't get tested. I just feel um, you know, I have my personal beliefs about the science and as a science teacher and what is right and yes, but if a person decides, otherwise, I don't, even have a choice if it's board policy. I don't necessarily think that that's the way to get to yes. I mean, we had, I didn't have many, but I had to have some heart-to-heart conversations, and I had to help them find answers. And they eventually complied. And I didn't have to write any one up. But we lost some good

teachers over it. And which put us in some difficult times, because it's already difficult. There's already a staff shortage. And yet, we're gonna go down the road where we're going to discipline, right, because of a vaccine.

As reported in these data, the COVID-19 pandemic has been and continues to be disruptive to the myriad operations and curricular leadership of public schools. The impact on public education and the leadership of schools is ongoing and will be felt for years to come.

My Narrative. My frustrations changed over the course of my principalship, but certainly at the beginning I saw issues that stemmed from my district leadership teams' leadership experience being completely within an elementary school setting. I found myself having to advocate for things at the high school level they had no personal professional experience with, for example, filling positions of teachers in high demand content areas. Although we had "hard to fill" stipends to help, they were not available consistently and led to losing some people who wanted to work with us but were not afforded that incentive. My systemic issues with district leadership came after my novice principal period, so I will table the rest for now, but I do deal with them in the next chapter.

As I mentioned previously, the principalship took a huge toll on my personal life and relationships. Work-life balance was preached in district leadership meetings, but the requirements and expectations for the job were stifling. I was required to attend most afterschool events including some weekend ones. I was always torn, as I enjoyed supporting the students, but found little time for anything else in my life. As time went on, I was able to have my own children attend many of the events with me, but I was not taking care of my physical and mental health. My weight fluctuated constantly as I did not have a set routine and time to workout or eat healthily.

Finally, I was not a principal during the COVID-19 pandemic, but I have been a teacher during this time. Seeing what my own principal and other administrators have had to deal with has been alarming. Honestly, I do not know how I would have handled leading during this difficult time. The stories relayed above are similar to stories I have heard in the media and from former fellow administrators who are still serving as principal.

Fusion of Horizons for Theme Four: Roadblocks to Leadership. This section for me best illustrates the importance of understanding identity and how our deeply personal beliefs need to be reinforced through our roles we enact, or there is going to be a lot of difficulties. The discordant nature of the events described in this section are difficult in the best of circumstances and can become career changing in the situation currently in the United States.

As I will discuss in the final chapter, novice principals would do much better if they had leadership who worked with them in ways that mentored them as individuals, not as part of a larger socialization program. While I acknowledge that not everyone who becomes a principal is a good fit for the job, however, every effort must be made to help novice principals experience verification of their core meanings and motivations to give them the best chance at becoming the best principal and leader they can be.

General Description and Summary

While there is agreement among novice principals regarding their transitions from teacher to principal, their individual motives and experiences vary depending on their own identity (re)creation processes, which create different phenomenological experiences. Novice principals understand that preparation for their own leadership is best accomplished in real situations and feel that more “on the ground” practical aspects of their preparation programs would have been more helpful to their leadership preparedness. They also believe that the transition into

administration constitutes a shift in priorities and focus, mainly a shift from mostly student focused to now include the school staff and community. Novice principals had various levels of confidence in themselves as they transitioned into the role of principal, and all participants acknowledged the difficulties associated with managing the entire school operation. Novice principals in this study believe that the values they embodied as a teacher are present in their leadership, specifically an emphasis on helping their teachers and staff feel supported as well as keeping student needs at the center of their work. Novice principals in this study all discussed roadblocks to their ability to lead in ways they felt important and shared various frustrations with district leadership and vision, work/life balance, and leading through the COVID-19 pandemic.

In summary, novice principals shared many similar experiences of leading their schools but were not monolithic. They have varying personal histories, values, identities, and roles that have shaped their phenomenological gaze of these events and journeys as a novice principal. Many of these are now affected under the weight of the short-term and long-term effects of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter V: Research Question Two Findings

This chapter continues the reporting of data, specially related to the second research question and is designed to explore the sense-making and meaning-making novice principals employ as they navigate the transition from the role of a teacher to the principalship, specifically, how novice principals engage with their leadership within the tension points between social justice leadership and neoliberal accountability regimes. The intent is to answer the second research question:

Research Question Two

- How do novice public-school principals navigate maintaining their core beliefs and values under the constraints of the role of principal, especially within the tensions between social justice leadership and neoliberal accountability regimes?

This chapter is designed to report findings pertaining to the second research question. As previously mentioned in the introduction to chapter four, some themes are present in both research questions. However, specific themes covering core values and leadership, social justice leadership, and accountability regimes flesh out the meaning units identified from interview data and pertained to the second research question and is reported here for clarity of the distinct research questions. Both the prevalence of themes in the data and instances of the absence of data will be reported.

Two theme categories, (a) difficulties of school measures on school leadership and (b) maintaining core beliefs in leading their school, were identified through Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) analysis of the interview data. Additional analysis of the fusion of horizons also was utilized.

One theme, social justice leadership, was notably absent from the interviews, a few notes are included here to give context, but will be analyzed in the discussion in chapter six.

Additionally, and of note, the word equity was never used by any of the participants and will be discussed as well in chapter six.

Theme Five: Difficulties of School Accountability Measures on School Leadership

Three of the five participants spoke of difficulties with accountability measures, specifically standardized testing/school grades/teacher evaluations. Accountability measures act as a large heading for many related sub-themes and are less tight in their scope than those in the previous chapter, which is one reason they are included separately here.

Roberto Martin, as it was previously stated in chapter four, was forced out of the principalship after only a year and a half. He noted that when starting out as an administrator, he lacked the knowledge of what to focus on, specifically he focused on the statement below on school accountability measures. He said:

You don't realize how critical dual enrollment and CTE/JTED courses are to the A through F calculation (school grade). You know that test scores and graduation percentage count, but so many other things are in there that can be the difference between a D and a C, which would have helped me, I think with the folks at the district.

Roberto also noted that, as principal, he would reach out to students who struggled with regular attendance to make a personal plea for them to attend on test days in order to make the attendance requirements for state testing. He said, "parents and students didn't know what to think about their principal coming over to their house. Folks were kind though and we did get kids there for the tests, definitely better than ever before". These extraordinary measures to get students to the test have become even more pronounced with resumption of state accountability

testing during COVID-19. For example, Megan Hunter spoke about the state testing requirements and giving tests during the COVID-19 pandemic. She stated that, “I mean I get it [needing to test for state assessments], but we’re just surviving here, and it was hard to like motivate the students to take it seriously...so yeah, we’re a little worried about impacts on school letter grades when everything resumes”. There was a general lack of understanding of how the state was going to resume the testing, or, most importantly, how they would use they data. With the possible punitive nature of school grades, most participants spoke of it warily.

