Getting to the heart of leading as a Cognitive Coach

Kimberly Coupe Pavlock

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Getting to the Heart of Leading as a Cognitive Coach

by

Kimberly Coupe Pavlock

Submitted to the College of Education
Eastern Michigan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Educational Leadership

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February 25, 2023
Ypsilanti, Michigan
Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my family: my husband, Jeff; my mother, Linda; my children, Annamarie, Rebecca, and Matthew; my sons-in-law, Gus and Rylan; and my grandchildren, Bernadette, Benedict, and Peter. I could not have completed my studies or this work without their constant love, support, understanding, patience, and encouragement.
Acknowledgments

I begin by offering all praise and thanks to God for the gift of this journey of learning and for the many people who, in addition to my family, supported and encouraged me along the way.

I am deeply indebted to the five educational leaders who participated in my study—for the generosity of their time and their willingness to be vulnerable and authentic in sharing their stories.

I am also extremely grateful to Dr. David Anderson, my dissertation chair, and my dissertation committee members: Dr. Mary Bair, Dr. W. Douglas Baker, and Dr. Carmen McCallum. Thank you for your careful reading of my drafts and for your valuable feedback along the way.

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I am also thankful to many other dear friends and family members who continually cheered for me, checked in on me, and prayed for me. I feel truly blessed.
Abstract

While the expectations and challenges facing K–12 educational leaders are considerable and significantly increasing, the support they receive in training, leadership development, and ongoing support has been limited in range and relevance. Although Cognitive Coaching is not a leadership development program, per se, Cognitive Coaching is a model of coaching that has been highly regarded and frequently requested by administrators, teachers, consultants, and literacy coaches in K–12 education, and the components of this coaching model can serve as a basis for leadership development. Previous research about Cognitive Coaching has highlighted the benefits of Cognitive Coaching for students, teachers, administrators, and people in fields outside of teaching. This qualitative study, in the tradition of interpretative phenomenological analysis, focuses on the experiences and perceptions of five educational leaders both in being coached and in using Cognitive Coaching as part of their leadership practice. For these leaders, the story behind mastering the skill and not the concept includes engaging in what is simple but not easy, daring to be vulnerable, embracing service and authenticity, and leaning into the value practices of leading with a learning mindset, confident humility, self-awareness, mindfulness, and intentionality to align their behavior with their values. The findings indicate that Cognitive Coaching is about more than cognition; it is rooted in affect and values. Embracing vulnerability is foundational to Cognitive Coaching and leading as a Cognitive Coach. To get to daring vulnerability, Cognitive Coaching leaders need to be authentic and have service at the heart.

Keywords: educational leader, Cognitive Coaching, leadership development, professional development, vulnerability, authenticity, service, affect, emotion, confident humility
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Chapter 1: Research Problem

Background and Problem Statement

The challenges facing K–12 educational leaders, especially principals, are numerous and complex. With increasing student accountability tied to leadership performance, principals are having to transition from managing to leading communities of practice while, at the same time, contending with a myriad of other pressures and conflicts, including increasingly complicated administrative responsibilities and relationships with various stakeholders (Tintoré et al., 2020). While some of the problems that principals face may be technical in nature, requiring managerial expertise and oversight, others can be far more demanding “wicked problems, which are complex and messy” (Heifetz, 1994, as cited in Tintoré et al., 2020, p. 2).

In their daily work with educational authorities, teachers, students, families, and community members, school leaders must deal with tensions that result from “competing values, competing interests, contradictory pressures, rising expectations and rapid social change and conflict between professional judgement and policy requirements” (Murphy, 2013, p. xvii). That leaders face challenges is nothing new; however, the nature of the challenges they face since the advent of COVID-19 is unparalleled. Continuous outbreaks of COVID-19 over the past 2 years have resulted in “the largest educational disruption in human history,” which, in turn, has led to a host of new and crucial challenges for educational institutions and for those who are leading them in regard to self-care and well-being, continuation and quality of education, mental and emotional health, equity, and technological access to name a few (Parveen et al., 2022, pp. 1, 10).

Even as the roles and responsibilities of educational leaders continue to evolve and change over time, school principals are frequently called upon to assume positions of leadership
without suitable training (Duncan, 2013; Tintoré et al., 2020). In fact, one of the primary challenges that school principals have reported is learning challenges that arise as a result of the complexities of their job (Tintoré et al., 2020). These challenges include “lack of preparation and inappropriate career development, scarce professional feedback, coaching, assistance, and support to improve, the need to improve leadership skills and capacities, and lack of time for the principals’ own professional growth” (Tintoré et al., 2020, p. 7). Some might find this lack of preparation and ongoing professional support of educational surprising given the fact that school principals are normally required to have teaching experience, a master’s degree in educational leadership, and administrator certification to serve as a school principal; however, leadership courses offered in education and in business are often concept, theory, and skills-based, separate from considerations related to identity, community, and context (Clapp-Smith et al., 2019). As a result, when school principals are faced with the complexities of their work, they are underprepared to meet those challenges, giving rise to leaders’ feelings of job dissatisfaction and burnout (De Jong et al., 2017) as well as a high rate of turnover (Barrera, 2019; Lackritz et al., 2019).

Clarke and Dempster (2020) summarize the current situation in K–12 education well when they write, “Indeed, it could be argued that school leaders are attempting to lead schools and improve students’ education in much more challenging situations than policymakers and education authorities may recognize” (p. 712). While the expectations for school principals are substantial and significantly increasing, the support they receive in training, leadership development, and ongoing support has been limited in scope and relevance.
Cognitive Coaching

Despite the existing want for more thorough preparation and backing for school leaders, there is a coaching model that has been highly regarded and sought after for administrators, consultants, literacy coaches, and teachers in K–12 education. That coaching model is Cognitive Coaching. Co-developed by Arthur Costa and Robert Garmston in 1984, Cognitive Coaching focuses on developing the self-directedness and cognitive complexity of leaders and learners (Costa & Garmston, 2016). The Cognitive Coaching Foundations Seminar includes 8 full days of training normally presented over 18–24 months (Thinking Collaborative, 2020). The expressed goal of Cognitive Coaching Seminars is “to develop one’s identity and capacity as a mediator of thinking” (Costa & Garmston, 2019, p. 29). Although Costa and Garmston (2016) use educational settings to highlight the Cognitive Coaching process in their book, they make clear to readers that Cognitive Coaching has value in a variety of professions, careers, roles, positions, and contexts (p. xix). As Costa and Garmston (2016) explain,

Cognitive Coaching is rooted in dispositions, beliefs, and values that honor the human drive for continuous learning and the spirit of collaboration. Cognitive Coaching is not giving advice or solving other people’s problems. … Cognitive Coaching is a nonjudgmental process of mediation applied to those human life encounters, events, and circumstances that can be seized as opportunities to enhance one’s own and another’s resourcefulness. (p. 23)

Although Cognitive Coaching was not developed as a leadership development program, per se, nevertheless, the components of Cognitive Coaching—which consist of a set of skills, capabilities, mental maps, beliefs, values, and commitments—when embraced, practiced, and refined over time, can provide a foundation for leadership development (Rogers et al., 2016).
**Research Question**

To develop a better understanding of the relationship between Cognitive Coaching and leadership development, my research question was “How do educational leaders experience Cognitive Coaching, both in being coached and in using Cognitive Coaching?” with two sub questions:

- What are their understandings of and perceptions of those experiences?
- How do those understandings, perceptions, experiences inform their leadership practice?

**Focus of the Study**

The focus on this study was K–12 educational leaders who had past and current experience with Cognitive Coaching. This experience includes their having received training by attending the Cognitive Coaching Foundations Seminar, being coached by a Cognitive Coach, and using Cognitive Coaching both formally and/or informally as part of their leadership practice. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how these leaders’ experiences and perceptions of Cognitive Coaching have informed their professional growth and manner of leadership as well as the implications of those experiences on the learning community.

As a particular coaching model, Cognitive Coaching provides terminology to guide and support the learning and shared understanding of fundamental concepts. In the next section, I will introduce significant terms used throughout my dissertation.

**Key Terms**

Because I refer in my writing to several key terms, including specific terminology used as part of the Cognitive Coaching model, I have included citations for terms specific to Cognitive Coaching in order to provide precise definitions as described by Cognitive Coaching co-
developers, Costa and Garmston (2016), and Cognitive Coaching co-directors, Ellison and Hayes (2006). For other key terms, I have written an explanation in order to clarify each word’s intended meaning in this research study:

*Coaching Tools:* The means that coaches use to establish trust, develop rapport, and lead coaching conversations with a coachee. These means include listening, pausing, paraphrasing, and posing questions.

*Cognitive Coach:* One who has attended all 8 days of the Cognitive Coaching Foundations Seminar and follows the Cognitive Coaching model.

*Cognitive Coaching:* A model of coaching that “focuses on mediating a practitioner’s thinking, perceptions, beliefs, and assumptions toward the goals of self-directed learning and increased complexity of cognitive processing” (Costa & Garmston, 2016, p. 4).

*Consciousness:* “Knowing what and how we are thinking about our work in the moment and being aware of our actions and their effects on others and on the environment. … Consciousness is the medium in which all states of mind are mediated” (Costa & Garmston, 2016, p. 118).

*Craftsmanship:* “An internal drive toward personal and group excellence” (Ellison & Hayes, 2006, p. 46).

*Efficacy:* “A resource that gives us motivation, hope, and belief in our own ability to influence and change our world” (Ellison & Hayes, 2006, p. 44).

*Flexibility:* “The mind’s ability to deal with human differences—conflicting ideas, alternative perspectives, divergent points of view, and collective problem solving” (Costa & Garmston, 2016).
Interdependence: A state of mind that embraces contributing to and benefiting from the work of others (Costa & Garmston, 2016).

Learning Community: A group of people who are affiliated with a school and/or educational organization, including administrators, teachers, students, parents, and staff.

Self-directedness: The ability and capacity to make decisions that assist one in achieving their own goals and objectives (Costa & Garmston, 2016).


Support Function: One of four roles assumed by the Cognitive Coach during a coaching conversation to best meet the present needs of the coachee. The four support functions include that of coach, consultant, collaborator, and evaluator (Costa & Garmston, 2016).

Value Practices: Ways of being that people adopt in order to align their behavior with their values.

Conceptual Framework

For this study, I investigated educational leaders’ understandings and experiences of Cognitive Coaching and how those understandings influence their leadership practice through a conceptual framework demonstrating the interrelatedness of relationships between the Cognitive Coach and the educational leader as well as between the educational leader and the learning
community (see Figure 1). Integral elements of the Cognitive Coaching model include the mission of Cognitive Coaching, four essential internal capabilities, four assumptions, four support functions, the five states of mind, and various coaching tools. Together, these elements of the coaching model serve as a foundation and guide the Cognitive Coach in mediating the thinking of the school leader in reflecting, planning, and problem-resolving conversations.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework*

Just as the Cognitive Coach can choose among four different support functions to most effectively support the self-directedness and cognitive complexity of the leader, so, too, can the leader choose among the four different support functions to support the self-directedness and cognitive capacity of the community of learning members through both formal and informal coaching conversations. Through these coaching conversations, the school leader and members of the learning community will have the opportunity to learn from and with each other. The school leader will then have additional opportunities to reflect, plan, and problem resolve
through ongoing one-to-one coaching conversations with the Cognitive Coach. The leader’s conversations with the Cognitive Coach will influence conversations with members of the learning community, just as conversations with members of the learning community will influence the leader’s conversations with the Cognitive Coach.

**Positionality Statement**

I first learned about Cognitive Coaching nearly 8 years ago. As associate director of a university writing center and as a first-year writing instructor, I was already interested in learning more about coaching. I had read books on literacy coaching and even attended a few coaching institutes offered through our local site of the National Writing Project. As a teacher, as a leader, and as a parent, I was drawn to learning more about how to better support others in their learning and thinking. Through the occasional coaching training that I attended, I learned a variety of helpful skills and tools, including listening, pausing, paraphrasing, asking questions. As eager as I was to get started on using these tools, however, I felt that, somehow, something was still missing. I knew I wanted to coach, and I had a few new tools—but tools to accomplish what, exactly? I was not sure. And then I heard about Cognitive Coaching, an 8-day seminar that was being offered by intermediate school districts (ISDs) across the state of Michigan, as the Michigan Department of Education had just recently chosen Cognitive Coaching as the preferred training method for coaches hired to support teachers in a state-wide professional development initiative, Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME; Michigan Department of Education, 2015).

Eager to learn more about how I could better support the students, writing consultants, and faculty with whom I worked in higher education, I signed up to attend Cognitive Coaching Foundations I training—the first 4 days of the 8-day training. Those first 4 days were
transformational for me, and when they came to an end, I could hardly wait to attend Foundations II training, Days 5 through 8. What was so transformational about the training that I received in Cognitive Coaching? More than providing seminar participants with a set of skills to support coaching—which are certainly important and which we did learn—Cognitive Coaching provides participants with a clear understanding of the mission, values, beliefs, assumptions, and research that support all aspects of this coaching model. Prior to attending Cognitive Coaching training, I felt like I had tools for coaching, but no real direction. My bag was packed, but where was I to go? As a teacher and as a leader, this lack of clarity around coaching was difficult for me. I knew that I wanted to help and support others, but how? And to accomplish what? If I didn’t have the answers, how could I lead and guide others?

Cognitive Coaching provided the answers to those questions for me, and it has significantly changed how I have come to view my work as a teacher and as a leader. Prior to attending Cognitive Coaching, I would say that I held more of a consultant view of my work and of myself. If my students, colleagues, or family members needed support, I was happy to share whatever ideas, answers, solutions, and resources I had with them. It wasn’t until I participated in Cognitive Coaching training that I learned the value of listening for understanding and asking meditative questions to support the self-directedness and thinking of others. More than consulting, now, I try to be intentional about choosing coaching as my default support function in my various roles.

**Purpose and Significance of Study**

Given the multitude of challenges currently facing school leaders, including limited leader development and ongoing support, the purpose of this study was to address a need for increased understanding about how coaching influences leaders’ professional growth and the
implications for the community of learning. In particular, this study took an in-depth look into one well-established coaching model, Cognitive Coaching, and how educational leaders not only perceive and experience Cognitive Coaching, but also how those perceptions and experiences inform their leadership practice.

The study’s intended significance will be its contribution to responding to a call in the literature for more research in regard to how coaching influences leader growth by focusing on one distinctive coaching model. Specifically, this study will focus on how Cognitive Coaching training and coaching influence the professional growth and practice of educational leaders by listening to the stories of educational leaders who have been trained in Cognitive Coaching, have engaged in one-to-one coaching with a Cognitive Coach, and intentionally use Cognitive Coaching as part of their leadership practice.

This research study will allow for a deeper understanding of leaders’ own understandings of and experiences with Cognitive Coaching, which, in turn, could lead to improved professional learning opportunities for school leaders and more effective school leadership to improve student learning.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Conceptual Framework

My conceptual framework includes key aspects of the Cognitive Coaching model; the leadership theories of instructional leadership, transformational leadership, distributed leadership; and a community of learning. I designed the conceptual framework to serve as an analytical tool—as opposed to an experiential one—to assist me in my data collection and analysis. Since the participants in my study would have all attended Cognitive Coaching training, engaged in coaching with a Cognitive Coach, and incorporated Cognitive Coaching as part of their leadership practice for more than a year, it was plausible to imagine that in recounting and reflecting on experiences with Cognitive Coaching, they would make reference to one or more concepts included in this framework. In addition to including coaching relationships between the school leader and the coach, I also included a community of learning in my conceptual framework to take into account relationships among the school leader and other members of the school community. Since the goal of Cognitive Coaching is to develop the self-directedness and cognitive complexity of leaders and learners, it is reasonable to convey that in educational settings, Cognitive Coaches might hope to create learning organizations as described by Senge (1990)—organizations that engage in personal mastery, uphold a shared vision, and esteem team learning (see Figure 2).
In the top left corner of the framework, there is a list of key aspects of the Cognitive Coaching model. These include the mission of Cognitive Coaching, four Cognitive Coaching capabilities, Cognitive Coaching assumptions, four support functions, five states of mind, and a variety of coaching tools. Each of these will be described separately below.

**Cognitive Coaching Mission**

First, as has been previously mentioned, the mission of Cognitive Coaching is “to produce self-directed learners and leaders with the disposition for continuous, lifelong learning” (Costa & Garmston, 2016, p. 1). To do this, Cognitive Coaches need to develop identities as mediators of thinking, supporting others in forming the appropriate dispositions and capacities of self-directed learners (Costa & Garmston, 2016, p. 1). This is a process in which the educational leaders who participated in my study were actively engaged. Their practices and experiences of embracing Cognitive Coaching as leaders will be described in more depth in Chapter 4.
What does it mean for a coach to be a “mediator of thinking” and to support the self-directedness of the coachee? It means that the coachee sets the agenda for each coaching conversation—not the coach. Costa and Garmston (2016) refer to the metaphor of a four-wheeled coach or wagon to explain the meaning and purpose behind Cognitive Coaching. It is “to convey a valued person from where s/he is to where s/he wants to be” (Evered & Selma, 1989, as cited in Costa & Garmston, 2019, p. 13). As Costa and Garmston (2016) explain, the concepts behind Cognitive Coaching call for a shift in thinking around some of our current paradigms. They write:

For many educators, a dominant sense of satisfaction has come from their expertise as problem solvers. The shift to a mediational identity creates a feeling of being rewarded by facilitating others to solve their own problems. The shift is from teaching others to helping others learn from situations; from holding power to empowering others; from telling to inquiring; and from finding strength in holding on to finding strength in letting go. A mediator refrains from giving advice, believing in what Cicero stated: “Nobody can give you wiser advice than yourself.” Changing one’s identity requires patience, stamina, and courage. (pp. 1–2)

To accomplish the mission of Cognitive Coaching, those who are trained in and become Cognitive Coaches often experience a shift in identity as they move among the four different support functions, choosing with intention the role of a coach to guide them in engaging in both formal and informal conversations (Pavlock & Anderson, 2021). Coaches’ behaviors during the coaching conversation are led by Cognitive Coaching capabilities that support the mission of Cognitive Coaching.
Cognitive Coaching Capabilities

Cognitive Coaching identifies four coaching capabilities that are central for a Cognitive Coach to accomplish. These include the following:

- Knowing one’s intentions and choosing congruent behaviors.
- Setting aside unproductive patterns of listening, responding, and inquiring.
- Attuning to and adjusting for human uniqueness.
- Navigating between and within coaching maps and support functions to guide mediational interactions. (Costa & Garmston, 2019, p. 46)

In order to effectively support and mediate the thinking of another person, the Cognitive Coach needs to approach each coaching conversation with purpose and intentionality. Because the focus needs to remain on the coachee, the Cognitive Coach needs to listen attentively, resisting any urge to interrupt, to share autobiographical information, and/or to ask questions out of curiosity rather than for the purpose of supporting the coachee. Another important capability of the Cognitive Coach is to pay close attention and be responsive to each coachee’s distinct individuality. The Cognitive Coach also needs to be adept at leading and moving among the various coaching conversations and support functions to best serve the coachee’s needs at any given moment.

Cognitive Coaching Assumptions

According to Costa and Garmston (2019), the learning and skills of Cognitive Coaching depend on four key assumptions—assumptions that rely on a Cognitive Coach’s understanding that perception is unique and created by each individual; therefore, “others’ points of view [are] simply different, not wrong” (p. 169). The assumptions include the following:
• Teaching is a complex and context-specific process; therefore, decision making is continual and context specific.
• Perceptions drive behavior.
• Changes in perception are required to change behavior.
• Changes in perception, which can lead to changes in behavior and to more effective performance, can be brought about through effective coaching and the mediation of thinking. (p. 141)

Through the mediation of thinking, a Cognitive Coach can support a coachee’s desire to improve their practice, by first focusing on a change in perception. That change in perception can then lead to a change in behavior that aligns with and supports the new practice.

Four Support Functions

In the Cognitive Coaching model, there are four different support functions that a coach can choose from to support the self-directedness of another. The four support functions include coaching, collaborating, consulting, and evaluating. Coaches learn to discern which function or role to adopt in any given situation based on the focus, intention, and purpose of the conversation. The support role that serves as the default function for mediators of thinking is the coaching function since it is through the role of coaching that one seeks to identify where a person is seeking support, where the person would like to go, and how best to support the person in achieving the desired outcome (Costa & Garmston, 2019, p. 12).

