ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS' LEADERSHIP AND PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLES:

A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

by

Pheneik Baskett

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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2020

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APPROVED BY:

Gail Collins, EdD, Committee Chair

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand assistant principals' (APs) leadership and perceptions of their roles. The study took place in a suburban school system located in the southeastern United States. The central research question asked, "How do assistant principals lead and perceive their role as APs?" The theory guiding this research was situational leadership theory as it demonstrated how leadership styles must be related to the needs of the constituents. Ambiguity and burnout were examined as factors that can impact APs' leadership and their perceptions of leadership. The data for this case study were collected through interviews, focus groups, and documents. Data analysis was based upon coding and memoing to ascertain common patterns and themes that emerged during data analysis. The study reflected that a significant gap in AP research exists. The findings indicated that APs are essential leaders within schools. APs' leadership is based upon the needs of the those whom they lead, and they build relationships to ascertain and support these needs. Additionally, APs benefit from working collaboratively with APs in small groups and with mentors.

Keywords: assistant principal, situational leadership theory

Copyright Page

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Thomas Baskett, and our daughter, Niya Baskett. Both of you have sacrificed many evenings and weekends as I worked on my dissertation. I love you both, and I am so blessed and grateful for your love and support. "Baskett," we joked that I have been in school our entire marriage and Niya's life. Thank you for your encouragement and understanding through my educational journey. Likewise, Niya, thank you for your understanding and patience when Mommy was busy "writing papers." Niya, I pray that you pursue your dreams as I have mine.

I also dedicate this to my parents, Johnny and Gladys Fowler. My mother has gone home to be with the Lord, but I am so grateful for the nurturing, loving, and caring environment our parents created for my sister, Nakia, brother, Jamarcus, and me. Our parent's faith in God and guidance has helped us to accomplish our goals. I honor my mother's memory with this dissertation. It was her example of being a masterful multi-tasker that has carried me through this journey. Likewise, my father's leadership style and analytic mind influenced me as I served as an educational leader. I love you all!

Acknowledgments

To my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for whom eternal salvation has been afforded to all who are willing to accept His gift, I give thanks and praises. Without my faith in God's ability to love and care for us, this would not be possible. My husband, Thomas, and our daughter, Niya, thank you for your sacrifices, love, support, and encouragement. I would also like to acknowledge my sister, Nakia, and my brother, Jamarcus, and Keanna for your support. I am appreciative of the guidance of my dissertation chair, Dr. Collins. Your rich feedback and expressed concern during life's challenge is noted. Likewise, Dr. Cox, I am grateful for your guidance and willingness to serve as a committee member.

My Aunts Geraldine, Pecola, and Beatrice, I thank you for your support and encouragement. To my Daddy, Johnny and Rosalind, I am grateful for your prayers, encouragement, and support. To my mother, Gladys Fowler, I acknowledge the seeds you and Daddy planted in my life. Mommy, your work ethic, dedication, and love did not leave when you made your transition from this life into the next. Rather, it lives on and I love you so!

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List of Abbreviations

Assistant Principal (AP)

Eastern City School District (ECSD)

Educational Doctorate (ED)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Principals and assistant principals (APs) provide school-based leadership for students who are pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. Principals occupy the role as general managers and instructional leaders for schools (Ediger, 2014). APs provide direct support for principals, manage the daily operations of the school, and function in several roles that support the stakeholders (Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Oleszewski, Shoho, & Barnett, 2012). Although AP roles in schools are significant, research on APs and their roles is minimal (Hausman, Nebeker, McCreary, & Donaldson, 2002; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Sun & Shoho, 2017) and fails to examine AP perspectives of the roles they play in schools (Glanz, 1994; Lee, Kwan, & Walker, 2009; Mercer, 2016).

The purpose of this research study is to examine how APs lead and perceive their roles. This study focuses on perspectives of APs who are currently working in southeastern public schools in the United States. Chapter One of this qualitative case study includes the background, situation to self, problem and purpose statements along with the significance of the study, definitions, and the research questions.

Background

APs are administrative leaders in schools. APs are also referred to as vice principals and deputy principals (Armstrong, 2015; Leaf & Odhiambo, 2017; Peters, Gurley, Fifolt, Collins, & McNeese, 2016). Traditionally, the roles of APs include functioning as a supervisor or manager responsible for the daily operations of the school, but the roles are evolving to include disciplinarians, evaluators, supervisors, spokespersons, facilitators, counselors, negotiators, monitors, managers, and instructional leaders (Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Oleszewski et

al., 2012; Peters et al., 2016).

Mercer (2016) shared that APs are expected to meet the needs of "their subordinates, superiors, and various stakeholder groups on a regular basis" (p. 89) which can be overwhelming for APs because of the number of roles that they play. Morgan (2018) surmised that the APs' perception of their roles is not readily addressed in literature. Studies tend to focus on the role of principals as opposed to AP roles. In order to understand the background of APs in education, it is important to examine APs in the schools historically, socially, and theoretically.

Historical Context

APs in school date to the 1930s (Glanz, 1994). Glanz (1994) proposed AP positions originated from the need to relieve principals from focusing on the daily operations of schools. Hoffman (1981) explained that historically, the role of APs lacked clarity and definition. He added that the role of APs was initially designated to help principals with clerical duties. As time progressed, the roles evolved haphazardly (Hoffman, 1981). However, APs did not take an active role in leadership in terms of making decisions. According to Marshall and Davidson (2016), APs were relegated to doing what they were told to do by principals. APs' abilities to serve as active leaders capable of making decisions that support instruction or hiring was not a part of what principals instructed APs to do. Traditionally, APs' roles included serving as disciplinarians and attendance managers (Glanz, 1994; Sun & Shoho, 2017) whose primary focus was to maintain the daily operations of the school (Gurley, Anast-May, & Lee, 2015). Gurley, Anast-May, and Lee (2015) warned school leadership of the danger of keeping APs in perfunctory roles functioning as managers when their talents could be used to directly impact and improve instruction as instructional leaders. Eventually, the roles of APs expanded beyond building level management to include roles as disciplinarians, evaluators, supervisors,

spokespersons, facilitators, counselors, negotiators, monitors, managers, and instructional leaders. The caveat is that APs are expected to function in these roles and meet the needs of various stakeholders (Gurley, Anast-May, & Lee, 2015; Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Mercer, 2016; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Peters et al., 2016) without adequate training to support their leadership. One factor that is important to understand is that APs are valuable assets who support school success (Sun & Shoho, 2017). This study will address their significance as well as examine how APs lead stakeholders in their roles. The social aspects of AP leadership also impact AP roles.

Social Context

Educational reforms such as No Child Left Behind, standards-based teaching, and Common Core have taken place in the last 20 years (Farley-Ripple, Raffel, & Christine, 2012; Yu-kwong & Walker, 2010). However, APs functioning in roles as building managers primarily remain the same. Oleszewski et al. (2012) suggested that APs are wasted resources due to their roles as disciplinarians and attendance managers. One counterargument to this notion is that APs' roles are expanding to include serving as instructional leaders to accommodate the reforms that have taken place in schools (O'Doherty & Ovando, 2013). However, AP roles need clarity and formal examination in order to avoid AP role ambiguity and burnout that can result when guidance is not provided to meet the new demands of the educational reforms taking place in many school systems.

Ambiguity results when APs are not clear about their roles because principals are not always clear about their expectations of APs, or principals do not specify or prioritize which role the APs should fulfill (Marshall & Davidson, 2016; Morgan, 2018). Searby and Armstrong (2016) suggested that ambiguity occurs because there is no specific definition for the duties of

APs, even though specific job descriptions are present for teachers and principals. Frequently, leadership training focuses on principal leadership as opposed to AP leadership and the roles they are expected to perform (Armstrong, 2015). Hence, APs are inadequately prepared for the rigors of their jobs and their roles.

Another byproduct of inadequate preparation for AP leadership and responsibilities is stress-related burnout. Burnout as a result of prolonged stress can manifest itself as cynicism, exhaustion, and professional inadequacy (Tikkanen, Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2017). Burnout results when people are not prepared or equipped to perform a task. Some causes of burnout amongst administrators are too many tasks without proper support and inadequate preparation to lead the various stakeholders that they serve (Beausaert, Frolehich, Devos, & Riley, 2016). Hence, ambiguity regarding the role that an AP is expected to fill can cause burnout. The final discussion of APs in this background section looks at the theoretical context for this study.

Theoretical Context

Hersey and Blanchard's (1982) situational leadership theory functions as the theoretical framework for this study. Situational leadership theory focuses upon leadership that is needed for certain situations (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982; Northouse, 2018). Situational leadership emphasizes leaders using leadership that supports the needs of the individuals or stakeholders they lead (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2001). It is defined by three aspects: a) the amount of guidance and direction (task behavior) a leader gives; b) the amount of socioemotional support (relationship behavior) a leader provides; and c) the readiness level that followers exhibit in performing a specific task, function, or objective (Hersey et al., 2001). The leadership can be "directive, coaching, supportive, and delegating" (Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Zigarmi, 2013, p. 53).

Situation to Self

I am an AP in a high school, and I fulfill multiple roles and support stakeholders such as teachers, students, staff, parent/guardians, and community members. I recall that much of my educational leadership preparation emphasized principal leadership as opposed to AP leadership. Hence, a dearth of research regarding APs exists. My motivation was to conduct a study examining the role of APs and AP perception of their roles. It was my premise that APs play an important role in the life of the school making it is necessary to study not only the roles of APs but also their perception of the roles. Traditionally, the roles of APs included teacher and staff supervision and evaluation, student behavior management, and instructional leadership; however, AP roles in today's schools are much more exhaustive and require flexibility and the adaption of leadership styles to meet the needs of the constituents with whom they work. The philosophical assumptions that will be examined next are essential in this study of APs' perceptions of their roles.

Ontological assumption "relates to the nature of reality and its characteristics" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 20). AP roles are integral in successful leadership and essential for student achievement. In order to codify AP perceptions of their roles, it was necessary for this research to include APs with different AP leadership experiences. For this reason, I interviewed APs who work in elementary, middle, and high schools to gain data from varied perspectives and experiences. The epistemological assumption was based upon the notion that AP perception can be influenced by AP experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It was important that I invested time in interviewing the participants individually and in groups, not only to ascertain their perceptions of AP roles but also to share in their experiences through interviews and focus groups. For example, the setting where APs fulfill their roles can impact their perception of their roles.

Valuable knowledge was gained through the interviews, focus groups, and examination of documents that I employed in this study. Next, axiological and methodological assumptions will be reviewed.

Axiological assumption is a "value-stance taken by the inquirer" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 18). The axiological assumption in this qualitative study stemmed from my belief that there was value in the personal experiences of APs and their perceptions of their roles (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I work as an AP, and I knew that there was value in my ability to relate to the perceptions of other APs. The experiences of those whom I interviewed resonated with me and broadened my view. I also saw the value in interviewing other APs who work in different schools and with different age levels to ensure that this research was balanced.

The final assumption is methodological assumptions. Methodological assumptions add value to the qualitative study in that differences and similarities exist between APs working in elementary, middle, and high schools. Likewise, varying stakeholders and demographics impact perceptions. The knowledge gained by researching the aforementioned was essential in understanding AP roles in the context of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Social constructivism was the paradigm used for this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus was to understand the roles of APs from their perspectives by studying APs via interviews, focus groups, and examination of documents. The interpretation of their roles helped to understand their perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Problem Statement

The roles that APs play are vast and are neither adequately defined nor researched (Searby, Browne-Ferrigno, & Wang, 2017). APs are often the individuals who provide the front-line interaction with many stakeholders (Bukoski, Lewis, Carpenter, Berry, & Sanders, 2015;

Mercer, 2016); consequently, APs are integral in school leadership. Research reflects that AP roles are often ambiguous due to the unstated rules and norms (Celik, 2013; Hutton, 2014; Marshall & Davidson, 2016); principals are not always clear regarding the roles that APs should play (Kwan, 2011; Marshall & Davidson, 2016; Mitchell, Armstrong, & Hands, 2017). Marshall and Davidson (2016) characterized the roles of APs as "ill-defined and inconsistent, requiring spontaneity, and an anticipation of needs and problems" (p. 274). In addition, research reflects that most college leadership programs are geared towards developing principal leadership as opposed to AP leadership (Gurley, Anast-May, O'Neal, Lee, & Shores, 2015; Herington, 2013; Hutton, 2014; Kearney & Herrington, 2013; Peters et al., 2016). In order for APs to perform their roles and appropriately meet the needs of stakeholders, further research on the roles of the AP must be conducted. Likewise, examination of AP perspectives of their roles will provide important insight into the roles and leadership. The problem that was examined in this study was the APs' perceptions of their roles and how the performance of the APs' roles support those whom they lead. The gap in the literature concerning the roles of APs demonstrated the need for this study (Searby et al., 2017).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand APs' leadership and perceptions of their roles. The participants in this study were APs working in elementary, middle, and high schools in a suburban public-school system in the southeastern United States. At this stage, AP perception was defined as how APs viewed their roles (Shore & Walshaw, 2018). The research data were collected using interviews, focus groups, and examination of documents. The theory guiding this study was Hersey and Blanchard's (1982) situational leadership theory. Situational leadership theory approach is "the emphasis is on the behavior of

leaders and their group members (followers) and various situations" (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982, p. 84). Northouse (2018) phrased it as leadership that is needed for certain situations. The leader's ability to adapt and lead is contingent upon the leadership that is applicable and necessary for the situation. What made the situational leadership theory tenable for this research is that it is practical and applicable to leadership roles that APs occupy in the schools they lead. A leader's leadership style is based upon the needs of the follower (Lynch, 2015). Hence, understanding the roles of the APs from their perceptions assisted in understanding how situational leadership can be employed by APs.

Significance of the Study

AP literature is limited because research typically places emphasis on principal leadership as opposed to AP leadership (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2012; Shore & Walshaw, 2018). Researchers who examine APs' leadership reflect on the roles APs fulfill within schools and the inadequate preparation for APs fulfilling their roles (Hausman et al., 2002; Marshall & Davidson, 2016; Militello, Fusarelli, Mattingly, & Warren, 2015). Marshall and Davidson (2016) described that APs "may flounder among myriad tasks given the ambiguity of AP roles and duties" (p. 273). Other researchers concluded that AP roles have not undergone much change from AP leadership inception; traditionally, APs perform managerial duties (Glanz, 1994; Leaf & Odhiambo, 2017; Marshall & Davidson, 2016). Seminal studies suggest that AP roles should include instructional leadership. The preceding was relevant; nevertheless, one aspect that had not been sufficiently examined was the APs' perception of their roles. The aforementioned was the significance of this study—to examine how APs perceive their roles. The outcome of the study adds to AP discourse and provides much needed insight that may support improved AP leadership and professional learning based upon AP input and reflection.

Research Questions

Related literature reflects that APs perform many duties within schools. APs are characterized as mid-level management whose duties include "managerial, leadership, supervisory, and/or school-wide operational duties" (Militello et al., 2015; Mitchell et al., 2017). However, literature also reflects that a lack of AP research exists (Marshall & Davidson, 2016; Oleszewski et al., 2012). The research questions for this study were developed to provide insight on APs' perceptions of their roles. Hersey and Blanchard's (1982) situational leadership theory assisted in evaluating how APs' leadership is impacted based upon the needs of their constituents. Both ideas informed the research questions developed for this study. The purpose of this case study was to examine APs' leadership and perceptions of their roles. Below is the list of research questions and explanations of how these questions informed this research. The central question that guided this study was as follows:

How do assistant principals lead and perceive their roles as APs?

This question sought to understand how APs lead and their perceptions of the roles they play. APs' leadership and roles are changing from mangers to include instructional leaders (Peters et al., 2016; Sun & Shoho, 2017). However, APs' perceptions are not emphasized in research (Baker, Guerra, & Baray, 2018). Research based upon this question provided insight regarding AP leadership and the various roles APs play, as well responded to how they felt about their roles.

The sub-questions that informed this research were as follows:

1. How are APs prepared for and supported in the roles they play in their positions as APs?

APs have been characterized as "the firefighters" and "handyman" of the schools, but in reality, their roles are not always adequately defined (Sun & Shoho, 2017) or supported with AP preparation programs in higher education and professional development on the job (Gurley, Anast-May, & Lee, 2015; Hamm, 2017). Allen and Weaver's (2014) research reflected that many APs felt unprepared for their roles because they needed professional development. This research question will help to ascertain how APs are prepared for and supported in their roles.

2. How do APs determine the leadership style needed to support those whom they lead?

Hambleton and Gumpert (1982) suggested "there is no lack of people to fill administrative or leadership positions, but there appears to be a shortage of people who know how to lead effectively when placed in leadership positions" (pp. 225–226). APs must learn to be effective APs while they ensure that educational outcomes are obtained (Clayton & Goodwin, 2015). Hersey and Blanchard's (1982) situational leadership theory suggests that leadership styles should meet the need of the followers. This research question sought APs' discussion of their leadership style and how their leadership met the needs of those whom they lead.