Barbara Marlowe was the only participant speak to accountability measures/testing in general with a critique of the system rather than other participants above who spoke about specific testing issues locally. Barbara noted that, “I am really conflicted about early childhood education and the way it’s gone [with the new standards]. Personally, I do not value that kids in kindergarten are sitting in rows and trying to make sure they can write an essay practically by the end of kindergarten”. She further stated that she had been reading up on how to better re-engage the disengaged child in today’s accountability heavy learning experience. She stated that she learned that:

...third grade burnout is real thing now. After reading all of that, I was going in, I was talking with the kindergarten teachers and the district is coming in, they’re removing all the kitchens and all the stuff out of Kinder classrooms, and like, what the hell?, that’s part of what exploratory learning is and that’s how we teach our social emotional skills. [The new expectations] is not how we can do that, but that’s what is expected. And that goes against my whole philosophy for kindergarten, but we have to do it, [we have to] follow the direction of the board and the state. It’s been really hard, because I’m conflicted about that.

Barbara contextualized the issues that she could see stretched across her educational career, which started before the implementation of No Child Left Behind in 2001. Additionally, she found one of the problems in educational leadership-new studies shaping theory, but rarely changing leadership of districts or schools. She continued this line of thinking when she spoke of problems she sees with teacher evaluations. She said:

Evaluations are the same, and I'm conflicted about that as well. I don't feel like money should be attached to evaluation. That goes against what I want, you know, for a risk-free environment, one where teachers feel empowered to take risks. But when you are attaching money to evaluations, how does that become risk free? So, I find my way to yes, find a way to get the money to 99% of my teachers.

In her desire to create an environment that teachers wanted to try new things, she saw one of the detrimental aspects of neoliberal merit pay, risk aversion.

My Narrative. Having the school grade of a "C", which was not acceptable by my district leadership or the community at large, was my dominating framework for my leadership as a novice principal. I was not equipped with the tools necessary to lead us to a higher score until my third year, as a school in danger of failing. The previously mentioned AZiLDR program gave me practical tools to begin that process, but it contained techniques, understandings, and practices that were unknown to me previously. As one example, I did not realize how pervasive and sinister a deficit mindset is to improving student outcomes, including test scores. Working with myself and my teachers to identify it, deal with it, and transcend it was huge. It was one of the reasons we saw increases across the student body, rather than only with our White students, as had previously been seen in the test data from previous attempts at increasing test scores. Although not perfect, it was a turning point for our school.

The amount of time and money spent in the pursuit of high test scores was alarming. New textbook adoptions in math and English drained most of my budget. To get further support for our disadvantaged students, I was forced to seek grants from outside organizations to help my students for support outside the school day. The 21st Century grant, which provided monies for targeted after school academic and social supports, was largely instrumental in providing better support, but that vital help was only available with outside help due to our tight budget constraints.

Fusion of Horizons for Theme Five: Difficulties of School Accountability Measures on School Leadership. Not surprisingly, test scores and general talk of accountability appeared throughout the interviews. Much of the talk centered around the recent disruption of regular high-stakes accountability tests with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Questions surrounding when/how/and even if testing would return were discussed.

Accountability measures were reported differently by the three participants (Megan, Kimberly, and Marcia) who were trained as professional teachers after the passage and implementation of No Child Left Behind in 2001. Although only one quote appeared here from those participants, “testing” and “accountability” permeated the interviews. These ubiquitous terms are a part of their everyday professional lives and were not subject to the critique we see above with Roberto Martin and Barbara Marlowe, both of whom were educational professionals before 2001. A larger discussion of these findings will be included in the discussion in chapter six.

Theme Six: Maintaining Core Beliefs in Leading Their School

All five participants spoke of maintaining their core beliefs, or values, throughout several leadership situations. Further, they all spoke of the importance of maintaining their core beliefs

as their driving force of leadership rather than just having the beliefs, they put them into action. Some participants spoke of the difficulties that arise while maintaining their core beliefs and one spoke of her driving values that inform her leadership in everything she does.

Megan Hunter said that she has been helping people since she was young. She noted that her parents, whom she spoke of with fondness throughout the interview, were heavily involved in their faith community and were always helping people at her church while she was growing up in the Midwest. She credits her parents with instilling that desire in her and emphasized that:

I love helping, like servant leadership, like getting in there getting dirty, literally down on the ground and helping. Before it was with the students, especially my STUCO kids [student council], now, it's like with my staff and I think they respect that a lot, and then hopefully they'll be a little bit happier, and happy teachers make a good school.

Similarly, Barbara Marlowe noted that her driving values of helping people were honed while she was an instructional coach and continues through today. She stated that, "I really loved working with teachers to help them experience new things and new ways of thinking that they can bring back to their [class] rooms. I really enjoyed that component". She continued a little later, "I really want to help people get excited about the job and try to break down barriers so that they can do the job and get excited and not be afraid to take risks, and fail forward".

Barbara often spoke of situations that she could help her teachers grow. This story is another illustration of her values of importance of growth through experience.

Roberto Martin spoke of the difficulty of maintaining his values when he became a principal. He noted that, "I was always perceived as a teacher, as a person who was open, available, and supportive with a good heart. The transition from that mode to administration [changed that perception] and was hard to work through". He spoke about difficulties dealing

with personnel issues and having people lash out who were being disciplined or fired. He ended that story simply with, “I didn’t know how to deal with all that, it’s hard when people say those things to you”.

Conversely, Kimberly Bryan spoke emphatically about her core beliefs driving her path and decisions as a school leader. I previously reported that she determined early in her career that being a principal was her career goal. She continued during that discussion to state that, “my values have driven me throughout my life. They come from my family, we’re all leaders. Sometimes things don’t really line up, but I do my best to stay true to my values and so far, so good.” While I believe her, she gave me no reason to believe otherwise, I often have wondered since the interview what she really feels. As I previously mentioned, her interview was the least conversational of all the participants, I feel like I never was able to really talk with her, but I understand that seeing her in that way is probably how many people perceive her as she leads her staff and school community.

My Narrative. My own values, core values of love, empathy, and support, were validated in various way in working with my students and teachers. However, the difficulties I faced were mainly when I was unable to see them in the work I was asked to perform (e.g. marketing strategies for student recruitment, curriculum product implementation in every classroom, transgender student bathroom policy from district). I really struggled to reconcile my own core identity with the neoliberal role I was often asked to perform.

Fusion of Horizons for Theme Six: Maintaining Core Beliefs in Leading Their School. Each participant spoke of values that were embedded in helping others come to where they were, to know that they know, for various outcomes of success. These values firmly situate themselves in compliance with established systems of school success. Values that spoke of

social justice, or advocating for systemic change, were notably absent and are discussed in the next section.

Social Justice Leadership Versus All Student Success

None of the participants spoke about social justice, or social justice values directly. Equity, as discussed in chapter two, was never mentioned. Instead, many participants utilized hegemonic neoliberal colorblind terms and phrases to describe their driving values. For example, all participants spoke to improving learning experiences for all students without acknowledging themes within social justice leadership or at least differentiating between students generally. Although certain student populations were singled out for help, for example in the stories below from Roberto Martin and Marcia Manning, there was not a larger discussion of systemic issues tied to those students' lack of "achievement". I will discuss this notable absence of these data in chapter six. Some of the quotes below are already referenced in chapter four but are included here to flesh out the theme of student learning. For example, Roberto Martin stated that he has a:

...heart for students who are not on track to graduate...I really advocated for those students, both with the current programs and the credit recovery option I brought in. Working with students and getting them what they need has always been at the heart of what I do, now that I was principal, I did what I could.