In the midst of a coaching conversation, a coach might discern that transitioning from coaching to collaborating is in order if the purpose of the conversation is to develop ideas, solve problems, and learn together (Costa & Garmston, 2019). At other times, a coach may shift from
coaching to consulting when it becomes clear that the person being coached needs information, advice, and/or insight from the coach to move forward in achieving their own desired outcomes.

Another support function that educational leaders may need to assume is evaluating (Costa & Garmston, 2019). Since the support function of evaluating is so different from that of coaching, it is essential for those who support others in both roles to be clear about their intention and purpose during a coaching conversation. In fact, three conditions should be present in situations where one might be acting as both a coach and as an evaluator: trust, differentiated behaviors, and a clear understanding of what is happening when (Glickman, 1985, as cited in Costa & Garmston, 2019, p. 37). Then, according to the Cognitive Coaching model, after a coach intentionally transitions from coaching to collaborating, consulting, or evaluating, it is important for the coach to return to the default support function of coaching in order to further support the person in becoming more self-directed, more capable, and more resourceful in the five states of mind.

**Five States of Mind**

According to Costa and Garmston (2016), the five states of mind have the power to create holonomy—the state of thriving both as an “autonomous unit and a member of a larger whole simultaneously” (p. 17). The five states of mind include (a) consciousness—having an awareness of self and others; (b) craftsmanship—seeking continuous improvement, excellence, and ongoing learning; (c) efficacy—believing in one’s ability to accomplish a task and have an impact; (d) flexibility—acknowledging and showing respect for other perspectives and possibilities; and (e) interdependence—recognizing the significant ways in which relationships with others contribute to and support the group as a whole (Costa & Garmston, 2016; Costa & Garmston, 2019). High levels of resourcefulness in the five states of mind, then, contribute to a
person’s ability to experience and achieve wholeness individually (independently) and collectively (interdependently).

Costa and Garmston (2016) further explain that the five states of mind can be used as “diagnostic constructs” to assess the resourcefulness of one’s self and others (p. 127). Depending on a coachee’s level of capacity in these areas, interventions can be planned to provide support in raising those levels. For example, if during a coachee’s planning conversation with a coach, the coachee demonstrates a low level of interdependence in seeking the support of others to carry out a project, the coach could pose questions that stimulate the coachee’s thinking in relation to collaboration and teamwork.

Coaching Tools

An essential component in any coaching relationship is trust between the coach and the coachee. Cognitive Coaches work to develop that trust through establishing rapport, listening, pausing, and paraphrasing. Listening, pausing, paraphrasing, and posing questions are all important tools in the coaching process, and it is through the skillful use of those tools that coaches can demonstrate their interest, care, and concern for the coachee when they are leading coaching conversations.

Coaching Conversations

The Cognitive Coaching model includes three different kinds of coaching conversations: reflecting, planning, and problem resolving. When coaches are first trained in how to lead these conversations, they may use conversation maps or printed guides to help direct them through the coaching conversations. These conversation maps, in combination with their coaching tools, help the coach mediate the coachee’s thinking as the coachee plans, reflects, and strives to resolve problems.
**Coaching Relationships**

The conceptual framework begins with the coaching relationship between the coach and the coachee or leader. Individuals who have attended all 8 days of Cognitive Coaching Foundations Seminar can serve in the role of a Cognitive Coach. Some Cognitive Coaches may also choose to attend the Cognitive Coaching Advanced Seminar, a 6-day institute that focuses on “deepening and extending [a coach’s] identity as a mediator [of thinking]” (Thinking Collaborative, 2020). Cognitive Coaches are trained in all aspects of Cognitive Coaching included in this conceptual framework: the mission, capabilities, support functions, states of mind, and coaching tools. A Cognitive Coach draws on these resources to mediate the thinking of the school leader during a coaching conversation.

At the center of the conceptual framework is the school leader. The leaders in this study will have attended Cognitive Coaching training and received ongoing coaching support from a Cognitive Coach. When school leaders participate in Cognitive Coaching training and experience Cognitive Coaching as coachees themselves, they have the same resources and tools available as their Cognitive Coach to support other members of the learning community in reflecting, planning, and problem-resolving conversations. Just as the Cognitive Coach models and provides ongoing support to the school leader through the Cognitive Coaching mission, capabilities, support functions, five states of mind, and coaching tools, so, too, can the school leader model and provide ongoing support as a coach to the various members of the learning community. The arrow between the leader as Cognitive Coach and the community of learning highlights the back-and-forth nature of how coaching conversations can influence and support the thinking of all members of the learning community.
**Learning Community**

The learning community consists of school administrators, teachers, students, parents, and staff. According to Costa and Garmston (2016), the reason to learn how to cognitively coach is “to enhance student learning” (p. 5). They explain, “Cognitive Coaches . . . dedicate themselves to the cascading effects of enhancing others, who, in turn, ultimately produce maximum growth in students’ acquisition of desired outcomes” (p. 5). I include the community of learning in my conceptual framework because I want to allow for the possibility that leaders’ Cognitive Coaching training, one-to-one coaching experiences with a Cognitive Coach, and intentional use of Cognitive Coaching may not only influence the leader’s professional growth but also the learning community of which they are a part.

**Literature Review**

**Professional Development for School Leaders**

In a review of the literature from the past 20 years on theories of school principals’ leadership and the effectiveness of school leadership and professional development for principals, Daniels et al. (2019) explored how early theories of school leadership—instructional, situational, transformational, and distributed leadership—have evolved over time. The authors found that, even today, the primary leadership theories being explored are those based on the former theories of instructional, distributed, and/or transformational (p. 116). While the focus of instructional leadership is on teaching and learning, the focus of transformational leadership is on inspiring and motivating teachers and staff to achieve school goals. In regard to distributed leadership, the aim is that instead of leadership being entrusted to one person, leadership is shared among a number of people. Furthermore, as Daniels et al. explain, a new theory of leadership has recently emerged. This theory, called leadership to learning, is a combination of
instructional, transformational, distributed, and situational leadership theories. Daniels et al. explain that as the context of schools is receiving increasingly more attention, researchers are now calling for a combination of different theories for effective school leadership as opposed to the traditional focus on one theory.

Citing Tynjälä (2013), Daniels et al. (2019) highlighted that principals’ learning can take place in informal situations; intentional, but non-formal situations (like coaching); and formal training situations. The authors found that most of the professional development literature has focused on formal trainings. Daniels et al. (2019) called for more attention be paid to investigating informal learning opportunities, the effectiveness of professional development activities, the transfer of learning, and leaders’ preferences and needs. Daniels et al. (2019) also remarked that because school context has moved increasingly more into the center of leadership considerations, it, too, should be included in research investigating the professional development and effectiveness of school leaders.

Another significant finding in Daniels et al.’s (2019) review of the literature regarding leadership and leadership development were leading categories in regard to effective school leadership. These five categories included leaders’ involvement and support of curriculum and instruction, effective communication and relationship building, focus on trust and collaboration, engagement in creating and sustaining mission and vision, and frequent feedback and recognition of others’ achievements (p. 118).

In a brief written for state leaders and others in the field of education, Riley and Meredith (2017) established that a number of states across the country are striving to improve school leadership (p. 1). Factors contributing to this increase in support included research showing the effect that school leadership can have on student achievement, assistance through the Every
Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and new national standards for educational leaders (Riley & Meredith, 2017, p. 1). Survey results of participants serving in two Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) Principal-Focused Action Groups revealed that 77% identified “developing programs or resources for principal mentoring or coaching” as a current or emerging priority, and 21% reported it as an area in which they had already seen past progress (Riley & Meredith, 2017, p. 2). The report revealed that principal mentoring and coaching had become the leading priority in state efforts to support school principals. This report aligns with other research detailing school leaders’ preferred methods for professional growth.

Focusing on the 2008 Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards and principals’ preferences for the delivery of professional development, Spanneut et al. (2012) found that mentoring/coaching was the first choice out of eight different options for principals of Grades PreK to 6. (Note: the authors combined mentoring and coaching as one option—mentoring/coaching—instead of presenting them as separate professional development options. The distinction between coaching and mentoring will be described later in this literature review.) Workshops were the PreK–Grade 6 educational leaders’ second choice. For principals leading Grades 6–8, the first choice of eight different options was workshops, followed by mentoring/coaching. For principals of Grades 9–12, workshops were the first choice, and small group study was the second choice (Spanneut et al., 2012). Across all grade levels of leading, Spanneut et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of principals’ self-directedness involving decisions regarding their own professional development when they asserted that “principals should have ‘autonomy . . . to select professional development that is aligned with their [own] plans’” (Southern Regional Education Board, 2010, p. vi, as cited in Spanneut et al., 2012, p. 83).
Providing additional support for the significance of personal agency and ownership of responsibility in regard to the professional growth of school leaders, Clarke and Dempster (2020) presented a personalized approach to the professional learning of school principals. They maintained that, often, the professional development that is mandated by organizations and systems can be detached and distant from the individual needs and concerns of the school leader. Given the effect that school leaders can have on the learning environment of a school, the authors argued, it is essential that school leaders continually strive to be committed learners themselves (Clarke & Dempster, 2020).

According to Duncan (2013), principals in the United States, regardless of gender or years of professional experience, “have a strong interest” in growing and developing as professionals (p. 304). The areas of greatest interest for professional development that resulted from Duncan’s (2013) study included data-driven decision making, instructional leadership, relationship building, and personnel issues. Highlighting principals’ interest in further developing their skills as school leaders were the results of a descriptive survey mailed to all school principals in one state in the western United States. As Duncan noted, even though leaders’ perceived needs may differ based on gender and/or career stage, identifying and responding to those needs by providing appropriate professional learning opportunities for principals could serve a district well (p. 308).

Coaching

In step with the more recent focus on growth opportunities favoring personalized learning, self-directedness, and continuous support, coaching has emerged as a viable professional development opportunity for school leaders. Coaching, according to van Nieuwerburgh (2012), is “about helping a person to achieve their goals or improve their
performance through structured one-to-one conversations” (p. 7). Researchers, like Rhodes (2012), have written about the rise in coaching and mentoring as a form of professional development in education as well as explored the issues and potential for both.

Since the focus of this study is on coaching and not mentoring, it is important to understand what coaching is and how it differs from mentoring. As van Nieuwerburgh (2012) explained, there is common confusion about what the differences between coaching and mentoring are, even in the field of education. While both coaching and mentoring take the approach of providing one-to-one support to facilitate the learning and growth of another person, coaching is more about upholding the self-directedness of the coachee, focusing on what the coachee wants to focus on and asking questions, while mentoring is more about telling and showing. Another difference is that the relationship between a mentor and mentee tends to be hierarchical, with the mentor having more knowledge and more experience than the mentee. In contrast, coaching relationships are non-hierarchical, and coaches do not need to be experts in a particular subject or field to support a coachee’s thinking (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012, p. 15).

According to van Nieuwerburgh (2012), a helpful way to think about coaching and mentoring is to imagine a spectrum with non-directive interventions on one end and directive interventions on the other. Coaching would rest on the non-directive interventions side, and mentoring would lie on the directive interventions side. Instructional coaching, van Nieuwerburgh (2012) noted, would be placed in the middle of the spectrum, as it combines a non-directive approach with some directive support to serve the interests and needs of the coachee/mentee (pp. 16–17).

Despite these differences, coaching and mentoring are often presented in the literature as one type of professional support compared to others (Johnston et al., 2016; Spanneut et al., 2012). When describing their own study, for example, Johnston et al. (2016) explained that
educational leaders “were asked a series of questions about whether their district provided mentoring or coaching (hereafter referred to as mentoring)” (p. 5). Indeed, while coaching and mentoring are similar in that both are based on trusting and collaborative one-to-one relationships focused on supporting the professional growth of another, still the differences between them do call for a deeper exploration into the differences between the two approaches for educational leaders in different contexts (Rhodes, 2012).

**Leadership Coaching in Education**

According to van Nieuwerburgh (2012), coaching in education started in the early 2000s. Years before that, coaching was introduced into business in the 1940s, gradually coming to be known as executive coaching in the 1980s (Wise & Jacobo, 2010, p. 160). Late in the 20th century, interest in and the use of coaching continued to rise as companies like American Express, AT&T, Citibank, Colgate, Levi Strauss, and Procter & Gamble adopted executive coaching as an approach to support employees in the transfer of training into their daily work (Smith, 1993, as cited in Olivero et al., 1997). In an action research project in a municipal agency studying the percent of change in productivity after training alone and after training with coaching, Olivero et al. (1997) found that the increase in productivity for those who attended training only was 22.4%, whereas the increase in productivity for those who attended training supported by coaching was 88.0%. Given the effectiveness of coaching in business and the primary goals of executive coaching in supporting leaders’ growth and development, it makes sense that coaching would become more prevalent in education (Wise & Jacobo, 2010).

**Leadership Coaching Results**

Grounded in 10 years of working with educational leaders across all grade levels—from early childhood to post-secondary—Robertson (2008) presented what she found to be benefits of
coaching educational leaders. These benefits included support and affirmation, an ability to focus on one’s leadership role, growth in new ways of thinking and knowing, more intentional action, personal investment in self-development, and increased agency in feeling empowered to adapt and make changes, if necessary (Robertson, 2008).

Numerous other studies have supported leadership coaching as well. In a multiple-case study of urban charter schools, Lackritz et al. (2019) found that principals who had experienced coaching within the last school year experienced enhanced leadership development in their communication with others, time management, and accountability. Coaching also provided the leaders with support in working through their emotions, sustaining instructional leadership, and managing people (p. 12). Another study by Klar et al. (2020), found that rural school leaders’ experience with coaching through participation in a leadership learning community resulted in the enhancement of the leaders’ ability to lead school improvement initiatives. According to Klar et al.’s (2020) findings, this growth was a result of four factors: personalized learning, the opportunity to focus on a problem of practice of the leader’s choice, coaching sessions, and collaboration with other leaders. In response to a question asking about what assisted the leaders in their leadership development, one leader offered, “Definitely fostering the thinking through the coaching aspect of not telling but asking lots of questions, getting us to do our own thinking” (Klar et al., 2020, p. 549).

In order to explore the extent of principal leadership coaching in the United States, the characteristics of principals being coached, the characteristics of the coaching relationship, and the perceived relationship between leadership coaching and the school principals’ performance, Wise and Cavazos (2017) conducted a national, mixed-methods study based on the responses of 1,361 public school principals, representing elementary, middle/junior, and high school levels.
Their findings revealed that nearly one-half of the respondents had received some type of leadership coaching, with more novice principals being more likely to receive coaching than more experienced ones. The research showed that principals in urban areas received more coaching (13% more) than principals in rural areas (p. 240). Wise and Cavazos’s (2017) findings also revealed that principals who received coaching “overwhelmingly . . . saw it as a means to support them in their work” (p. 241). The principals identified collaborating with others and having opportunities for reflections as two aspects of coaching that they found particularly helpful (p. 241).

Additional research on coaching has demonstrated that posing questions is a viable professional development strategy for deepening school leaders’ reflection regarding personnel issues and school improvement (Lindle, 2016). From the coaches’ perspective in Lindle’s (2016) study, posing questions gave space for principals to resolve issues instead of hurrying to fix them. In this study, district-level leaders learned how to coach veteran principals across a consortium of nine rural school districts. The coaching approached used was cognitive coaching; however it was not the specific Cognitive Coaching model co-developed by Costa and Garmston in 1984.

**Leadership Coaching Inconsistencies and Considerations**

While much of the literature has highlighted evidence of the effectiveness and benefits of coaching, some of the research has also revealed some inconsistencies (Lackritz et al., 2019; Ray, 2017). In their study of urban charter school principals’ experiences with leadership coaching, Lackritz et al. (2019) found that some participants’ descriptions of the role of their coach were more in line with what the literature describes as the role of a mentor than that of a coach. One example of this included a coach who was also the supervisor of one of the study
participants modeling skills the coach wanted the coachee to learn. A second example included the coach setting the agenda for coaching sessions instead of allowing the leader, the coachee whom they were coaching, to set the agenda.

Another issue that surfaced through Lackritz et al.’s (2019) study was the process for how coaches were selected for coachees. In some cases, the coach for a principal was also the principal’s supervisor. The coaching relationship was created to support the principal as well as providing a way for the coach/supervisor to observe and evaluate the coachee. While this dual role of the coach worked in some situations, in other situations it did not. The mixed role of coach and evaluator resulted in some coachees’ feeling tense and insecure. Given the importance of the coaching relationship to the effectiveness of coaching, it is critical that trust be the foundation of that relationship and leaders feel comfortable with their coach (p. 17). In other research studies as well, trust has been identified as playing a vital role in coaching relationships (Alvarez, 2019; Blackman, 2010; Lindle, 2016).

In regard to the impact of coaching, Lackritz et al. (2019) found that the principals’ perceptions of the efficacy of their coaching experiences were influenced by what they perceived as their coach’s level of competency and the structure of the coaching sessions. While participants in the study listed a number of coaching competencies that they experienced and believed were helpful to them as leaders (i.e., listening, asking questions, communicating, planning), other significant competencies were not mentioned, like creating a coaching agreement and establishing trust. As Lackritz et al. (2019) noted, these issues bring to the forefront questions relating to how coaches are chosen for school leaders and the degree to which coaches are trained in order to provide quality coaching support for leaders.
Leaders as Learners

To move from a mindset of managing an organization to leading one, school leaders need support in developing practices that “focus on developing leaders as learners” (Aas, 2017, p. 450). According to Aas (2017), reflection is one of these essential practices as reflection enables school leaders to connect professional and evidence-based knowledge with their daily practice.

Aas (2017) has defined reflection as “an assumption of the critical investigation of an individual’s own leadership practice that provides learning and development” (p. 441). It is through deep and critical reflection that leaders develop and increase their capacity for change—change for the benefit of themselves and for the benefit of the organizations they lead (p. 450).

Aas et al. (2020) have argued that such a shift in thinking and approach requires a transformation in how leaders understand their leadership role, how they engage in new practices, and how they relate new understandings to their daily work.

In a study exploring the experiences of principals who sought their own professional development and transformational learning through coaching, Barrera (2019) found that transformational learning was supported by coaching relationships that were authentic, based on trust, and focused on the coachee. Barrera also found that transformational learning was supported by coaching conversations that focused on reflection, were questions-based, and provided a structure for accountability. Barrera’s (2019) study also revealed that principals who had experienced transformational learning through coaching were also more likely to focus on developing transformational learning cultures at their own schools (p. ix).

Cognitive Coaching

Although the amount of research on the Cognitive Coaching of principals is limited compared to that which is available on the Cognitive Coaching of teachers, Edwards’s (2023)
synthesis of the Cognitive Coaching research has demonstrated the following 10 outcomes of implementing Cognitive Coaching:

1. Cognitive Coaching was linked with increased student test scores and other benefits for students.
2. Teachers and administrators grew in efficacy.
3. Cognitive Coaching impacted thinking, causing teachers and administrators to be more reflective and to think in more complex ways.
4. Teachers were more satisfied with their positions and with their choice of teaching as a profession.
5. School cultures became more professional.
6. Teachers collaborated more.
10. Cognitive Coaching benefited people in fields other than teaching. (p. 2)

To summarize, Cognitive Coaching has resulted in improved test scores for students, increased efficacy for teachers and administrators, more reflection and complex thinking, greater career satisfaction, expanded collaboration, enhanced benefits for teachers and administrators professionally and personally, and added benefits for people outside of education.

Given the positive outcomes of Cognitive Coaching with teachers, Ellison and Hayes (2008) hypothesized that school leaders would also benefit from Cognitive Coaching. Ellison and Hayes (2008) conducted an action research project in which they provided Cognitive Coaching to sixteen building administrators over a 4-month period. Results of pre- and post-
surveys of those who participated revealed that (a) trust was an important factor; (b) all but one participant believed it was important for the coach to be someone other than the coachee’s supervisor; and (c) the participants valued the fact that the coach had been an elementary school principal as well (p. 92). Another result of the survey was that the participants perceived that they had increased in resourcefulness as a result of their Cognitive Coaching experience (Ellison & Hayes, 2008).