3. How do APs address the challenges of AP leadership?

Marshall and Davidson (2016) characterized AP leadership as a profession wrought with possible challenges. APs may experience a lack of preparations to fulfill their duties and responsibilities, parental and student apathy, or career frustration and stagnation (Marshall & Davidson, 2016; Sun & Shoho, 2017); This sub-question served two purposes: APs could discuss some of the challenges they face, and they could respond to how they address the challenges they experience in their leadership roles.

Definitions

The following terms are defined based on the significance and relevance of this study on APs' perception of their roles.

1. *Assistant principal* (AP) – the leader of the school who supports the principal. This position is the entry level to administration, and this study examines the perception of APs regarding their leadership (Searby et al., 2017).

2. *Situational leadership* – situational leadership, coined by Hersey and Blanchard, is "the amount of direction (task behavior) that is provided by the leader, the amount of support (relationship behavior), that is provided by the leader, and the confidence and competence (readiness level) that is present in the follower" (Bedford & Gehlert, 2013, p. 58; see also Hersey & Blanchard, 1982; Hersey et al., 2001).

3. *Professional learning communities (PLC)* – Van Themaat (2019) defines PLCs as follows: "PLCs provide an opportunity for educators to think together and collaboratively enhance each other's learning" (p. 291).

Summary

Research that seeks to understand AP leadership and the roles of APs from their perceptions is not well documented. The purpose of this research was to understand APs' leadership and perceptions of their roles considering the stakeholders that the leaders must support. This qualitative research examined AP leadership and the roles from the APs' perceptions. This study was conducted in a suburban school district in the southeastern United States. Situational leadership theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982) was the theoretical framework for conducting this study. Sub-questions addressed how APs were prepared for and supported in

the roles they play in their positions as APs, and how APs provide leadership and meet the needs

for those whom they lead.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

APs play integral roles in schools. Although principal leadership research is evidenced in a plethora of studies (Glanz, 1994; Goldring, Mavrogordato, & Haynes, 2015; Sun & Shoho, 2017), AP research has been minimally examined (Barnett et al., 2012; Hausman et al., 2002; Oleszewski et al., 2012). The historical role of APs was to provide support for principals by maintaining the day-to-day operations of the school (Hausman et al., 2002); however, AP roles have evolved to include roles such as instructional leadership. In studies that examine AP leadership, the emphasis is often on the roles and tasks in which APs perform (Ediger, 2014; Hamm, 2017). One aspect that AP research lacks is the investigation of APs' perceptions of their roles (Khan, Martinez-Garcia, & Slate, 2014). Researching both APs' leadership and their perceptions of their roles will provide insight regarding APs' views of the leadership they employ to support the stakeholders they lead. Given the significance of AP leadership and APs' roles in schools, this study will add to the discourse that is needed to gain a better understanding of AP perceptions of their roles and the leadership that is needed to support stakeholders.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the APs' leadership and perceptions of their roles. The theory driving this study is situational leadership theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982; Hersey et al., 2001). Situational leadership theory is a theory whereby leaders' leadership styles yield to the needs of the followers (Blanchard et al., 2013; Hambleton & Gumpert, 1982; Hersey & Blanchard, 1982; Hersey et al., 2001). For the purpose of this study, situational leadership theory assisted in comparing the perceived roles of APs with the merits of adaptable leadership styles based upon the stakeholders' needs. The stakeholders include students, teachers, staff, parents/guardians, and community members (Mercer, 2016; Shore & Walshaw, 2018). The

study began with examining the theoretical framework that is based upon situational leadership theory, followed by the literature review and the summary.

Theoretical Framework

A theory is "a general explanation of why variables work together" (Galvan & Galvan, 2017, p. 6). Situational leadership theory focuses upon leadership that is needed for certain situations (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982; Northouse, 2018). It is a theory that is birthed out of leadership in business management, but it is applicable to leadership in a variety of contexts that includes AP leadership (Hersey et al., 2001). The leader's ability to adapt and lead is contingent upon the leadership style that is applicable and necessary for the situation. What made the situational leadership theory tenable for this research was that it is practical and applicable to leadership roles that APs occupy in the schools they lead (Blanchard et al., 2013; Hambleton & Gumpert, 1982; Hersey & Blanchard, 1982). This study was grounded by examining the APs' leadership and perceptions of their roles using situational leadership theory. The relationship between AP perceptions of their roles and their fulfillment of the roles is also predicated upon the leadership needs of the stakeholders. For the purposes of this study, stakeholders included the teachers, students, faculty, staff, parents, and community members. Hersey and Blanchard (1982) stated:

> Situational leadership is based on an interplay among (1) the amount of guidance and direction (task behavior) a leader gives, (2) the amount of socioemotional support (relationship behavior) a leader provides, and (3) the readiness ("maturity") level that followers exhibit in performing a specific task, function, or objective. (p. 150)

Initially, Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory was used for managers dealing with new employees whereby managers would use a direct approach of leadership with the

expectation that the leadership style could evolve to supportiveness as the employee became more experienced in the position (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982; Thompson & Glasø, 2018). However, it was practical to evaluate the leadership based upon the needs of the employees in schools.

Leadership Style Impacts Followers

Leadership style is "the way you work with someone. . . . It's how you behave, over time, when you're trying to influence the performance of others, as perceived by them" (Blanchard et al., 2013, p. 12). Hence, a follower's perception of a leader impacts leadership style (Hersey, 1984). If leaders want to influence followers, they must lead in a way that supports the followers' buy-in to the leader's vision and leadership (Blanchard et al., 2013; Hersey, 1984; Hersey et al., 2001; Raza & Sikandar, 2018).

Situational Leadership Theory Purpose for This Study

Situational leadership theory was applicable to the study of APs' leadership and perceptions of their roles, for APs are tasked with providing leadership that provides direction, support, and oversight for the stakeholders they lead (Hersey et al., 2001). Situational leadership theory provided a method of evaluating leadership practices that are based upon and support the needs of followers. Additionally, situational leadership theory also allowed flexibility in a leader's leadership style, thus, assisting those followers who need additional support and empowering those who can work independently (Thompson & Glasø, 2015). The APs are the leaders, and the stakeholders—teachers, staff, students, parents, community members—are under AP leadership. Hersey and Blanchard (1982) argued that situational leadership is more of a model as opposed to a theory. However, it provides a method of looking at the leadership practices of leaders and how they must adapt their leadership to fit the situation or needs of the

persons for whom they provide leadership (Blanchard et al., 2013; Hambleton & Gumpert, 1982; Hersey & Blanchard, 1982). Moreover, leaders must treat different followers differently (Thompson & Glasø, 2018). Thus, this requires leaders' understanding of the needs of the followers and the leaders' adapting leadership to meet the followers' specific needs. Hersey and Blanchard's collaboration and development of situational learning theory began in the late 1960s, and they worked collaboratively until 1982 when both branched out and worked and published with other colleagues (Hersey et al., 2001). Both Hersey and Blanchard continued to work and make changes to the situational learning theory.

Hersey and Blanchard's (1982) situational leadership theory evaluated the behavior of the leader and the tasks of those who follow the leader. The theory evaluated the leadership style and follower readiness. Below is Hersey et al.'s (2001) description of style and readiness:

Style 1 (S1). This leadership style is characterized by above-average amounts of task behavior and below-average amounts of relationship behavior.

Style 2 (S2). This leadership style is characterized by above-average amounts of both task and relationship behavior.

Style 3 (S3). This style is characterized by above-average amounts of relationship behavior and below-average amounts of task behavior.

Style 4 (S4). This style is characterized by below-average of both task behavior and relationship behavior. (p. 174)

Hersey and Blanchard (1982) characterized the four styles as telling, selling, participating, and delegating. Another description of the leadership styles was updated to use the terms directive, coaching, supportive, and delegating in Situational Leadership Style II (Blanchard et al., 2013). The Four Leadership Styles were modified by Blanchard et al. (2013) as follows:

STYLE 1—Directing

High Directive Behavior and Low Supportive Behavior

The leader provides specific direction about goals, shows and tells how, and closely

monitors the individual's performance in order to provide frequent feedback on results.

STYLE 2—Coaching

High Directive Behavior and High Supportive Behavior

The leader continues to direct goal or task accomplishment but also explains why, solicits

suggestions, and begins to encourage involvement in decision making.

STYLE 3—Supporting

Low Directive Behavior and High Supportive Behavior

The leader and the individual make decisions together. The role of the leader is to

facilitate, listen, draw out, encourage, and support.

STYLE 4—Delegating

Low Directive Behavior and Low Supportive Behavior

The individual makes most of the decisions about what, how, and when. The role of the

leader is to value the individual's contributions and support his or her growth. (p. 53)

Situational leadership theory also includes readiness levels that are indicated by the four

levels. The original version of situational leadership used the term "maturity" level of the

follower (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982); however, modified versions of the model changed the

"maturity" to the "readiness" of the followers (Blank, Weitzel, & Green, 1990; Hersey et al.,

2001). The readiness level involves the followers' readiness to perform. "Readiness levels are

the different combinations of ability and willingness that people bring to each task" (Blanchard

et al., 2013, p. 177). Ability represents the knowledge, experience, and skill that an individual or

group brings to a particular task or activity (Blanchard et al., 2013). Willingness represents "the extent to which an individual or group has the confidence, commitment, and motivation to accomplish a specific task" (p. 176). Hersey and Blanchard's (1982) situational leadership theory readiness level includes:

Readiness level 1 (R1). Unable and unwilling. The follower is unable and lacks commitment and motivation

or

Unable and insecure. The follower is unable and lacks confidence.

Readiness level 2 (R2). Unable but willing. The follower lacks ability but is motivated and trying

or

Unable but confident. The follower lacks ability but is confident as long as the leader is there to provide guidance.

Readiness level 3 (R3). Able but unwilling. The follower has the ability to perform the task but is not willing to use that ability

or

Able but insecure. The follower has the ability to perform the task but is insecure or apprehensive about doing it alone.

Readiness level 4 (R4). Able and willing. The follower has the ability to perform and is committed

or

Able and confident. The follower has the ability to perform and is confident about doing it. (pp. 176–177)

It is important to understand that at a lower level performance, the followers may not yet have the capacity to perform the task; therefore, the leader makes the decisions in the lower level tasks and the follower directs the task as the follower gains confidence (Hersey et al., 2001). This is an indication of the readiness level of those under leadership (Blank et al., 1990; Hersey et al., 2001) and is characterized as telling (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982) or directive (Blanchard et al., 2013).

Although research regarding situational leadership exists, a dearth of research exists with the application of the theory in an educational setting (Haibin & Shanshi, 2014). It is necessary to examine APs' leadership and perceptions of their roles because APs' perceptions influence how APs lead, and APs should be considered as leaders of learning and not just managers (Leaf & Odhiambo, 2017).

It is important for leaders to ascertain what levels the people with whom they lead find themselves, and the leaders must adjust their leadership to meet the needs of those whom they lead (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982). For example, if a follower is not confident about a new initiative and is unwilling to take a risk, then the leader must adapt to the situation and adjust the leadership to support the needs of the follower by telling or directing. Hersey and Blanchard (1982) characterized this aspect of leadership as requiring little relationship between the leader and the follower because the leader is in the role of telling or directing. A leadership match should exist whereby the leader matches the perceived efforts and needs of the follower (Haibin & Shanshi, 2014).

Another concept that Hersey et al.'s (2001) situational leadership theory offered is that it is the follower's needs that dictates the leadership style that the leader employs. A formula or prescribed method to determine which leadership style is applicable to a situation does not exist;

however, regarding the follower, situational leadership emphasizes the following:

"(1) diagnosing the level of readiness (2) adapting by selecting high probability leadership styles, (3) communicating these styles effectively to influence behavior" (p. 190). Leaders must work to help followers grow in their ability to take ownership, gain confidence, and produce without the leader telling the follower what to do (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982). The leader's style should assist in the progression towards R4 where the follower is ready and willing to perform any task that is necessary for the follower to perform (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982; Hersey et al., 2001). For instance, a new teacher must be supported in developing classroom management. An AP can undermine a new teacher's authority if the AP interferes with the teacher's authority. The AP must support the teacher in taking ownership of the class, and the teacher must be willing to perform in their classroom management.

Researchers have embraced the challenge with using situational leadership theory in the manner that Hersey and Blanchard (1982) suggested by conducting research that takes into consideration the notion that sometimes followers do not easily fit into categories one through four. For example, Luo and Liu (2014) used situational leader theory to research "the usefulness and effect of a dynamic situational leadership and employee readiness match on employee outcomes" (p. 1727). In this study, the researchers found that leaders must consider a contingency perspective whereby the leader considers the needs of the employee as well as the external environmental changes. Another researcher evaluated the use of situational leadership theory to improve the patient-centered focus in a medical facility (Lynch, 2015) and found that "individual followers at various levels on the developmental continuum require the situational leader to use a leadership style that matches their level so that they are enabled and supported in the delivery of more effective person-centered care" (p. 8).

Situational leadership theory is not without challenge in its application. Thompson and Glasø (2015) found that "establishing follower need for a specific style of leadership has proven to be more difficult" (p. 528). The needs of the follower are not always prescribed or readily assessable and determining specific styles of leadership for followers is sometimes challenging for leaders to determine (Thompson & Glasø, 2015). However, this study still provided the basis for evaluating the perceptions of the roles of leaders, and the examination of the common themes that emerge from this research may lend to an understanding of the perception of the APs assessed in a qualitative case study. The theory served as a platform for examining the perceived roles considering the stakeholders' (followers') reaction to the tasks (Thompson & Glasø, 2015; Hersey & Blanchard, 1982), and this understanding made situational leadership theory applicable and relevant in this study.

Related Literature

AP roles in schools are comprehensive, for APs have many areas of leadership for which they are responsible, and they have many daily duties (Nieuwenhuizen, 2011). Mercer (2016) reported, "Assistant principals must interact with students, teachers, cooks, custodians, bus drivers, parents, and community members while their superiors are in offices completing reports, in board rooms discussing leadership issues, legal dilemmas, and other things" (p. 89). APs are sometimes tasked with meeting the needs of stakeholders simultaneously (Mercer, 2016). Duties and roles are synonymous, for they indicate APs' areas of responsibilities in their performance as APs. Duties have not changed much in the past 40 years (Craft, Malveaux, Lopez, & Combs, 2016), but the duties have increased to include instructional leadership, financial managers, and public relations experts (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013; Searby et al., 2017). Extant research examines the additional roles that APs play, but research is limited on the APs' perceptions of

their roles (Celik, 2013; Gurley, Anast-May, & Lee, 2015; Kearney & Herrington, 2013;

Militello et al., 2015; Oleszewski et al., 2012). Prior to the 1980s, research focused on

traditional AP roles such as day-to-day operations of the school; however, research, albeit

minimally, began to study the roles of APs in the 1990s (Hausman et al., 2002).

AP Roles

The principal of a school is the leader who is ultimately responsible to ensure that

students receive a quality education that prepares them for their future career endeavors

(Morgan, 2018). However, principals need support from other leaders to accomplish this task,

and that is why APs are essential school leaders. APs were created to decrease the workload of

principals (Peters et al., 2016). In fact, it is usually principals who determine APs' roles and

duties (Barnett et al., 2012; Glanz, 1994; Marshall & Davidson, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2017).

Fulfillment of AP roles begins with the perception and relationship between the principal and the

AP (Houchens, Niu, Zhang, Miller, & Norman, 2018). The better their relationship and the APs'

understanding of their roles, the more effective APs will be. APs are vital to the function of the

school, and when APs do not function in their roles "such as assemble curricula, represent the

school, handle student discipline, supervise the teachers, teach classes, and more" (Schermuly,

Schermuly, & Meyer, 2011, p. 253), the functioning of the school is threatened.

APs are referred to as the unsung heroes who typically respond to the most challenging

situations within the daily operation of schools (Hamm, 2017). APs face challenges such as a

major school disturbance, parent complaints, and "resolution of stakeholders' conflicts" (Rintoul,

& Kennelly, 2014, p. 45). Historically, not much attention is given to the roles of APs in

literature (Barnett et al., 2012; Bukoski et al., 2015; Shore & Walshaw, 2018), yet the roles APs

embody in educational settings are integral aspects of school leadership as APs support and

provide leadership within the schools they serve. Mercer (2016) explained, "Assistant principals are expected to meet the needs of their subordinates, superiors, and various stakeholder groups on a regular basis. The myriad of pressures coming at them are not prioritized" (p. 87). They serve as mid-level management whose leadership supports the stakeholders associated with schools (Abrahamsen, 2018; Militello et al., 2015; Mitchell et al., 2017), and their leadership involves interaction with various stakeholders such as principals, faculty, staff, students, parents/guardians, school system representatives, etc. (Barnett et al., 2012; Khan, Martinez-Garcia, & Slate, 2014; Sun & Shoho, 2017).