Roberto recalled many stories of what was, from his perspective, going above and beyond for students. Although he did not directly address definite themes of social justice leadership and values, his work speaks to his desire to work with students for their success, albeit in general terms.

Marcia Manning, who works with students who have been removed from their regular school due to behavior issues focused on the difficult nature of her students:

My kids don't want to be here, right? They don't give two shits about us or anybody else when they arrive, for the most part. You get past all that. They're great kids. Oh, yeah. And [the students] want you to want them to be here. But it takes a minute to get that said, we're on the firing line.

Kimberly Bryan noted the experience of molding students into the type of student they need to be for success. She noted:

Watching students come in as freshmen, and they're immature, and they're all these crazy things. And then learning about them and watching them reach their goals. And sometimes it's not what they were expecting, but they did something great. And they're setting themselves up. And I think, that's K-12. Just watching students find their way and supporting them and the mistakes that they make and supporting their growth.

Kimberly also spoke of ways in which she worked on changing systems, albeit change within the existing structure rather than outside, for student success. She said:

I love to get creative, and to think about systems, and how systems can support teachers and systems that support students. And so just constantly, that improvement of always striving to be a little bit better. And being my best self every day so that I can give my best to the kids because they deserve that.

All participants reported having students at the center of their leadership. However, students were almost universally lumped together as monolithic and not their individual situations, with the unique and notable contributions from Marcia Manning, who lead an elementary alternative school.

Leadership for social justice was absent from the data collected. Although each participant may utilize social justice values in their leadership, those values were not front of mind for these interviews when asked explicitly about their driving values as leaders. A more robust discussion and links to the literature on this topic are contained in chapter six.

Chapter Summary

In an attempt to differentiate between issues of the transition from teacher to principal, this chapter aimed to respond to the second research question: How do novice public-school principals navigate maintaining their core beliefs and values under the constraints of the role of principal, especially within the tensions between social justice leadership and neoliberal accountability regimes? Utilizing an additional round of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, it was apparent that these participants felt many of the issues of neoliberalism and social justice leadership, but talked around the systemic issues, rather than directly addressing them. These data will be further analyzed and discussed in the final chapter. Accountability language and measures were ubiquitous throughout the interviews.

In summary, the larger questions of hegemonic regimes of neoliberal accountability measures and social justice leadership were a veritable black hole in these data. As noted in the discussion in chapter two regarding equity and education, discussions of equity related items were firmly planted in neoliberal assumptions of the supposed monolithic nature of students' opportunity for success. Several participants expressed frustrations that were categorized into the themes above, such as Roberto Martin with credit recovery and Marcia Manning with her alternative students, but the specific language of critique and emancipation embedded in social justice leadership values were not observed.

Chapter VI: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore and interpret the meaning-making and sense-making experiences of novice public school principals as they navigate their transition into the role of the principal. Specifically, the intent was to answer the following research questions:

- How do novice public-school principals make sense of their change in identities and roles from teacher to leader?
- How do novice public-school principals navigate maintaining their core beliefs and values under the constraints of the role of principal, especially within the tensions between social justice leadership and neoliberal accountability regimes?

In answering these questions, one may begin to understand the lived experiences of these novice principals with their varied motives, values, and reactions to the leadership experience and the barriers along the way.

This study focused on the lived experiences of five novice principals navigating leading their schools in the era of COVID-19. The data collection was conducted after the largest wave of COVID-19 infections to date had abated in the spring of 2022 and is firmly set within those realities. Discussion surrounding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on both the novice principals studied as well as my own journey of the dissertation are found in the appropriate sections above and below.

This study was informed by theoretical frameworks based on hermeneutical phenomenology, sociological identity theory, neoliberalism, and social justice leadership. The initial methodological approach consisted of hermeneutic phenomenological data gathering techniques through interviews as conversation, a hermeneutic circle that included my own interpretations of the sense-making and meaning-making I observed during the interviews.

These observations were recorded in audio journals a few minutes after each interview. These efforts were followed by an initial round of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which elicited four main themes and sub-themes that were presented in chapters four and five. The remainder of this chapter consists of analysis and discussion of these themes through the various frameworks of understanding listed above. These findings, analyses, and discussions to better understand these phenomena end with three areas of recommendations for novice principals, principalship preparation, and district level support for socialization.

Findings Summary for Research Question One

Themes emerged in four categories within the bounds of question one: (a) preparation, (b) transition to administration, (c) personal values influencing leadership styles and roles, and (d) roadblocks to effective leadership. The following is a brief review of the findings.

Data were derived from interviews conducted with five novice public-school principals. The data were analyzed through IPA resulting in four main thematic categories. These themes focused on the lived experiences of the participants' transitions into the principalship and were reported across the five participants within each identified theme. Additionally, use of the hermeneutic circle in order to understand each participants' meaningful experience towards a fusion of horizons was undertaken (Suddick et al., 2020).

For the first theme, each participant described various levels of preparation, both informal and formal, as important to their development as school leaders. Four of the participants told stories of feeling inadequate and never intending to be an administrator, while the remaining participant described their desire and belief in their ability to take on the role of principal from early in their teaching career.

Some of the participants reflected on their preparation master's degree programs. All the participants who commented on their preparation programs found it lacking in areas that directly impacted them as novice principals. These findings are further reflected in the recommendations for practice below. Additionally, four of the five participants had various levels of trepidation taking on and pursuing the role of principal. One participant showed confidence throughout the stories she told with her desire and ability to lead as a principal. Their individual stories illustrated their own background and identity work that informed this topic.

The second theme centered around the transition experience of becoming a principal. All the participants focused on the transition to the role of a full building principal. Four of the five participants had previous administrative experience as an assistant principal, one participant being the exception. Each of the four focused on different aspects of the differences between being an assistant principal and the full principal. The transition to the principalship was difficult for most of the participants. Their own personal confidence struggles came through in each participant's answers and their exasperations.

The third theme focused on the values and motivations the participants reported that influenced their leadership styles and practices. All the participants noted one of their driving values/motivations was keeping the students at the center of their leadership and at the center of personnel decisions. Improving inputs and outcomes for students and teachers was a focus of all participants. Further, the recruitment and retention of teachers was an important sub-theme to enact the values and motivation of working for student success. Specifically, four participants pushed forward the discussion of the importance and impact of staff on students with a discussion of recruitment and retention of quality staff. Many motivations and values were discussed by the participants. However, the students, and their success, were paramount in this

theme. Notably, throughout the discussion, students were spoken about as a monolithic group with systems in place to help all students. At no time during the interviews were students discussed in an individualized or contextual way outside of the unique situation of the alternative school overseen by Marcia Manning.