In another study, new principals participated in a Leader2Leader (L2L) Leadership Pilot Program, receiving Cognitive Coaching support as part of the program (Rogers et al., 2016). New principals were coached by experienced principals who had completed or were in the process of completing all 8 days (40 hours) of Cognitive Coaching training and had volunteered to serve as coaches. The authors noted that results of a program evaluation of the Cognitive Coaching component of the L2L Leadership Pilot Program showed that the principals who were trained in Cognitive Coaching were able to coach the new principals appropriately and successfully. Results of the program evaluation also showed that the new principals were able to participate in coaching with favorable results, improving in “knowledge, practice, level of thinking, self-reflection, self-efficacy, and confidence” (Rogers et al., 2016, p. 24).

**Adding to the Leader Development and Cognitive Coaching Literature**

Leadership in education has received a great deal of attention in the past few decades due to the changing role and responsibilities of school principals; however, research focusing on effective school leadership theories and professional development is limited (Daniels et al., 2019). Studies investigating the needs and preferences of school principals is scant, as is research focusing on the effectiveness of various kinds of professional development for principals (Daniels et al., 2019). Similarly, further research is also needed to investigate professional
development for school leaders as it relates to self-directedness and adult learning theory (Zepeda et al., 2014).

Even with the limited amount of research available on this topic, the literature does present corresponding recommendations for developing effective professional development for principals. One key finding across numerous studies is the value and importance of coaching as an effective professional development technique for educational leaders (Barrera, 2019; Blackman, 2010; Daniels et al., 2019; Klar et al., 2020; Wise & Cavazos, 2017). As Wise and Cavazos (2017) found, “Overwhelmingly, school principals that received coaching saw it as a means to support them in their work. A number mentioned specific attributes of coaching that they found helpful, including collaboration and opportunity for reflection” (p. 241).

As this focused review of the literature around leader development, coaching, and Cognitive Coaching has demonstrated, the amount of research focusing on the professional development of leaders is limited, especially in the areas of coaching. As a result, the opportunity to explore how educational leaders have incorporated Cognitive Coaching as part of their professional learning and practice has emerged for me as a significant area to focus my attention in order expand on the current research available.
Chapter 3: Methods

Research Tradition

In this chapter, I describe the research approach and methodology used for this study. The research approach that I used was qualitative, and the research tradition that I drew upon was phenomenology. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) have explained, “From the philosophy of phenomenology comes a focus on the experience itself and how experiencing something is transformed into consciousness” (pp. 25–26). The authors have further noted that the job of the phenomenologist is to portray the “essence or basic construction of experience” and that phenomenology is appropriate for the study of “affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences” (pp. 26, 28). Since the purpose of my research is to understand and depict the essence of educational leaders’ understandings and experiences of being coached and using Cognitive Coaching as part of their leadership practice, phenomenology—specifically interpretive phenomenology—proved to be a suitable choice for my study.

Matua and Van Der Wal (2015) have highlighted the differences between descriptive and interpretive phenomenological research approaches, explaining that the focus of descriptive phenomenology is to present a specific experience in such a way that others can experience it (p. 24). Alternatively, the focus of interpretive phenomenology is to gain a thorough understanding of what an experience means to those who have gone through it in their particular context and the degree to which it has affected the essence of who they are (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015, p. 24).

Regarding interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), Smith et al. (2009) have also written, “IPA is committed to the detailed examination of the particular case. It wants to know in detail what the experience for this person is like, what sense this particular person is making of
what is happening to them” (p. 3). My goal as a researcher, then, is not simply to describe how educational leaders use Cognitive Coaching, but rather to gain a “broader and deeper understanding” of educational leaders’ perceptions of leading as a Cognitive Coach. Using the interpretive phenomenological approach to research provided me with valuable insight into the study participants’ experiences and understandings of those experiences.

In the tradition of phenomenological research, interviewing was my primary method of collecting data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Smith et al., 2009). More information about my data collection methods is included below.

**Participants**

Following the tradition of IPA, I purposefully included five participants in my study. As Smith et al. (2009) explain,

IPA studies usually have a small number of participants and the aim is to reveal something of the experience of each of these individuals. As part of this, the study may explore in detail the similarities and differences between each case. It is possible to move to more general claims with IPA but this should only be after the potential of the case has been realized. (p. 3)

The five participants in my study were selected based on the criteria that they currently serve as educational leaders in K–12 education, have attended Cognitive Coaching Seminars Foundation Training to be trained as a Cognitive Coach, receive one-to-one Cognitive Coaching support themselves, and intentionally use Cognitive Coaching as part of their leadership practice and have done so for at least a year.

An experienced Cognitive Coach and Cognitive Coaching Seminars trainer assisted me in finding participants who qualified for my study because she was already familiar with leaders
who met the criteria that I had established. This person was someone with “credibility in that scene” (Tracy, 2020, p. 110), as she had coached and trained in Cognitive Coaching a significant number of teachers and educational leaders in West Michigan. This person reached out on my behalf to six educational leaders who qualified as participants for my study. The participants represented schools, districts, and educational organizations of different levels and sizes. During the time of my study, four of the five leaders were serving in leadership positions that were different from the positions they held when they first attended Cognitive Coaching training. Since educational leadership is a growth profession, and leaders are frequently promoted from one position to another, these promotions in leadership were not surprising. I reached out to all six of the educational leaders recommended to me. While all six initially responded positively to my invitation, five of the six maintained communication and participated in the interview process.

**Data Collection: Interview Protocols and Questions**

The method that I used to collect data was through interviewing. While there are many different approaches one can take to interviewing, I was drawn to the approach described by Seidman (2019) as “in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing” (p. 14). According to Seidman, this method brings together life-history interviewing with “focused, in-depth interviewing informed by assumptions drawn from phenomenology” (p. 14). Seidman’s method consists of a series of three interviews. The focus of the first interview is the participant’s focused life story. The focus of the second interview are the details of the participant’s lived experience of the phenomenon of study. The focus of the third interview is the participant’s reflection on the meaning of their experience. For this study, the phenomenon that participants recalled and reflected on was their experience as educational leaders of being coached and using
Cognitive Coaching as part of their leadership practice.

While Seidman’s (2019) method consists of three 90-minute interviews that occur within a 2-week time period, I adapted Seidman’s approach for my study and planned for two interviews lasting 60–90 minutes each. I decided on two interviews instead of three because I believed that I would be able to secure the amount of information necessary to analyze and accomplish the goals of my study. Still, I followed the topics of focus recommended by Seidman. For the first interview, I developed questions concentrating on focused life history and details of lived experience, combining the two areas of focus from Seidman’s first two interviews. For the second interview, I developed questions focused on reflecting on the meaning—again, as Seidman’s method includes.

My first set of interviews ranged in length from approximately 33 to 93 minutes, with an average of 73 minutes. The second set of interviews ranged from 27 to 81 minutes, with an average of 55 minutes. The amount of time between interviews also varied among participants. The shortest amount of time between a participant’s first and second interview was 17 days. The longest amount of time between interviews was 28 days. The average amount of time was 22 days. The lives of educational leaders are busy, and the two interviews were scheduled when the leaders were available to meet with me. The two interviews provided me with plenty of rich data for my study while respecting the time and commitments of the participants. Even as Seidman encourages researchers to “respect the structure” of the interviewing process, he provides alternatives and highlights that the real goal of the interviews is not the interviews themselves but rather learning about the participants’ life history and the way they have come to make sense of the experience and given it meaning in their lives (p. 25).

Since the participants in my study were from West Michigan—a 2- to 3-hour drive
from me—I conducted all of my interviews on Zoom, and the interviews were recorded so that transcripts could be generated. At the start of each interview, I asked study participants for permission to video record the interview. All five agreed and provided consent for Zoom to record. At the close of each interview, I stopped the recording and saved each interview to the Cloud. Later the same day, Zoom automatically sent a Cloud video recording and an audio transcript of the recorded Zoom meeting to my university email address. The video recordings provided by Zoom included video with a side-by-side transcript. For each interview, I watched and listened to the video recording alongside reviewing and editing the transcript to ensure its accuracy. I listened and checked each transcript multiple times to ensure accuracy in capturing the participants’ words as well as to add and make note of various other enlightening aspects of the interview, including the interviewee’s tone, voice inflection, pauses, facial expressions, and other non-verbal gestures.

I stored all of the Zoom recordings, audio files, and transcripts on my password-protected laptop. I printed copies of my transcripts in order to work with them more easily during the coding and writing process. I assigned a pseudonym to each participant and ensured that no identifying information (i.e., school, district, job title/position) appeared in my printed materials, research journals, or notebook entries. Information that could potentially identify a participant in the study is stored in a password-protected Google Drive account or locked file box.

In regard to developing questions for a semi-structured interview, Smith et al. (2009) recommend that for well-spoken adults, creating an interview schedule that includes six to ten open questions with additional prompts can take between 45–90 minutes for an interview (p. 60). With that in mind and using Seidman’s (2019) model as a guide, I developed the following
interview questions as a starting point for my interviews:

- Interview One—60–90 minutes (actual 33–93)
  - Part One—Focused Life History
    - Please share how you came to be [fill in the actual job title], an educational leader?
    - What kinds of training and support did you receive in preparation for this position?
    - What kinds of experiences do you believe have helped prepared you for this position?
    - How did you come to be involved in Cognitive Coaching?
  - Part Two—The Details of Lived Experience
    - Please share what it is like for you to be [fill in the actual job title], an educational leader?
    - How would you describe a typical day from the time you wake up to the time you go to sleep?
    - What might be some of the ways in which Cognitive Coaching is part of your daily life?
    - Think of a time recently when you engaged in Cognitive Coaching. This could be an informal coaching exchange, such as when you might draw upon various coaching tools/and or strategies during a brief hallway one-to-one with a teacher or parent outside of a Cognitive Coaching conversation, or it could be a more formal coaching conversation, when you might be focusing on coaching someone through a planning,
reflecting, or problem-resolving conversation. Please describe what happened. What was the experience like for you? How did you feel? How do you think the other person might have experienced the coaching?

- How might you describe your relationships with teachers? Students? Parents? Staff?
- In what ways has Cognitive Coaching played a role in your relationships with others (teachers, students, staff, parents, other administrators, family members)?
- In what ways has Cognitive Coaching played a role in your delivery as a leader?—your leadership practices?
- What kinds of challenges have you experienced in using Cognitive Coaching in your role as an educational leader?
- What kinds of support have you received in implementing Cognitive Coaching in your leadership practices?

- Interview Two—Reflecting on the Meaning—60–90 minutes (actual 27–81)
  - Part One—Set of Questions Based on First Interview (Sample questions)
    - In your first interview, you mentioned that your first 3 or 4 years in this role were like a “deep dive.” Please tell me more about that deep dive. What was it like for you? How did you feel?
    - You said that you could remember thinking that Cognitive Coaching was “hard but it’s worth the effort.” What do you think was “hard” about Cognitive Coaching? What was it that convinced you so early on that it was worth the effort?
Others have talked about vulnerability as playing a role in their experiences with Cognitive Coaching. What might your thoughts be about how that plays out, if at all?

Part Two—Start of Second Interview General Questions

- How might you describe yourself as a person?
- How might you describe yourself as an educational leader?
- How do you think your experience of having been coached by a Cognitive Coach has influenced you as a person and as a leader?
- How do you think your experience of using Cognitive Coaching has influenced you as a person and as an educational leader?
- How do you think other people (teachers, students, parents, staff, other administrators) see you—as a person and as a leader?
- As you reflect on your experience with Cognitive Coaching, how might you describe any impact that it may have had on you—personally and/or professionally?
- Concluding questions: What questions might you have for me about my research study?
- As I work on transcribing and coding my interviews, would it be okay with you if I were to reach out in the future to do some member checking to make sure how I am interpreting what you have said is accurate?

The semi-structured format of these interviews provided me with a strong set of open questions to ask each participant as well as the opportunity and flexibility to follow up with additional prompts related to the participants’ responses.
Data Analysis

As previously mentioned, the research tradition that I relied on for my study was interpretive phenomenology. In regard to analyzing the data, I followed the six-step interpretive phenomenological analytic process outlined by Smith et al. (2009), drawing upon the methods of grounded theory—initial, axial, and theoretical coding—to analyze the data that I collected (Saldaña, 2016). The IPA analytic process, combined with these methods of grounded theory, supported me well in exploring each participant’s particular experience and understanding of using Cognitive Coaching as part of their leadership practice.

Credibility

According to Tracy (2020), the credibility of qualitative research represents qualities of dependability, trustworthiness, and believability (p. 275). Creswell and Poth (2018) have described nine strategies for assessing the quality of qualitative research, organizing each strategy from the lens of the researcher, the participant, or the reader (p. 259). They have recommended that researchers choose from at least two of the nine strategies for any research study (p. 259). For my study, from the researcher’s lens, I sought the accuracy of my qualitative research by substantiating support for themes across different data sources and engaging in reflexivity to bring to the surface the values, biases, experiences, and expectations I might have (pp. 260–261). Because I completed the Cognitive Coaching Foundation Seminars, as well as the Advanced Coaching Seminar, and I have a positive view of the program, I had to be careful during the research process not to let my personal bias influence my study. I tried to deal with the possibility of confirmation bias by engaging in the process of reflexivity through journaling, memoing, and talking with my advisor. Journaling, memoing, and dialogue helped me reflect on my values, beliefs, and underlying, unexamined assumptions. I strove to be acutely aware of my
emotions and how I was processing and interpreting the information I gathered. Engaging in reflexivity raised my consciousness so that I could be more intentional about identifying and managing my bias. I engaged in the process of *epoche or bracketing* in an effort to set aside any biases, prejudices, perceptions, and/or assumptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It has been my intention to present my research—the voices, experiences, and perspectives of the educational leaders I interview—fairly and accurately.

From the participant’s lens, I sought participants’ feedback through member checking so that they could evaluate the accuracy and credibility of my analysis and interpretations. A second strategy for assessing the quality of qualitative research from the participant’s lens is to engage in prolonged engagement and persistent observation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although field observation was not one of my data collection methods, the quality and accuracy of the data that I gained from interviews was enhanced by my talking with participants more than once and having an additional opportunity to ask clarifying questions and to listen for consistent and/or contradictory details.

From the reader’s lens, I strove to provide “rich, thick description” of details related to the participants, their responses, tone of voice, behaviors, and key themes that emerged from the data so that readers can see for themselves the “transferability” of information from one context to another (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 263). Like anthropologists who study a particular community, as Flowers et al. (2009) have explained, IPA researchers comprehend the local nature of their particular cases and, therefore, develop analyses that are intentionally “cautious and are built cumulatively. They must be therefore be dealt with in detail, and in context” (p. 50).
Rich Rigor

Another criterium for quality that Tracy (2020) has highlighted in regard to qualitative research is rich rigor. For a study to meet the criteria for rich rigor, the study needs to show evidence of “sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex theoretical constructs, data and time in the field, sample(s), context(s), data collection and analysis processes” (p. 270). My research meets the criteria for rich rigor in the fullness and relevance of the data that I collected through two consistent and comprehensive interviews with each study participant and the level of detail that I have incorporated in my reporting of the data.

Six-Step Analytic Process. In order to ensure that my study would meet the criteria for rich rigor, I followed the six-step analytic process outlined by Smith et al. (2009) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Smith et al.’s (2009) Six Steps of the IPA Analytic Process*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>Reading and re-reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Initial noting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>Developing emergent themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td>Searching for connections across emergent themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5</td>
<td>Moving to the next case</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 6</td>
<td>Looking for patterns across cases</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Step 1: Reading and Re-reading.** I began the analytic process by reading and re-reading, focusing on one participant’s interview transcript at a time. Smith et al. (2009) have noted, “Part of this might actually involve recording some of your most powerful recollections of the interview experience itself, or some of your own initial, and most striking observations about the transcript in a notebook . . . ” (p. 820). The authors have explained that this is a process that can help the researcher “bracket” or set aside these personal ideas and connection for a later time. In addition to writing notes to discuss with my dissertation advisor, I wrote in a special research journal, recording key observations, insights, connections, and questions. It was through the transcribing, reading, and rereading process that I identified experiences and areas of focus or question that I wanted to follow up on with additional prompts during the second interview.

**Step 2: Initial Noting.** The second step in the analytic process for IPA is the initial coding. Smith et al. (2009) have highlighted that this is “the most detailed and time consuming” (p. 83). The purpose of this step is “to produce a comprehensive and detailed set of notes and comments on the data” (p. 83). The authors have recommended three different ways—or three analytic tools—to read and engage with the interview transcripts: descriptive comments, linguistic comments, and conceptual comments (p. 84). While descriptive comments focus on describing what the participant has said, linguistic comments focus on the specific language used by the participant, including pauses, tone, laughter, repetition, and more (pp. 88–89). Conceptual comments make up what Smith et al. (2009) have identified as the third level of commenting. It is this level, they explain, is “more interpretive” (p. 88). The authors have explained, “There is often an element of personal reflection to conceptual coding, too. The interpretations which you develop at this stage will inevitably draw on your own experience and/or professional knowledge” (p. 89).
In addition to following Smith et al.’s (2009) recommendations and guidance in regard to initial coding, I also drew upon what Saldaña (2019) has identified as the methods of in vivo and process coding. According to Saldaña (2019), these methods align well with research questions that focus on participants’ understandings of their own experiences and the meanings that they ascribe to them. Because these coding methods align well with my particular study of exploring participants’ understandings and experiences of using Cognitive Coaching, I used both in vivo and process coding during this second step of the IPA analytic process when I was engaged in the initial coding of the data. It was after I had transcribed both interviews for each study participant that I began the initial noting process using in vivo and process coding so that I could focus on the two interviews for each participant or case at a time.

Recognizing that all of the participants in my study are educational leaders who attended Cognitive Coaching training, have engaged in one-to-one coaching with a Cognitive Coach, and intentionally use Cognitive Coaching as part of their leadership practice, I developed a conceptual framework that included key terms and concepts related to the shared life experience of using Cognitive Coaching. It was reasonable to assume that the participants in my study would make reference to these words, and some of these key words and concepts could serve as a priori codes across the data. Indeed, this proved to be the case. Some of the key words and concepts from the conceptual framework that served as a priori codes included reflection, problem resolving, planning, consciousness, mediative questions, listening, and paraphrase.

**Step 3: Developing Emergent Themes.** The third step in the analytic process is to then work with these initial notes and comments to develop emerging themes. Smith et al. (2009) have emphasized the point that the themes that emerge through the initial noting “reflect not only the participant’s original words and thoughts but also the analyst’s interpretation. They reflect a
synergistic process or description and interpretation” (p. 92). Focusing on the two interview transcripts for each study participant at a time, I studied the initial codes and notes for that particular case before moving on to another one.

**Step 4: Searching for Connections Across Emergent Themes.** Step 4 of the analytic process includes a search for connections across emergent themes (Smith et al., 2009). The authors have suggested a couple of different ways to make connections across the themes. First, they suggested listing the themes in chronological order as they come up during the interview and then reading through the list to group themes that are related to each other. A second suggestion was to print the list of themes, cut them up into individual pieces of paper, and then organize the themes into related groups (p. 96). Other ways that Smith et al. suggested looking for patterns and connections across themes include identifying abstract ideas that create a “superordinate” theme, distinguishing contrasting ideas and relationships, and discovering similar contextual elements, recognizing the frequency of a theme to name a few (pp. 96–98). Focusing on the two transcripts of each educational leader at a time, I reviewed the emerging themes to explore and identify connections. I created lists and diagrams to make connections more visual.

**Step 5: Moving to the Next Case.** The fifth step in analyzing the data is to move on to the next case. Smith et al. (2009) have emphasized:

> Here it is important to treat the next case on its own terms, to do justice to its own individuality. This means, as far as possible, bracketing the ideas emerging from the analysis of the first case while working on the second. This is, of course, in keeping with IPA’s idiographic commitment. (p. 100)

The researcher then repeats steps one through four of the analytic process with the next
participant’s transcript(s). In order to maintain focus on just one case at a time, I coded and analyzed each study participant’s interviews together instead of separately. This meant that I was more fully immersed for a longer period of time in the experiences, stories, and reflections of each individual. While there were numerous times when my analysis of a new case immediately called to mind a memory or connection with another case, I tried to regain my focus to see the case before me as one that was unique. In some cases, I made note of the connection in order to explore at a later time.

**Step 6: Looking for Patterns Across Cases.** After carefully analyzing each participant’s transcripts, the sixth and final step in the process is to look for patterns that emerge across all of the cases (Smith et al., 2009). It was in this final step of the analytic process that I was able to identify connections, themes, and patterns throughout the study participants’ experiences and reflections. It was also at this point in the process that I was able to identify superordinate and subordinate themes across the data.