Celikten (2001) suggested, "The fact that assistant principals oversee many different duties, facing different obstacles each day, caused the job description of assistant principalship to lack a clearly defined list of duties and responsibilities" (p. 68). One resulting problem is that APs are tasked with so many roles that they are unable to accomplish all the duties associated with their roles (Barnett et al., 2012). Celikten (2001) conducted a qualitative study of APs and found that 76% of the respondents concluded that it was the APs' responsibilities to do whatever it takes to maintain a safe and orderly environment despite their busyness.

Example of APs Role

In a case study, Khan et al. (2014) examined a novice AP who was tasked with moving into a position where the principal leadership style was one of delegation. The novice AP was tasked with heading an investigation regarding a cheating scandal which resulted in the previous AP being fired and the principal formally reprimanded. The AP was charged with this role as well as the day-to-day responsibilities of an AP to include student discipline and teacher leadership. The preceding case study is an example of the roles APs find themselves encountering. Weller and Weller (2002) found that the roles of APs are not universal. Rather,

"any task necessary to maintain school operations can become an assistant principal's responsibility" (Buckman, Johnson, & Alexander, 2018, p. 36). Many of the roles of APs also include community relations, instructional supervision, student discipline, staff supervision, and clerical duties (Glanz, 1994; Militello et al., 2015; Oleszewski et al., 2012). Other duties include supervising building and maintenance (Shore & Walshaw, 2018). However, the primary function is to maintain the stability of the day-to-day operations of the school. It is the focus on stability that sometimes hinders APs' completion of their duties and roles. Shore and Walshaw (2018) conducted a study examining the APs' perceptions of their roles and found "the challenge for many [APs] was to effectively manage a role where unplanned and unscheduled tasks were often urgent and took precedence over other important tasks" (p. 317). One respondent described feeling like a "fire-fighter" who is reactionary, thereby, contributing to his frustration and dissatisfaction. Hence, it is necessary to examine the various roles of APs as well as their perceptions of their roles, and how situational leadership is applicable in examining how APs provide leadership that supports the fulfillment of their roles.

School discipline and attendance roles. Student discipline and attendance are two responsibilities of many APs (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Students, parents/guardians, and teachers are the people for whom APs must provide leadership. In studies conducted by Glanz (1994) and Hausman et al. (2002) both studies' conclusions indicated that most of the respondents' duties involved student discipline and student attendance. Glanz's (1994) study revealed that the respondents believed enforcing discipline was over 90% of their responsibilities. Another participant in Lochmiller and Karnopp's (2016) study remarked that student discipline was 80% of an AP's role. The findings of the studies also reflected that APs spent most of their time on student discipline followed by attendance (Glanz, 1994; Hausman et

al., 2002). One major problem with APs focusing on discipline and attendance is that they do

not curtail student behavior (Toth & Siemaszko, 1996); rather, they manage student behavior.

DeMatthews (2016) argued, "The process of discipline can appear straightforward, especially

since both state and districts have formalized policies to classify student misconduct and

prescribe appropriate disciplinary consequences" (p. 7.) Conversely, managing student

discipline is a complex and sensitive role that APs play. Research reflects that "the disparity

between racial minorities and their White peers has generated interest, concern, and discussion

from a variety of stakeholders" (Okilwa & Robert, 2017, p. 239). Toth and Siemaszko (1996)

concluded that APs would better serve focusing on improving instruction; counselors and other

school professionals can be assigned to manage student discipline and attendance tasks. They

are professionals whose positions lend to better support of students' reasons for exhibiting

discipline and attendance concerns. Perhaps Petrides, Jimes, and Karaglani's (2014) argument

that APs need operational leadership support so that they can administer discipline fairly and

effectively would provide better support in their roles as disciplinarians. Monitoring student

attendance is also a role that APs must play. Student attendance impacts student achievement.

School leaders are tasked with creative ways to encourage student attendance via school

improvement plans and family engagement (Hartman, 2018). Another aspect of discipline and

attendance responsibility and roles also involves managing the needs of students (Cohen &

Schechter, 2019). In order to be effective in this role APs must build relationships with students

(Carpenter, Bukoski, Berry, & Mitchell, 2015) to effectively support them in positively

addressing discipline and attendance issues.

   Instructional leaders. While traditional APs have worked in managerial positions, APs'

roles have expanded to include serving as instructional leaders (Searby et al., 2017). This is due

to the educational reforms that require improved instructional strategies in the classroom (Armstrong, 2015; Gurley, Anast-May, & Lee, 2015; Gurley, Anast-May, O'Neal, et al., 2015; Searby & Armstrong, 2016; Sun & Shoho, 2017). APs who spend more time on instructional tasks have a more positive outlook on the ability for leaders to impact student growth (Morgan, 2018). This is needed because of the emphasis placed on student achievement.

The phrase "instructional leader" was coined by Hallinger and Murphy (1985). The emphasis is on teaching and learning (Shaked, 2019), actions that support the learning of students (Grissom & Loeb, 2011). APs' functioning as instructional leaders is necessary due to educational reform that has taken place across the United States via policies such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, as well as the implementation of high stakes standardized testing (Armstrong, 2015; Gurley, Anast-May, & Lee, 2015; Gurley, Anast-May, O'Neal, et al., 2015; Searby & Armstrong, 2016; Sun & Shoho, 2017). Currently, the new emphasis is for students to be college and career ready (Morgan, 2018). It is a new call for accountability that forces educational leaders to take another look at the instructional practices within schools (Kwan, 2011). Instructional leaders evaluate the education of students and seek to ensure that the instructional practices support student achievement. APs are cognizant that they need to be more involved instructionally (Houchens et al., 2018) to meet the demands for student achievement (Vang, 2015). Gurley, Anast-May, O'Neal, et al. (2015) stated of principals, "The principal engages in: (a) supervising and evaluating instruction, (b) coordinating the curriculum, and (c) monitoring student progress" (p. 135). The aforementioned is not just the responsibility of the principal. APs must also share in the evaluating, supporting, and monitoring the instruction of students. Mercer (2016) added, "All school administrators in contemporary schools feel pressure to increase or maintain student performance as measured by a variety of

factors including scores on standardized tests, student attendance rates, promotion rates, and graduation rates" (p. 91). Hence, APs are responsible for the achievement of students, and that is best supported by the instructional practices of teachers. Therefore, APs must provide leadership for teachers in their daily instructional practices to meet the educational needs of students in the 21st century. The renewed emphasis on APs being instructional leaders also supports APs functioning in diverse roles as instructional leaders (Gurley, Anast-May, & Lee, 2015). In a study conducted by Leaf and Odhiambo (2017), four schools were selected to learn about effective schools' leadership practices. Teachers, APs, and principals participated in the study and responded to questions regarding whether the participants perceived APs as leaders, what responsibilities APs have, and what type of professional learning the APs need. The outcome of the study supported that the three group respondents agreed that their APs successfully worked as instructional leaders; however, they had other duties that occupied their time such as managing the day-to-day operations of the school (Leaf & Odhiambo, 2017). In another study conducted by Lochmiller and Mancinelli (2019) Washington principals and APs were tasked with completing comprehensive evaluations for novice teachers and focused evaluations of teachers. The challenge is that APs need additional support in order to fulfill the role of APs. Professional development and leadership training programs are needed for APs to be effective instructional leaders (Gurley, Anast-May, & Lee, 2015; O'Doherty & Ovando, 2013).

Aspiring principals. APs' roles also include that of aspiring principals. Researchers have found that some APs view their roles as preparation for their future position as principals (Marshall & Davidson, 2016; Militello et al., 2015). Hence, the role of AP leadership should prepare APs to eventually serve as principals (Schulz, Mundy, Kupczynski, & Jones, 2016). One finding of Glanz's (1994) survey was that APs believed that the role of the AP should include

professional activities. Lee et al. (2009) conducted a study and used a questionnaire survey of about 300 Hong Kong vice principals and established that the traditional roles as managers are perfunctory. Instead, the study concluded that APs should function as "staff management, strategic direction and policy environment, quality assurance and accountability, teaching, learning and curriculum, external communication and connection, leader and teacher growth and development, and resource management" (Lee et al., 2009, p. 201). The preceding are valuable experiences to support aspiring principals. However, research reflects APs spend more time responding to the day-to-day operations (Gurley, Anast-May, & Lee, 2015; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Searby et al., 2017) as opposed to implementing needed changes such as staff management, strategic planning, curriculum, etc., as Lee et al. (2009) allude to in the aforementioned.

Schulz et al. (2016) conducted a study to examine if AP leadership prepares APs for principal leadership by comparing leaders who obtained certification on "practiced leadership skills" (p. 3). The participants in this study were given Kriekard's questionnaire that examined six aspects of leadership, including staff management, student relations, and community relations (Schulz et al., 2016). The outcome of the study revealed that APs were not as prepared to lead in all areas of the survey. Emphasis on day-to-day management does not afford APs with the experience needed to lead a school as a principal. APs need to have robust meaningful experiences (Hamm, 2017) to support their growth that could serve them as principals. Experience with budgeting and financing, instructional leadership, and interacting with the superintendent was suggested to enhance AP leadership roles (Morgan, 2018; Searby et al., 2017). It is problematic that many APs lack the knowledge and experience to adequately lead schools as principals. APs should be afforded the opportunity to learn from their principals (Sun,

2018), but their daily responsibilities prevent them from doing so. Berry and Townsend (2019) argued, "Customized, targeted preparation and guidance for aspiring and fledgling head teachers [principals], and appropriate modeling of the role, could encourage deputies [APs]" (p. 29) to want to pursue principalship. This is also important because research suggests that a number of principals are nearing retirement; qualified candidates must be prepared to take these roles (Fusarelli, Fusarelli, & Riddick, 2018). APs who aspire to become principals must engage in leadership roles and experiences that will prepare them to assume principalships.

Another study conducted by Beltramo (2016) evaluated the role of teachers who serve as teacher leaders in the capacity of an AP. This case study examined the practice of teachers serving as APs who were tasked with conducting evaluations of teacher instructional practices. The study examined the relational practices and how peer teachers connected and responded to the teacher leaders. One could surmise that the same may be true of the APs who serve in the same capacity as evaluators of teacher practices. It would be important to examine the roles as evaluator of teacher instructional practices using Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory. Not enough research is available to evaluate this important role of APs.

APs must balance the job expectations of leaders with the expectations of the principal and county level leaders (Baker et al., 2018). Administrators must be able to reconcile educational policies and mandates that are dynamic (Clayton & Goodwin, 2015) and often reactionary to student performance on assessments. Situational leadership theory will assist in the examination of balancing school system expectations and the APs by empowering the stakeholders. Additionally, the roles of APs include balance between work and home. In a report published by Karakose, Kocabas, Yirci, Esen, and Celik (2016), the researchers examined the principals' burnout and life satisfaction. They concluded in the study principals and APs

"experience moderate level of burnout specifically emotional burnout . . . [and] . . . the roles and responsibilities of principalship should be redefined in a more robust perspective by the policy makers" (p. 1492). Given the roles of APs, examining the perceived roles of the APs is essential to expanding the knowledge of APs and why some are hesitant to remain in those positions.

Challenges of AP Roles

Despite the additional responsibilities in AP leadership roles, APs face hinderances in their leadership capacities. This is a result of some school leaders' commitment to traditional, historical leadership practices that hinder APs' roles from growing beyond perfunctory building level management duties (Petrides et al., 2014). One of the first examinations of AP roles via a study was conducted by Austin and Brown (1970), and they reported that most APs felt unfulfilled in their AP roles due to the monotony of managing the daily operations of school. Austin and Brown further noted that most APs viewed the AP position as a segue to principalship. Researchers in subsequent studies reveal that APs' views of the AP positions and their roles have not changed much since the 1970s. Marshall and Davidson (2016) remarked that APs encounter "professional shock" for various reasons. Some are dismayed by the monotony of the position as building level managers (Marshall & Davidson, 2016; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Petrides et al., 2014). Others feel intimidated by the uncertainty of the position, for APs have experienced lost positions due to budgetary constraints (Marshall & Davidson, 2016) that resulted in RIF [reduction in force]. APs have idealized views of how they would like to see APs lead in their roles; however, for many APs, current practices do not allow APs to fulfill the idealized views of AP leadership (Militello et al., 2015). Often, they are related to mid-level managers who supports principals and teachers along (Abrahamsen, 2018) with other stakeholders.

Ambiguity of roles and burnout. AP roles can be ambiguous (Militello et al., 2015; Searby & Armstrong, 2016). Peters et al. (2016) characterizes AP roles as complex and ever-evolving. The increased responsibilities of administrators along with the ambiguity place APs at great risk for increased stress and burnout (Karakose et al., 2016). Burnout occurs when people experience role ambiguity and stress that lead to burnout (Celik, 2013). These changes have increased throughout time. While many current job descriptions for APs include instructional leaders, APs are not always clear about the roles of APs. APs are accustomed to someone else, the principal, being ultimately responsible for the school (Spillane, Harris, Jones, & Mertz, 2015). Duties are typically assigned by the principal, and "responsibilities and duties assigned to the AP often involve narrowly defined and unpredictable situations for the inexperienced administrator" (Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016, p. 222). Consistently, APs are assigned tasks that principals no longer desire to do (Rintoul & Bishop, 2019). Armstrong (2015) conducted a study where she interviewed four APs in their first through third year of experience as APs. The new APs found their roles to be ambiguous because they felt their preparation had been inadequate (Armstrong, 2015). While teachers and principals receive professional development to support their transition into their roles, APs rarely receive training that will help them in the performance of their duties (Barnett, Shoho, & Okilwa, 2017). This lack of preparation causes role ambiguity. In a case study conducted by Gonzales (2019), the subject was an AP who worked with a principal who was not clear about his expectations for the AP. The principal frequently sent conflicting messages, and he was never clear about his vision. Such lack of clarity by principals often causes angst and may lead to APs being ineffective (Oleszewski et al., 2012). In the Gonzales case study, the AP felt frustrated because he did not know how to support the principal—especially when student achievement and engagement were problems at

the school. Such ambiguity of roles often causes APs to flounder as they navigate the role of AP

(Marshall & Davidson, 2016) and some experienced burnout as a result (Tikkanen, Pyhältö,

Pietarinen, & Soini, 2017).

Burnout may also occur when APs desire to move into leadership positions; however,

they find it difficult to obtain principal positions. Marshall and Davidson (2016) noted of APs

that "some become plateaued, applying for higher positions but being rejected" (p. 274). It

becomes difficult for APs to navigate the bureaucracy that hinders some of their pursuits for

principalship, yet they feel stifled because of the obstacles to moving up into leadership

positions.

Inadequate leadership preparation. Disillusionment is another byproduct of

ambiguity. Disillusionment occurs due to the unpredictability that comes with having an all-

encompassing position that supports so many stakeholders (Shore & Walshaw, 2018). Extant

literature indicates that leadership training programs fail to provide education and training that

prepares leaders for AP leadership (Kearney & Herrington, 2013; Mercer, 2016). Some

leadership preparation programs' placement of leaders after graduation rate is deficiently low;

Fuller, Hollingworth, and An (2016) study's outcome reflected that 50% of the participants

found placement as leaders in a school within five years. Additionally, these leadership

programs do not equip APs to be principals of school, and this can be because of the APs'

limited experience as an AP (Armstrong, 2015; Gurley, Anast-May, O'Neal, et al., 2015; Hutton,

2014; Kearney & Herington, 2013; Peters et al., 2016).

Disillusionment can also occur due to the APs' acquiescence to a culture that does not

promote growth of a leader. Baker et al. (2018) presented a case study of a novice AP who

initially had a good working relationship with the principal because he followed her lead in his

leadership, but the AP's leadership philosophy differed from the principal in that he believed in

shared leadership and encouraged teachers to share in leadership. In contrast, the principal was

more autocratic. The relationship soured when the principal began to feel as if the AP did not

support the principal's vision. The AP was concerned that his job would be threatened, so he

resigned himself to the will of the principal and opted to be compliant. Marshall and Davidson

(2016) proposed that APs grappling with situations as described above can result in leaders who:

- let the "higher-ups" initiate new ideas and programs (or at least give them credit);

- do not take risks, even when you see unmet needs or policies that simply do not work;

- make sure, if you must make a change, do it quietly; if you have disputes, keep them quiet, shared only with close and trusted colleagues;

- be sure to display agreement with the school cultures' dominant values; do not use your position to overtly challenge the status quo; avoid intellectual and philosophical debates with "higher-ups";

- avoid doing anything that could earn you the label "troublemaker;" and

- be sure to cover all assigned tasks, even when you are needed for other tasks, or even when a glaring need is left undone; further, protect your control over "your" tasks when other administrators intrude on that territory. (p. 273)

This type of leadership is counterproductive to leadership that is needed to support student

achievement and stakeholder growth. Another byproduct of ambiguity and burnout is

disillusionment that happens when APs become frustrated when they apply for principalships

and other leadership positions, but they are unable to obtain the positions (Marshall & Davidson,

2016).