The final theme highlighted participant perceptions of stories that were categorized into “roadblocks to effective leadership”. Two sub-themes, personal life and work/life balance, and the COVID-19 pandemic were included in this theme category. During these discussions on the roadblocks of leadership, the participants were observed exhibiting changes in their demeanor and body language, specifically, crossing arms, a furrowed brow, raised voices, and other similar behaviors. One participant in particular, Roberto Martin, told several stories of frustration and hopelessness as he attempted to navigate difficult situations and conflicting administrative priorities.

Personal life and work/life balance were another theme that presented itself throughout the interviews. Each participant talked about it in terms of the balance being between work as a principal and their personal life. Although each participant has their own circumstances in their personal life, each discussed situations and frustrations with issues surrounding this topic.

Finally, three participants spoke about the leadership difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically the effect of mask mandates on the public and vaccine mandates on the staff. Although it did not come up directly, the two other participants noted aspects of the pandemic and were discussed.

In summary, novice principals shared many similar experiences of leading their schools but were not monolithic. They have varying personal histories, values, identities, and roles that have shaped their phenomenological gaze of these events and journeys as a novice principal.

Findings Summary for Research Question Two

Themes emerged in two categories within the framework of question two: (a) school accountability and (b) general difficulties leading in today's environment. A third theme, social justice leadership, was identified from the absence of the theme in the data. The importance and discussion of the absence of this theme will be analyzed later in this chapter. The following is a brief review of the findings.

Three of the five participants spoke of difficulties with accountability measures, specifically standardized testing/school grades/teacher evaluations. Accountability measures act as a large heading for many related sub-themes and are less tight in their scope than those in the previous chapters, which is one reason they were included separately. These accountability measures were reported differently by the three participants who have been professional teachers after No Child Left Behind in 2001. Accountability measures, such as school grades and high-stakes testing, were a part of their everyday role as principal and were not subject to the critique of the two of the educators, both of whom received their education degrees and started their education career before 2001.

All participants spoke of maintaining and working to maintain their core beliefs, or values, considering several leadership situations. All participants spoke of the importance of maintaining their core beliefs as their driving force of leadership. Some spoke of the difficulties that would arise while maintaining their core beliefs with the exception of one participant who spoke of her driving values that informed her leadership in every facet of her job that, while difficulties may come, her values remain intact.

In summary, the larger questions of hegemonic regimes of neoliberal accountability measures and social justice leadership were absent in these data. Several participants expressed

frustrations that were categorized into the themes above, but the specific language of critique and emancipation were not observed.

Connections and Contributions to the Literature

The literature review contains many themes, frameworks for understanding, ontologies, and epistemologies that were present within these data and are linked below. Importantly, some themes were notably absent and are also discussed below. I explore the process of data gathering in general utilizing the concept of a hermeneutic circle and weave in discussions around my experience with the method. I then discuss how these data reinforce some of the assertions of the literature around leading in today's neoliberal accountability environment, specifically how participants enacted more technocratic aspects of leadership as a buffer to the additional pervasive layer of the COVID-19 pandemic. I then discuss the impact of identity verification and validation (Burke & Stets, 2009) on the participants of this study and their experiences that engage these impacts of sociological identity theory. This section ends with a discussion of what was not said, what was not told, regarding social justice leadership values.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Hermeneutic Circles

Phenomenology has a wide range of application in human sciences research. The approach of this study is decidedly less esoteric than van Manen (2016a) and more pragmatic utilizing the analytical processes of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, et.al., 2009). Additionally, data were analyzed for a fusion of horizons as detailed by Suddick et al. (2020). Data gathering efforts were derived mainly from interviews with each participant. However, hermeneutic phenomenological processes also embed the researchers' experience with the studied phenomenon, as well as their ongoing sense-making of the research process. This adds additional data for analysis and discussion that follows below.

Hermeneutic phenomenological methodology emphasizes the conversational give and take of interactions in interviews as integral to eliciting data that are rich in meaning-making and sense-making stories that are vital to illuminating and uncovering lived experience. As described in chapter three, while the researcher is usually “bracketed” out of the data gathering and analysis in more traditional qualitative methods, hermeneutic phenomenological method deliberately includes the researcher at every stage, weaving in and out. This intentional inclusion allows the reader to better understand the person behind the research, what they decided to focus on, how they interpreted data, their analyses, recommendations, and conclusions to create a fusion of horizons. In turn, this more transparent look into the human behind the study gives the reader more context by which to understand and incorporate or not incorporate recommendations and conclusions. This deliberate dialectic exercise is pervasive at every step of the research process. This process is evident in the conversational nature of the interviews, as well as analysis and commentary, which assists in the linking of themes to existing literature, as well as illuminating what is absent from these data. These facets of the research process are interwoven with explanation and interpretations guiding and driving the research and researcher.

Interviews as a Hermeneutic Circle. Interviews were conducted under less than ideal circumstances. COVID-19 realities and protocols had made in-person activities impossible, or at least discouraged, depending on sometimes conflicting district, city, state, and federal recommendations and requirements. I found the conversational aspect of the interviews over Zoom to be more difficult than the in-person interviews allowed. I also found that participants, regardless of platform, were reserved in their initial answers at the beginning of the interview. However, most opened up and gave more rich answers to the questions being asked after I spent

considerable time in conversation as a fellow insider, verifying my bona fides as a former principal. I will speak more to this process in the discussion of identity verification below.

One participant, Kimberly Bryan, was the exception. Her interview was the shortest (twenty-seven minutes long) and her answers felt rehearsed, or at least they were stories she has told many times. This did not diminish her contribution to the overall study, rather, it was an interesting observation of the importance of our own stories to our legitimization of role performance and is explored generally below in the discussion of sociological identity theory. For the most part, participants seemed to open up and answer questions that were more personal and that required more vulnerability, but only after they felt comfortable enough with me. Although not unique to my study, these observations will inevitably help me to be a more effective interviewer in the future.

At the end of the interview, each participant was asked to complete a short additional interview or journal prompt to elicit further sense-making and meaning-making experiences. These additional data gathering opportunities were communicated before the interview in my initial recruitment email and were reminded about after the interview. Unfortunately, none of the participants, all of which opted for the emailed journal prompt with one question, returned their answers. Even after two additional email and phone messages for each participant, none were returned. Although the lack of engagement with the follow-up question could be for myriad reasons, the ongoing difficulties with the COVID-19 pandemic, upcoming state assessments, and the pending end of the school year were likely culprits.

Hermeneutic phenomenology also requires the researchers to engage with the participants' sense-making and meaning-making processes and record their thoughts before and after the interviews as additional data points designed to triangulate these interview data. I

recorded audio journals of my impressions within a few minutes of each interview, each journal entry only lasting a few minutes. Some of those entries appear above and below, while most served as a guide while writing these analyses and are present throughout.

Leading in Today's Public-School Environment

The participants in this study exemplified the difficulties of leading public schools today. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has offered its own challenges to leading schools and will undoubtedly continue to do so in the future, the pressure on principals to achieve has never been higher (Crow et al., 2017). This comes as, according to a recent Gallup poll, public confidence continues to erode in public institutions, including public schools (Brenen, 2021). None of the participants in this study reported positive community involvement in their leadership stories. This, of course, does not mean that these principals do not have positive community interactions or involvement, rather, that negative aspects of community involvement dominated their sense-making and meaning-making at the time of their interviews. The story that Megan Hunter told of protesting parents and community members occupying the front office to protest COVID-19 restrictions was especially poignant and illustrative of the devolving environment many schools find themselves today.