Writing about her use of interpretive phenomenological analysis to research the professional experiences of women deputy headteachers, Guihen (2020) described her experience of following the analytic process as set forth by Smith et al. (2009). Guihen (2020) offered:

> Following this advice, I adhered to the procedure … and found the steps to be a useful (and somewhat reassuring) set of guidelines; the analytic steps … afforded support while allowing the freedom to find my own way forward in organizing and analyzing data. (p. 532)

In regard to the initial coding, Guihen (2020) wrote that she added descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual commentary to her interview transcripts. She noted, “I found that each of these three
stages made me look at the transcript in a new light” (p. 532). Reading Smith et al.’s (2009) guide to interpretive phenomenological analysis and Guihen’s (2020) autoethnographic account of using IPA for her educational research helped me feel better prepared when I began my own doctoral research process.

**Ethical Treatment**

In conducting this study, I followed all Institutional Review Board Human Subjects Review guidelines and gained approval from the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee. The purpose of my study was to address a need for increased understanding of K–12 educational leaders’ understandings and experiences of Cognitive Coaching and how they perceive the effects of Cognitive Coaching on their leadership practice. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe the process for addressing ethical issues in research. I adhered to the three principles they explain: (a) respect for persons—protecting participants’ privacy as well as data pertaining to them, (b) beneficence—securing participants’ well-being by providing the maximum possible benefits and minimizing any possible harms, and (c) justice—treating all participants “fairly and equitably” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 54). I ensured that the study participants had a thorough and clear understanding of what their participation in the study would entail, including their right to leave the study at any time. I also made sure that participants experienced no harm. I was sensitive and paid close attention to participants’ physical and emotional responses during the interviewing process, and I did not pursue any questioning that might cause emotional harm.
Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

This study focused on five K–12 educational leaders who have experience with Cognitive Coaching—both in being coached and in using Cognitive Coaching as part of their leadership practice. The purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding of how these leaders’ experiences and perceptions of Cognitive Coaching have informed their professional growth and manner of leadership. The research question guiding this study was “How do educational leaders experience Cognitive Coaching, both in being coached and in using Cognitive Coaching?” and included the two sub questions:

- What are their understandings of and perceptions of those experiences?
- How do those understandings, perceptions, experiences inform their leadership practice?

The data were collected through two Zoom interviews with each of the study participants.

This chapter will include two main sections. In the first section, I present a profile of each study participant. In the second section, I present the superordinate and subordinate themes that emerged from the data.

Participant Profiles

All five participants in my study are educational leaders from West Michigan who were selected because they met the following criteria: (a) serve as educational leaders in K–12 education, (b) attended the Cognitive Coaching Seminars Foundation Training to be trained as Cognitive Coaches, (c) receive Cognitive Coaching support from a Cognitive Coach, and (d) intentionally use Cognitive Coaching in their professional contexts and have done so for at least a year. Even with these shared Cognitive Coaching experiences, the professional paths, experiences, and stories of the participants are unique. In the next section, I will introduce the
educational leaders. To preserve confidentiality, I have created pseudonyms. Each participant profile begins with information about how these women entered the field of education and then recounts how they came to experience Cognitive Coaching and move into their current positions of leadership.

**Emma**

Emma is a White woman who has spent 28 years in the field of education and currently serves as the director of instruction for a small rural school district. For her first teaching assignment, she had the opportunity to teach in an interdisciplinary humanities program with a team of other teachers. She described this first teaching job as “an amazing experience. It was completely a team–taught adventure, a wonderful group … very collaborative, very collegial.” She further noted, “I felt like I just had all the, like, six coaches with me, right? That I worked very closely with and met and … they all became my mentors.”

As a secondary classroom teacher, Emma primarily taught social studies and law–related courses, and as the years progressed, Emma assumed some leadership positions as well, including serving as a site leader in one district and then as a social studies department head, district improvement team member, and district technology team member in another district. It was only after being in the classroom for 15–16 years that Emma decided to explore educational leadership and pursue an education specialist degree (EdS degree) in educational leadership at a state university. She had already received her master’s degree at the same time she earned her secondary teaching certification.

For Emma, it was while attending one of her graduate educational leadership courses that she first heard about Cognitive Coaching. A Cognitive Coach and trainer had been invited to speak to the class about Cognitive Coaching. Emma recalled, “When [the instructor] had invited
her in, and she started talking about this Cognitive Coaching thing, and I just went, ‘Whoa! Wait a minute. I’m loving what I’m hearing, right?’” For Emma, what she learned about Cognitive Coaching “struck a nerve, and [she] kind of always remembered it.”

Keeping Cognitive Coaching in the back of her mind worked to Emma’s advantage when, after completing her EdS degree in educational leadership in 2012, she applied for a new instructional coaching position that was posted for her building. After finding out that she had been hired for the position, she went online to search for Cognitive Coaching and learned that a new training session would be starting the following day. Her principal supported her in attending the training. Emma was so impressed by what she learned, she then convinced the other two instructional coaches who had been hired with her to attend the training, too.

Through her work as an instructional coach, Emma learned how much she enjoyed working with adults. After 22 years in the classroom, then, she applied for an administration position in a different school district, and she was hired as a high school assistant principal. It was after 2 years in this position and spending 2 hours in the car driving to and home from work each day that Emma sought another administrative position in a district closer to home. She was again hired as a high school assistant principal. After more movement in the district, however, she “threw her hat in the ring” for the position that she is currently in as director of instruction, and she has been in this position since the fall of 2019—just 6 months before the start of COVID-19.

**Kate**

Kate is a White woman who, like Emma, started her career in education as a social studies teacher at the high school level. Even though Kate majored in psychology, she knew that high schools were requiring American history and that teachers were needed, so she set her mind
on completing the necessary credits to be able to teach American history as well. Kate shared that as a classroom teacher, she found that course content was “never her specialty.” It didn’t come naturally and was something she had to learn. Instead, she explained, “It was the delivery and facilitation of learning where I think my strengths lie, and so it just made it really fun.” Kate imagined that after teaching for just a couple of years she might become a principal, but she enjoyed teaching so much, she remained in the classroom for 19 years. During that time, Kate became department chair. Kate was also involved in a great deal of committee work, serving as a leader on the curriculum committee and chair of the First Week of School committee. In regard to her high level of district engagement, Kate explained, “I see places where human effort can maybe make a difference, and so we’d even, I’d even make up committees to try to make a difference in different ways.”

Just as Kate was motivated to get involved in and create committees to address specific areas of need in her school and district, Kate was also moved to offer ideas and support when she sensed “an absence of leadership” following the retirement of a highly respected curriculum director. Kate first applied for an assistant principal position at the high school. Although she was not hired for that position—which Kate admits, “really stung”—district leaders offered her another opportunity. The current director of instruction would be leaving soon, so they proposed that Kate shadow the director for over a year. She did just that, splitting her time between shadowing part time and continuing to teach in the classroom part time. That is how, Kate explained, she “fell” into her current position as director of instruction, adding, “But I will tell you that I really love it! And for somebody who really enjoys the art of teaching or the science of learning, this is a really good place to be.”

Kate has earned two master’s degrees: one in educational leadership and administration
and the second in library and information science. Kate has also served in the same school
district for a total of 29 years—the first 19 in the classroom and the last 10 years as executive
director of instructional services. It was in the first year or two of being in the director position
that she was introduced to Cognitive Coaching. The district was in the process of developing
instructional coaching, and other district leaders believed that Cognitive Coaching “was a high
leverage practice” that could support whatever model of coaching they decided to adopt. The
district had not yet chosen a particular model of coaching to implement. Kate was one of the first
educators from the district to attend the training, noting, “I would say some of the best
professional development I’ve ever had was Cognitive Coaching and Adaptive Schools.” Later
that same summer, 60 more educators from the district attended the Cognitive Coaching
Foundations Seminars. Cognitive Coaching was then brought to the district and integrated in a
variety of ways, including classroom learning labs and job embedded professional development.

Alexis

Alexis is a Black woman whose professional career started as a counselor in K–12
education before she moved into various other educational leadership positions. With a master’s
degree in counseling, master’s in education, education specialist in educational leadership, and a
doctoral degree in educational leadership, Alexis currently serves as inaugural director of
diversity, equity, and inclusion for a large state-wide education association. During her 15 years
in the field of education, Alexis has also served and led as an educational consultant; principal;
and director of diversity, equity, and inclusion for an ISD.

Significant experiences leading to Alexis’s career in education and as an educational
leader can be traced back to her growing up and attending predominately White educational
institutions as a Black girl and then woman. As Alexis explained, “Being an underrepresented
underrepresented student and the eldest of my sibship, I felt strong advocacy in terms of advocating for what was needed in that space, on behalf of myself but also other folks.” Although she wasn’t originally drawn to a career in education, when Alexis realized how much influence public education has on children, she “naturally wanted to be in the space and help design it to make sure it was inclusive.”

Alexis first learned about Cognitive Coaching through leadership courses she experienced more than a decade ago with two women she identified as “fierce female leaders.” These two women, in addition to leading the courses Alexis attended, were also experienced Cognitive Coaching Seminars trainers and coaches. Through her interactions with these women, Alexis came to see Cognitive Coaching as “a gateway to the deeper way that [these women] showed up, and some of the questions that they asked—word, language that they used—came, stemmed from the Cognitive Coaching.” As Alexis noted, “I wanted more of that.”

**Julia**

Julia is a White woman who has worked in the field of education for 33 years. Julia has described herself as “always one that has pursued learning and different skill sets.” After 24 years in the classroom as a high school social studies teacher, Julia assumed a new position in her district. As a classroom teacher, she explained, “I had moved from career tech ed into special ed, but I’d kind of had done the subject matter every way I could, and so I was looking for what’s going to be my next step, and I became an instructional coach.” After serving as an instructional coach for 3 years, Julia assumed a new role in the district as administrator of instructional services. Then, not long after that, another position opened up in the district—one of serving as an assistant principal of instruction. Julia has now served in this current position as assistant principal for 4 years.
According to Julia, her “shift” or the movement that she made from instructor to instructional coach to administrator was the result of a shift in her own thinking—a shift that started with Cognitive Coaching. Instead of waiting for leadership opportunities to come to her, Julia realized that she was already on a path towards leadership. Additional experiences that helped prepare Julia to be an educational leader include receiving a leadership mentor through a teacher leadership program. As part of the program, Julia took on a large professional development “change project” by bringing learning labs to her school campus, and one of the teacher leadership program instructors mentored her through the process. Additional key experiences Julia noted as having helped prepare her as an educational leader include earning her EdD in transformational organizational leadership, Cognitive Coaching, and Jim Knight’s model of coaching.

It was during Julia’s participation in the Literacy Coaches Network that she first learned about Cognitive Coaching. The facilitators of the Literacy Coaches Network—who were also Cognitive Coaching Coaches and trainers—recommended the Cognitive Coaching Seminars training to Julia. Julia not only attended the Cognitive Coaching Foundations Seminar, but she also attended the Cognitive Coaching Advanced Seminars twice because, as she explained, “I always learn something.” Julia has also attended Jim Knight Instructional Coaching training and just recently completed Marshall Goldsmith’s Stakeholder Centered Coaching, demonstrating her commitment to ongoing learning and coaching.

Amy

Amy is a White woman whose current educational role is as a middle school assistant principal. With 22 years in the field of education, this is a relatively new role for Amy, who started in this position in 2019. According to Amy, becoming an assistant principal “was not
anything [she] ever envisioned for [herself].” She loved teaching and spent most of her years in the elementary classroom as a third-grade teacher. It was during those years in the classroom that Amy also served as a leader among her colleagues in becoming department chair and assuming additional responsibilities. Owing to the leadership she demonstrated, Amy explained, she was provided the opportunity to experience Cognitive Coaching—both in attending the training and in being coached by a Cognitive Coach. Then, when the district created new coaching positions, Amy was asked to move into one of those new roles, splitting her time equally between coaching and reading intervention.

After serving in this split coaching role for a year, Amy then completed a year of service for the state as Teacher of the Year. When she returned to the district, she was invited to serve as an instructional coach at the high school. During that same time, through some nudging and connections made through networking, Amy started reflecting more on where she wanted to be in her career and what she wanted to do. She explained that she didn’t have any intentions of leaving her current district: “Just, the opportunity to stretch in a different way and apply the skills that, that’s what I find energizing. … And so I really started to consider the administrative side of it more so.”

In relaying the story of how she moved into her current position as a middle school assistant principal, Amy emphasized, “It was one of those things that I could never have planned. It was, just evolved over time, and, yeah, so more the networking, I suppose.” Even though Amy had not focused on educational leadership or administration in any of her graduate studies, others, she explained, “saw something in [her] that they valued,” and that is how she came to be hired as an assistant principal.
Emergent Themes

Analysis of the research data collected through interviews with these five educational leaders led to the emergence of four superordinate themes labeled as follows: (a) simple but not easy, (b) vulnerability, (c) values, and (d) value practices. Table 2 includes each of these superordinate themes as well as their corresponding subordinate themes.

Table 2

Superordinate and Subordinate Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate themes</th>
<th>Subordinate themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simple but not easy</td>
<td>• Identity shift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Behavioral change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Role conflict/tensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerability</td>
<td>• Professional</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o As coachee</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o As coach</td>
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<td>o As leader</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Personal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>• Service</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Authenticity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Value practices</td>
<td>• Learning mindset</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Confident humility</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Self-awareness</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mindfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Intentionality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These superordinate and subordinate themes emerged from my using the in vivo and process coding methods when analyzing my data. With its focus on language, in vivo coding brought to the surface for me repeated words, phrases, and concepts across the interviews with participants. According to Saldaña (2016), in vivo coding is especially appropriate for “studies that prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (p. 106). Using in vivo coding enabled me to identify shared language and experiences among the study participants. Regarding process coding, Saldaña explains that it is a method that is used “simultaneously with Initial Coding, Focused Coding, and Axial Coding, and a search for consequences of action/interaction is also art of the process” (p. 111). In this study, process coding allowed for me to see in the data how participants understood some of the various ways in which identity influences values and beliefs—and how values and beliefs can, in turn, influence an individual’s behavior and actions.

In my presentation of the superordinate and subordinate themes that follow, I provide evidence of support from all five study participants for the themes of “simple but not easy” and identity shift because they stood out as the most significant in how they relate to and provide meaning and context for the remaining themes. For the additional superordinate and subordinate themes, I draw data from three or more participants to support these claims. I have decided to do this in order to highlight the most illustrative examples, evenly representing participants’ understandings and perceptions across the various themes.

**Simple but Not Easy**

The first superordinate theme that emerged from the data was the leaders’ perception that becoming skilled at and using Cognitive Coaching was “simple but not easy.” Amy, in particular, noted:
At first, [Cognitive Coaching] does feel pretty unnatural, which it doesn’t over time, which is always funny because then when new people are coming into the fold with that, like, that, just, it always feels like, this is, like, really? So, simple, so simple—just not easy.

Like Amy, each one of the leaders with whom I spoke shared aspects of “simple but not easy” in their telling of professional and even personal stories about how they initially learned Cognitive Coaching and now continue to use and develop their coaching skills. Their stories highlighted three experiences, in particular, that signified “simple but not easy”: (a) identity shift, (b) behavioral change, and (c) role conflict and tensions. Struck by this common thread among their stories, I decided to refine my research question regarding these leaders’ experiences with Cognitive Coaching to ask, “What is the story behind mastering the skill and not the concept?” In other words, what is the story behind developing their Cognitive Coaching skills and using them as educational leaders?

When talking about their experiences with Cognitive Coaching and integrating it into their work as educators and educational leaders, the study participants frequently used the word “just” as a qualifier before naming specific “simple” coaching practices. According to the Cambridge University Press (n.d.), “just” can be used in multiple ways. As shown in Table 3, however, “just” is used by Emma, Kate, Julia, Alexis, and Amy as an adverb to mean “only” or “simply.”
Table 3

Participants’ Use of “Just” to Convey Simple

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Illustrative quotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>“just opening up the conversation so that they’re reflecting”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>“I can ask too much, and I just try to listen when that's the case to pull back a little bit.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>“I can just ask questions, and I can paraphrase back to him, and I can summarize, and I try and capture his emotions.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alexis</td>
<td>“just in being with people in a unique way to amplify who they are, and their resourcefulness”</td>
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<td>Amy</td>
<td>“just having to, myself, pause and reflect on, okay, what is it?”</td>
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Through their use of “just,” participants highlighted practices that may be simple to comprehend—they are not complex concepts—but that require a high level of skill to put into practice. These practices include opening reflecting conversations with others, listening attentively, asking questions, being fully present for others, and pausing to reflect.

What the study participants revealed was “not easy” about their efforts to master the skills of Cognitive Coaching included challenges relating to the three subordinate themes of (a) identity shift, (b) behavioral change, and (c) role conflict and tensions.
Identity Shift. As was previously noted in Chapter 2, the concepts behind the mission and work of Cognitive Coaching necessitate a shift in identity for the Cognitive Coach—from being a problem solver, providing others with answers, to becoming a mediator of thinking, supporting and empowering others to find their own solutions. Whereas the role of a consultant is to tell and to teach, the role of a coach is to listen and to inquire. To underscore a previous point made by Costa and Garmston (2016), “Changing one’s identity requires patience, stamina, and courage” (p. 2). This proved to be true in varying degrees for the educational leaders in my study as well. Embracing the mission of Cognitive Coaching meant that they wanted and needed to shift from a consultant mindset to a coaching mindset, and this was not an easy shift to make, especially for leaders coming from a teaching background, which included all of the participants except Alexis, who started her professional career as a counselor in K–12 education and earned her master’s in counseling as well.

According to Emma, what drew her to Cognitive Coaching was the professional way in which the process honored and offered meaningful support to teachers. It was a process that stood out as being different from other models of professional development in the way that it valued and reinforced the expertise and goals of educators. She explained:

Really, what it came down to was, here is process that really does help support adults in the field of education, working with with students in a way that truly honors their professionalism. And gets, you know, the whole idea right of of trying to build that self-directedness in the professionals, and so I think that’s what resonated. Because I think it was something that, as a teacher, because I clearly was still a teacher in the classroom, who was yearning for that, yearning for, kind of learn the process, but also to be on the receiving end of the process, I guess, too.
Even with a strong commitment to the process, Emma shared that the experience of moving from learning about coaching to putting it into practice was “difficult” because it necessitated a change in her approach and ways of interacting with others. It required a shift in identity. She clarified:

You just feel like, okay, this, you know, this is going to take a lot of practice and a lot of work and a lot of time. So, and I’m incredibly self-critical as it is anyhow, so, you know, it was just that just trying to practice a lot.

Emma wanted to show up as a coach, not as a consultant. She wanted to support others in their problem resolving, not provide answers to others’ problems. Just as this shift in identity and behavior was challenging for Emma, so, too, was figuring out how to make Cognitive Coaching her “own.” Emma explained:

So, there’s all these, you know, these great maps and great, you know, sentence stems, but I think the hardest part is making it kind of be authentic and coming from you, right? As the person, and try, so that was kind of hard because I’m very much, like, the rule follower, right? And I’m like, wait a minute. I’m supposed to be saying this right now, so um, so I think that’s the hardest part to all of it is is to try to make it as authentic and not make it feel scripted, but knowing, you know that there is a, there’s a flow. I think that was, that’s the hardest part to it all, especially when you start out.

For Emma, then, while the Cognitive Coaching resources that she had available to her were helpful, figuring out how to develop her own authentic approach proved to be the most challenging aspect of becoming a coach. It is one thing to practice new skills and behaviors. It is quite another to develop a new identity that becomes an important part of one’s own being.

Similar to Emma, Kate described her first experience of learning Cognitive Coaching as “hard but it’s worth the effort.” Her identity had been as a consultant. Now, she wanted to
develop the identity of a coach. Kate understood that these different identities were based on different frameworks—frameworks that Kate viewed and referred to as schemas. Becoming a coach meant adopting a new schema out of which to relate to and interact with others. Revealing what Kate believed was hard about Cognitive Coaching, she explained:

Cognitive Coaching, it was a different schema. It, it was opposite of, I know; I’m a consultant. So, my schema was very developed in the consultant role. Whether I am being the consultant or receiving information, so this idea that you can build capacity in other people to solve their own problems was very new to me and genius. So, I didn’t have, like, my synapses weren’t connecting on that, so it was, it was really like riding a bicycle for the first time. There’s so many so many mechanisms that you have to do, the balance, and the pedaling, and the steering. Cognitive Coaching is like that.