APs' Perceptions of Their Roles

Hausman et al.'s (2002) article emphasized a study by Hartzell that found several emerging themes that included the following: most beginning APs do not understand the nature of principalship; APs who are new lack leadership; AP training does not prepare APs to move on as principals, and finally, becoming an AP causes APs to experience personal and professional challenges. The aforementioned demonstrates the importance of studying the perception of APs. A dearth of research regarding APs and AP perception of their roles exists (Leaf & Odhiambo, 2017; Marshall & Davidson, 2016; Militello et al., 2015). One study that somewhat examines AP perception was conducted by Shore and Walshaw (2018). The purpose of the study was twofold: to examine if the New Zealand participants experienced job satisfaction by viewing their role as a terminal career and to examine the APs' perception of their roles. The job choice theory was used and respondents in the survey responded to questionnaires that sought to survey if the participants experienced job satisfaction. A total of 169 participants responded to questionnaires, and from that group, interviews were conducted to follow up on their perception of the roles of APs. The researchers found that 58% of the respondents were satisfied in their roles as APs and did not aspire to be principals (Shore & Walshaw, 2018). Shore and Walshaw (2018) concluded that there are stresses involved with being an AP, for the respondents stated that more needed to be done to support new APs:

> There are dissatisfactions with any system. Without the support of a formalized induction programme, formal mentoring support, systems of feedback on performance and in-depth leadership training, 'on the job' training will assume greater significance. (p. 323)

However, the study demonstrates that the role of experienced administrators is one where job satisfactions is possible. Research needs to focus on APs' perception of the roles (Shore & Walshaw, 2018).

Professional Learning and Situational Leadership

Research using perceived roles of APs must be linked to the leadership experiences in which APs find themselves (Kearney & Herrington, 2013). That can only occur through leadership training and professional learning designed to assist APs in operating more effectively in their roles (Kearney & Herrington, 2013). Often, professional learning is geared towards APs becoming principals (Schulz et al., 2016) and fails to properly address AP leadership. APs must ensure that students receive an education that prepares students for the rigors of future educational and career goals; however, AP leadership involves providing leadership that ensures that the goal is met. In a study conducted by Odhiambo and Hii (2012), 26 teachers, 12 students, and 12 parents responded to questions: how effective is school leadership perceived by the stakeholders and "how do principals understand their roles" (p. 234). The results of the study were that the participants had favorable perception of their leaders. The researchers ascertained that it is important for leaders to establish positive relationships with the stakeholders (Odhiambo & Hii, 2012).

Ozdemir and Yalçin (2018) evaluated the role that principals play in preparing APs to lead and found that there is a need for the leaders to support the subordinates as APs consider a move into leadership as principals. Although Ozdemir and Yalçin did not use the situational leadership theory, their research would suggest that APs cannot be prepared to act if the principal does not demonstrate leadership that is cognizant of the needs of the APs (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982; Leaf & Odhiambo, 2017; Searby et al., 2017). Likewise, APs must adjust their leadership

to meet the needs of the stakeholders for whom the APs provide leadership (Blanchard et al., 2013; Hersey, 1984; Hersey & Blanchard, 1982).

Both Ozdemir and Yalçin (2018) and Odhiambo and Hii's (2012) studies reflect that APs must build relationships with the stakeholders in order to be effective leaders. That requires APs understanding the needs of their stakeholders and responding in a manner that supports the needs of the stakeholders.

Educators just beginning their careers as APs do not have the educational preparation experience that prepared them to lead (Kearney & Herrington, 2013; Peters et al., 2016). Hence, APs need assistance in identifying the needs of the stakeholders and providing leadership that will support them in leadership. APs need training in order to effectively lead; often this training is offered through leadership preparation programs and professional learning programs that will assist in leadership (Marshall & Davidson, 2016; O'Doherty & Ovando, 2013). Aspiring leaders' preparation programs and professional learnings that included AP emphasis could prepare assistant leaders with the tools to respond to the leadership that the stakeholders such as teachers need (Schermuly et al., 2011). Kearney and Herrington (2013) conducted a follow-up study to a leadership training program designed for APs in southwest Texas. In the study 10 APs who completed the program while working as APs responded to follow-up interviews evaluating the effectiveness of the program (Kearney & Herrington, 2013). The respondents found meeting public information officers, principals, and superintendents to be quite informative regarding their roles and responsibilities in schools; however, APs also explained that they needed more support on the day-to-day operations of the schools (Kearney & Herrington, 2013). This demonstrates that APs need the professional learning to assist in the performance of their roles as APs.

Another support for APs can come through mentorship by principals and experienced APs (Marshall & Davidson, 2016).

Traditional leader training programs do not provide aspiring APs with the experience and training they need to adequately be prepared for the role of AP. APs need targeted training that supports the relationships they must develop with stakeholders in order to lead them effectively. Research demonstrates that a gap in literature does not address how APs can adequately develop the relationships and utilize leadership that includes the APs' perceptions (Hausman et al., 2002). The practices of situational leadership theory will also aid in APs being prepared to lead based upon the abilities of the stakeholders whom they lead (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982).

Stakeholders

Stakeholders are essential to the function of schools. Ni, Yan, and Pounder (2018) stated, "While a school principal is designated as the formal school leader, other organizational members and external stakeholders also play a significant role in influencing school decisions, though often to a different extent" (p. 219). Stakeholders within schools include teachers, staff, administrators, parents/guardians, and community members. The leadership needs of the stakeholders vary. APs interact with stakeholders to support the operation of schools, and the leadership APs provide is contingent upon the needs of the stakeholders. Hence, AP leadership is as diverse as the needs of the followers. Leadership should provide direction and guidance for stakeholders (Okoji, 2015); however, the level of direction and guidance rests on the needs of the stakeholders. That is why it is important for administrators to possess emotional intelligence (Kearney, Kelsey, & Sinkfield, 2014), thereby ensuring that the leadership supports teachers, and decisions are based upon the stakeholders needs and not leader emotionalism. It is a necessary balance that will support AP leadership of stakeholders.

Students. APs are charged with ensuring that the schools have an environment where teaching and learning can take place (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019). Reforms in education have forced APs to ensure that students are college and career ready (Morgan, 2018). However, APs are still responsible for daily operation of schools and that includes meeting with students, counseling students, and disciplining students (Dhuey & Smith, 2018; Glanz, 1994; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Morgan, 2018). APs must blend their educational responsibilities as instructional leaders with their daily interactions with students (Barnett et al., 2012). When dealing with students, APs must seek to be fair and consistent (Williams, 2012). This requires that APs seek to build relationships with the students. In a study conducted by Barnett et al. (2012), 11% of novice APs expressed that they did not feel prepared for communication during conflicts. APs must be able to communicate in order to form relationships with students. This ability helps APs to deal with conflict (Craft et al., 2016) as well make connections with students to support them.

In addition to developing relationships with students, leaders must also understand "that the function of schools, similar to that of families or other social systems, is to activate needs through supportive conditions and processes" (Adams & Olsen, 2017, p. 511). Administrators who help to foster such environments encourage students' development of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Adams & Olsen, 2017)—qualities that evolve from students feeling psychologically supported for success. Student autonomy is encouraged by educators taking into consideration the "students' perspective; identifying and nurturing the students' needs, interests, and preferences; providing optimal challenges; highlighting meaningful learning goals; and presenting interesting, relevant, and enriched activities" (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010, p. 589). Helping students develop competence is another aspect that administrators should expect of the educators. Competence is when students feel like they have control over their

outcomes (Jang et al., 2010), and relatedness results when students feel supported by others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In other words, one major component of student success is when students feel confident in their abilities to learn and be successful, and this is undergirded by teachers and educators who act in such a way that students feel supported and believed in by those who teach them. Administrators must set an environment and tone so that teachers' instructional strategies and actions allow students to develop autonomy, competence, and relatedness. APs can assist in this by encouraging teachers and staff to create a culture where students not only feel supported but also develop autonomy, competence, and relatedness as a result of the culture that APs assist in creating so that students can thrive.

Teachers. Teachers are essential in school improvement (Scales & Rogers, 2017) and are foundational in student learning. Teacher leadership is often assigned to APs (Barnett et al., 2012; Militello et al., 2015; Petrides et al., 2014). AP leadership can empower teachers' self-efficacy, which could support teacher productivity (Duyar, Gumus, & Sukru Bellibas, 2013; Moran & Larwin, 2017). APs along with principals are key in identifying teachers who are not effective teachers through high stakes evaluations (Donaldson & Mavrogordato, 2018). The relationships that teachers have with APs provide leadership that promotes teachers working collaboratively with administrators and peers to ensure that instructional strategies and the development of curriculum are adequately done to positively impact student achievement (Ni et al., 2018). Ni et al. added that administrators must build relationships to support teachers in fulfilling their tasks of assisting students in student achievement, and this is contingent upon the needs of the teachers. These relationships can positively impact teacher job satisfaction as well as promote teacher efficacy (Duyar et al., 2013). Goldring, Taie, and Riddles (2014) noted that 16% of public-school teachers do not remain at their schools. It is the responsibility of APs to

support teachers to curtail attrition and promote teacher efficacy. Providing leadership that

meets the needs of the teacher benefits students because of support that teachers garner from

administrators. Duyar et al. (2013) contended that "the principals who make teachers a priority,

consider their emotions, listen to them, and provide them with needed support are more likely to

foster the teachers' job satisfaction" (p. 703). Just as the one size fit all does not support

students, it is not effective or appropriate for teacher leadership. Duyar et al. added that

providing teachers with personal and professional supports enhances their experience and it is

effective. Thus, administrators who ascertain the needs of their teachers will positively support

the morale of the educators.

Another way APs can ascertain the needs of teachers is based upon the evaluation

processes for teachers. Kraft and Gilmore (2016) described the observation and feedback duality

that provides vital information regarding teacher needs:

> First, observation rubrics provide teachers and evaluators with a common framework for
>
> planning, enacting, and discussing classroom instruction. Second, the observation and
>
> feedback process can develop teachers' habits and abilities to reflect on their own
>
> practices and assess their own strengths and weaknesses. Third, evaluators can provide
>
> teachers with specific and actionable feedback on how they might improve their
>
> instructional practice or serve as a sounding board as teachers drive their own
>
> improvement process. Finally, the observation and feedback process provide a formal
>
> structure that pushes teachers to set goals and tracks their progress toward meeting these
>
> goals. (pp. 714–715)

The preceding reflects how APs can effectively respond to the needs of teachers and provide

leadership that is appropriate based upon the APs' observations and feedback. Additionally, it

supports APs in utilizing leadership styles that are needed for the teachers. This is an effective tool that also provides empirical data to justify the leadership choices of APs. Furthermore, it exemplifies transformational leadership that reflects leaders' support of teachers and commitment to collaboration (Geijsel, Sleegers, Leithwood, & Jantzi, 2003).

Parents/guardians. Parents/guardians are important in supporting and guiding their children in educational achievement and growth (Sebastian, Moon, & Cunningham, 2017). Another benefit of parental/guardian involvement is that it supports children during the challenging adolescent time period (Lazaridou & Gravani Kassida, 2015). When administrators and teachers communicate with parents, the desired outcome is that parents will become more involved in the education of their students (Patten, 2017). Research involving parents/guardians and their students' education typically explores parental involvement in their children's education at home or parents/guardians supporting the school's efforts to educate students (Lareau & Muñoz, 2012). Isolated research evaluating AP leadership of parents/guardians is not readily researched. However, APs interact and lead parents in conferences and meetings about their students' academic and behavioral performances frequently (Militello et al., 2015; Morgan, 2018; Oleszewski et al., 2012). APs provide leadership for parents as well. In a study conducted by Barr and Saltmarsh (2014), the authors examined the role of principals in fostering relationships between students and parents. The authors use principals to refer to both APs and principals. Parents in the study felt like it was the principal's responsibility to encourage inclusivity for students and parents as well as to manage communication with individual families. Principals alone cannot do that for each family, but APs, significant members of leadership, can accomplish this by providing a more personalized touch for parents and students since they interact with them.

Instruments such as surveys of parents, collaboration with parent teacher organizations, and community feedback provide data regarding the needs of parents (Sebastian et al., 2017), and these can be useful tools for APs to identify and bolster the needs of parents. In a study conducted by Bukoski et al. (2015), the AP participants revealed that they did not get the opportunity to be involved with the community as much as the principal, but the data from surveys still prove valuable in that APs can use their knowledge to lead parents/guardians in assisting in the education of students.

Staff and community members. A consistent characteristic of AP leadership involves APs supporting the daily operations of the school (Glanz, 1994; Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Oleszewski et al., 2012). One area of supervision is personnel management which includes secretaries, paraprofessionals, custodians, along with teachers, etc. (Oleszewski et al., 2012; Shore & Walshaw, 2018). These positions are also referred to as classified positions:

> Their roles vary widely and include such responsibilities as supporting daily school operations (e.g., lunch service, monitoring students sent to the office), providing instructional support (e.g., delivering small group instruction, assisting special education students within general education classrooms), and supervising and managing student behavior (e.g., playground and lunchroom supervision, one on one support for students with emotional disorders). (Feuerborn, Tyre, & Beaudoin, 2018, p. 102)

APs provide leadership and direction for the individuals working in these positions. Given the close nature in which they work with students, classified employees also play instrumental roles in schools. For this reason, it is important that APs exercise leadership that supports the significance of their roles. Communication and staff feedback will assist APs in responding to

the needs of the staff, thereby, supporting APs in providing leadership that is appropriate for the staff.

Summary

Hersey and Blanchard's (1982) situational leadership theory serves as the instructional framework to support understanding the leadership style needed to effectively support the stakeholders with whom APs interact during the performance of their duties. APs must provide leadership and implement a leadership style. This chapter examined APs' discussions of their leadership style for those whom they lead. Hersey and Blanchard (1982) suggested that leadership styles should meet the need of the followers.

APs fulfill myriad roles in their positions (Peters et al., 2016), for they support the daily operation of schools (Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Oleszewski et al., 2012). This chapter reviewed the notion that APs are tasked with many roles (Barnett et al., 2012; Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Oleszewski et al., 2012). Research reflects that the role of APs, albeit consumed by discipline and attendance (Armstrong, 2015), must evolve to include the other aspects of AP roles such as instructional leadership and budgeting/fiscal management (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013; Searby et al., 2017). This chapter also reviewed the burnout and frustration that APs sometimes experience (Militello et al., 2015; Peters et al., 2016). In addition to the roles, this chapter focused on the various stakeholders that APs provide leadership. Those stakeholders are students, teachers, faculty, staff, and parents/guardians. They can provide vital information that could lead to the improvement of AP leadership understanding as well as how APs can perform their jobs effectively. The goal of this study is to add to the research based on the perception of APs by evaluating their roles and their perceptions of their roles. Situational

leadership theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982) provides the framework that grounds the purpose

of this research.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

Current research studies tend to focus on principals and aspiring principals as opposed to APs and their roles (Bukoski et al., 2015; Burrows-McCabe, 2014; Kearney & Herrington, 2013). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand APs' leadership and perceptions of their roles. The participants in this study were APs working in elementary, middle, and high schools in a suburban public-school system in the southeastern United States. Data were collected using interviews, focus groups, and documents. The specifics of this case study examined in this chapter include the design, research questions, setting, participants, procedures, the researcher's role, the data collection methods, and data analysis. This chapter concluded with a discussion of trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

Design

This qualitative case study examined APs' leadership and perceptions of their roles. Yin (2018) explained that the case study design allows focus on an in-depth case within a real-world context. Yin (2018) suggested, "You should think of your case study as the opportunity to shed empirical light on some theoretical concepts or principles" (p. 38). The case study design can be used for the in-depth study of an individual or a group (Yin, 2018). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) characterized this as the unit of analysis. The delineating factor of case studies that involves groups or units of analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) is that the cases are not defined by beginnings or ends; rather, the research question helps to formulate the focus of the study (Yin, 2018).

Another significant characteristic of a case study is that it is within a bounded system (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). Merriam and Tisdell (2016)

clarified that bounded is determined by how finite the data collection will be. If the data collection is limitless, then the case is not bounded. Consequently, "a case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single, bounded unit" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pp. 232–233).