Additionally, the technocratic nature of leadership today seemed to serve as a buffer to these social trends, a way to disengage. Most participants told of their focuses on student learning and achievement, with an eye towards compliance of accountability measures, that seemed to address and assuage parents and community members already determined that schools were failing our kids. In one journal entry after the interview with Robert Martin I noted, "...it seems that the motivations for helping students are out of fear...fear of the district [leadership], fear of parents, and a general fear of failure". Later, after my interview with Barbara Marlowe, I

also stated that, “there just seems to be a lot of fear, I can certainly understand that having gone through that myself...where are the mentors? Where are the positive influences? We’re drowning [fellow principals]”. However, and somewhat paradoxically, fear was also embedded in the same conversations that revolved around hope, hope for the future post-COVID, but more about hope that was inherent in the students that these principals worked with every day. Every interview ended with a story or two from the participant that gave a message of hope, a hope that seemed to serve to inform me as much as to reassure themselves. That reassurance aspect of their meaning-making and sense-making served to validate their role identity as a novice principal navigating today’s complex schools and is the subject of the following section.

Identity (re)creation and Sociological Identity Theory

Within Sociological Identity Theory (Burke & Stets, 2009), identity verification and validation are constantly being tested against within a person’s interactions with the world around them. Successful verification occurs when that individual’s behaviors either confirm (verify) expected and predicted patterns derived from the social structures (both formal and informal) that surround the individual. These verifications serve to validate behaviors and invalidate others. Importantly, the opposite is also true. That is, unsuccessful verification causes discordance and stress that can greatly impact the individual’s job satisfaction and performance. Much of my own research journals consisted of my thoughts about identity and the identity (re)creation process that I observed in the interviews and will be woven through the discussion below.

All participants exhibited multiple instances of validation and invalidation of their role identity as a novice principal. While previously reported in chapters four and five, several stories are illustrative. For example, Roberto Martin struggled with his role verification and

validation which culminated in his being asked to step down as principal. When he recalled various difficult encounters with district officials he stated repeatedly about a “disconnect” and feeling “confusion” at what exactly the district vision was. This discordance continued for him throughout most of the year and a half he spent as principal. Importantly for Mr. Martin, these story elements of verification and validation fundamentally changed when he spoke of his new role as a building principal at a different school in a different district. Stories in this category, for the most part, consisted of language consistent with successful verification. He used phrases like, “I’m really happy here”, and “I get to do what I feel is best to help the students”. These data point towards successful identity verification, and according to Sociological Identity Theory, success in the role of principal.

Similarly, Barbara Marlowe, from the same era of educational practice pre-No Child Left Behind as Roberto Martin, expressed struggles with what she knew about education than what the district was doing with the kindergarten classrooms where the school was forced to remove experiential learning and experiences from the curriculum to accommodate new “higher” standards. Her response to that, and other struggles she reported, was to go ahead and do what she knew was best and hope it did not come to the attention of the district. In her own words, she would “ask for forgiveness rather than ask for permission”. Barbara enacted an important coping mechanism when role identity is not being validated or verified, subterfuge.

Megan Hunter’s interview was full of instances of identity verification and validation. Having been at one school for her entire nine-year career in public education, Megan reported experiencing high levels of identity verification and validation. Her work and access to district leadership personnel were referred to frequently when she told stories about her transition into the principalship. She reported knowing what was expected, how she was supported, and the

work she was doing to continue to be supported. Megan is an inexperienced principal, but she is experiencing high levels of identity verification. As such, according to Sociological Identity Theory, she is poised to continue to see high levels of job satisfaction and stability.

The process of identity verification and validation was central to my own leadership experience as a building principal for six years. Although I did not have the language or knowledge of Sociological Identity Theory during my tenure, the consequences of validation and, more accurately, failure to validate my identity was devastating to my personal life and core identity and served as one of the main reasons I decided to move on to other opportunities. I know that I am not alone in these experiences (Snodgrass-Rangel, 2018).

As noted in the literature review, successful identity verification is important for the development of and retention of novice principals (Crow et al., 2017; Spillane & Lee, 2014). Each participant who reported successful identity verification instances exhibited overall confidence in their leadership. Obviously, confidence does not necessarily a great leader make, but it can be an indicator of a higher potential for success, however it is defined. Specific recommendations relating to successful identity verification are included in the recommendations section below in the hope of providing concrete systems of thinking and acknowledgement of the importance of identity verification vis-à-vis novice public-school principals.

Exploring The Silence in The Data: Social Justice, Equity, and Leadership

Hermeneutic phenomenological method is about exploring lived experience through the sense-making and meaning-making processes discussed above (Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 2016b). What is said and how it is said by the participants is just part of the process. Importantly, hermeneutic phenomenology also emphasizes a focus on what is missing from the conversation, what is not said, and by exploring where the data are silent as a further indicator of

sense-making and meaning-making. For example, one area of almost total silence were the theme of social justice and equity. As demonstrated in chapter five, many participants spoke about improving learning experiences for all students without acknowledging themes within social justice leadership (e.g. leadership that "fosters equitable school practices, processes, and outcomes for learners of different racial, socioeconomic, gender, cultural, disability, and sexual orientations backgrounds" (Jean-Marie et al., 2009, p. 4)). As social justice is both a goal and a process (Bell, 2016), leadership of this type is proactive, rather than reactive. Unfortunately, much work is to be done in this area and the silence within these data speaks volumes.

These observations of the absence, or modification, of a deeper social justice leadership is in line with the scholarly literature on principal leadership in the United States. To illustrate, and as introduced in the literature review, DeMatthews (2018) captured what values and motivations drive most principals as a result of their training and socialization, which speak to the relative silence of these issues in the data. He noted that:

[most principals] believe they must always remain neutral, keep politics out of their school and out of their decisions [while leading] in ways that promote student achievement as measured by state assessments and continuous improvement goals...they are often driven by compliance, competition with other principals in their district, and a desire to ensure each day runs smoothly and without controversy. (p. DeMatthews, 2018, pp. 1-2)

While DeMatthews' quote addresses the discussion above regarding identity verification and validation, I focus here on my observations of the participants, what was said and what was left unsaid regarding social justice and equity leadership. One quote in particular stood out to me during one of the interviews and was the subject of much of my audio research journal recorded

after the meeting. Kimberly Bryan exemplified this “neutral” attitude towards her leadership throughout the interview. In her discussion of supporting students, she spoke of systems that existed to support student’s success. Specifically, Ms. Bryan noted that, “I love to get creative, and to think about systems, and how systems can support teachers’ systems that support students. And so just constantly, that improvement of always striving to be a little bit better”. These “systems” she is referring to are specific curriculum programs that are designed to get students academically prepared to take state assessments, which take large amounts of time during classroom instruction. After the interview, I noted:

...I got excited when I heard [Ms. Bryan] talk about systems, but realized pretty quickly that she was speaking of reinforcing systems, rather than challenging them...Language of critique speaks of systems, these are usually about oppression and are discussed in terms of the need to break them down in order to help lift students who suffer under systems of neoliberalism...[the principal] seems to openly celebrate these same systems as positively monolithic, but these systems [universal curriculum] perpetuate the haves and have nots in education today.