Kate decided that she wanted to relate to and support others in a different way and that required a shift in how she viewed herself and in how she would show up for others at work. Like riding a bike, she would need to concentrate, practice, and risk imbalance in order to gain proficiency and make the process her own.

Similar to Kate’s comparing the process of becoming a Cognitive Coach to riding a bike for the first time, Alexis compared the process to trying on and breaking in a new pair of heels or shoes. It was an awkward and uncomfortable experience at first. Alexis explained, “So, you feel wobbly, like these aren’t my shoes. This doesn’t really have a groove of my foot in it. I’m not, I don’t have my balance or cadence, or it’s not really calibrated yet.” Just a like a new pair of shoes can feel like they aren’t one’s own—“these aren’t my [emphasis added] shoes,” Alexis said—coaching wasn’t a perfect fit at the outset for Alexis either. Still, through practice and the
process of adapting and fine-tuning, however, Alexis came to experience coaching as a part of her identity. She described the process:

I think, well, initially it was over here [using her hands to show space away from her body], and now it’s in here [using her hands to indicate what is within her]. Like, it’s it is how I show up. It is a piece of my identity versus, versus it being these glasses [holding up a pair of her own glasses], something so concrete. It really is something that I have integrated as part of me.

Becoming a coach was a process for Alexis that was not easy, but it is one she said that she is “grateful” for because, as she explained, it “has been instrumental in [her] growth, development, and in [her] courageous acts … those Cognitive Coaching relationships and spaces.”

Julia also experienced a profound shift as a result of her experience with Cognitive Coaching, an experience that she said that she cannot really separate from the learning and experiences that she also had from participating in Advanced Cognitive Coaching, Adaptive Schools, and her teacher leadership group. Julia noted that the leaders/facilitators of her teacher leadership group were also trained Cognitive Coaching trainers and coaches, so for 18 months, her learning “was infused with all Cognitive Coaching and Adaptive Schools.” (Cognitive Coaching Seminars and Adaptive Schools Seminars are offered through Thinking Collaborative, which houses both.)

For Julia, the shift that she experienced was in both how it pressed her thinking beyond implementing new instructional practices to internalizing new ways of thinking and, even more remarkably, into thinking about her own thinking. Julia explained:

And it was deeper, and it pushed my thinking, whereas trainings before were, oh, implement, you know, I don’t know, meeting students at the door. That’s not a deep
reflective thing to do. You implement it, and it’s good, and kids like it and whatnot, but getting you to think about your thinking. I think that piece was a game changer.

In addition to her thinking, Julia also described a shift that took place in her leadership. Immersed in these new ways of learning and thinking, Julia took on a new change project—a “big one”—which was implementing learning labs at her school. This opportunity, Julia remarked, “helped to sort of solidify some things” and opened up even more possibilities for her. The shift and change that she experienced was one that she believed others could have observed in her. She said:

And I think others looking at me would say, if they were watching, they would say, wow, things really changed right there at that, at that time, so I think it was even noticeable, but sometimes that’s how it all work[s]. It all comes together, and then, poof, you know, you’re launched.

Prior to her experiences with Cognitive Coaching and the teacher leadership group, Julia believed that in order to be a leader in her school and district, she needed to wait to be invited into such a position. Her perception changed, however, as she developed more personal agency though a variety of Cognitive Coaching, Adaptive Schools, and teacher leader experiences. Julia revealed:

My view of leadership was that you sit there, and you wait until someone says, “Hey, I think that you should go and try this,” right? That must have happened a lot in our organization. I just didn’t give it too much thought. I thought, okay, when I’m ready, that’s how it’ll happen. And I think it was [my teacher leadership group facilitators] who flipped that for me a little bit. And then, once I started with the, you know, it started with the Cognitive Coaching. So much more followed that that started my brain on, “Oh, you
mean, I don't have to sit here and wait? Like, okay, I can, I'm I'm already starting down the path toward leadership?”

The shifts that Julia experienced, then, were not only in her thinking, but also in how she came to see herself. Instead of continuing to wait to be invited into leadership, Julia came to recognize her own influence and agency as a leader. She experienced a shift in her identity as an educator.

Amy experienced shifts as well in her thinking, in her new role and identity as a coach, and in her stance as a teacher. The first “powerful shift” that Amy experienced through Cognitive Coaching was during the Cognitive Coaching Foundation Seminar training that she attended. She recounted three specific occasions that were “transformational” and key to opening up her thinking. The first was experiencing how the use of tentative language when posing questions can help one feel more at ease and open to exploring ideas, rather than feeling “frozen” by having to know the “right” answer. The second was learning about the five forms of feedback, particularly those forms that prioritize feedback supporting data and meditative thinking over praise and judgment. The third was being partnered with her district’s new superintendent to practice a Cognitive Coaching conversation. She described how she felt about that coaching experience:

I remember feeling very nervous [she laughs] about it because I didn’t know [the superintendent] very well. He was, we had, he hadn’t been our super very long, and I guess, I as much as I felt nervous about it, after the fact, having, you know, really been intentional about trying to listen and pause and paraphrase and make those intentional moves and pose questions whether they were the, you know, the most effective questions at that time or not, that doesn’t really matter. It was just more the the how I felt afterwards, where it’s like I was so nervous going into it, but then afterwards, it was, like,
really that’s, like, because it’s not about me at all and what I say or don’t say. It’s really just that intentionality around listening and reflecting back what someone else is thinking, that, I felt, I guess, empowered by that. Like it was really just about giving somebody space to process through something themselves, which is most of the time what people want. Not always, but I feel like most of the time.

Amy experienced a range of emotions through this coaching experience. She felt nervous, relieved, affirmed, empowered, and inspired. Convinced of its value, Amy brought her learning about Cognitive Coaching back to the elementary classroom and introduced key coaching concepts and skills to her students.

For Amy, sharing what she had learned about Cognitive Coaching with her students was significant, and taking on a new identity as a coach meant that she needed to change the way that she showed up in the classroom. Amy acknowledged, “It was meaningful trying to get the kids to do [aspects of Cognitive Coaching] … But I did have to even transition my stance with kids, where I’m like, okay, we’re, this is no longer about being right or wrong. This is about growing our thinking together, and I’m going to need your help.”

Indeed, as Costa and Garmston (2016) noted, shifting one’s identity from consultant to coach—from solving others’ problems to supporting others in solving their own problems—is not easy. A shift in identity also requires a shift in one’s practices. The educational leaders with whom I spoke identified challenges they encountered in implementing and following through on behavioral changes that they were trying to make as well.

**Behavioral Change.** Regarding the complexity of behavioral change, it is one thing to understand a concept, it is quite another to actually apply it, especially when a newly desired practice is not aligned with one’s already established habits and behaviors. Costa and Garmston
(2016) refer to Dilts’s hierarchical model of learning, which includes identity (at the top of the hierarchy), followed by beliefs, values, capabilities, behavior, and then environment (at the lowest level) to explain how changes in higher levels of learning can influence lower levels (pp. 28–30). Although it is possible for behavior, situated at a lower level, to change beliefs, which are positioned at a higher level, nevertheless, according to Costa and Garmston, it is more efficacious to effect change through intervention at a higher level than it is to initiate change from a lower level because those domains in the hierarchy that are more closely related to identity are more likely to result in behavioral change over time (pp. 35–36).

Reflecting on their Cognitive Coaching experiences, study participants spoke about some of the behavioral changes that have been the most challenging to adopt. For Kate, who admitted that her own “schema was very developed in the consultant role,” adjusting her behavior to align with a new Cognitive Coaching schema and coaching identity was a challenge because she immediately and instinctively wanted to solve problems instead of listen and provide support for others to solve their own problems. She said:

I have a tendency to just want to get to the solution. And then you’re missing so many of the important pieces. You know that that, and I’m talking about a, I’ll just say a natural weakness of mine. Let’s just get to the answer. Let’s find the solution. Let’s solve the problem. But through Cognitive Coaching, it’s the journey that helps build efficacy, that helps build capacity [emphasis added]. … That’s what Cognitive Coaching is supposed to do, helps build capacity in people. So, overcoming that personal barrier is a challenge. Despite the fact that Kate understands and believes in the benefits of coaching, she still finds it difficult to take a step back from trying to solve problems in order to move towards better supporting the thinking and self-directedness of another. During the interview, Kate herself
asked, “How come I don’t think of it [Cognitive Coaching] more often to use?” Answering her own question, Kate continued:

Because my default, you know, my default is probably the consulting part when I know better. So, I can say this, Cognitive Coaching has helped me reflect, you know, looking in the mirror that my previous practice of consulting and being autonomous isn’t sufficient for the outcomes that I want to have. Cognitive Coaching helps me to be the leader that I want to be. So that, and I think repeated practice of that, brings a person increasingly closer to be the leader that they want to be, that they intend to be.

Kate recognizes that self-awareness and practice are needed to more consistently use the Cognitive Coaching behaviors she deems necessary to be the kind of leader she aspires to be.

A second behavior that Kate mentioned struggling with was setting aside her own opinions and judgments in order to listen to and honor the views and opinions of others. She explained:

It’s a barrier to know that I have strong opinions, and that I’m supposed to set that aside, and I know that that’s the right thing to do. You don’t have to convince me that setting opinions and judgments aside is the right thing to do; it’s just hard sometimes. When she feels strongly about an issue or idea, Kate understands that it is important for her to hold back when the goal of a particular conversation is to support the thinking of another person. Still, knowing the right thing to do is one thing. Following through with her words and actions is quite another.

In addition to the challenge of withholding strong opinions, Kate noted how difficult it can be to paraphrase when she is feeling heightened emotion during a conversation because it requires a change in behavior for her. Relating an example from her personal life, Kate admitted,
“It’s easy for me to remember to paraphrase when my children are upset about something. It’s real easy. Or my husband. … But if I get dragged into the emotion, then … that’s what I tend to forget.”

Julia, too, spoke about the challenge of putting new coaching knowledge, skills, and tools into practice. Used to her former ways of interacting and communicating with others, remembering and integrating new ways of relating, listening, and speaking with others was not easy. She described a strategy that she used when she first started learning Cognitive Coaching to help her remember and to focus on one facet of coaching at a time. She explained:

Yeah … I had no idea that behavioral changes were so hard. Um, so, when I was, I would choose, for example, pausing, right? And then, I, that’s why I still grab that. I would grab these little, like they used to be really popular these, these kind of things. [Julia holds up to the camera a “be nice” bracelet that she is wearing.] Okay, but they had gummy ones that were a little bit smaller in different colors, so I would take, I don’t know, the pink one for pausing, right? And that was my reminder because I never took it off, and it was like right there and then in conversations or whatever, I would, “Oh, there it is again.” It was a reminder that I, helped me to change my behavior. It’s sort of similar to writing on a mirror or having sticky notes. That was my method of getting some of them over and over into my brain.

A keen desire to develop a new identity as a Cognitive Coach inspired Julia to want to change old behaviors in order to practice new ones. Recognizing how difficult it can be to change behavior, Julia committed to using a specific technique—wearing “little teeny stretchy rubber band bracelets”—to remind her to integrate aspects of coaching throughout the day. Julia was
dedicated and determined to make these changes, so much so, that, as she said, “I never took [the bracelet] off.”

Two behavioral changes that Amy shared could be difficult at times to live out consistently at work and at home were listening and supporting another’s thinking. Amy spoke about the need—and the challenge—to stay focused and fully present for others. She shared her strategy as an assistant principal of saving emails, paperwork, and other similar tasks to do at home so that she can focus on the people in front of her during the school day. She explained:

I’ m not the fixer of all things, but you know, trying to help everyone feel empowered to to live into what it is we say we value, believe in, who we are. But, yeah, and then that goes back to the very basic tenants of pausing and paraphrasing and again that communication. Listening is critical to all of that. Just being present, like I really have to be very present and focused in all of those situations, and it’s easy to get distracted, which I why I feel like any, like I mentioned earlier, the emails, blogs entries, any of the paper trail stuff ends up being all stuff I typically end up doing at home because I need to be present with the people in front of me so that I can, you know, have the most influence while I am present with them.

Fully aware of how easy it is to get distracted when trying to be completely present for another person, Amy adopted a daily routine which allows her to more effectively engage in one-to-one conversations with others, staying focused on using her coaching skills of listening, pausing, and paraphrasing.

Still, even with the best of intentions and efforts, behavioral change can be incredibly difficult. Just as Kate noted that if she gets “dragged into an emotion,” it can be easy for her to
forget to paraphrase, so, too, did Amy admit that there are times when she is feeling weary that she can fall back into old habits with her husband and children. She said:

You know, when you’re tired and you’ve been intentional about those things all day long, it can be that much harder to do that when you’re at home with your family, and that’s where I always feel like, there are times I’ll even say, “Okay, wait a minute. Let me start over. … I was not listening carefully, or I have gone into trying to fix it, and that was, I know that is not helpful right now, let me back up a second.

Amy strives to be consistent in her behavior as a coach professionally and personally; even so, when she is feeling drained and exhausted, it can be easy to get distracted and fall back on trying to fix instead of listen to others’ problems. Because Amy has shared aspects of Cognitive Coaching with her children—especially the oldest who was a student in her class when she was teaching purposeful talk to her students—they know the coaching behaviors that their mother values. Amy said, “[The oldest] would very much call me out if I wasn’t practicing what I preach, which I’m thankful for because it all helps hold me accountable.”

Role Conflicts and Tensions. Other aspects of what is “simple but not easy” when it comes to using Cognitive Coaching as an educational leader are the role conflicts and tensions that leaders experience when navigating among the four different support functions—especially coaching and consulting—in a position of leadership. Conflicts and pressures emerge when leaders feel pulled in different directions due to the various aspects of their job. They also emerge when time is tight and of the essence—and when leaders’ expectations for themselves and others do not correspond with reality.

Emma started in her position as director of instruction for a small, rural school district in the fall of 2019, just 6 months before the start of COVID-19. From the outset, Emma felt she had
a number of challenges to meet, including preparing for and hosting a complete On Site Review with the Michigan Department of Education and Office of Educational Supports in March of 2020. Within 30 days of the On Site Review, Emma was tasked with writing COVID-19 preparedness and response plans as well as putting together district and building-level compliance plans. From the start, Emma’s job has been multifaceted. In addition to aligning curriculum, planning professional development, and writing grants, Emma also serves as the director of technology for the district. All of this she does, too, without the support of a full-time administrative assistant. Emma talked about what it has been like for her to move from a larger school district to a smaller one. She explained, “So I thought, this will be, you know, this will be easy. It’s a small organization. What I’ve learned is sometimes the smaller the organization—right?—the more responsibilities because you just don’t have staff.”

Having a myriad of responsibilities with a limited amount of time has resulted in Emma feeling frustrated about having to devote more time attending to administrative tasks and duties than to coaching and leading—the kind of work that she had envisioned and really wanted to do. She explained:

I thought I would have more time to like sit down and coach principals and coach teams. … I’m doing so much like day to day minutia and uncovering … so many things here that should have been done, that haven’t been done, or were being done, and not being done correctly, so I’m still uncovering stuff and trying to put systems in place—there’s no systems—so so that’s kind of tough because I can’t really, the vision stuff is just not even on my radar right now, and that’s where it should be, and I feel like I’m not coaching as much as I want to be.
What Emma had imagined that her new position as director of instruction would be like has turned out quite differently and that has led to feelings of disappointment and discouragement. She wants to coach, but she feels that administrative responsibilities, systemic challenges, and time restraints get in the way.

Nevertheless, as Emma explained, she hasn’t given up on using her coaching skills, and she has ideas about how she might start to use and incorporate them more in her daily work. She offered:

And so, um, my goal, they’re sitting there—my four, the four support functions are on my little thing hanging up here [pointing to a space to her right]—and I told myself, I gotta get them on my door. And I want to just like start building the vocabulary, and people before they walk in … “Okay, do you want coaching? Do you want collaboration? Do you want consultation? Do you need collaboration?” like, I just need to start to be more intentional about even just using some of the jargon here, um, [pause] and I just haven’t done that yet.

Emma would still like to coach and be more deliberate about supporting others through the four different support functions, especially coaching, consulting, and collaborating. As Emma highlighted, though, time has been a significant challenge, and it has impacted how she leads and relates to others. She explained how even when she is thinking of coaching principles while speaking with someone, she has decided not to invite or engage in a coaching conversation because of the longer period of time the conversation might take. She explained:

Alright, so this, here’s, here’s a principal at this school. This is where I know, you know, where their strength is. This is where I know their growth areas, right? So, I’m always thinking of states of mind. But I think part of it is just, because of time, right? This is
what’s frustrating. And because I’m in a position, a lot of times, where, I just have to like, tell them what to do. I just have to because of, you know, deadlines. You know. I’m become, you know, it’s much more of that consultant sometimes, *but* [emphasis added] I’m very good at when a principal says to me, “So, [Emma], am I doing okay? Give me feedback.” *Then* [emphasis added], I’m like very good at like, so, you know, setting up times to be able to do that. To go meet them in their office, meet them where they are. And just give them that time. Because, hopefully, they’re doing the same with their teachers, right?

When feeling pressed for time, Emma has experienced conflict in deciding how she wants to show up—as a consultant, as coach, or as a collaborator—for the people with whom she works.

In addition to time, a second challenge that has created conflict for Emma as a leader who values coaching is the culture in which she works—a culture that does not seem to value the benefits of coaching. Emma explained:

So, what I have learned is, you know, many districts have an instructional coach. The teachers are open to coaching. We [our district] signed on with an opportunity. It was a great great opportunity. The teachers said they wanted to do it. … And they were going to get coaching as part of it. It was like pulling teeth. They said they wanted to do it, but they didn’t want the coaching, really. They didn’t want to do the videos, and so what it really showed me was that, a lot of our teachers are not open to coaching. It’s not a culture of coaching, so I would say that that’s, that’s probably the biggest challenge. It’s a cultural challenge.

Emma wondered aloud, “How do you coach people who don’t want to be coached?” Emma shared a reason why she thought the educators in her district might be resistant. She suggested:
I think there’s still a side, you know, and very much, there’s a lot of old-fashioned ideas here in this rural community. I think people still think like the coaching means like I need help, or I’m not doing something well. And that’s that’s I think the biggest barrier, and I think, probably, as I think about the two administrators who are probably not open to coaching, it’s because they feel like if they do it that they’re not doing a good job because they need help, right?

Emma appreciates that coaching requires vulnerability and that many of the people with whom she works are not ready to being vulnerable. As much as she values coaching, it is sometimes just easier—especially when time is tight—to simply provide people with the answers they are ultimately looking for, instead of slowing down to support their thinking.

Like Emma, Alexis also noted the conflict that she has experienced when others’ expectations of what a leader should be and do are not aligned with her own values and goals. Alexis described the tensions that can result when leaders and the people they lead hold different perspectives and concerns:

So, if people are grounded in technical and don’t want to be reflective or introspective and want [snaps fingers] quick answers or want me to just right away give them answers, it becomes problematic. Which is, you know, me also choosing which hat I am going to wear in a situation, but there are some situations where, even if somebody is asking for “just tell me the answer,” if you’re a leader and you’re on the balcony, you’re looking at the situation, and you know you’re thinking about sustainability and empowerment. I’ve chosen a hat deliberately that may be ouchee for you, but it’s going to produce some growth and tension that you might not like, but that’s my value on being us being learners and being part of a collective.
Alexis acknowledged that even though she was “teeing up the tension” in taking a different approach than what the other person wanted, as a leader, she had strategic reasons for doing so and, therefore, acted in accordance with those reasons.

In addition to addressing the tension that leaders can experience in choosing how to act or react in specific situations, Alexis also noted the conflict that she experienced as a Black woman when she was first trying to meet the prototype of an educational leader, which in her mind, was a White male. She explained:

I’m just gonna be real honest. I think the prototype when we talk about leadership in schools is usually a White male, and I fail miserably at being a White male. And so saying, it’s because you’re trying to be a White male and you’re a Black woman [laughing]. Stop it [laughing]. Be yourself [more laughing] and allow the work to be done, and through that lens, and you will be where you’re supposed to be doing the work that you have been called to do.

Recognizing the conflict within herself in trying to be and lead as someone other than who she truly was, Alexis learned to embrace the process of becoming who she is meant to be and fulfilling her own vocation.