Case study was the appropriate design for this research because it provided an in-depth examination of APs' leadership and perceptions of their roles within the bounded context of one school system located in the southeastern United States. This case study was also an instrumental case study. Instrumental case studies focus on a singular issue and choose one bounded case to explore the issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The instrumental case in this study was APs' leadership and perceptions of their roles within the bounded setting of the school system. Case study was also the important design for this study because it was both a common case and revelatory (Yin, 2018). APs were common in that most public schools employ at least one AP; likewise, it was revelatory in that APs were rarely studied. The case study design began to examine APs' leadership and perceptions of their roles to provide vital information regarding APs' roles in educational settings.

Case studies that incorporate multiple sources are highly regarded (Yin, 2018). Therefore, AP perspectives from elementary, middle, and high school provided valuable insight from APs working in all the grade levels of the school system. APs within the studied school system receive professional learning that is specifically targeted to support AP leadership. It was interesting to see the similarities and/or differences of APs' responses and whether it impacted the APs' perceptions.

Another aspect of the case study includes a theory that links the case, the research question, and the data. The case study design benefited from using previous theories to guide the

research (Yin, 2018). The theory helped to inform the analytic generalizations, which means the assumptions that were made are supported by the theory giving a method of examining and evaluating the case (Yin, 2018). Situational leadership theory was developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1982), and it posits that leadership is predicated upon the needs of the followers. APs operate in a number of roles, and their function in their roles is influenced by the needs of those who follow their leadership in their roles. APs make numerous decisions. These decisions not only must be appropriate responses based upon the circumstances but also be based upon the needs of the followers (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982).

Research Questions

The research central question and sub-questions addressed in this study are as follows:

Central Research Question

How do assistant principals lead and perceive their roles as APs?

Research Sub-questions

RQ1: How are APs prepared for and supported in the roles they play in their positions as APs?

RQ2: How do APs determine the leadership style needed to support those whom they lead?

RQ3: How do APs address the challenges of AP leadership?

Setting

The setting for this case study was Eastern City School District (ECSD; pseudonym), a suburban school district in the southeastern United States with an enrollment of approximately 16,500. Eastern City's population is 90,000 as of the 2017 Census Bureau. The population of Eastern City is 55% Black, 31% White, 10% Hispanic/Latino, and 1% Asian, followed by

American Indian and Alaskan Native/ Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islanders as a collective 3%

(Census Bureau). This is a shift in the population from 15 years prior when Eastern City was

predominantly White. Eastern City's poverty rate is 14% (Census Bureau). Likewise, ECSD

demographics underwent a significant change. ECSD student demographics is predominantly

Black (66%). The school system's demographics also included 13% White, 14%

Hispanic/Latino, and 73% of the students receive free or reduced lunch.

I selected ECSD because it underwent significant changes in leadership. The school

system has a new superintendent who has led a reorganization at the county office and school

leadership level. The school board leadership also experienced a change in demographics

moving from one Black representative just five years ago to now containing predominantly

Black schoolboard members. I believe that a study of a school system that experienced change

would provide poignant information from APs within the system. The leaders of ECSD placed

renewed interest in supporting APs through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs); hence, I

was interested in seeing if the APs' participation in the PLCs have had any impact on their

perception of their roles as APs.

Participants

Participants for this study were selected using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling

involves selecting participants based upon specific criteria (Stake, 2006). One benefit of

purposive sampling is the various perspectives that can result from the participants within the

study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The criteria for this study included participants who were APs

within ECSD with at least one year of experience in ECSD. Selecting APs with a minimum of

one year experience in ECSD provides a common basis of working specifically in ECSD.

However, representatives from all grade levels provided varying experiences within the school

system. Approval from the school system was obtained. I placed this letter temporarily in Appendix A but it was replaced with the IRB approval letter in my final dissertation to preserve the confidentiality of this school district.

Procedures

The procedures for this case study allowed me to examine the phenomenon in varying environments (Stake, 2006). The phenomenon for this case study was the APs' leadership and perceptions of their roles. It is probable that the perceptions of APs working in elementary, middle, or high schools varied based upon the different populations with whom they work. Eastern City's Director of Assessments granted permission to conduct the study in ECSD. Once approval from Liberty's Institutional Review Board (IRB) was granted, I conducted a pilot study to practice my interviewing skills and to ensure that I was able to answer research questions using the data collections methods. The pilot study highlighted and confirmed the significance of this study, for the participants shared that not enough attention is paid to the roles of APs. Their support made me understand the value of the study of APs. It also confirmed that I had a variety of research questions to obtain data for study.

After completing the pilot study, I emailed the recruitment letter (Appendix B) and the screening survey (Appendix C) to ECSD APs. Once I received the feedback from the screening survey, I selected a group of participants from all three levels (elementary, middle, and high school) and sent a letter to selected participants for the study (Appendix D) along with the Consent Form (Appendix E). Then I sent emails thanking participants who completed the screening survey but who were not selected for the study (Appendix F).

I conducted individual interviews and focus groups with the participants synchronously via Zoom. I also examined documents that are used by the professional learning cadres to

support APs in the school system. As an AP within the school system I am a part of the AP PLC

and have access to documents. To begin this research, I interviewed each participant separately.

After I completed all of the interviews, I provided three opportunities for teachers to participate

in one of the three focus groups. I was hopeful that I could have a heterogenous group of

participants from all grade bandwidths in each group to see the varying perspectives. I sent an

invitation via email asking the participants to select a date that they could attend the focus

groups. The focus groups took place after the contracted work hours. For both the interviews

and the focus groups, I recorded them using my laptop and an audio recorder. The data

collected from the interviews and focus groups were coded and interpreted using a database, and

pattern matching was used to examine the perceptions of APs (Yin, 2018). The outcome was

compiled, analyzed, and reported.

The Researcher's Role

Creswell and Poth (2018) stated, "In social constructivism individuals seek understanding

of the world in which they live and work" (p. 18). The epistemological belief is that "reality is

co-constructed between the researcher and the researched and shaped by individual experiences"

(Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 35). I have five years of experience as an AP in an ECSD high

school. As the researcher, I acknowledge that I work as an AP, and that causes me to have some

biases about AP roles. These preconceived perceptions were noted in the Researcher's

Reflective Journal in Appendix G.

Hamm (2017) characterized APs as unsung heroes because they are usually the first to

handle difficult situations such as major disciplinary problems. As an AP, I can attest that I am

usually the first to respond to situations that can be emotionally charged and sometimes volatile.

I am expected to maintain school safety and lead and support all stakeholders including students,

faculty/staff, parents, and community members (Oleszewski et al., 2012; Shore & Walshaw, 2018).

The leadership certification that I completed provided theoretical and practical experience through internships, but it is the firsthand experience that I received working as an AP that caused me to question other APs' perceptions of their roles. This is what led to my study. Although my experience as an AP may cause me to have biases, I used journaling to support transparency, balance, and objectivity as I conducted the study (Appendix G). I conducted research ethically and reported outcomes based upon common themes that emerged from the analysis of the research.

As the researcher, I also was committed to protecting the participants by ensuring confidentiality through the assignment of pseudonyms for all participants and the schools' involved in this study (Yin, 2018) so that their responses would be open and uninhibited. I asked probing questions and actively listened in order to effectively report the findings.

Data Collection

Yin (2018) suggested that sources of evidence or data collection can occur through "documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observations and physical artifacts" (p. 113). Merriam and Tisdale (2016) proposed that data collection and analysis should be done simultaneously. This method assists with ascertaining themes that emerge from the data (Yin, 2018). The three methods used for data collection in this study were interviews, focus groups, and document analyses. Two important aspects of data collection for this study were the interview and focus group questions; I asked two experts to review the questions before I began data collection. One expert is an AP with a doctorate in educational leadership. The other expert has a doctorate in educational leadership and serves as an adjunct

professor at two online universities. Both felt that the questions were appropriate. One suggested that it would be better to have the focus groups meet in person, but she understood that it may be difficult to get leaders to meet. The other expert suggested I use a service to transcribe the interviews and focus group data if I was unable to complete the tasks in a timely manner.

Interviews

Individual interviews were the primary method used to collect data. The interviews lasted no more than one hour (Yin, 2018). Wolgemuth et al. (2015) reported that professionals with busy schedules welcomed interviews for qualitative research, for the interviews allowed participants to take time out and self-reflect. Yin (2018) asserted that interviews are effective methods to collect data to find out the lived experiences of the participants. Yin also suggested that interviews should be guided conversations but structured. The interviews were conducted one-on-one, and they were recorded using a laptop and digital recorder (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Additionally, I allowed myself a period of reflection following the interviews to ensure that I reflected and elaborated on the interview responses (Patton, 2015). I transcribed the interviews as soon as possible after each interview.

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions (see Appendix H)

1. What is your current position? How long have you been in your current position? How long have you been at your current school?

2. What are your specific areas of responsibilities or leadership as an AP at your school?

3. What are the various roles that you know that APs may serve at your school or from talking to APs who serve in other schools?

4. How do you perceive the roles of APs?

5. What surprised you about the roles of APs?

6. How would you describe your preparation to become an AP?

7. How effective are you at fulfilling your specific areas of responsibilities? Explain why.

8. What are the greatest hinderances to you fulfilling your role as an AP?

9. What are the supports that you have experienced in your role as an AP?

10. How do you characterize your leadership style?

11. How do varying situations impact your leadership?

12. How do you determine the leadership needed for those whom you lead?

13. How do you modify your leadership to meet the needs of those whom you lead?

14. How do those whom you lead respond to your leadership?

15. What are the needs of those whom you lead?

16. How does your role as an AP align with your leadership style?

17. How can APs be prepared to fulfill their roles as APs?

18. What role is your most effective and why?

19. What role is your least effective and why?

20. What role do you most enjoy and why?

21. What role do you least enjoy and why?

22. What else can you add that we haven't already talked about?

In order to ask questions, I attempted to ask them in a sequence that went from general to specific (Patton, 2015). The first five questions were written to gain basic knowledge (Patton, 2015). Level 1 questioning was employed to obtain interviewees' responses to the questioning while inwardly asking Level 2 questions to ascertain the influences that led the interviewees to answer the question (Yin, 2018).

The questions were framed to seek the APs' perception or experience (Patton, 2015); thereby, the responses assisted in triangulating data based upon the responses of the participants (Yin, 2018). Most questions were written in the how or why format. This aligned with the case study design (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018), and it was done to solicit responses that would support analyzing the case (Yin, 2018)

The interview questions served as an interview guide, for the questions were written prior to the interview (Patton, 2015). The first two questions were designed to obtain background information in order to ascertain with what grade level the APs work. The questions were also written to identify their duties, responsibilities, and assignments. APs are experts because they work in the role. Hence, Questions 4 and 5 sought to learn from the expert participants' broad perceptions of the roles of APs (Kallio, Pietila, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). Their responses brought clarity to what APs think about AP roles. The sixth question was geared to find out what preparation APs needed to fulfill their roles. Recently, there has been a push for leadership training programs to become accountable for the program's adequate preparation of APs and principals (Fuller & Hollingworth, 2016). I was interested in discovering the participants' perceptions of their training and whether their experiences prepared them for leadership.

Morgan (2018) argued that AP roles suffer as a result of ambiguity and a failure to adequately define the job description. The next sequence of questions (7–9) sought to ascertain the personal experiences of AP roles. The tenth question examined the leadership styles of the APs. Leadership styles must adapt to meet the needs of their constituents (Hersey et al., 2001). AP leadership roles are evolving to include roles such as operating as instructional leaders (Leaf & Odhiambo, 2017). I was interested in seeing how APs characterized their leadership styles. Questions 11–13 focused on Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory, and this

framework was used to evaluate APs' leadership and perceptions of their roles. Situational

leadership theory's premise is that the needs of the followers determine the leadership style that

the leader employs (Hersey et al., 2001). Questions 15 and 16 delved into the relationship aspect

of AP leadership. Building relationships is an aspect of successful leadership (Toom, 2018).

The final questions, 16–21, sought to explore the APs' thoughts concerning their roles and their

perception of these roles. Tensions often arise due the ambiguity of the roles of APs (Houchens

et al., 2018). This line of questioning provided in-depth information regarding APs' leadership

and perceptions of their role.

Focus Groups

Another form of interviews is focus groups. Krueger and Casey (2015) stated, "The goal

of a focus group is to collect data that is of interest to the researcher—typically to find the range

of opinions of people across several groups" (p. 7). A focus group "encourages understanding,

description and analysis of the reality through the dynamic of social relations" (Kallio et al.,

2016, p. 88). My role as the researcher was to moderate, listen, observe, and analyze (Krueger &

Casey, 2015). Then, I came to a consensus based upon the data collected from two focus group

sessions. Focus groups are normally comprised of six to eight participants who share

homogenous characteristics (Ryan, Gandha, Culbertson, & Carlson, 2014). I convened two

focus group meetings for APs who agreed to participate in the study. I offered the focus groups

in online synchronous focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Ryan et al., 2014). Yin (2018)

recommended smaller group settings as opposed to convening all the participants at once. My

intent was to convene face-to-face meetings; however, the COVID-19 pandemic made it

impossible for APs to convene together in one place. Hence, I used online synchronous focus

groups via Zoom to conduct the focus groups. We met after contracted school hours. The focus

group questions were developed to encourage open conversations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I

used a laptop and digital recorder to record the focus group conversations. Participants were

reminded to refrain from using colleagues' names. The following questions served as general

questions for discussion:

Structured Open-Ended Focus Group Questions (see Appendix I)

1. How do you characterize the leadership and role of APs?

2. How do you feel stakeholders view the roles of APs?

3. How do you determine the type of leadership that is needed for the stakeholders you

   support?

4. How do you perceive the leadership training program you received prior to becoming

   an AP?

5. How can the school system leaders support APs?

6. How can APs be more effective?

7. How do grade levels of the student population impact AP roles?

Focus groups provide checks and balances for participants in that they tend to self-

regulate and limit extreme responses (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Patton, 2015). Questions 1 and 2

sought the perceptions of APs regarding their roles. Stake (2006) referred to this as focusing on

the experience of the participant. Research demonstrates that many APs' roles include

managerial tasks (Glanz, 1994; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Sun & Shoho, 2017). APs' perceptions

not only quantified their roles but also qualified their roles. Question 3 stemmed from Hersey

and Blanchard's (1982) situational leadership theory. The premise of situational leadership

theory emphasizes a leader's behavior in relation to the needs of the follower (Hersey &

Blanchard, 1982). Hence, Question 3 sought to ascertain the type of leadership that APs offer

those whom they lead. Another impact on AP perceptions involved APs feeling equipped to lead in the various roles. Research reflects that APs' roles are limited because they lack the experience to function in roles beyond managerial ones due to the lack of training (Houchens et al., 2018). Likewise, Questions 4 and 5 were related to situational leadership theory in that it speaks to the support and training that district and principal leadership affords APs. I tried to determine how APs perceived the district leaders' efforts to train and support leaders to be effective in their roles. Patton (2015) suggested that questions should be action-oriented to solicit concrete answers. Questions 6 and 7 sought action-oriented responses by soliciting the opinion of APs, who are experts, to ascertain their views on support needed to improve AP role effectiveness.

Document Analysis

Documents were the third method of data collection. Documents such as organizational documents, administrative documents, emails, reports, surveys, and questionnaires were viable documents to examine for this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015; Vargas-Urpi, 2017; Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) cautioned that the documents may contain bias, but they could be used to "corroborate and augment evidence from other sources" (p. 115). If the information contradicted the other sources, then it supported additional research (Yin, 2018) which was also important in the case study method.

Patton (2015) referred to the records, documents, and artifacts as material culture. ECSD has a professional learning community for APs. The group meets at least monthly and the APs receive professional learning that is targeted to support AP leadership. Resources are frequently uploaded. During each meeting, the APs receive supportive documents such as agendas, summaries, PowerPoints, data reports, and ancillary documents to assist and support AP

leadership of stakeholders. The district leadership utilizes electronic platforms that house documents, training material, and survey results that APs are encouraged to reference to support their leadership of the stakeholders. The documents also apprise the APs of the goals, initiatives, and expectations for school leadership and operation. Examination of artifacts such as agendas and ancillary documents provided valuable data. Access to these documents was also useful in ascertaining the school district's focus for APs as well as evaluating the influences that shaped and/or impacted the APs' perceptions of their roles. Permissions were sought of ECSD leadership to ensure that access to the documents was approved.