I continued later:

I remember being the exact same way, honestly, I sometimes still cringe at the color-blind language I used as a new principal. When I was introduced to social justice leadership values [through my PhD program], I was blown away by my blind spots, ashamed really...nothing in my preparation [for the principalship] deliberately prepared me to be a social justice leader, it was all about compliance and working within a system I was unaware was at work [“value-free” neoliberal accountability regimes].

Other interviews had additional obvious monolithic color-blindness language, such as “all” students, and “success for everyone”. The obvious silence of issues of social justice leadership were notable.

To be clear, I deliberately did not ask a direct question about social justice leadership, or their specific literature-based values in the interview. This was done, in part, to focus on the main values, front of mind, that each participant claimed in the direct question of what values they bring to their leadership. The values expressed by the novice principals were decidedly neoliberal in nature. However, after conducting my analysis, if I were to do this study over again, I would add a specific question about the participants’ incorporation of social justice values to be able to analyze overt data on the subject in order to be more deliberate in my exploration of the subject of social justice leadership. Regardless, the absence of social justice leadership from the broader discussion of values of each participant is telling and speaks to the pervasive and all-consuming nature of “value-free” neoliberal accountability regimes inherent in much of the leadership today (Crow et al., 2017; DeMatthews, 2018).

Additionally, the use of the word equity was absent from all of the interview transcripts as well. Again, there was talk about want to help students who struggled, but they were lumped together as “all kids” with very little differentiation.

In summary, discussions of social justice leadership and equity were absent from the overall data gathered in interviews. These data were not directly solicited, but rather were absent from the larger discussion of values of leadership with each participant. The findings are consistent with extent literature on leadership of public-schools today.

Limitations

As previously mentioned in the beginning of chapter four, this study was not representative of all groups that make up the demographics of novice public-school principals in southern Arizona as four of the participants were White women and one Latino male. As such, replication of this study with a more representative set of participants would be a logical next step in gathering additional data points for analysis. The COVID-19 pandemic caused notable disruption to the recruitment of participants as well as the interview processes. Two identified participants who agreed to be interviewed were ultimately unable to be interviewed as they were personally impacted by a COVID-19 death close to them personally or professionally.

Additionally, more participants that could be grouped and analyzed as rural or urban schools and districts would be helpful in identifying more specific recommendations based on the rural/urban distinction and could lead to better outcomes for principals leading both types of schools.

Recommendations for Further Research and Conclusion

This hermeneutic phenomenological study highlights several areas for future research on novice principal's transitions into the role of principal. The findings and limitations can serve as additional frameworks for conducting research in this burgeoning area of research and understanding of principal leadership. I have included four specific areas of recommendations based on the findings of this study. The recommendations are given at a high level; however, efforts should be made by each group to understand and overtly include the underlying frameworks for understanding that set the foundation for these recommendations.

For Further Research: Methodology

One of the contributions of this study is to methodology. More specifically, I am utilizing aspects of theory from different research fields (e.g. educational leadership, curriculum studies, higher education, sociological identity theory, critical theory, and phenomenology) in an attempt to uncover complexities of enacting the role of a principal as a novice. While there are overlaps between the research fields, there are important gaps that could be closed with further research. For example, the epistemological sense-making of educational leadership studies and practice help to understand various ways of knowing and the skills, competencies, and best practices of leadership, but fails to address the ontological crisis of identity inherent in any role enactment as detailed in sociological identity theory. Whereas questions of the role of ontology in identity/role formation have entered higher education research in an attempt to deliberately form more complete university professors rather than just focusing on skills and competencies needed to teach (Dall’Alba & Barnacle, 2007; Fellenz, 2016). These larger questions also occupy space in curriculum theory (Pinar, 2012) that has almost exclusively been directed at K-12 teachers, but not educational leaders per se.

The methodology of phenomenology offers a bridge of bringing the ontological gaze firmly enmeshed with epistemological ways of knowing, helping to open a more complete space to answer these research questions.

For Novice Principals

Novice principals must be aware of the identity crisis that impacts most people transitioning into the principalship to know they are not alone in their struggle through the transition. Principal preparation should focus on firming up leadership identity and vision in order for novice principals to verify and validate their identities, including social justice leadership values. However, as socialization impacts these efforts, districts who recruit and

employ these novice principals should have systems of support to address these important issues and is discussed below.

Social justice and equity must be more than just posters on the wall or platitudes in meetings (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Instead, novice principals should be equipped with frameworks of understanding that foster working to eliminate the injustice of inequity rather than simply acknowledging them.

For School Districts

Novice principals must be given clear direction as well as manageable, measurable, yet reasonable expectations from their district leadership in enacting their role as principal of their school. The overwhelming nature of the job (Apple, 1995;2014; Ball, 1990, Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Baltodano, 2012; Carpenter, Scribner, & Lindle; 2016; Pinar, 2012; Ryan & Higginbottom, 2017) denotes the need for extensive professional and personal support. These efforts will give opportunity for novice principals to experience frequent identity verification and validation, which would likely lead to more long-term stability for the students and staff. Additionally, mentoring efforts should focus on the whole person, not just the professional socialization efforts in most districts today. Additionally, engaging district leadership to deeply examine themes of social justice and equity and other emancipatory frameworks to inform professional development across the district, but especially in the socialization efforts of novice principals.

For Further Research: Larger Studies

This study and its findings also make a case for a large-scale qualitative analysis of the effects of identity verification and validation on principal longevity in the job. The extant literature on the subject is lacking and was called for by Crow et al., (2017) in order to better

understand the impact of transition into administration on a person's identities. More research should be conducted and triangulated for more robust recommendations for certificated principal preparation programs as well as mentorship programs within districts and other educational jurisdictions.

Refinement of the interview questions towards assessing understanding of the social justice leadership and equity component would elicit more specific data for more specific analysis. These data would further explore the sense-making and meaning-making of the tensions between neoliberal accountability regimes and social justice leadership, or whether there are even tensions at all, which would be an important addition to the literature on principal leadership.

Conclusion

Leading in today's public schools continues to present challenges both personal and professional to novice principals. More support is needed in providing space for understanding and growth in professional preparation programs as well as mentoring programs within the district or region in order for novice principals to validate and verify their shifting role identity.

Meaning-making and sense-making are constantly being performed by novice principals through their stories and narratives and are instructive into how they see their role in the world, how they navigate that world, and what matters to them. Many enact and perform their role deeply embedded in hegemonic neoliberal accountability regimes which have created and perpetuate systems of "value-free" education. Unfortunately, these regimes are not equipped to inform those novice principals on the ground level how to lead in today's complex and complicated realities. Social justice leadership matters and should be embedded in the values and motivations of today's novice principals. This is not only what is right and best for students,

but for novice principals in the crucible of leadership enactment to gain foundational frameworks for truly equitable leadership. A wider gaze allows for deep understanding of educative processes which has been severely limited under the obliterative nature of neoliberalism on education and on society writ large.