For Julia, a significant tension that she has experienced in her role as assistant principal of instruction is the “weight” of knowing that “the number one predictor of success [for students] is the teacher in the classroom” and that she is the point person for supporting all of the teachers at the tech center—many of whom have not had any prior teacher training. Julia explained:

We have 2,700 kids coming through our school, and we don’t have teachers that have been trained in a college class. We have teachers that are coming out of business and industry, yet they’re being held to the same rubric or the same evaluation tool as the rest
of the K–12 teachers, so not only are we bringing PD [professional development], and we’re doing observations, but I’m also teaching Education 101 on the fly. And that’s that’s a weighty responsibility. So, I, I feel I feel a weight. I feel a responsibility to make sure I’m doing a good job and making sure that what needs to be delivered to make them successful is happening. I spend a lot of personal time one on one with the instructors.

Again, a lot of it is more coaching than anything else, so it it’s a responsibility.

Julia wants to provide the best support she can to help the teachers and their students succeed. While most of the support that she provides is coaching, Julia did share that there are times when assuming the role of a coach is more difficult because of the duty and obligation she feels to ensure that the teachers are well equipped and prepared to teach. Sometimes, this means she needs to engage in more telling than coaching. She explained:

So, it’s hard with a new teacher, right? I can’t just sit back in my role and ask ask some questions that are going to help them be able to reflect. I have to be direct, and sometimes that feels to me like it’s a little bit harsh, whereas, I had another instructor in my office today, and he’s kicked back in the chair, and I’m kicked back in the chair, and I can just ask questions, and I can paraphrase back to him, and I can summarize, and I try and capture his emotions. It’s it’s a different experience. I feel more laid back. I don’t feel as responsible. He can take it wherever he wants to go. He’s relaxed about it. With a new teacher, it feels harsh for me to have to tell them, this, this. “You have to put it on the board every day. It has to be written from a student’s perspective. … Here’s a list of verbs that you might want to use.” It just feels harsher to me.
The support that Julia provides new and experienced teachers is different, and she hopes that the support she does provide new teachers is the kind of support they are looking for and need. She noted, though, that she really isn’t sure. Julia acknowledged:

I haven’t ever asked a newer teacher, how did that come across to you? I hope they feel like … I’m so overwhelmed with all the things I have to do at school, she’s just giving to me exactly what I have to do. It’s very, you know, it’s no fluff. There’s not, we’re not going to go on and on for hours about it. I hope they feel like they’re getting it straight.

As much as Julia values coaching, she deliberately chooses to relate with newer teachers more as a consultant than as a coach because she believes they are more in need of direction and clear instruction than opportunities for reflection.

Still, Julia isn’t really sure how the new teachers feel. She wonders if her approach might be “harsh.” She started considering what might happen if she followed up with the newer teachers, but immediately, she recognized that time would be an issue. She said:

So, you know, that’s a possibility for me to follow back and say, “Okay, we had our conversation, now let’s talk about that conversation. How was that for you?” It’s a time factor. You know, I just don’t.

For Julia, Emma and Alexis—in fact, all five of the educational leaders with whom I spoke—competing leadership responsibilities, limited time, and conflicting expectations—all contribute to these leaders’ perceptions and experiences of using Cognitive Coaching as “simple but not easy.”

Vulnerability

A second superordinate theme that emerged from the data was the leaders’ willingness to be vulnerable. According to Brown (2019), “The definition of vulnerability is uncertainty, risk,
and emotional exposure. But vulnerability is not weakness; it’s our most accurate measure of courage” (p. 154). Indeed, while “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” are all unavoidable life experiences, still, some people and some leaders are more willing than others to risk feeling uncomfortable, embarrassed, and/or frightened. All five of the study participants with whom I spoke shared some of the various ways they have dared to be vulnerable as leaders, as coaches, and as those being coached—as coachees. While study participants shared more than a few instances of daring to be vulnerable, highlighted below are some of the most illustrative examples, starting with Emma’s.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Emma found herself in a difficult and vulnerable position as a leader when she needed to make significant decisions about what to make available on the district website for parents to be able to access materials to support their child(ren)’s remote learning. She invited teacher input, and she also considered the needs of families. In the end, Emma made a decision for learning template consistency across K–12 grade levels, and her decision was not popular among the teachers. Emma described the fallout and her feelings about that:

So, that was tough, because, you know, teachers didn’t like necessarily kind of being told, “Nope, here’s what everyone’s template is going to look like because we need to keep this consistent, to make it easier on our families, our kids.” So, I think there’s some credibility that, you know, I lost a little bit just because, you know, I just didn’t do what the teachers wanted, which is, let’s just do what we want to do, and everything will be fine.

As Emma noted, it was “tough” to make a decision that she knew teachers would not like, but she had clarity on why it was a decision that she had to make. Emma further clarified:
I think they [the teachers] know that I work my butt off, and they inherently know that ultimately my concern [sic] are for the kids and that’s that’s where it’s always going to be, and I hate to say it, and I’ve said it in the meeting, and you know, I don’t care if it’s convenient for adults. It’s got to be what’s best for kids, and so that’s why I got into education.

Emma demonstrated daring vulnerability as a leader in making a decision that she truly believed in and aligned with her values. Her decision involved all three aspects of vulnerability: uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure. This all happened, too, within Emma’s first 6 months of serving as director of instruction, adapting not only to a new position, but also to a dramatically altered way of life as a result of the pandemic.

Like Emma’s brave vulnerability as a leader, Alexis demonstrated courageous leadership in recognizing and admitting that she does not have all the answers—a perspective she has also embraced as a Cognitive Coach. Indeed, leaders are often presumed to have all the answers, and that daunting expectation of others can add to leaders’ feelings of vulnerability. Alexis addressed this challenge when speaking about the first few days in her new role as director of diversity, equity, and inclusion and the approach that she intentionally took as a learner in this new position:

Being an educational leader in this time, I think there’s this burning platform to, one, not only understand self-care, but community care. And I think to see more broadly than what we have seen it previously, and right now, being an educational leader, for me, I have green lighted myself to take the posture of a student, which I think is hard in some systems and or some people to say you don’t have all the answers and/or to take the posture of learner and, in fact, this is Day 5, so this is where Day 5 of my current
educational leader role is kind of like converging in this moment. It is the thing that I have had to remind myself of. It is okay to be a learner. It is okay to lead and be a learner, to model that, and you’re still okay.

As a new inaugural director of diversity, equity, and inclusion during a time of intense racial tension, social conflict, and political unrest, Alexis had to remind herself that it is fine not to have all of the answers. Moreover, she wanted to demonstrate to others the value and vulnerability of leading as a learner.

When I asked Amy how Cognitive Coaching has played a role in her relationships with others as a leader, vulnerability emerged as one of her immediate answers. She explained that for her, relationships were about really seeing and honoring the other person, and an acronym that she likes to “cling to regularly” is LOVE, which stands for listening, observing, vulnerability, and empathy. She shared:

I do feel like that’s love in action. It’s a choice, and that’s how you are in relationship with others is when you are truly, again, as I described, seeing, honoring who they are, so that so much of that is through listening, observing, putting myself in their shoes, and there’s vulnerability in taking a step back, and really trying to know them and to connect with them. Yeah, that does require vulnerability and helping them know me, like, that’s part of that.

As a leader, Amy demonstrates vulnerability in choosing to listen attentively and imagine as best she can what the other person is experiencing and feeling because she wants the other person to feel both seen and heard. An example of how Amy puts this acronym into practice is when a parent calls the school to talk about an incident with their child. Amy explained:
So, [the parent] might be really worked up about something, and I might not agree with the way they’re talking to me about it. Ah, you’re yelling at me, and I’m not sure why, but I’m trying to really listen to what the emotion is, and I have no idea what’s going on in your life, but I just want to make sure you feel heard because you are hurting and upset right now, and I know it really has nothing to do with me, but just, it also, that has enabled me to de-escalate a lot of situations and making sure parents feel like I care about what they have to say and about their child.

Risking uncertainty and holding space for the heightened emotions of others is one way in which Amy demonstrates daring vulnerability as middle school assistant principal. Her willingness to remain fully present for others during trying situations aids in her being able to show empathy towards others.

Navigating the different support functions as a leader, Kate has dared to be vulnerable as a Cognitive Coach. Even though she believes that she is not as “skillful” as so many other coaches—like the instructional coaches in the district and her Cognitive Coaching trainer and coach—Kate still continues to coach. When she coaches, Kate admitted to having “two primary patterns of feelings.” The first, she explained, is being critical of herself, and the second is trusting in the promise of Cognitive Coaching. Regarding her own self-criticism, Kate explained:

So, when I’m doing, when I’m, when I’m a Cognitive Coach, I’m very concerned that I’m not asking the right questions or paraphrasing enough or I’m not thinking about the skills, the states of being. I’m not thinking about that … and so I’m worried, am I doing it the wrong way, or am I doing it in a way that isn’t going to be productive for this person?
Kate often feels “concerned,” “worried,” and unsure about her skills as a Cognitive Coach. Even so, she continues to risk experiencing these uncomfortable feelings in order to offer the kind of support that she believes can truly help others.

The second pattern of feeling that Kate described is understanding the power of Cognitive Coaching and realizing that coaching—even when it is done imperfectly—can still be of great benefit to another. She explained:

And then the competing idea [to not coaching perfectly] is that there isn’t a wrong way [to coach], that if you are paraphrasing, and you are asking invitational questions with tentative wording, and you’re paying attention to what they’re saying, that you will think of the appropriate follow-up questions, and that I should resist being a perfectionist, knowing that Cognitive Coaching has this incredible potential, like, if you know all those parts, like the value is is insane, but even if you’re not doing it that way, you’re still going to add value to the relationship, into the thinking of the person.

Kate recognizes that “being a perfectionist” can get in the way of offering meaningful and valuable support to others; therefore, instead of playing it safe by avoiding feelings of discomfort, Kate continues to venture into coaching.

Whereas for Kate, coaching others has been a recurring occasion for daring vulnerability, for Julia, it has been the experience of actually being coached that has necessitated courage on her part. Contrasting the difference for her in coaching versus being coached, Julia explained:

So, I experience vulnerability in Cognitive Coaching when I’m being coached. I do not experience it when I’m coaching. Meaning, I’m asking questions to get you to think through some things, right? For me, that’s not vulnerability. In fact, it’s almost a little bit of a, I have these words between me and whoever I’m coaching, but definitely, in my
when I was being coached, I think it begins to cut open your brain to examine your own thinking and that can be very vulnerable. Yeah, I, it, if it’s a really perceptive, good Cognitive Coach, they can cut to the core. They they see it, and they can cut to your core. Because the coaching process and tools, like asking questions, serve as a kind of safeguard between her and the person she is coaching, Julia doesn’t experience vulnerability when she is coaching. When she has been coached, however, Julia admitted to feeling extremely vulnerable, in the sense that what the coach was inviting Julia to do was to think more deeply about her thinking and open up about any deep-seated thoughts and feelings.

In addition to demonstrating a willingness to be vulnerable in the work place, some study participants also shared examples of daring to be vulnerable in their personal lives as well. Amy demonstrated the value of being vulnerable at home when she spoke about how coaching has impacted her relationship with her husband and their two boys. Prior to learning and developing her coaching skills, Amy shared that the way she spoke with her husband was completely different. She explained:

I used to jump in and not allow him the space to finish [his words] because I did not, like, I didn’t know pausing and paraphrasing, before where I would jump in and interrupt all the time, like, it was just, I’m like, oh my gosh. Again, that simple not easy, but how did I not ever know that, like how yuck. Wow, and you stayed married to me that that long, still, even when I did all that. This that was really eye opening.

Amy realized that the way that she took over these conversations with her husband was not in line with her new values and beliefs. In daring to be vulnerable, she could embrace the discomfort, embarrassment, and regret of her prior behavior and admit that she had acted in the wrong. So impactful was this lesson for Amy, she said that she has even referred to this
experience with her husband as an illustration of her own changed behavior during presentations for others. Again, this is more evidence of Amy’s willingness to be vulnerable—not only in growing from the experience but also sharing her growth publicly with others.

In her role as a mother, too, Amy has dared to be vulnerable by teaching her boys valuable coaching and communication skills and encouraging them to be open with her, even if what they have had to say occasionally stings a bit. She explained:

And it’s interesting because my boys grew up going to school with me almost their entire lives, so they’ve heard about like, my evolution of thinking and how that translated into classroom work and work with colleagues, and they actually grew up experiencing some of that, so that they would even call me out on that sometimes when, “Oh, Mom, you talk about parking your thinking. You didn’t park your thinking. [laughing] Which, I actually really appreciate that they’re they’re teasing me, but at the same point in time I’m going, “Yes, thank you,” like, and that has actually been key to, I think, our relationships is that, man, I mess up so often, in both arenas, but I, this is, that’s a Brené Brown piece, too, where it just like, am I in there rumbling with it, though? Yes, I’m going to mess up, and I have to be okay with that, and in the fact that, then, in the personal arena that my kids are even able to notice and name things that are not helpful keeps the communication open, though.

Amy has shared the journey of her ongoing learning and development as a professional with her family and that has resulted in the entire family’s ongoing learning and development as well. Instead of feeling defensive when her boys “notice and name” something that she has said or done that has not been helpful, Amy welcomes their feedback and the opportunity for continuous self-improvement. She models bravery for her children in daring to be vulnerable.
Values

A third superordinate theme that emerged from the data was values—the two key values of service and authenticity in particular. While the study participants spoke about their experiences as leaders and as coaches, the values of service and authenticity came up repeatedly as being integral to the why and the driving force behind their risk taking and daring to be vulnerable.

**Service.** When the study participants responded to questions about how they would describe themselves as a leader, their relationships with others, and how others might perceive them as a leader, over and over again their responses included the words “serve,” “service,” and/or “servant.” Even Emma, who was emphatic in saying that she hated the term—“The servant leadership term. I hate the word servant, I really do.”—still made reference to the concept of service to describe how others might view her as a leader. She continued:

So that’s one of the things [service] that maybe comes from my blue collar, you know, upbringing is that, you know, there are days, where a couple weeks ago, I was doing lunch supervision at the high school because we had some issues going on, and I’m like, how like, do I need to be there today? Like, so I think, you know, I I’m not afraid of doing the things that may not necessarily connect to this role, but in a small district, so I don’t want to say I’m a servant, but, but, you know, I’m very willing to just kind of help where there is a need. I guess that’s the best way I can describe it.

While Emma does not want to be regarded as a servant, she wants and is willing to serve in whatever ways she can—even volunteering to help with lunch duty—to support and help meet the needs of others across the district.
Similar to Emma, Kate is also eager to support the students, teachers, students, parents, and staff in her district and views her role as a leader as being one of service as well. Kate explained:

I’m not a person that likes titles or hierarchy. I want people to know that we’re all on the same team, and that, because my workstation is in a different building does not make me above any job that they have to do. So, I would like to describe my relationship is in service to the people in this district.

For Kate, serving the people with whom she works is a priority. She shared an example of how she strives to offer support, even if it requires stepping out of her comfort zone. She explained:

On Monday I’m going to substitute teach for in the morning for a new teacher. We don’t have enough subs, and she has a new teacher training at the ISD, and she wouldn’t be able to go if I don’t fill in. So, this just transpired today, and while I’m a little bit scared about going into a second-grade classroom as a high school teacher, I feel, I feel really good. I know that the kids will be safe, and that we’ll laugh a lot. I don’t know how much learning will happen, but that teacher can go, so, I’m glad that I can participate and, um, model service so that I want people to feel like they’re not in it alone and that they don’t have to solve things alone.

Because of her strong desire to serve, Kate was willing to risk stepping into an uncomfortable situation to support this second-grade teacher. More than words, Kate’s actions demonstrate how much she values service and is willing to risk being vulnerable to put another’s needs before her own comfort.

Similar to Kate’s responses and others, Julia also spoke about service when asked how others see her as a person and as a leader. She commented:
I hope they see me as, ah, I’m simply here to serve you. I’m simply here to enable you.

… Is that the case? I don’t know, you’d have to ask them. Yeah, but that that would be my hope that they, they know or they see the servant leadership piece because that’s, you know, that’s the only reason I’m there.

Julia recognizes that she cannot truly know how others view her, but her main concern as a leader is serving others and making their jobs easier. She shared a story about helping someone who had requested a printer and had been told that she could not have one. Julia shared, “It became a two-week trial for me to get her a printer, right? Because she needed one, and I can understand her special dilemma.” Julia was committed to offering support despite the additional work and frustration she might experience as a result. Service would have to take precedence over her own comfort and convenience.

When describing herself as a leader, Amy explained, “I, who I am as a human being, as a person, is who I hope I show up as as a leader because that’s what leading is about is bringing out the best in the people you serve.” It is through being in service to others that Amy believes she has the most influence as a leader: “Maximizing, you know, what other people bring to the table so that we can collectively do great things together.”

**Authenticity.** A second value that appeared repeatedly throughout the data was authenticity. Leaders spoke not only of wanting to be true to themselves, but also holding up the individual uniqueness of others. When Emma spoke about how she has incorporated Cognitive Coaching into leadership practices, she touched on the importance of being able to lead in ways that were authentic to her and empowered others as well. Instead of leading by authority, Emma strives to lead by inviting others’ contributions and favoring collaboration. She said:
I’ve really probably gotten pretty good at [building rapport and trust] … providing just time for [groups of teams] to collaborate, to get to know each other, to have dialogue, instead of you know, me basically saying, “Here, this is what I think all of you guys should do,” right? … It’s just not my style this, “Okay, this is what we’re going to do, and this is how we’re going to do it” because I don’t have all of the answers. I don’t want to have all the answers. I want, you know, the administrators and teachers, part of the group, and, you know, to provide that input.

Through Cognitive Coaching, Emma has learned skills and strategies that enable her to be authentic and to lead in ways that align with her values and beliefs. She prioritizes the building of trust and cooperation among team members and promotes their contributions.

Alexis highlighted the importance of authenticity when she spoke about the process of developing a coaching identity. As noted earlier, Alexis compared first attempts at using her coaching skills to trying on a new pair of shoes—they didn’t feel like they were her own. She explained how she came to see space for authenticity in her leadership practice, acknowledging a spiritual aspect of that for her:

The other piece that I had to reckon with was, and my integration of Cognitive Coaching doesn’t have to look like the trainers’, like there are some stems that we all use and there’s, there are dispositions and the capabilities and all of that, but it doesn’t always sound exactly the same, which I think that part is spiritual in terms of, I can be and utilize my gifts and talents and so it manifests itself very differently here [moving hand in front of herself] than it might over there [pointing away from herself], and yet it’s still great work.
Alexis admired the work of her Cognitive Coaching trainers and coach, but she realized that in order to be effective as a coach and as a leader herself, she needed to be authentic and integrate her own individuality in the process. She couldn’t coach in the very same ways they did.

Another way in which Alexis demonstrated her valuing of authenticity was when I asked how she might describe herself as a leader, she responded, “Um, let’s see. I would say … probably more of an anomaly than the norm because of the way I try to show up in community with other people.” Alexis no longer feels like she has to show up as an expert—as one who has all of the answers. Instead, Alexis prefers to show up as a healer. She acknowledged:

I think I used to try to fit in and do it a certain way, but now. I know I don’t have to, and I don’t really want to or care to. And some of that is rooted in that identity that I was talked about in terms of healer. I don’t think all educational leaders see themselves as healers.

But perhaps things might be different if we did.

Alexis’s unique approach to leading has been as a healer, focusing on creating situations that bring joy, health, and wholeness to others. While she has tried to lead in different ways—trying to lead as a White male even though she is a Black woman, as mentioned previously—Alexis has learned that she is happier and more effective as a leader when she is being true to herself—when she is authentic.

Just as Alexis leads out of her identity as a healer, Amy leads out of the deep sense she has in being beloved. In response to how she might describe herself as a person, Amy explained:

I’m going to share one word—but this has been a long time of really evolving into, really embracing and understanding and believing this—is beloved. That I am beloved, and I and that’s. [pause] It’s even getting me choked up. [pause] You know, so much of my faith journey…. It really doesn’t matter my words and actions, you know, like I, again, I
am beloved just because I, I am His [raising hands up, looking above], and and that, when I live in that space, I hope then … that others feel loved because that’s what, if that’s what I believe I am, that, then I’m living in love and helping others feel and that they feel beloved.