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Data Analysis

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According to Yin (2018) the analysis of data depends on the researchers' own style and ability to think empirically and identify various interpretations. Yin added that researchers should have an analytic strategy for the collected data. The analysis relies heavily upon inductive reasoning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Patton (2015) suggested that patterns are the common findings from participants, whereas themes lend to the interpretation of the pattern. The study of the new phenomenon relied upon the data from interviews, focus groups, and documents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to examine APs' perceptions of their roles. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated, "Conveying and understanding of the case is the paramount consideration in analyzing data" (p. 233). For this study, I focused on analyzing the themes from the data collected and used inductive reasoning to make interpretations of the themes found in the data. The process included transcribing the interviews and focus groups interviews. Next, I employed member checking of the transcripts to ensure that I adequately expressed their sentiments. This was done after member checking each interview and focus group. As I reviewed the transcripts, my focus was on the data analysis. I made notes and observations also termed as codes on

spreadsheets to distinguish common themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During the first cycle

coding, I reviewed the data and developed 140 codes from the interviews, focus group, and

documents. Initially, I planned to use NVivo 12 to load the codes. However, I found it easier to

use Excel spreadsheets to list the codes. During the second cycle of coding (Saldaña, 2015) , I

narrowed the codes to 16 themes. This same process occurred with the documents selected as

well. The common data were compiled and placed into the Excel spreadsheets. These common

traits became categories. The categories were examined for common themes. After careful

analysis of all the data from this case study, seven final themes emerged; these themes answered

the research questions as I moved from inductive reasoning to deductive reasoning and finalized

my data analysis to present the findings of this case study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research must be trustworthy in that it is credible, dependable, confirmable,

and transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness ensures that the work is

comprehensive and complete. Trustworthiness is evidenced by thorough collection, analysis,

and interpretation of data. Additionally, the aforementioned adds to the validity of the research.

Logical analysis of data from the interviews, focus groups, and documents were used to

ensure that the methods used were credible, dependable, and transferable. Patton (2015) stated

that "while working inductively, the analysist is looking for emergent patterns in data" (p. 560).

This approach allowed me as the researcher to look at the data collected and make comparisons,

identify common themes, and draw conclusions (Patton, 2015).

Credibility

Triangulation of data is when multiple sources of data are used to support a case study

(Yin, 2018). Triangulation of data supports credibility (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). In this study,

triangulation of data occurred though the data collected from the interviews and focus groups and documents. I sought to ensure credibility through fieldwork implementation by conducting interviews and focus groups to obtain and support the analysis of data (Patton, 2015). I also implemented member checking to ensure that the data collection accurately reflects what the participant stated (Amankwaa, 2016; Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I contacted the participants via email after I transcribed the individual interviews and requested that they review the transcript of the interviews to ensure that the transcriptions accurately captured their responses. This procedure is called member checking and helps to ensure the credibility of the collected data prior to data analysis. Credibility was further established by ensuring that the data were corroborated by the data sources for this study through the documented interviews and focus groups that used the same approach.

Dependability and Confirmability

This qualitative case study was dependable because I used the same procedures with the interviews and focus groups. Therefore, the findings had continuity because they could be consistent and repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I obtained appropriate permissions from Liberty's IRB and obtained the school system's authorization to conduct the study. I documented all interviews via recordings and transcribed the interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). Audit trails were evidence that research was dependable (Baillie, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I employed qualitative research techniques such as coding and identified common themes (Baillie, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2018) as I examined and evaluated data. I had planned to use a computer software program to input data to sort and identify common themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, I found that it was easier to use Excel spreadsheets to list the codes. During the second cycle of coding, I

narrowed the codes to 16 themes. I maintained accurate notes and references (Patton, 2015).

Another process I employed was a memo which meant that I took notes that served as reflections

as I conducted this research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Confirmability was employed by analyzing results based upon common themes from data

points. Reflective journaling and notetaking assisted in ensuring confirmability. Keeping a

researcher's reflective journal (see Appendix G) allowed me to acknowledge my bias as I

examined data. Yin (2018) suggested that reporting preliminary findings to critical colleagues

who can offer "alternative explanations and suggestions for data collection" (p. 87) is another

way to attain confirmability. I selected peer reviewers who earned educational doctorates. Both

had experience as public high school educators. One of my peer reviewers is an assistant

principal. The other peer reviewer is a retired English teacher and department chairperson who

works as an adjunct college professor. Both served as accountability persons with whom I

reviewed data and preliminary findings. Their critical feedback supported confirmability.

Transferability

I sought to conduct this research so that others could use similar methods. Although the

outcome and findings of the study may not be the same, another researcher could implement the

strategies that were used in this research (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). Transferability was ensured

through "rich description of the setting and participants" (Baillie, 2015). An audit trail allows

the researcher to chronicle the process utilized to ascertain the findings of the study (Creswell &

Poth, 2018). I developed an audit trail (see Appendix J) to support the transferability of the

study.

Ethical Considerations

Yin (2018) stated that researchers should "conduct research ethically, from a professional standpoint but also by being sensitive to contrary evidence" (p. 83). Other ethical considerations that were employed through this research included a commitment to protect human subjects (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Hence, I obtained signed consent from all participants. I protected the confidentiality of the participants and schools by using pseudonyms. I stored the names and pseudonyms of the schools and participants in a code book that was stored in a locked cabinet separate from the other data. The laptop and USB flash-drive used to store research data were password protected. I conducted the research by employing continuity in the processes and using objectivity in my analysis of the data through notetaking and memoing. I will maintain all data for three years upon which I will shred documents and delete all digital data and recordings.

Summary

This chapter focused upon the methods that were used in this qualitative case study. Permission to conduct the research was obtained by the Liberty's IRB. I also obtained permission to conduct the study at ECSD. Interviews, focus groups, and documents were the data that informed the research. Data analysis took place by memoing and reflective journaling to ascertain themes and codes. Excel software was used to interpret common data themes. The trustworthiness was ensured by conducting research that was credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this research study was to examine how APs lead and perceive their roles.

This chapter's emphasis is on analyzing data and reporting the findings from this study. The

data collected came from interviews, focus groups, and documents. The interviews included 22

open ended questions (Appendix H), and the focus group had seven open-ended questions

(Appendix I). The documents came from five sources dedicated to AP leadership (Appendix K–

Appendix O). This chapter begins with demographic information for the participants. All

quotations from participants are presented verbatim, which includes verbal ticks and grammatical

errors in speech and writing to accurately depict the participants' voices. A description of the

documents used are followed by common themes and results from the study.

Participants

There were 11 participants who initially agreed to participate in the study. However, in

the end, only 10 APs participated in the interviews, and seven participated in the focus groups.

One participant had a family emergency and was unable to be interviewed at the scheduled time;

although she declined to reschedule the interview, she did participate in one of the focus groups.

The participants selected one of two dates for the focus group meetings. The initial focus group

meeting had five scheduled participants. However, only four attended. The second meeting had

six participants who agreed to attend the meeting, but only three participants attended the

meeting. One participant stated that she had a family emergency. Another person said she

overslept, and a third participant said she forgot. A final person did not follow up. The three

participants who missed the meeting were unable to reschedule a meeting. All of the participants

were given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Ms. Bryson

Ms. Bryson has been an assistant principal for four years after being a classroom teacher for over a decade. Previously she was a high school teacher. Her mother is a retired assistant principal, so she has been positively impacted by her mother who has served students in the same capacity. Ms. Bryson describes her leadership as follows:

> I am supportive to all to students, to teachers, to parents. I am a fierce advocate for them as far as making sure they get what they need to be successful. I am also a very compassionate disciplinarian. . . . I am nurturing. I consider myself an instructional leader. I am a well-rounded person when it comes to my job. It's a lot of word and adjectives. I think it's better to ask someone else what they think of me. I am passionate about what I do and I am a fierce advocate for them.

Ms. Bryson is reflective, confident, and committed to her role as a leader. She values the family atmosphere amongst the administrators in the school in which she works.

Ms. Allen

Ms. Allen has one year of experience as an AP and three total years of leadership experience in the elementary school in which she serves. She described herself as "a perfectionist and overachiever." Her previous educational experience was in a much larger school system in comparison to Eastern City. She was used to the high demands of her previous school district leader. Ms. Allen admitted to being a little shocked by Eastern City teachers' resistance to the level of accountability that she expected. Hence, during her first semester at her elementary school, she learned to harness her personal attributes and expectations in order to better support the stakeholders she served. Not only did Eastern City district leadership change but also the elementary school in which she worked had 10 changes in leadership within the past

three years. Ms. Allen found herself needing to support teachers who struggled to adjust to the district and school level changes of leadership. She seeks to be a democratic leader who welcomes the input of the teachers she leads, and she benefits from having a former principal mentor her as she grows as an AP.

Ms. Charles

Ms. Charles is an experienced administrator. She had 12 years of leadership. Most of her experience is as an AP for 11 years. Her experience also includes being a principal in a different school system. Her AP experience has only been as an instructional principal. Ironically, she has never had the responsibility of student discipline, which is normally a part of most AP assignments. Ms. Charles considers herself a servant leader who has a penchant for testing as well. She joked that her least favorite AP responsibility is athletic supervision and prom. Ms. Charles is very aware of her personality—even in her role in ECSD for two years, Ms. Charles has remained true to herself. When a teacher complained to the principal that she did not think it was necessary to have one-on-one meetings with Ms. Charles, she shared:

> I told the principal I am never going to be that person that says hey, just do it. We are going to talk it through and establish together that they need to do it. I try not to change who I am that much. I try to be sensitive to everybody's needs. I try to listen and to see specifically what they need from me.

That is a part of Ms. Charles' servant leader personality.

Ms. Darcey

Ms. Darcey has been an AP for eight years at the same high school. Her longevity at the high school makes her an experienced leader within the school system. She described herself as

follows: "I am a get in there in the trenches type person." It is true by her level of commitment to her job. Ms. Darcey sets daily goals and challenges to accomplish for herself. She explained:

> If I had to leave work at 4:15, then I am calling parents on my way home or at my kids' games. Just so I can try to finish up what has to be done that day. I try to finish up my day.

She participates in the weekly grade level course meetings and attempts to enter teachers' classrooms at least once a week. Her goal is not to micromanage; rather, her preference is to connect and build relationships with her teachers and students within the school. One of the areas that concerns her is that APs are expected to conduct investigations of student violations of school codes of conduct; however, she does not feel they are adequately trained to do so. She is self-motivated and wants to make certain that she accomplishes her goals.

Ms. Early

Ms. Early is a veteran educator with almost 17 years of experience. She has been an administrator for five years and served in the typical AP roles that include teacher evaluation of two departments and a grade level administrator. She also serves as the coordinator for new teachers in her building. Ms. Early has a very calm demeanor with an infectious smile. She shared that everyone knows that "I love the children; I guess it's the mother in me." She shared that she tries to be calm and fair with everyone with whom she interacts. She remarked that she learned early on from a professor, "when people go to 10, you have to go to one." Her calmness disarms people. It is also clear why she was selected for working with the younger grade level within her building. Perhaps her loving and supportive demeanor helps students to respond and behave positively during the transitional phase of their education.

Ms. Ireland

Ms. Ireland is in the early phase of her career. She has a year and one half experience as an administrator. She was hired as an AP in the middle of the school year. She moved from being a middle school teacher to a high school administrator. She expressed she felt that the role of an AP is "building management and putting out fires." Although she longs for additional professional learning to support APs, she still feels effective. Her preparation to become an AP demonstrates her commitment and drive for achievement as a leader. She described that she not only earned a leadership degree, but she also volunteered in leadership opportunities in the summers and on her breaks. She also completed the school system leadership program for aspiring leaders. She acknowledged that she is still learning how to be an effective communicator. Furthermore, she is clear that her personality best suits her for tasks that do not require as much interaction with people. She shared, "I am most effective in executing tasks, meeting deadlines." Consequently, she truly enjoys being over testing or developing the master schedule.

Mr. Franklin

Mr. Franklin has three years of experience as an AP. His position garners him a number of leadership duties because his school only has two administrators. He offers that APs "are the engine that runs the building." However, he clarifies that "I have to be collaborative because there aren't other APs in my school." Mr. Franklin believes in supporting teacher leaders because they help in doing what is best for students.

Mr. Franklin is known for the relationships he develops with students and most enjoys helping students realize their dreams through aiding in helping them select classes for desired

majors and potential colleges. He believes he can reach students by building relationships, and that is evidenced by his ability to effectively communicate with parents.

Ms. Height

Ms. Height has two years of experience as an AP. She also works in a school where there are only two administrators, so she has a number of responsibilities. When asked what most shocked her about schools, she responded the adults. She is driven and reliable, and she was surprised to have educators in her building who were not performing as they should. Therefore, she found that she has to have "high expectations, clarity, and consistency." She also has to adjust her leadership to meet the needs of those whom she leads. She acknowledged that some people find her to be stringent, but she is just serious about her job and every adult doing what is best for children. Therefore, she holds teachers accountable, but she also said she is willing to roll up her sleeves and work with teachers to accomplish their goals of providing students with the best education.

Mr. Kimble

Mr. Kimble had many professional careers outside of education; however, he was drawn to education and leadership because he enjoys working with kids—especially those who may not be the "role model" students. He wants these students to understand that "we aren't that different, but we did the things that were necessary to get ourselves in a certain place where we need to be." Mr. Kimble demonstrates calmness even when "the building may be falling down." Calmness and consistency are two tenets that make him successful in his leadership. He added that leaders must remain true to themselves if they are going to be effective leaders. Currently, Mr. Kimble has been an AP and in the school system for three years.

Mr. Gordon

Mr. Gordon has five years of experience as an AP and 14 years working in leadership capacities. Mr. Gordon has a thoughtful, reflective demeanor. He says planning and operational tasks are where he is most effective and that is a quality he uses in his leadership. It is important to him that his leadership assists people in keeping their mind on the mission. His ability to look at the "big picture" assists in leadership. He also thinks that strong principals help to make APs better and more accountable even though APs are self-motivated. Mr. Gordon shared that nothing prepares APs for the role more than "digging in and getting done." He recalled that the classes he took for certification did not have much practical application.

Ms. Jordan

Ms. Jordan has been an AP for five years. She has a strong personality and is staunch in her expectations for those whom she leads. She described herself as no nonsense. Moreover, she believes in accountability for all stakeholders which includes the teachers, students, parents, and staff members. All are responsible for the education of students, and it is imperative that everyone works with excellence. Ms. Jordan was unable to complete an interview due to a family emergency and declined to reschedule for the interview. However, she was able to participate in the focus group, and that is how the brief description was written.

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Results

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The research results from this qualitative case study were derived from analysis of the data collected from interviews, focus groups, and documents. APs were interviewed independently. APs also participated in one of the two convened focus groups. Codes were used as an initial method of analyzing the data. Through a process of analysis seven themes emerged from the codes. The seven themes represented in this study include (a) managers and supporters,

(b) AP leadership educational preparation and support, (c) mentorship and peer support, (d)

relationships influence leadership style, (e) surprising challenges to AP leadership, (f) flexibility

and time management, and (g) AP leadership insight. The next section presents the theme

development, table of codes and themes, and theme analyses.

Theme Development

The purpose of this case study was to explore AP leadership and APs' perceptions of

their roles. Data were collected using interviews, focus groups, and examination of documents.

Codes emerged during a review of the data. Through a process of refinement, themes were

derived from the organized codes. Table 1 provides a detailed list of the codes that resulted in

the final seven themes.

Table 1

Codes Leading to Themes

Codes	Themes
Manager or supervisor of faculty and staff	
Support teachers, students, parents/guardians, staff, community	
Manage and support student behavior, grade levels, departments, athletics	Managers and supporters
Numerous roles and responsibilities require flexibility and impact leadership	
Manage and supervise high stakes testing	
504, RTI, special education	

Leadership program preparation insufficient and
 perfunctory

Theory vs. practice

Leadership preparation varies; some good and
 some bad aspects

In class preparation is good

Positive in class program collaborate and share
 ideas with classmates

School system AP meetings rushed; too much
 information to digest

AP meetings provide directives from school
 system leadership

New AP meetings are structured because of
 county level reorganization

Meetings are more intentional and informative

School system AP leadership professional
 learning covers how to speak with
 stakeholders and hold difficult conversations
 aimed to support leadership

AP leadership educational
 preparation and support

Colleagues and co-administrative team members
 bounce ideas off each other

Share stories with peers in leadership classes

Assigned mentor by school system leadership

Principal provides supports

School system provides leadership program for
 those with leadership aspirations

AP PLC participates in professional learning on
 effective ways to have difficult conversations

Mentorship and peer support

Connect with stakeholders to find out their needs

Figuring out the needs helps leaders determine
 leadership style

Being observant allows leaders to trust
 stakeholders to work independently and
 support those who need it

Create family with colleagues so that team of
 leaders can work collaboratively to build a
 team

Situational leadership

Relationships influence leadership style

Teacher pushback and complaints

Teacher apathy and lack of accountability

Teachers complaints when asked to fulfill their
duties and responsibilities

Lack of time to accomplish myriad tasks   Surprising challenges to AP leadership

Leadership certification programs did not fully
prepare for all of the roles and duties

Red tape

Helicopter parents

No longer interested in moving on to principal

APs days are fluid; expect the unexpected

Plans can be interrupted by major and minor
crises

Many APs must work outside of the school day
because of interruptions

Time management; time is always a factor; there   Flexibility and time management
are only so many hours in a day

It is necessary to institute routine practices such
as requiring that visitors make appointments
and designated to be in classrooms

Infringement on family personal time

People interested in AP leadership should seek
other leadership opportunities such as
instructional coach, lead teachers, department
chairpersons, grade level lead, etc.