Finally, novice principals are people who come from diverse backgrounds, experiences, and motivations. They deserve the best personal and professional support while they enact their role as they learn to lead their schools and school community, hopefully in outcomes that benefit all of their community and the wider society.

Appendix A

Interview Protocols

Utilizing the framework proposed by Crow et. al (2017), the following questions are derived from their four contexts of understanding. These include:

Personal Context: home and education background, training and path to principalship

Community context: families served by the school and the teachers who work within

Institutional context: the people in positions of power who control process and product, and the structural regularities of schools and districts that govern the actions of school principals.

Historical and social contexts: that encompass and reflect all of the others. They include, the historically accepted patterns of behavior, hierarchies of power and norms of interaction that shape us and that principals, in turn, may perpetuate, resist or mediate.

Interview One Questions

1. Tell me about one time as a new principal when you realized you were not a teacher anymore.
2. Tell me about your journey of becoming a principal.
3. Tell me how your role has changed as an educator as you transitioned into leading your school.
4. Tell me about a time your personal values clashed or conflicted with aspects of leading your school.
5. What motivations drive you as a principal?
6. Are there any different motivations that drove you as a teacher that you no longer need or use?

7. Is there anything else you would like to add to what we have already covered or that you feel would be relevant to this discussion?

Appendix B

Participant Reflexive Journal Prompt or Second Interview

Prompt 1/Question 1:

In the time since we spoke, what other insights or ideas have you had about any of the questions that were asked?

And

Prompt 2/Question 2:

What advice would you give another new principal to navigate being a new principal?

Appendix C

Public-School Principal Interview Research Consent Form

Introduction and Purpose

My name is Kent Thompson. I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Arizona in the Department of Educational Leadership. I would like to invite you to take part in my dissertation research study, which concerns how school leaders make sense of their transition from teacher to principal while leading in today's public school environment.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in my research, I will conduct one interviews with a follow-up interview or reflective journal writing activity at a time and location of your choice. The interview(s) will involve questions that will explore your experiences transitioning into the role of a principal from a teacher. These interviews will last between forty-five minutes and one hour. With your permission, I will audiotape and take notes during the interview. The recording is to accurately record the information you provide and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you choose not to be audiotaped, I will take notes instead. If you agree to being audiotaped but feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview, I can turn off the recorder at your request. Or if you don't wish to continue, you can stop the interview at any time.

Benefits

There is no direct benefit to you from taking part in this study. It is hoped that the research will help me to better understand the process of meaning making and sense making in novice principals.

Risks/Discomforts

You are free to decline to answer any questions you don't wish to, or to stop the interview at any time if at any time during the interview you feel uncomfortable or upset. As with all research, there is a chance that confidentiality could be compromised; however, I am taking precautions to minimize this risk by housing all electronic notes and audio behind a firewalled and password protected external hard drive. All written notes will be housed in a locked file cabinet that only I will have access.

Confidentiality

Your study data will be handled as confidentially as possible. Individual names and other personally identifiable information will not be used in the publication of the dissertation or subsequent papers.

Compensation

You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

Rights

Participation in research is completely voluntary. You are free to decline to take part in the project. You can decline to answer any questions and are free to stop taking part in the project at any time. Whether or not you choose to participate in the research and whether or not you choose to answer a question or continue participating in the project, there will be no penalty to you or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Questions

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me. I can be reached at (520) 861-3207 or kthompson1@email.arizona.edu. You may also contact my dissertation advisor professor, Dr. Kris Bosworth. She can be reached at (520) 626-4350 or bosworkk@arizona.edu

CONSENT

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your own records.

If you wish to participate in this study, please sign and date below.

Participant's Name (*please print*)

Participant's Signature

Date

Appendix D

Email for Prospective Research Participants

Subject line: Please participate in my research about leading schools as a novice principal

[Date]

Dear [principal]:

My name is Kent Thompson. I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Arizona in the Department of Educational Policy Studies and Practice. Previously, I was the principal at Sahuarita High School for six years before leaving to pursue my degree full time.

I am writing to ask you to be a participant in my dissertation research study on how novice principals (those in their first three years of leading a school) navigate and understand their role as principal within the contexts of accountability and social justice.

The process will include one interview that will last between 45 minutes and an hour and a follow up interview or reflective journal writing prompt. With your permission, I will audio record the interviews in order to transcribe our conversations. All data used in the writing of my dissertation will utilize pseudonyms.

I hope that you will join me in this exciting research. If you have any questions or concerns, please reach out to me either by replying through this email or on my cell at (520)861-3207.

Thank you for your time.

Kent Thompson

Doctoral Candidate

Department of Educational Policy Studies and Practice

The University of Arizona

Appendix E

Wearing the Scarlet Letter: An Autoethnographic Journey of a High School

Principal Navigating Neoliberal Curriculum Adoption

Kent A. Thompson

Bergamo Conference Paper Presentation

October 13, 2017

In this experimental paper, I discuss my lived experience as a public-school principal with my new critical lens of a doctoral student. Utilizing a form of evocative autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) I will share first-person autoethnographic passages bracketed by analysis. I explore themes related to the all too familiar experience of school leaders navigating neoliberal accountability measures and realities. I conclude the paper within the framework of William Pinar's complicated conversation as curriculum as a response to the neoliberal hegemony. Names other than my own have been changed as well as school names. In addition, and in the spirit of the evocative autoethnography, some artistic license has been applied to the autoethnographic scenes.

Bochner and Ellis (2016) describe autoethnography as:

Inhabit[ing] a space between science and art; between epistemology and ontology; between facts and meanings; between experience and language; between the highly stylized conventions of fact-based reporting and the unfixed alternatives of literary, poetic, and dramatic exposition; between cold and rational objectivity and a hot and visceral emotionality; between a commitment to document the reality of what actually happened and a desire to make readers feel that truth coursing through their blood and guts" (p. 66)

In other words, it brings the story of our his(her)story to life in a visceral, memorable way. Evocative autoethnography offers me a space to explore my own journey that I have not been able to explore previously in my proto-academic life. Although I am conscious of various critiques of the process, such as the lack of traditional academic analysis (Anderson, 2006). I am intrigued and encouraged by the form and performance as cutting at the heart of human experience that can feel retrained in more traditional academic treatments.

- - -

Looking into the mirror I see the freshly etched letter on my forehead. No matter what I do I can't see anything else but that letter "C". The meeting I just came from still echoing in my head.

Stern looks, platitude, platitude, reassurance, stern look, chastening, platitude, marching orders, firm handshake.

The light above the urinal flickers like it has for years, like it has through at least ten work orders and two facility directors. Was is Morse Code? Was it communicating with me in a new language? "Am I fucking crazy?"

"Told you so; told you, you couldn't do this"

"who's there?!" ...no one, not even the communicative light. My old companion is back, well, he never really leaves, just retreats into the background long enough for me to think I have lost him.