Owing to the love that Amy has herself experienced through faith, she wants others to feel loved and deeply cared for as well. Amy related how at the end of the previous school year, a teacher approached her to say that she had remembered Amy talking to the staff about identity and her experience of feeling beloved. The teacher said, “I just need [you] to know that that has stuck with me because, like, you help us all feel loved in that.” According to Amy, hearing that from the teacher was not only enlightening, but also “one of the most powerful … moments of feedback” that she had ever received. Amy added, “I don’t know that I was super intentional about wanting to make sure they all felt that. It’s just something that is core to my values and beliefs.” For Amy, showing love and kindness towards others through her words and actions is what it means to be true to herself and to lead authentically.

**Value Practices**

A fourth superordinate theme that emerged from the data was value practices—practices that include study participants’ leading with a learning mindset, confident humility, self-awareness, mindfulness, and intentionality. I have named these various practices “value practices” because of the ways in which study participants have expressly leaned into these practices in order to align their behavior with their values.

**Learning mindset.** A first of five value practices that emerged as themes from the data was a learning mindset. According to Drewery et al. (2019), who researched the relationship between a lifelong learning mindset and career success in the field of accounting and business,
“Lifelong learners have a lifelong learning mindset, which includes epistemic curiosity, strategic thinking, and resilience” (p. 569). For all five educators, embracing a learning mindset has been key to their professional growth as coaches and as leaders. They have all pursued graduate education, earning master’s, specialist, and doctoral degrees. They have attended countless professional conferences, seminars, workshops, and district in-service events. Even more remarkable than the knowledge gained from those academic and various other learning experiences, however, has been the learning mindset that has fueled each woman’s thirst for knowledge and the deliberate pursuit of continual improvement—not only for themselves, but also for the people they lead and serve.

In each of the stories the study participants shared about shifts in identity, pivots as leaders during COVID, and fresh starts—whether those fresh starts included launching an innovative project or accepting a new position—evidence of inquisitiveness and strength was apparent. Serving in her new role as director of diversity, equity, and inclusion, Alexis shared how she came to serve in this inaugural leadership position. Her story highlights the importance and impact of staying curious and being resilient. Alexis described how her interest in education and her passion for advocacy began:

I honestly have to acknowledge that I have always attended predominately White institutions as a Black woman, and I think that always situated me in a curious place in terms of seeing and experiencing the educational ecosystem and perhaps piqued my interest in who are the players in this ecosystem that make a difference for all students. Recognizing that she, her younger siblings, and other underrepresented students had needs that were different from those of White students, Alexis started questioning in order to learn more about the system, how it worked, and what she might be able to do in order to make it a more
equitable and welcoming space for all students. This is a practice she has continued to engage in not only in her younger years as a student but also throughout her adult years as an educator and as a leader.

When asked about how she feels about herself, Alexis remarked, “I think that I am a learner. I love to learn. I have a problem when I can’t learn, like I get agitated because I am curious.” For Alexis, learning is an essential part of who she is and what she needs to do in order to feel at ease. She is passionate about supporting others, and because of what she has accomplished, she believes others perceive her commitment to service and leading the way as well.

Regarding how she thinks others see her as a person, Alexis offered that others see her as someone willing to approach new and challenging situations with courage and resilience:

I think people personally and professionally, people see me as someone who defines myself, that is courageous, that does have a pioneering spirit. That does also have a resilient spirit, like bounce back type. I do think people professionally and personally see me as a healer and educator. I think that because of the work that I do. … I will say some people see me as an agitator also. Yeah, because I do have hard conversations. I don’t shy away from hard conversations, yet I do know, in the age and stage that I’m in, that there’s a way to scaffold hard conversations.

As a leader, healer, and educator, Alexis is willing to lean into discomfort to achieve what she believes is a greater good.

Like Alexis’s, Kate’s experiences as a leader demonstrate her passion for learning and resilient spirit as well. As noted earlier in the chapter, when Kate spoke about her role as director of instruction, she exclaimed, “I love it! And for somebody who really enjoys the art of teaching
or the science of learning, this is a good place to be.” Elaborating further on what it is like to serve in her position, Kate explained:

I think the best part is being a creator, being creative and being a problem solver. So, working with teachers and committees and other people, and you can fill in the blank, right? It’s like, to implement technology, or this new science curriculum, or instructional coaches, or whatever the need is, let’s go after it. That’s so fun!

Again, similar to Alexis, Kate finds great joy and satisfaction in the continuous learning that is an essential part of her job. She is eager to collaborate with others and to take on new projects. Kate values the variety in her work as well as opportunities to lead and serve other people—even in the midst of conflict.

During our interview, Kate made a point of emphasizing that she is not troubled by conflict. In fact, Kate views conflict as being “desirable” because of what can be discovered and gained through it. Conflict is an opportunity for additional learning. She explained:

I think that if we are careful in our why, and the reason that we do things that conflict can be resolved, and if there isn’t conflict, well, there there are, there’s always conflict, but I if you don’t know about it, that’s super unhealthy, because then you can’t even address it, if people aren’t speaking up about it, so that’s really challenging, and, like, I love that challenge if somebody’s upset or mad, how can I make it better or what can I learn from their disposition or their thinking.

For Kate, her desire to learn and grow is greater than the discomfort she might feel in addressing conflict. It is with notable determination that she would rather meet any challenges that arise than choose to ignore them.
That Julia embraced a learning mindset was evident in the first minutes of her first interview with me. When asked about how she came to be an assistant principal of instruction, Julia shared how her passion for learning inspired her to take on new responsibilities and assume new positions in education:

So, um, I would say that I'm always one that has pursued learning and different skill sets, so I was in a classroom. I think it was around, maybe year, trying to think back, um maybe year 24, so I felt like I had made changes in my career. I had moved from career tech ed into special ed, but I'd kind of had done the subject matter every way I could, and so I was looking for what's going to be my next step, and I became an instructional coach and then, due to someone leaving their position, there was an assistant principal sort of of instruction so doing evaluations and PD [professional development].

Not wanting to stay in a position that had become uninteresting to her, Julia started seeking other opportunities. It was during this time that Julia took Cognitive Coaching, and from there, that was when the move from being an instructor to becoming an instructional coach to then becoming an administrator took place. Julia’s inner drive to learn more and to challenge herself in different ways was integral to her moving into coaching and into leadership. As a leader, Julia has continued to nurture her love for learning. Attending additional coaching training seminars, like Marshall Goldsmith, and continuing to be coached, Julia has continued to cultivate her learning mindset.

Confident Humility. According to Grant (2021), confident humility is “having faith in our capability while appreciating that we may not have the right solution or even be addressing the right problem” (p. 47). It is having confidence not in what one already knows but in what one
is capable of learning. All five study participants demonstrated confident humility in some of the ways they spoke about their experiences and learning as educational leaders.

As a leader starting a new position, especially during a world-wide pandemic, Alexis spoke about what the reality of a situation like that means to her. She explained:

And, so, what does that mean in terms of you sitting in a leader’s seat? So, it means acknowledging the loss of clarity and investing in the action of knowing in in that new moment. And even even that sometimes is kind of like, that’s still not a lot, but it’s more insight than what you had, and it’s relevant to this moment that you’re in.

Alexis admits that there will undoubtedly be times of uncertainty for leaders; however, if she approaches her work with confident humility, acknowledging the truth of the situation and trusting what she can glean from the present moment, that will be an appropriate place to start.

Referring to her very recent experience of starting a new job, Alexis shared:

So even now, I think about as a person that’s what? 14–15 days in, there’s transferable knowledge that I have, and yet, because the context is different, there has to be space of letting go and letting in a new synthesized version of knowledge that’s going to be impactful. [smiling] Because otherwise, this is not doctoral level language, otherwise, you’re screwed. Like, you become irrelevant, non-responsive. It’s just a mismatch based on your inability to be a learner, to embrace it. So, yeah, I’ve learned to let it go. Lean in.

Be a student.

With confident humility—and a sense of humor—Alexis has opted for “letting go” of the way things used to be in order to press into new ways of leading and learning. She knows that she will need time and space to familiarize herself with her new surroundings and her new position. She is not concerned about what she doesn’t know. She has confidence in her ability to learn.
Julia, too, has demonstrated confident humility when speaking about her continuous growth as a Cognitive Coach. Admitting that even after years of practice she still has more to fine tune in order to be skilled at questioning, Julia explained:

The questioning alone, for me, has been a lifelong journey so learning to ask good open-ended questions is. I’m still not there, you know, I’m still working on it, and I’ve been working on it for, you know, I don’t even know how long.

Julia is humble enough to admit that even after all these years, she continues to work at asking effective open-ended questions. She knows that she has room to improve; she also knows that with repeated practice, her mediative questioning skills will continue to improve.

When Amy first attended Cognitive Coaching training, she was a classroom teacher. To develop her skills as a coach, she decided to teach and practice various coaching skills with her students. As Amy acknowledged, she felt unsure about how her teaching and the students’ learning would go:

I didn’t know what I was doing. I have books out in front of me going, “Okay, we’re going to try this, you. Like, okay, we’re gonna, we’re going to be thinkers. We’re going to try and do this together.”

Amy was able to admit to her students and to me how little she knew at the time. Still, she believed in herself and had enough confidence to try. She wanted to learn Cognitive Coaching better and, seeing the value, wanted to learn and practice alongside her students.

Further evidence of Amy’s confident humility can also be seen in a remarkable exchange that she had with one of her students. Amy recalled the moment when a student started to see himself as a teacher, too:
I remember a student saying to me, like, well, no offense, Mrs. …, but but it's like we're we're the teachers too. Like, you're still the teacher, but like we're teachers too, and I'm like, “Oh my gosh, yes!” Like there was no offense in that whatsoever, that was like the best thing I could have ever heard from a student in trying to help them take ownership.

Through taking a humble, yet confident approach to learning, Amy was able to become a learner with her students and invite them to become teachers in the classroom as well.

**Self-Awareness.** A third value practice that showed up in the data across participants was self-awareness. Carden et al. (2022) described self-awareness as follows:

Self-awareness consists of a range of components, which can be developed through focus, evaluation and feedback, and provides an individual with an awareness of their internal state (emotions, cognitions, physiological responses), that drives their behaviors (beliefs, values and motivations) and an awareness of how this impacts and influences others. (p. 164)

For all five of the study participants, striving to maintain awareness of their own thoughts, feelings, and physical responses as well as how their manners might affect others was a common practice.

At one point in our conversation, Emma demonstrated a keen sense of self-awareness when she shared that she did not feel particularly confident in her new role as director of instruction. When I asked what guides her through new challenges when she is not feeling confident, she explained that she has always struggled with things having to be “perfect.” Emma admitted that she can get “bored very easily,” adding, “I want a new challenge, even though it scares the hell out of me, right?”
Emma is self-aware. She understands her own feelings of doubt and insecurity and where they come from. When a colleague offered Emma praise for a meeting that Emma had just recently led, Emma was able to focus on those words of praise and integrate them with her own thoughts and feelings to arrive at a place of acceptance. She offered:

I know my intentions are good and pure, and I’m trying, so I guess, you know, if it’s not perfect, I just kind of gotta let it go. So maybe that’s just it, is just kind of coming to terms with, you know, it is what it is, and things will get done, and I just got to be okay with it, but am I confident in this role? No. No. Honestly.

Emma leans into self-awareness to cultivate a clearer understanding of herself and others. She pays attention to the thoughts and feelings that drive her actions. She also attends to the influence that her behavior has on other people.

Similar to Emma, Kate has a good sense of what she needs to pay attention to in herself and others. Kate demonstrated self-awareness when she noted how difficult it can be for her at times to step back and let others express their views. She commented:

I have to be careful because sometimes that part of me that disposition still wants to take over, so I’m as an educator and an educational leader, sometimes I talk too much, and I have to let others, you know, have other voices in the room.

Kate is aware of her tendency to take control. She understands the negative effect that that can have on others. By remaining self-aware, Kate can monitor her thoughts and feelings, recall how much she values listening others’ perspectives, and choose behavior that is congruent with her values.

Julia demonstrated self-awareness and even used the term herself when she spoke about how Cognitive Coaching has played a role in transforming her delivery as a leader—her
leadership practice. In place of striving to provide ideas and answers, Julia’s focus changed to working hard to become a better listener and observer. She explained:

So, so, taking those [Seven Norms of Collaboration from Adaptive Schools] and living them out, I think, has changed things. I think my go-to prior to Cognitive Coaching was, I'm going to throw out all my ideas, right? I've got really good ideas, and I'm going to throw them out for everybody, and everybody's going to love them. I found myself with Cognitive Coaching being quiet, becoming a listener, um. The awareness of self is a big one, right? I, not only am I more aware of myself and my actions, but I'm more aware of other people's actions. I think I've, I think it's the listening aspect. I can listen now on a deeper level. I used to hear people and hear what they were saying. Now I can hear what's behind the words.

Julia is cognizant of how Cognitive Coaching initiated change in some of her values, beliefs, and actions. Whereas she used to delight in being the one to come up with ideas for the group, through her training in coaching, Julia learned to appreciate taking a step back to listen more attentively. Practicing self-awareness has increased Julia’s level of consciousness about herself as well as others.

**Mindfulness.** A fourth value practice that emerged from the data was mindfulness. Reina and Kudesia (2020) highlight key aspects of mindfulness when they wrote:

Ultimately, mindfulness relies on the self-regulatory processes by which people monitor and adjust their attention, thoughts, and feelings. When the mind drifts off or gets immersed in a stream of thoughts and feelings, people must notice their state of mind and adjust it, by bringing their attention back to ongoing events or detaching from that stream of thoughts and feelings … . (p. 79)
Whereas self-awareness tends to focus on achieving consciousness about one’s thoughts and feelings, mindfulness concentrates more on watching over one’s thoughts and feelings in order to make adjustments, if necessary, to attain one’s goals.

Kate demonstrated mindfulness when she spoke about how she knows that she can dominate and take charge in certain situations. She explained:

I’m aware that I can dominate. Like, my leadership can dominate because I I like to be active, and I like to share ideas, so I have to be aware of that and put, pull back sometimes if I’m talking too much in a group so that, so that ideas can be heard and that we can get, have discourse, we can get to the best solution.

Kate understands that she needs to not only be aware or conscious of her tendency to dominate, she also needs to stay mindful of when she is talking too much, so that she can change her behavior and provide others with the opportunity to speak and share their own ideas. Because she values the contributions of others, Kate stays mindful of how her words and actions uphold those values. During those times when she realizes that she is falling short, Kate can make the necessary adjustments to better align her words and actions with her values.

Alexis spoke about being mindful in the context of describing how Cognitive Coaching has played a role in her delivery as a leader. She explained key differences between leading with authority and leading through personal identity and influence:

Yeah, I think it’s the difference between being a boss versus being a leader. Being a dictator versus being a facilitator, catalyst, or healer; being a dictator versus a healer. I think it’s a difference of being mindful and not [emphasis added]. Being a bull in a china shop versus being very mindful of bringing the calm and inviting people in the calmness, or the groundedness, even in, you know, in a hurricane type situation or a tornado type
situation. … So, there’s some mindfulness and some deliberateness and a consciousness about identity and the influence that has on everything, so yeah.

Alexis knows how she wants show up; she wants to show up as a leader who is also a healer. By staying mindful, she monitors her attention, thoughts, and feelings to ensure that they align with her values, beliefs, and identity. If not, she can adjust her behavior to better achieve the outcome she desires.

When Julia expressed that Cognitive Coaching was a life-changing event, I followed up by asking how it had been life-changing for her. She responded by explaining that she is more mindful now of how she questions and how she comes across to others. She said:

I’m a questioner, and I question to get down to it. So when I do that, that can come, sometimes come across very harshly. I’m much more mindful of that now, and I take a step back, and I’ll use “might,” how might you look at this? Um. A lot of times I ask questions now of my instructors that I don’t have an answer already in the back of my head. … And I notice I don’t jump in and tell you anymore. I ask questions so that you can uncover that.

Like Alexis, Julia practices mindfulness to monitor her thoughts, words, and actions and to choose behavior that is consistent with the kind of leader she wants to be. She wants to ask questions in ways that invite thinking, not that make others feel like they are being interrogated.

**Intentionality.** The fifth value practice that emerged from the data was intentionality. The definition of intentionality that most closely represents the theme as it was shared by the study participants comes from the *APA Dictionary of Psychology* (n.d.): *n.* a characteristic of an individual’s acts that requires the individual (a) to have goals, desires, and standards; (b) to select
behaviors that are in the service of attaining the goal (e.g., means to an end); and (c) to call into conscious awareness a desired future state.

All five educational leaders shared occasions of intentionality when, with a particular goal in mind, they chose congruent behaviors to achieve a particular, desired outcome. Emma, for example, spoke about deliberate steps that she had taken to support and empower an administrator in the district who was demonstrating a real interest and passion in her work, particularly in the area of supporting new teachers. Emma asked this administrator if she might be willing to take the lead in starting a new mentoring program for new teachers in the district. Emma said that the administrator was “so delighted.” Emma’s intentionality around her work with this administrator and other administrators in the district is evident in her reflection:

I think part of it is just understanding what people may have an interest in and just encouraging, just, you know, and so she's she's doing a great job, and I think that's just part of it is just trying and it's, too, part of it is just building relationships, right? So, and just being intentional about building relationships and keeping those relationships strong. … But just know what kind of, not only what they're interested in, but where their skills are. … So, I also adapt, do you, you know Adaptive Schools [nodding]? So, I'm always, that, triple track agenda in my head.¹ So, even like the kind of going through building working agreements on Wednesday, part of the reason why I wanted to do it is because, principals, you should be doing this with your staff, you should be doing this with your PLCs [Professional Learning Communities], you should be doing this with your leadership team, so I'm constantly trying to model that work for them to implement in their buildings as well.

¹ A triple track agenda consists of the current task or purpose of the group, process skills development, and group development (Garmston & Wellman, 2018, pp. 40–41).
In addition to being intentional about building and maintaining strong relationships with others in her district, Emma is also intentional about discovering others’ particular interests and abilities. Similarly, when Emma is leading meetings, she is intentional about incorporating and modeling leadership and facilitation practices that she would like the principals integrate at the building level with their own teachers and staff. To create a collaborative culture in which principals and teachers can work together for the benefit of students, Emma chooses actions that are aligned with these goals.

Kate, like Emma, values collaboration and is purposeful in choosing actions that align with her desire to create a cooperative culture in the workplace. Kate understands that while she might be more naturally drawn to working independently, she needs to collaborate and welcome others’ ideas to grow and to develop strong cooperative relationships. Kate explained:

And then, for so much of my life, I really like to be like an autonomous leader, and that doesn't serve well, really. If you want to be good and improve, you have to collaborate, so I've really shifted to value collaboration, and I have to be careful because sometimes that part of me that disposition still wants to take over, so I'm as an educator and an educational leader, sometimes I talk too much, and I have to let other, you know, have other voices in the room. And I might want to do it my way because I think my way's better, and I have to be conscious of releasing that so that we can let other people have ownership, and that's that's where Cognitive Coaching has helped me a lot.

Kate practices intentionality because she knows her limitations and inclinations, and she knows what kinds of behavior will contribute to creating a richer and more collaborative work environment. According to Kate, Cognitive Coaching helped her learn skills and strategies that she can be intentional about incorporating into her leadership practice to reach her desired goals.
Alexis exhibits intentionality by choosing to act in ways that are congruent with her goals as a leader—even when her actions are not always understood or appreciated by others. Earlier in this chapter, in the section addressing role conflicts and tensions, Alexis spoke about the process of “choosing which hat [she] is going to wear in a situation” and making that choice deliberately as a leader who is focused on learning, growth, and sustainability. Alexis’ deliberate decision making is evidence of her leading with intentionality.

These are the key findings from my research. There is one additional finding from my research that was not expected but was found to be experienced by each one of the study participants and that is that just as all five attended Cognitive Coaching training through the Thinking Collaborative, so, too, did all five attend Adaptive Schools training through the Thinking Collaborative.

**Adaptive Schools**

Since all five of the study participants appreciated and valued their training in Cognitive Coaching, it is not surprising that all five decided to attend Adaptive Schools Foundation Seminars to learn more about skills necessary to develop collaborative teams. Cognitive Coaching Seminars and Adaptive Schools Seminars are both offered through Thinking Collaborative. According to the organization’s website, “The mission ofThinking Collaborative is to provide individuals, teams, and organizations with the identity, capabilities, concepts, and skills to establish and sustain systems that result in increased performance and resourcefulness” (Thinking Collaborative, 2022). While Cognitive Coaching focuses on improving individual resourcefulness and capacity, Adaptive Schools focuses on developing the capability and collaboration of teams. As noted previously, Cognitive Coaching incorporates the Five States of Mind: consciousness, craftsmanship, efficacy, flexibility, and interdependence. Similarly,
Adaptive Schools features Five Energy Sources that reside within individuals and groups that can lead to high performance (Garmston & Wellman, 2018, p. 65). These Five Energy Sources are comprised of the same five categories for the Five States of Mind: consciousness, craftsmanship, efficacy, flexibility, and interdependence.