Volunteer to work on committees like the
leadership team or accreditation team

AP leadership requires on the job training

Leadership training cannot fully prepare   AP leadership insight
individuals for AP leadership

Shadowing other leaders will assist with
preparation for AP leadership

Supervise games and extracurricular activities

Participate in AP leadership programs for school
district employees

Theme 1: Managers and supporters. Several of the leaders who were interviewed characterized themselves as managers of the building—responsible for the day-to-day operations of the school. Ms. Bryson adequately described it as follows: "It's a lot of managing adults, it's managing period." Ms. Ireland described the role of an AP in this manner:

So, I feel like the role of the AP is mainly building management and putting out fires. While I do understand the grandiose vision of being an instructional leader, reality is depending on the demographics of your school, that may not necessarily be your day to day activity.

During the focus group discussion, Ms. Jordan characterized the role of APs as:

a housekeeper maintaining order in the building or building maintenance, sometimes that kind of thing that we are not able to be the instructional leaders that we are supposed to be because so much other things pull at you—mainly discipline.

Both Ms. Ireland and Ms. Jordan are high school APs, yet their experiences of AP roles are similar to those of elementary and middle school APs. Ms. Allen, an elementary school AP shared, "You have to be a great organizer of time. Like parents who show up that you didn't expect and are like why don't you have time to talk to them."

AP leadership is not monolithic regarding the roles and areas of responsibilities. In addition to serving as a managers and supporters, many respondents addressed the specific roles they fulfill as APs. Ms. Darcey shared more about the leadership and roles of APs:

Um, outside of discipline, also instructional leaders, review lesson plans, serve in data talks and be responsible for about how they have been doing, [redacted] teacher evaluation program and [redacted] principal evaluation program for certain teachers, at times you are crisis management depending on what happened that day, you're

sometimes a counselor for both students when they have issues and also teachers when they have issues. So, you're kind of a like a sounding board and buffer between the teacher and the principal administration. Then in times depending on a day, you may have to help a student with registration. It runs the gamut depending on the day.

The varied roles are also evidenced by the trainings for APs. Documents in Appendices K, L, M, and N demonstrate the varied duties associated with AP roles. The document in Appendix K emphasizes the challenging conversations that APs engage in with stakeholders during the fulfillment of their roles. Documents in Appendices M and N are agendas that serve to inform APs of the various responsibilities that the school system leadership expects for APs to follow.

A total of 11 participants were a part of this study. Ten participants were interviewed and seven participated in the focus groups. All participants expressed having several roles as APs. They used the words *roles* and *duties* interchangeably. However, both words lend to their responsibilities and duties. These responsibilities varied based on the unpredictable nature of working in a school and that unpredictability impacts their leadership. Ms. Allen shared:

It's a lot of hats sometimes—especially in elementary when there is only one or like two of us total. So, with everything that transpires during the day from having bus duty, discipline during the day with kids, trying to observe on top of trying to give or to coach in some degree. Umm, there are a lot of hats and sometimes not enough time in the day.

Mr. Gordon discussed leadership and roles that impact the leadership of APs:

The school that you are an administrator in, it really can have an impact on the roles that you play. For example, an AP at another school might lead a PLC, sure absolutely, but he doesn't spend as much time on the discipline side, but probably has to spend more

time in other areas such as grant writing or parent outreach and the such. I think there are

a lot of similarities, but I think the time being spent more heavily in other areas.

Mr. Franklin expressed how varied roles lends to flexible leadership because APs do not know

what the day will bring:

They [APs] run the building as APs pretty much we are the engine that runs the building.

We carry out the day-to-day operations of the actual school from when the doors open or

closing. Anything that pops up that is a student, teaching or parental concern or a teacher

or faculty concern, APs are on the front line for that.

APs support the principal. During the research, several APs explicitly expressed that

their roles are to support the principal. Mr. Kimble remarked, "You are supportive of your

principal as well and everything that pertains to building." Ms. Height expressed that APs have

to "follow the directives of the principal." Ms. Charles responded in her interview:

I really do think that our job is to be of support to the principal and help them in whatever

also be a support to the teachers. The role of the principal . . . is a big role and whatever

we can do to assist and help. So, that is taking on the operations, taking on the human

resources, taking on the instructional part, taking on those PBIS pieces and discipline

whatever we can do to help and support the principal is what I see we can do as APs. We

are just that the assistants. And, I say to all of my principals in my AP role is whatever

you need me to do.

It was during one of the focus group meetings when the question was posed asking how the

stakeholders view APs. Ms. Jordan responded, "They see us a support to our principals. I

definitely think that is what they want us as a support to our principals." Ms. Height followed

her response with the following:

And I would say a big support because the principal is the one who delegates things, and they don't get their hands dirty as well. The AP is actually the one who is doing the work right now and so more of the work with the teachers and students.

Ms. Height's tone may have held some condescension, but it illustrates her opinion that APs are more visible in day-to-day interactions in the performance of their jobs.

Theme 2: AP leadership educational preparation and support. The participants' perceptions of their educational leadership preparation vary, but many found it did not adequately prepare APs for the rigors of the job. Ms. Bryson shared:

I did an add on and then I . . . you know that preparation felt like I was going through the motions. I knew what I wanted to get out of it, so I just wanted to get it done. The most helpful class was the ethics class. I think it was the most beneficial. When I got my specialists, and all the work before the dissertation, it was dealing with curriculum and instruction. I believe the curriculum and instruction helps me more now. For example, how to bring up a program and how to evaluate its effectiveness and examine its usefulness and effectiveness. It helps me to support teachers by looking at the curriculum.

Ms. Early shared:

So, things that I did or like in school? My leadership training program I think I had some really good professors because of course it's a lot of theory and research based but I think the professors because you know it was a face-to-face program, so none of it was online. But, I think it was good because it gave me an opportunity to talk face-to-face with my classmates to see how they would handle some things. So, my professors at my university would say let's talk through this scenario. So, that gave me insight of how to

handle and navigate problems. I think it prepared me in that aspect. To me no leadership program prepares you for it. The preparation comes in being in it. The preparations come by dealing with problems and situations. It comes from experience.

Mr. Gordon remarked:

Well, I would say inadequate because after I became an AP and got my specialist, . . . I felt like I was better prepared to do the work when I got my specialist as opposed to master's leadership certification. The classes were more meaningful and when I got out of the classes, I was better able to apply. I don't think they prepared me. It was more of dig in and get it done. And, the work that you are doing a year before you become an AP, you are in a department, but I'm sure you had an active role on the instruction within your department. Now, the work that you can do prior to becoming an AP are better preparation than a teacher education program. I can't recall that I was really prepared.

One focus group member's response to the question about their educational preparation offered a dichotomy of thought. Ms. Jordan and Ms. Height provide insight into their thoughts on their educational preparation. Ms. Jordan contributed,

I know for me, I don't care how much book they give us, it still does not prepare you for the job. We talk about theorists and how a child develops. I think being a parent for me, it's not like a book can teach me. It's on the job training. I wasn't prepared for the job, but I had to commit myself to it. I would go home and be dog tired because I couldn't give anything to my own kids because I had to give out so much to other kids. There is the AP, social worker, and the parent. Life coaches. I really wasn't. There is no book work that can prepare me for my job.

Ms. Height added:

> You know, . . . it depends on the job. My AP role at Eastern City may look different
>
> from the Eastern City middle school, to an Eastern City specialty school. It's situational.
>
> In the district, all schools aren't created equal.

Another theme that emerged from this study is school system preparation and support. Eastern City Schools' county level leadership uses professional learning communities (PLCs) support groups with common duties and responsibilities. APs are also grouped and participate in professional learning to support their growth. The AP leadership meets and collaborates both as whole groups and as smaller groups based on the grade levels they lead. During one focus group's discussion of the question regarding how the school system leaders can support APs, the responses developed around the idea of PLCs. Mrs. Bryson responded first:

> The county doing this year with the meetings and trainings have been more helpful than
>
> previous years. The small group settings, doesn't feel like I wasted those two hours. It
>
> seems more purposeful and allows for collaboration. I think our county is on the right
>
> path.

Mr. Gordon reflected:

> The AP meetings in the past used to be a repeat from previous meetings. What
>
> aggravated me [in the previous years] was that everyone was in a rush in those meetings.
>
> They would be overviews, so now they are revamped to be better and learn something
>
> valuable so that they can work. We can't train APs to be principals, we need to make
>
> sure they are solid in instruction and analyze data. Unfortunately, we try to train them to
>
> be principals. The district has done a better job to support them [APs]. Now there is a
>
> support group that meets monthly where they can work with their PLCs.

Mr. Franklin added:

> The new AP meetings have been more structured. Being in PLC meetings to ensure
> teachers are supported and pushed. You can support people across content levels and fill
> our toolbox. We are in meetings with our PLCs and get information and training without
> having to go out for information.

Documents included in this study were introduced during the monthly AP PLCs. These documents highlight the district leadership's emphasis on supporting AP leadership within the AP PLCs. Documents are housed in an online platform designated for AP leadership.

Eastern City School District instituted a training program to support novice APs during their first three years of leadership. The school system supplies each leader with a mentor to coach and support the APs during their pivotal years. Additionally, novice and experienced APs convene periodically to share and discuss their experiences. They have the option to participate in leadership training modules such as The Eastern City D.E.L. Training (Appendix L). This document highlights the programs used to support growth for APs who are interested in additional leadership opportunities such as principal or school system level leadership.

Both Appendix M and Appendix N represent agendas for two AP PLC meetings. Appendix M is a monthly meeting agenda. The focus for that meeting was learning targets. APs are charged with supporting teachers with effective instructional strategies such as learning targets. Appendix N is the agenda for a meeting that focused on hearing from leaders from all county level department heads which included the school system's legal counsel. Pseudonyms are used for participants facilitating the meeting. This document is significant in that the APs in Eastern City are tasked with a number of responsibilities that are impacted by the represented offices. For example, the school legal counselor provides updates so that APs will be compliant

with laws and policies. As leaders, APs serve as a liaison between district leadership and the stakeholders whom they lead. This document reflects the professional learning support APs receive to enhance their leadership and roles.

The Eastern City Result Wheel (Appendix O) provided a visual for the district's wheel for learning. It is important that APs understand the wheel so that they can support teachers in instruction that leads to positive learning results. APs are expected to communicate the aforementioned in the places in which they provide leadership. The challenging conversations (see Appendix K) was used to model for teachers the best manner of communicating difficult conversations. All of the documents were used to support APs in their leadership.

Theme 3: Mentorship and peer support. Mentorship and peer support is the third theme. Mentors were both district assigned or formally and informally selected by the participants. Ms. Allen expressed:

> I can say that I have a great mentor. This year, I think with them giving every elementary school two assistant superintendents, the one thing they were very intentional about is assigning every AP with a mentor in the summer. Very much like a new teacher schedules time with a mentor consistently, they ensured that we had time with our mentors and had that experience coming into the role as an AP. I felt like that was a big support. Um, my former principal became an assistant superintendent. I can call her at any point and time. She was a principal for 14 years. She is very knowledgeable about the things to be effective in the role, so if I was thinking of doing something or if something doesn't make sense, I can go to her before going to my principal to run it by her. My current principal is new in the role. She and I are new running the school together.

Mrs. Ireland shared about her experiences with mentors.

> So, I definitely would say that my principal is supportive. We do have a relationship where I can ask any and every question that I need to for guidance and if not, she will direct me to the person. But, I also have the support of the assistant superintendent as well as other people in the district. I will say that the assistant superintendent has given me the mentor I requested. I do know the school district has a program for new APs as well.

Mrs. Height noted:

> My supports are the assistant superintendent and the superintendent. Their support was amazing. If it was not for the talks and cooperation, I don't think it would have been a smooth transition. They made the transition easier. It's also the guidance, the academic and professional guidance from colleagues.

Ms. Early expressed that other APs in the district have given advice and feedback. Many of the APs shared that a great source of support in their leadership was among their fellow APs. Mr. Franklin explained, "It's more so trial by error; picking the brain of the colleagues; whatever, if I have any questions I can talk to my colleagues whether it's been some of the other APs."

> Ms. Bryson summed up the strength of peer support:
>
> I know my experience is different from a lot of people because the building I am in, my admin team, all of us are like a family. We talk a lot, not just school related stuff. We know our families. If there are issues, we can talk though them just like brother and sister. We are going to come up with solutions. I do talk to other APs to get information. Sometimes, I still refer to the best AP I know, my mother. I like to get feedback. I am

doing the right thing and going in the right direction and doing the right things. What

you find out is that nothing has really changed, we just put a new name on it. So, if we

keep in mind why we are really here and why are we doing this job which is for students

and for kids, then I think the decisions that are made and supports that you have will put

you in the right direction.

Mr. Kimble added, "Um, I mean really just teaming has been one of the main supports; I feel as

if most of the supports have been in working with the team I work with. We collaborate well."

Theme 4: Relationships influence leadership style. Many respondents said that

building relationships is essential for leadership. This is in reference to APs building

relationships with the stakeholders in which they lead. Mr. Kimble described the unique way

that he builds relationships:

It's really observing people. I'm more of an actions speaks louder than words type of

person. So, I really try to watch how people behave and interact, and then in watching

and observing how they interact and their personality type and things of that nature, that

generally gives me cues how to work with a person and how to identify a path. Another

thing I try to do is to identify people's goals. People generally try to work towards things

that are important to them. Once I identify those major things, it allows me to understand

how I should fashion my interactions with them to get the best I can out of a person.

Ms. Darcey shared a comprehensive discussion regarding building relationships that includes all

stakeholders:

You got to read the person you are dealing with. No matter if it's a student, the parent, or

the teacher. Now, teachers, unless you've been there for a while, you've developed them

for a while, so you develop that relationship, so just like teacher and a student in the

classroom, you know if that teacher needs a support in one area or another area. You know if you have to chunk assignments for them. For parents, you've got to read the room when you come in. What's the body saying? Do I need to sit and be quiet and let them vent to me? And then, once they have vented kind of say I understand how you are feeling, let me explain what the kids have been doing on our side. Each student, unless they are new, or new students who are in my alphabet, I get an email pop up when they come to the school that says 'so in so' registered in my school today. Or, if I see our peer leaders walking around, I go out of my way to make a point to go meet them. And if I haven't seen them with a peer leader walking around, when I get the email that says a student has enrolled in your school, I go find them in their classrooms and introduce myself because I always want our first interaction to be a positive interaction. I can redirect a kid, and they can say, oh yeah, I met her. I try to get to know the person. I ask where they are from and that type of thing. So, then based on what they say, I come up with some type of connection with them and bond with them on that level.

Several participants stated that the leadership style they use depends on the situation and the stakeholder who is involved. In a focus group interview the discussion between the participants is captured below where they discuss how their response is determined based upon the needs of the individuals whom they lead:

Ms. Early: It just depends on the situation or who you are dealing with. Certain situations call for the type of leadership that involves having a conversation and trying to come with a resolution or a solution together. And, in some situations, it calls for leadership that is like hey, this is what it is, and this is what I need to do, and what I expect. And, it's more direct so I can tell you what is going to get done.

Ms. Jordan: I think that's a very good way to put it. It depends on the population and the

people that you are actually dealing with. Other times you give directives versus on

depending on the person with the directives you give. It depends on where you are

located that sometimes impacts the way people respond.

Ms. Height: Can I echo the same response? Leadership is situational depending on the

situation that you are in, so definitely situational.

Ms. Charles summarized, "It takes getting to know who you are working with and adapting to

them." Ms. Bryson added, "First you have to have a relationship with the person in order to be

able to listen and then get an answer and find a solution."

Theme 5: Surprising challenges to AP leadership. One of the challenges that APs

face is teacher apathy or teachers who challenge the professionalism that is expected of teachers.

Ms. Allen that she was surprised by

the pushback from teachers. I have never seen people tell their boss what they are not

going to do. I guess because I've never worked in a school like under leadership where

that was just what people did. Um, and really like want to debate with you what they are

and are not going to do. I think that was the most stunning thing because we are asking

you to do your job. We aren't asking you to do anything illegal. We are just asking you

to do what is best for kids. And I think the hardest thing for them to understand is that

we don't always do what is convenient for adults, but we do what is best for kids. So just

having to have that conversation consistently with teachers. This is a profession, and this

is what you chose to do. . . . [A]nd they aren't going to do what is convenient for adults

but what's best for kids.