"Get out of here" I scold him. "I don't have time for you, I need to figure this out" He recedes back into the background, malevolent grin on his face, he's rattled me, and he knows it.

I straighten my tie and breathe deep before leaving the quiet of the faculty bathroom back into the maelstrom.

- - -

Five years later, the previous scene still haunts me. I am struck by the hopelessness I felt and the inevitability of doom.

My generation of educators have been brought up inside the neoliberal educational machine. No Child Left Behind and Common Core are all that we have known. Test preparation and practice are part of the curriculum siphoning time and resources in a time of shrinking budgets and

increased class sizes. Marketing forces bend priorities towards recruitment and retention as districts and schools rush to compete for student dollars in increasingly diverse open education markets.

My preparation as a teacher and as an administrator was designed to work within the machine. Accountability, data disaggregation, standards, and test preparation were the subject of my classes and projects. In the name of progress and inevitability we were preparing students for the twenty-first century in increasingly narrowing way.

My school wasn't the only one struggling in this hegemony of accountability. Our school leaders struggled to find a way forward. We were desperate for options, but options for working in the machine generally perpetuate and replicate the machine, further entangling education with neoliberal sensibilities (Lipman, 2011).

The following scene from an administrative meeting at the district captures this desperation and conflict.

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The bosses look stern, but jovial...maybe they won't be too harsh, and who is that tall and handsome suited stranger with them. Back slaps, head nods and shoulder grabs between them, "must be important", I think.

Principals continue to file into the administrative meeting. There's a nervousness in the air as our superintendent begins the meeting.

Stern looks, platitude, platitude, reassurance, stern look, chastening, platitude, introduction of mystery man

He slowly rises, buttoning his suit coat - wearing a sympathetic and knowing look.

“I understand how many of you are feeling. I was sitting there like you five years ago, wondering what I was going to do to lead my school out of the desert of mediocrity towards the promised land of success”

“Oh, he’s good” I thought

PowerPoint slide after PowerPoint slide flies by at a quick pace, his rhetoric perfectly timed...

“In just five years, my school and our district, Mount Zion School District, went from being close to state intervention to the top in the state!”

The stranger was revealed, the bosses were nodding and smiling at each other, barely stifled gasps emanate from the assembled.

Mount Zion School District

Mount Zions’ rise is legendary and well documented by the news and politicians alike and we had one of them in our midst. We were saved!

Our stranger revealed that a team was assembling to come and teach us their ways, the Mount Zion way, that was to become OUR way.

Audible excitement now broke through all meeting decorum

The stranger continued saying something about a nominal consulting and materials fee, but that we would be saved from educational purgatory and damnation. Indeed a small price to pay for such freedom.

The stranger continued, “we will begin immediately, after the IGA has been board approved, to realign your district into a district of student success”

All decorum lost, I joined the chorus of leaders exclaiming hallelujahs. The C scrawled in my forehead was hurting less and less.

- - -

My district purchased and implemented this curriculum product from this very successful district. We were desperate. We needed to “win” at the neoliberal game. Like many other districts, we had to be in a position to compete for ever increasingly shrinking dollars from the states and the ever-increasing siphoning of students (and money) away from us to strip-mall charter schools and vouchers. We had little time for alternative, more holistic educative processes and concerns. The idea of asking, “what knowledge is of most worth?” (Pinar, 2012) let alone through a curriculum theory lens, was never brought up—we did not even know it existed. We had narrowed the educative experience to a delivery of ready-made lessons designed to get the most students to succeed on the omniscient and omnipresent state tests. It was easy for me to get caught up inside the machine. My own underdeveloped axiology was being sacrificed at the neoliberal alter...and sometimes I came willingly.

Almost immediately the curriculum product implementation created issues at all levels and subjects. However, the check had been written, the business leaders and school board had been sold that this was the way to “fix” our schools and so it continued. Dissent among the teachers and principals now only existed underground. I felt the tensions through the teachers and knew I had been duped. I found myself straddling the line between good soldier for my leaders and a part of resistance (albeit behind closed doors) for my teachers. This damaging cognitive dissonance played out in many conversations and meetings throughout my time as principal. One such conversation soon after the announcement of the saving curriculum product is illustrative of this tension.

- - -

“you know this is all bullshit, right?” asks Alex.

“well..” I hem and hah trying to think of the right political speak...,she’s right you know.

“Well, Alex, you know the game, I got the bosses on my back, the town council, the school board, and the chamber of commerce all wringing their hands in this economy. They feel that a “C” grade will hurt growth. Besides, a “C” grade makes us all look bad.”

Alex is sending me another stern look.

“Political bull-shit, Kent and you know it. What about our students? What about your teachers? There is more than just test scores and letter grades. Don’t lose sight of that!”

“I know, Alex, but we really need to get our test scores up”

“I know, but don’t forget this” she said, pointing to my heart.

Of course she is right. Right now though, my students’ holistic education was getting in the way of increasing test scores in math and English...maybe I could redo the schedule to include more time for the tested subjects...ugh.

- - -

Coda

I left my job as principal after six years, three years after the curriculum adoption. Although we had been successful in getting our school grade up to a B, it was done at great moral cost.

Working within a system that was squeezing the humanity out of education and me as well caused serious consequences to student learning and my own health. I lacked understanding, I lacked perspective, I lacked resources. Like many others, I am an educator because I have an innate love of humanity and an intense need to help others around me...and I was failing at both. The last two years of being a principal I was concurrently a graduate student. I had been learning the language of critique and various emancipatory theories that finally gave voice to my inner values, my heart and soul as a human and an educator. Consequently, my eyes had been

opened to the reality of the neoliberal accountability machine and I could not be a part of it anymore until I could return with more tools of understanding.

I have discovered myself in the process. My role as an educator expanded to break free of the automaton of neoliberalism that I had become. As I mentioned above, my education as a teacher and administrator was very narrow. It would have been immensely helpful to be exposed to the complexities of curriculum theory and to put it to work. I have come to understand what William Pinar (2012) meant when he declared curriculum as “complicated conversation”, a rich term worthy of deep study, far expansive of its narrow usage now within schools. Further, curriculum is more than even what is taught. Pinar’s expansive vision of this complicated conversation is described as:

[a] conversation with oneself (as a ‘private’ person) and with others threaded through academic knowledge, and ongoing project of self understanding in which one becomes mobilized for engagement in the world...The curriculum is an ongoing effort at communication with others that portends the social reconstruction of the public sphere. (p. 47)

This again is a far cry from the meaning of the term curriculum as it is colloquially known. It situates the teacher, sometimes vulnerably, in the middle of the act of education. It transforms teachers into human beacons capable of so much more than most currently understand. Being a part of the “social reconstruction of the public sphere” allows us to be a part of Paulo Freire’s emancipatory vision that, "it is necessary that the weakness of the powerless is transformed into a force capable of announcing justice" (Darter, 2015). To be a part of a transformation that "announc(es) justice" is exactly what I aspire to. I can think of nothing better than for our teachers, students, and community to be awoken to the myopic and limiting realities of

neoliberalism in education and to be opened up to the beautiful messiness of complicated conversation. As a scholar, and a human being, I hope to be a part of that transformation.

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