On a few different occasions, study participants referred to the Five Energy Sources instead of the Five States of Mind when talking about Cognitive Coaching. Given the Five Energy Sources and the Five States of Mind are the same—albeit, the Five States of Mind refer to individual resourcefulness and the Five Energy Sources refer to the underlying dynamism of groups—it was not too surprising that study participants occasionally combined Adaptive Schools terminology and philosophy when speaking about Cognitive Coaching.

An example of this mingling occurred when Emma was reflecting on and speaking about how Cognitive Coaching is part of her daily life. Emma referred to modeling for other leaders in the district the kinds of behavior that she wants to see. She highlighted a few practices—establishing norms and creating agendas—and then quickly added:

That’s more Adaptive Schools, but, you know, I would say the listening piece … the Five Energy Sources or States of Mind … and I’m always going, “Okay, you know, is this person, like, where is their efficacy right now?”

In talking about how she has integrated Cognitive Coaching in her daily life, Emma recognizes that she has incorporated complementary aspects from Adaptive Schools as well.

Like Emma, Amy referred to the Five States of Mind—articulating them as the Five Energy Sources—when describing how Cognitive Coaching was a part of her daily life. Amy said:
The most basic thing is just making sure I pause to listen to seek understanding. And then, trying to make sure I'm being mindful of the five forms of energy and trying to think of them, how to paraphrase to ensure whomever I'm with in that moment or on the phone with is feeling heard. As more often than not, that's what they're needing.

Amy, like Emma, is aware of how greater resourcefulness in the Five States of Mind and the Five Energy Sources can lead to improvement in individual and team success. Considering the sameness of the five components of each and each educational leader’s learning in Cognitive Coaching and in Adaptive Schools, this mingling of terms—accidentally referring to Adaptive Schools instead of Cognitive Coaching is understandable.

In the next chapter, I will present my conclusions as well as implications for practice, theory, and future research. A final positionality statement will conclude the last chapter.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

To study the phenomenon of leading as a Cognitive Coach, I explored the experiences and perceptions of five K–12 educational leaders by taking an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) to my research. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), phenomenology is an appropriate research tradition to choose when exploring the “essence” of an experience, especially the “affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences” (pp. 26, 28). And in my research study, IPA has allowed me to gain a broader and deeper understanding of what leading as a Cognitive Coach has meant to five K–12 educational leaders in their own particular circumstances, relationships, and experiences of being (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015).

The data that I collected provided valuable insight into the study participants’ understandings and perceptions as educators using Cognitive Coaching as part of their leadership practice. As my data demonstrate, the study participants did, indeed, share affective, emotional, and, at times, intense human experiences—experiences that have led to considerable changes in their very being and shifts in identity.

I approached my initial investigation of the experiences of educational leaders who use Cognitive Coaching through a conceptual framework that I had developed to show the interrelatedness of relationships between the Cognitive Coach and the educational leader as well as between the educational leader and the learning community (see Figure 3). The conceptual framework was helpful to me in creating a surface-level framework for these key relationships and concepts and in developing my interview questions. As I anticipated, study participants referenced various aspects of Cognitive Coaching, including the Cognitive Coaching mission, four support functions, Five States of Mind, coaching tools, and the Cognitive Coach. These are foundational features of my conceptual framework.
One key theme that emerged from my data and is intricately related to Cognitive Coaching and to the relationships depicted in this conceptual framework is vulnerability. Vulnerability has played a significant role not only in each leader’s personal and professional development as a leader and as a coach, but also in their relationships with the learning community and their Cognitive Coach.

Regarding the relationship between vulnerability and leadership, Brown (2021) writes:

In my most recent research on courage and leadership, the ability to embrace vulnerability emerged as the prerequisite for all of the daring leadership behaviors. If we can’t handle uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure in a way that aligns with our values and furthers our organizational goals, we can’t lead. (p. 14)

Daring to be vulnerable was an essential and shared experience among the educational leaders participating in this study. In fact, in light of Cognitive Coaching’s Five States of Mind, it is
vulnerability that serves as the catalyst for increased resourcefulness in consciousness, craftsmanship, efficacy, flexibility, and interdependence. In moving from low resourcefulness in the Five States of Mind to high resourcefulness, having the courage to embrace vulnerability allows for greater openess to enlightenment and change. Vulnerability is essential for growth and transformation (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

*Increasing Resourcefulness in the Five States of Mind Through Vulnerability*

*Note.* Adapted from *Cognitive Coaching seminars foundation training learning guide* by A. L. Costa and R. Garmston, 2019, p. 27.

As Brown (2012) asserts, vulnerability is “the cradle of the emotions and experiences that we crave” (p. 34). In regard to the Five States of Mind, vulnerability is the cradle or gateway for developing greater awareness, expertise, capability, adaptability, and connection.

Recognizing the central role that vulnerability had played in the leading and coaching development of these educational leaders, I then wondered how it was that they were willing to take such emotional and uncertain risks. I also wondered why. Why risk trying something new?
Why risk admitting not to know something? Why risk showing one’s feelings, admitting a mistake, apologizing?

These questions led directly to two other key themes that emerged from my data: the values of authenticity and service. Study participants expressed keen aspirations of being true to themselves as leaders and as coaches. They also conveyed a strong desire to be and lead in service to others. Their intense focus on supporting the good of another is at the heart of Cognitive Coaching. As previously highlighted, the mission of Cognitive Coaching is “to produce self-directed persons with the cognitive capacity for excellence both independently and as members of a community” (Costa & Garmson, 2021, p. 16). This mission of supporting the self-directedness of another underscores the values of service and authenticity in helping others become who it is they want to be—individually and as part of a larger community.

To represent this new understanding of the role vulnerability, authenticity, and service play in the development of leaders, coaches, and the learning community, I developed a new conceptual framework with the various aspects of Cognitive Coaching presented in black font: Cognitive Coaching and the Five States of Mind. My contributions are presented in blue: leader value practices (including learning mindset, confident humility, self-awareness, mindfulness, intentionality), vulnerability, authenticity, and service (see Figure 5).
Whereas my first conceptual framework presented what was happening regarding the Cognitive Coaching of educational leaders and by educational leaders at the surface level, this new conceptual framework presents how the study participants were experiencing Cognitive Coaching as leaders at a deeper level.

Starting at the top of the conceptual framework, we see the leader as both a Cognitive Coach and coachee. The leader provides support as a Cognitive Coach and receives coaching support as a coachee. The leader’s focus is on supporting individual and organizational growth through authentic leadership and service.

Through the coaching they receive and the coaching they provide, educational leaders seek to raise resourcefulness in the Five States of Mind—their own states of mind as well as others’—to achieve greater holonomy or wholeness among individual members of the learning
According to Costa and Garmston (2021), “The ultimate goal of Cognitive Coaching, therefore, is to facilitate each individual in becoming more resourceful in each and all of the Five States of Mind, thereby becoming more effective and skillful at contributing interdependently to the educational system” (p. 19). By coaching and encouraging greater consciousness, craftsmanship, efficacy, flexibility, and interdependence, educational leaders can hold up both individual and organizational growth and development.

As my research findings revealed, leaders engage in five value practices to improve resourcefulness in the Five States of Mind and to align their values, beliefs, words and actions with who they want to be as a leader and coach—their authentic identity. The value practices they draw upon include learning mindset, confident humility, self-awareness, mindfulness, and intentionality. The value practices assist leaders in integrating the Cognitive Coaching mission, capabilities, assumptions, support functions, and coaching tools.

Underlying and running through all aspects of the leader’s Cognitive Coaching, value practices, Five States of Mind, and identity as a leader and coach is vulnerability—the leader’s willingness to be vulnerable—to learn, grow, and develop alongside members of the learning community they are committed to serving.

Conclusions

Originally, my research question was “How do educational leaders experience Cognitive Coaching, both in being coached and in using Cognitive Coaching?” with two sub questions:

- What are their understandings of and perceptions of those experiences?
- How do those understandings, perceptions, experiences inform their leadership practice?

As I started analyzing the data, I found that a more focused question emerged, “What is the story behind mastering the skill and not the concept of leading as a Cognitive Coach?” My new
conceptual framework outlines that story. The following conclusions offer a more in-depth explanation.

**Conclusion One: Affect and Values**

Cognitive Coaching sounds like it is all about cognition, but it is rooted in affect and values. Even as the leaders in this study embrace a cognitive approach to coaching, at the heart of why they lead as they do are the values they hold and the feelings of goodwill they have towards others. These values and feelings shape their identity—who they want to be and how they want to show up as leaders and coaches.

Explaining how intricately feelings are connected to the body and to cognition as well, Damasio (2010) notes, “We are not necessarily thinking machines. We are feeling machines that think” (2:07). It is our feelings that allow us to attend to what is going on in the body. Furthermore, Damasio (1994) explains, “And since what comes first constitutes a frame of reference for what comes after, feelings have a say on how the rest of the brain and cognition go about their business. Their influence is immense” (pp. 159–160). My research findings demonstrate and emphasize the importance of feelings in leaders’ development of identity and in their relationships with others. Just as Amy holds onto her identity as one who is beloved and wants others to experience love as she has felt loved, Alexis leads and coaches out of her identity as a healer—an educator-healer—striving to engage with others in “healing-centered ways” to support their feeling “included, welcomed, like they belong.” Feelings are, indeed, an integral part of these women’s experiences as leaders and as Cognitive Coaches.

**Conclusion Two: Vulnerability**

Foundational to Cognitive Coaching and leading with Cognitive Coaching is one’s willingness to embrace vulnerability as a leader, coach, and coachee. Brown (2018) emphasizes
the importance of leaders’ risking vulnerability in order to achieve their greater ends when she writes:

Adaptability to change, hard conversations, feedback, problem solving, ethical decision making, recognition, resilience, and all of the other skills that underpin daring leadership are born of vulnerability. To foreclose on vulnerability and our emotional life out of fear that the costs will be too high is to walk away from the very thing that gives purpose and meaning to living. (p. 43)

As my research findings revealed, educational leaders demonstrated vulnerability in a variety of ways: using new coaching skills, even when they felt unskilled; experiencing the discomfort in adopting a new identity and showing up differently—taking a coaching approach instead of a consulting approach; shifting power and control from themselves as leaders to others; daring to show up as novices and as learners as opposed to as experts, and being open to discomfort in the shift of their identity. Leaders risked vulnerability on these numerous and diverse occasions in order to live and lead in ways that aligned with who they wanted to be and how they wanted to show up for themselves and for others.

**Conclusion Three: Value Practices**

Five of the themes that emerged from the data can be seen as value practices that cultivate vulnerability and support behavioral change in developing, transforming, and integrating identity. These five practices include having a learning mindset, confident humility, self-awareness, mindfulness, and intentionality. As Julia observed about the process of adopting and integrating new coaching tools, “Behavioral change is hard.” And why is it so hard?

According to Call (2022), “Behavior change is complicated and complex because it requires a person to disrupt a current habit while simultaneously fostering a new, possibly unfamiliar, set of
As illustrated through the findings presented in the previous chapter, adopting a Cognitive Coaching identity necessitated that the educational leaders risk uncertainty and discomfort in adopting practices supportive of changes in behavior more closely aligned with this new identity. Their practices of welcoming more learning, having confidence in what they could learn and do—even if they felt uncertain, practicing self-awareness, being mindful, and acting with intentionality all worked together to support these women in fostering the courage and persistence necessary to bring about the personal and professional transformation.

**Conclusion Four: Increased Resourcefulness in the Five States of Mind**

Combined with Cognitive Coaching, daring vulnerability and congruent practices can help leaders support and cultivate increased resourcefulness in the Five States of Mind for all members of the learning community. As previously noted, the goal of Cognitive Coaching is to support others in developing increased resourcefulness in the Five States of Mind for both individual and organizational growth and improvement. Through their application and modeling of vulnerability and the five value practices, educational leaders demonstrate through their words and actions their openness to growth, daring to take risks and to be uncomfortable for their own self-improvement and the development of others. In developing their own resourcefulness in the Five States of Mind through coaching, daring vulnerability, and applying these practices, these educational leaders have become better equipped to support other members of the learning community in their own growth and development.

**Conclusion Five: Authenticity and Service**

In order to get to daring vulnerability, Cognitive Coaching leaders need to be authentic and have service at the heart. As deeply held values, authenticity and service drive and guide these leaders’ words and actions. Just as authenticity has inspired the study participants to align
behavior with their values, beliefs, and identity, service has also inspired them to focus on the needs of others, recognizing that even by serving one individual, the organization as a whole can benefit. All members of the learning community are interconnected in striving for holonomy.

Highlighting an important connection between authenticity and vulnerability, George et al. (2018) explain that, oftentimes, when leaders are early in their career, they can have abundant energy and drive to achieve external and worldly success. Over time, however, these same leaders might come to realize that they have been missing something, not living out of who they would like to be: “Knowing their authentic selves requires the courage and honesty to open up and examine their experiences. As they do so, leaders become more humane and willing to be vulnerable” (George et al., 2018, p. 15). The educational leaders interviewed for this study know who they want to be and how they want to show up in service to others. Daring to be vulnerable has allowed them to be both more self-aware and other-focused at the same time.

Given the importance of service as a shared value and motivating factor among all five educational leaders in my study, I sought additional information about the role of service in leadership and found numerous articles related to servant leadership. One definition of servant leadership, in particular, aligned well with the new conceptual framework I had developed:

In sum, the servant-leader is a steward who holds the organization in trust to the public it serves, while remaining intimately attuned to the needs and situations of those who work in the organization and sincerely committed to empowering others to succeed professionally and personally. … A servant-leader is one who is committed to the growth of both the individual and the organization, and who works to build community within organizations. (Reinke, 2004, p. 33)
The simultaneous focus of servant leadership in attending both to the growth of the individual and to the growth of the organization corresponds notably with the concept of holonomy and the goal of Cognitive Coaching, which focuses on increasing the resourcefulness of individuals in the Five States of Mind in order to inspire and sustain individual and organizational development. As my research findings have shown, Cognitive Coaching is one significant way in which educational leaders can influence and serve individual and learning communities as a whole. Although servant leadership was not one of the leadership theories initially considered or included in my literature review at the start of this research project, this study’s findings bring to light how putting “service before self” can integrate well with the theory of leadership for learning—a more recent theory of leadership that brings together multiple leadership theories: instructional, transformational, distributed, and situational.

**Implications for Practice**

While the perceptions, understandings, and experiences of each of these educational leaders are unique, still, my findings across the interviews with all five educational leaders lead to implications for practice for Thinking Collaborative, the organization offering training seminars in Cognitive Coaching and Adaptive Schools, as well as for ISDs and school districts.

For Thinking Collaborative, the implications of this research for practice include offering dedicated Cognitive Coaching training that integrates daring vulnerability and the five leader value practices with Cognitive Coaching theory and practice. This training would help leaders better understand how daring to be vulnerable leads to increased resourcefulness in the Five States of Mind. Similarly, emphasizing the effectiveness of the five value practices in supporting leaders and Cognitive Coaches in behavioral change and shifts in identity would also be of great value to leaders who use Cognitive Coaching as part of their leadership practice.
Another opportunity for Thinking Collaborative would be providing ongoing practice and support following the Cognitive Coaching Seminars for newly trained and practicing Cognitive Coaches—especially as teachers, coaches, and leaders move into different positions and need/want to coach and lead in different ways.

For ISDs and school districts, implications for practice include providing professional learning opportunities for educators to learn and develop language, awareness, and strategies to help embrace vulnerability in order to lead communities of learning with more confidence and skill.

Since a number of ISDs and school districts have already hosted the Cognitive Coaching Seminars for local teachers, coaches, and administrators, finding ways to provide additional follow-up and ongoing support for Cognitive Coaching practice, reflection, and networking among trained Cognitive Coaches serving in new and/or similar roles would also be a valuable service, as changing behavior is “complicated and complex” (Call, 2022). It requires commitment, persistence, and resilience—all of which ongoing support following the initial training could help facilitate.

**Implications for Theory**

Regarding the implications for theory, the results of my findings highlight five implications for theory. First, in the process of developing one’s identity, changing one’s identity, or integrating multiple identities, vulnerability is indispensable. Second, closely related to the first implication, in regard to its role in identity development and change, vulnerability is the gateway—an essential emotional aspect—to growth and transformation in the Five States of Mind. Being consciously aware of our emotions provides us with the opportunity to be flexible
in choosing how we might want to respond in any given situation, based on our prior experiences in a particular environment (Damasio, 1994, p. 133).

A third implication for theory is to further expand on the current descriptions and definitions of consciousness in the Cognitive Coaching training literature to include and highlight an increased awareness of one’s own emotions. According to the Cognitive Coaching Seminars Foundation Training Learning Guide, people with high levels of consciousness are those “who monitor their own values, thoughts, behaviors, and goals” (Costa & Garmston, pp. 23, 26). In this definition, neither feelings nor emotions are included in the list of what might be monitored. In their book, however, Costa and Garmston (2016) do include an awareness of feelings in their explanation of what it is to be conscious. They write, “To be conscious is to be aware of one’s thoughts, feelings, viewpoints, and behaviors and the effect they have on one’s self, on others, and on the environment” (Costa & Garmston, 2016, p. 117). Updating the definition of consciousness in the Learning Guide to include “feelings” or “emotions” would enhance and better represent the breadth of awareness practiced by those with high levels of consciousness.

A fourth implication for theory includes incorporating the five leader value practices as part of the Cognitive Coaching framework in order to offer additional support to Cognitive Coaching leaders’ embracing vulnerability and authenticity in service to others.

The fifth implication for theory is expanding on the Cognitive Coaching assumptions to observe that skillfully changing behavior requires not only a change in perception (cognition) but also changes in affect (emotions), values, and practices.
Implications for Future Research

Opportunities for future research might include longer term longitudinal studies, not just a snapshot, to explore educational leaders’ understandings of and experiences with Cognitive Coaching over a period of time. Additionally, since this study focused on five educational leaders in K–12 education, all of whom are women from one geographical area and who have been in education for more than 15 years, future research could focus on a larger and more diverse group of leaders who use and experience Cognitive Coaching, such as leaders in higher education or in other fields or industries. Future research could also focus on other members of the learning community in order to learn about their experiences, understandings, and perceptions of leaders who use and experience Cognitive Coaching.

This study focused on Cognitive Coaching. Future research could focus on a comparative study between Cognitive Coaching and another coaching method. This study also focused on educational leaders who continued to use and experience Cognitive Coaching—both as coaches and as coachees—years after attending their initial training. A future study could explore the understandings and perceptions of educators who waned in their participation in Cognitive Coaching.

The five study participants in this study also all participated in Adaptive Schools, so future research could also focus on gathering more history from research participants to determine how much Cognitive Coaching contributed to their leadership development and practices—as well as Adaptive Schools and other professional learning experiences and trainings. Finally, given that vulnerability was a theme that emerged in the research, a future study could look at vulnerability more closely and in different ways, including observations, focus groups, and interview questions focused more specifically on vulnerability.
Final Positionality Statement

What I have learned through gaining a broader and deeper understanding of these educational leaders’ experiences and perspectives has already become a part of who I am, influencing and strengthening me in all of these different areas. I feel more comfortable facing uncertainty with a learning mindset and confident humility, applying new learning to my life experiences as a researcher, writer, coach, teacher, and leader. Evidence of the impact that this research project has already had on my life can most notably be seen in my recent decision to leave a writing center associate director position in higher education to serve as principal of a K–8 grade school.

The women who participated in my study have inspired me to be more courageous and to embrace the discomfort—and joy—in personal and professional growth. As Cognitive Coaching leader myself, I have learned from their stories and experiences how leaning into authenticity and service can cultivate daring vulnerability and increase resourcefulness in the Five States of Mind. I have also learned how engaging in the value practices can support behavioral change and further my development as a leader and as a coach. I know that each woman’s story is unique, and my story will be unique, too, but what I have learned from these educational leaders has resulted in my feeling assured, encouraged, and inspired.
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