Ms. Height shared similar experiences:

> What surprised me about the role was, it may seem crazy, but it wasn't necessarily about
> the work, but the people. I would say the teachers. Some teachers are just on it and some
> are not, and I think of my situation because it was a really lax school, more teachers were
> not. I think it was just the adult accountability that surprised me the most. I would say
> on the positive for the educators who have that accountability want instructional
> direction.

Mrs. Ireland offered:

> Um, I guess what surprised me the most and I have to think about that is the amount of
> adults that complain. I think I understood the responsibility aspect as well in my previous
> experiences of shadowing and working under assistant principals and learning, but I
> didn't realize how much adults complain to their administrators and that they expect you
> to have a solution on the spot. Those are my biggest aha.

> **Theme 6: Flexibility and time management**. APs shared that their roles require time
management and flexibility because of the fluidity of their day-to-day experiences. Ms. Darcey
shared:

> I think in leadership you are trained in ideal worlds teaching and learning, curriculum,
> alternative styles of assessment; differentiation, instruction. What you are not trained for
> is what happens when you've got your day planned at where you are going at 8:05 then at
> 7:40 in the cafeteria a fight breaks out in the cafeteria with 8 people. Now, the next two
> hours of the day are spent by contacting parents and trying to figure out what happened.

Time management was leveraged by eight of the 11 participants either in their individual
interviews or focus group responses. Ms. Bryson argued, "Time is always a factor because

regardless if you are dealing with adults, parents, or teachers, we only have a certain amount of time." Mr. Kimble remarked of time as a hindrance: "Um, probably just bandwidth and not enough time to do all things asked of me." Ms. Early suggested, "It [time management] comes with time and growth with being in the position learning how to manage it all because it is a lot." Ms. Charles stated, "It's like I have to figure how to do it here." In the focus group, Mr. Gordon expressed that administrators must incorporate time management, and Mr. Franklin added that they need to focus on benefits for more than one teacher or student but schoolwide.

The Results Wheel (Appendix O) is not only used to guide the instruction of students but also represents the importance of time management for APs and teachers. It serves as a roadmap to ensure that the instructional practices yield results. If the instructional practices do not fit in the wheel, then they are wasting time.

Theme 7: AP leadership insight. The APs offered insight regarding AP leadership. Ms. Darcey recommended:

For any person aspiring to go into AP role, definitely, if they have the opportunity to be a coach or an instructional coach, it helps. Take on roles like department chair and mentors. Go in and observe so that they can improve in their instructional practices. If you aren't comfortable with sharing insight on how they [teachers] can be better, it will be a struggle for an AP who hasn't had the opportunity.

Ms. Charles suggested:

To me the role of administration just like the role teaching, yes we can have the book knowledge, but until you get in there and experience things with other leaders. Hands on experience is the best to prepare an AP.

Mr. Gordon suggested that it is important for AP leadership to do the following:

> I guess for the teachers some of the needs come from how to support teachers in
>
> becoming more effective at what they do. You think about a great teacher who does a lot
>
> of different things. Differentiation, varying instructional strategies, and the one who
>
> learning that stuff, how do you support them or making teachers better instead of
>
> coaching teachers since that is how curriculum structure teaches us to do.

Ms. Ireland said that it is important for aspiring APs to conduct observations:

> I think by shadowing. Not just once a semester that is required by a program but at least
>
> five or six opportunities to shadow the same person over a period of time for example, a
>
> semester or year because oftentimes, we shadow three different schools and one leader
>
> one time. And unfortunately, it doesn't give us the best perspective, so I would say
>
> shadow the same person over several times would be more helpful. I also think there
>
> should be an internship. I feel that any program should require a certain amount of hours
>
> that APs dedicate to certain tasks such as scheduling or testing, textbooks etc.

Ms. Darcey offered that APs must also consider the emotional health of the students in which
they serve and be prepared to serve them:

> I think that performance based assessments need to be tailored to the instructional side,
>
> but also emotional side, and mental side. Mental illness is a major thing right now, and I
>
> don't think we are touching on that in principal prep or leadership prep like we should be.

 Mr. Kimble urged, "Another thing is I believe is that they [APs] have to be someone who is
willing to take ownership of everything." In contrast, Ms. Allen believes "if you try to fight all
the fires, we might not be effective in any of the places."

Research Question Responses

The purpose of this case study was to identify how APs lead and perceive their roles as APs in a school district located in the southeastern United States. The following central question and three sub-questions informed this study.

Central research question. The central research question asked, How do APs lead and perceive their roles as APs? The research results reflected that APs lead by ascertaining the needs of those whom they lead and responding according to their needs. These findings also indicated that APs perceive their roles as varied and essential. Mr. Gordon explained, "The AP is the leader of the department you are over. You are an administrator at the school, but you are the 'go to' person for the department." Ms. Early argued:

My perception is that it [AP leadership] can be stressful at sometimes, but they are definitely needed because in any organization, corporate or education, there needs to be that leadership or that tiered leadership. So, our roles are definitely needed and they vary from building to building. But, it's a lot.

Overtime, AP roles expanded from serving as disciplinarians to including many management responsibilities (Cohen & Schechter, 2019). AP roles vary and are "context-dependent" (Clayton & Bingham, 2018) and are assigned based on the principal's discretion and the needs of the school. Ms. Early noted that some of the roles of APs include the following:

Oh, in addition to discipline and evaluations, you know supervising different departments, partner in education liaison, athletics, instructional piece in regards to counseling and scheduling, and professional learning. Also, life coach.

APs understand that their roles are essential to supporting the day-to-day operations of a school (Oleszewski et al., 2012; Sun & Shoho, 2017). APs are tasked with leading and interacting with

stakeholders. The landscape of AP roles changes indiscriminately (Craft et al., 2016), yet it would be difficult for schools to be effective without AP leadership and their flexibility in the performance of their roles.

Sub-question 1: The first sub-question asked, How are APs prepared for and supported in the roles they play in their positions as APs? Most APs in this study reported that AP leadership preparation programs of study did not adequately prepare them to become AP leaders. Rather, working as APs trained them for their roles as leaders. Ms. Darcey recalled:

> I went through a college in the state. It was their educational leadership program specialist. It was all performance based assessment. I'll tell you all the performance based assessments dealt with instruction. The real day-to-day stuff was through the principal leadership I had in my building.

Although a few expressed appreciation for certain aspects of their programs, mostly, the educational leadership programs neglected to sufficiently prepare them for the rigors of AP leadership and the varying responsibilities. Mr. Gordon said of his classes, "I don't think they prepared me. It [the program] was more of dig in and get it done." The sentiment of "getting it done" signifies acquiescence and acceptance that the purpose of the educational program is to complete it in order to be able to earn leadership certification and a leadership degree if offered.

School systems implement nascent leadership training programs to mentor aspiring APs and buttress APs working in their positions. ECSD offers a leadership training program. The Developing Educational Leaders (Appendix N) and the agenda for an AP meeting (Appendix L) signify the efforts that school systems are exerting to support leaders through in-house training to develop leaders. The ECSD leadership goal is to select leaders from the pool of participants in ECSD's leadership development cadres.

Another issue found in my research is that leadership programs of study generally point educators to principal leadership. According to several APs in my study, the practicum and internship aspects of their programs did not serve as sufficient preparation because of the myriad roles and responsibilities of APs. For this reason, Ms. Height explained, "You're prepared framework wise, but you really have to get that on the job training," a sentiment that many APs expressed in the study. The daily experiences prepare APs for their leadership roles.

Sub-question 2: The second sub-question asked, How do APs determine the leadership style needed to support those whom they lead? Ms. Charles and Mr. Gordon stated they are servant leaders. Ms. Bryson surmised, "I am supportive to all to students, to teachers, to parents," and Mr. Franklin characterized his leadership style as collaborative, whereas Ms. Height urged, "I just think people should do right by kids." Ms. Jordan and Ms. Height argued that the leadership style needed for APs is situational. Ironically, situational leadership is the theory used for this study. AP leadership is predicated upon the needs of those whom they lead. It is the leaders' conscientiousness of constituents' needs that determines the leadership APs employ.

Sub-question 3: The third sub-question asked, How do APs address the challenges of AP leadership? Ms. Darcey responded that "APs are flexible" and able to readjust to deal with challenges that occur in their leadership. Ms. Early explained, "It comes with time and growth with being in the position learning how to manage it all because it is a lot." Mr. Kimble offered consistency:

> You have to be consistent in what you are doing, so I try to maintain in my approach and
>
> dealing with things. . . . I think I'm effective because when I go back and look at the big

picture, maybe not everything, but day-by-day, and at the end of the week, everything

gets done and everything my principal wants gets done.

Without consistency, Ms. Height shared the teachers' default is to "fall back into old habits."

She explained that she has worked diligently to improve her teachers' professionalism by

emphasizing quality lesson plans and punctuality in attendance and deadlines. Once she stopped

monitoring them weekly and providing frequent feedback, educators fell back into old habits.

She would rather not micromanage teachers but surmised that she will have to until the culture of

the school changed.

Stress, both personal and professional, is another challenge APs discussed. Many

reported they responded to challenges by remaining calm. Ms. Early described the following

scenario:

If you have a meeting with Mr. X at 1:30, but you are in the cafeteria and fight breaks

out, I stay relaxed. I don't scream and I don't yell. I try to keep my composure no matter

if it's a very stressful situation. . . . So, just stay composed no matter how stressful it can

be—especially dealing with parents.

Mr. Gordon advised, "Stay positive and encourage others to try to keep them going and

motivated."

Other APs sought to rely on colleagues' support when challenges arose. Ms. Charles

recounted:

Everywhere I've been, I think I've been with a good admin team. We support each other.

If we have a problem, we talk about it. We figure it out together with what's best for the

schools. So, I really think it's the admin team has always been my biggest support

system.

Other APs acknowledged that seeking guidance from principals and mentors is also how they respond to challenges.

APs also shared that they try to be proactive to build relationships with stakeholders. These relationships can thwart, circumvent, or resolve challenges when they arise. Ms. Darcey opined, "I remember a former principal once said do not Napalm the bridge because they are coming back whether it's teacher, student, or parent or whatever." It is their conscious decision to remain grounded and use their resources that assists them in responding to challenges.

Summary

The purpose of this case study was to examine AP leadership and APs' perceptions of their roles at a school district located in the southeastern United States. This chapter presented the data and results of the study based upon the 11 participants' responses to both interviews and focus groups questions along with an analysis of documents. The central research question and three sub-questions found in Chapter Three served as a reference to analyze the data. Seven themes emerged: (a) managers and supporters; (b) AP leadership educational preparation and support; (c) mentorship and peer support; (d) relationships influence leadership style; (e) surprising challenges to AP leadership; (f) flexibility and time management; and (g) AP leadership insight. Pseudonyms were used to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. Additionally, the responses were written in narrative prose to accurately portray the participants' viewpoints.

CHAPTER FIVE

Overview

The purpose of this case study was to examine AP leadership and APs' perceptions of their roles in a school system located in the southeastern United States. Data were collected from eleven APs who participated in interviews and focus groups. Quotations were written verbatim to accurately depict the thoughts and reflections of the participants. The third data point stemmed from documents uploaded to an AP PLC folder. Chapter Five includes a summary of the research findings, a discussion of the findings and the implications in light of the relevant literature and theory, an implications section that examines the methodological and practical aspects of the research findings, delimitations and limitations of the study as well as recommendations for future research.

Summary of the Findings

This section of Chapter Five presents the findings of the research questions and the sub-questions and summarizes the findings of the data collection. The central research question of this study asked, How do APs lead and perceive their role as APs? The sub-questions asked:

1. How are APs prepared for and supported in the roles they play in their positions as APs?

2. How do APs determine the leadership style needed to support those whom they lead?

3. How do APs address the challenges of AP leadership?

Seven themes emerged from the central research question and sub-questions. The themes included (a) managers and supporters, (b) AP educational leadership preparation and support, (c) mentorship and peer support, (d) relationships influence leadership style, (e) surprising challenges to AP leadership, (f) flexibility and time management, and (g) AP leadership insight.

The first sub-question asked, How are APs prepared for and supported in the roles they play in their positions as APs? Eleven APs participated in the study. All the participants expressed either during the individual interviews or focus groups that their educational preparation did not adequately prepare them for the myriad roles associated with AP leadership. Ms. Early and Mr. Gordon were already employed as APs. Although the actual leadership instruction in their respective programs focused on principal leadership and not the specific roles associated with AP leadership, they shared that their face-to-face class instruction afforded them opportunities to share and discuss their leadership experiences as well as obtain feedback from colleagues in their courses. Regarding how the APs are supported in their roles, many participants interpreted the question within the context of their current role as APs in ECSD. Several APs mentioned that they received support from fellow APs within their schools or from those who share common grade levels backgrounds. More than half of the APs had mentors assigned or self-selected. In efforts to support and inform APs from a school district level, ECSD leaders restructured the AP PLCs to support AP leadership through professional learning and resources to assist AP leadership. Allen and Weaver (2014) noted that large school districts in the United States offer professional learning for AP leadership. ECSD leaders understand the importance of AP roles and the need for continued education.

The second sub-question asked, How do APs determine the leadership style needed to support those whom they lead? The APs' overwhelming response was to determine the needs of those whom they lead. This is done by the APs building relationships with their constituents. The leadership is for all stakeholders such as teachers, staff, students, and parents. Communication and observation lend to building the relationships so that APs can determine the needs of those whom they lead. Then, APs provide leadership based upon the stakeholders'

perceived needs. Moreover, the stakeholders are more likely to accept the leadership of APs because of the relationship that the leaders and stakeholders possess.

The third sub-question asked, How do APs address the challenges of AP leadership? One of the challenges that APs asserted included teachers' apathy. Several APs expressed frustration with teachers who complained because they were expected to follow AP leadership and district expectations. While not characteristic of all teachers, two qualities that challenged AP leadership were some teachers' lack of professionalism and complaining natures. Additional challenges were time constraints and the myriad duties and responsibilities that APs were tasked to complete. APs found that they did not have ample time to tackle duties—especially with the fluidity that each day brings.

Discussion

This section focuses on the discussion of the AP leadership and the perceptions of their roles considering both empirical and theoretical literature found in Chapter Two. I found limited information regarding AP leadership. Research tends to focus on the role of principals. This study can add to the research on AP leadership and their perception of their roles.

Empirical Discussion

Research on AP leadership is limited in its scope, for research on school-based leadership typically focuses on principal leadership and the ascent to principal leadership. However, the available research on APs notes that APs are tasked with many roles (Barnett et al., 2012; Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Oleszewski et al., 2012). Historically and currently, APs maintain the day-to-day operations of the school and support the principal (Hausman et al., 2002; Kearney & Herrington, 2013). The participants in the study described their responsibilities as serving as managers responsible for the daily operations of the school along with other duties and

responsibilities. Principals have authority and assign the roles for APs (Cohen & Schechter, 2019). However, the predominant aspect of AP leadership is to support the principals by managing the day-to-day operation of the school, leading stakeholders such as teachers, staff, supporting students, serving as a liaison for school leaders and other stakeholders, ensuring a safe learning environment, and supporting the instruction of students (Glanz, 1994; Hausman et al., 2002; Kearney & Herrington, 2013; Militello et al., 2015; Oleszewski et al., 2012). The aforementioned remains consistent with research and the participants of this study.

APs in this study offered that their roles vary based upon the principals' assignments. Many factors impact the assignments such as grade levels. Most elementary schools have one AP whereas middle and high schools generally have a minimum of two APs, depending on the size of the student population. During the interviews, it was noted that elementary APs often share leadership with principals, whereas middle and high school AP duties and responsibilities may be more specific. As Mr. Gordon stated, "The AP is the leader of the department you are over."

School discipline is one of the major responsibilities of APs (Marshall & Hooley, 2006) and is often synonymous with AP roles amongst perceptions of APs. The APs of this study acknowledged that APs monitor and enforce schools' codes of conduct when students violate the rules. The challenge is that AP leadership duties and responsibilities expand beyond student discipline. APs admonished that discipline is time consuming and prevents them from being able to fulfill their other roles and responsibilities. Studies by Glanz (1994), Hausman et al. (2002), and Lochmiller and Karnopp (2016) found that discipline takes much of APs' time, yet discipline solely does not curtail negative student behavior (Toth & Siemaszko, 1996). Other behavior management options such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) are

being promoted and utilized in schools; hence, APs do not need to devote an inordinate amount of their time enforcing discipline (McIntosh, Kelm, & Canizal Delabra, 2016).

As previously stated, AP roles vary depending on principals' assignments; however, the roles have expanded to include a wide range of responsibilities (Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Oleszewski et al., 2012). Participants in this study stated that their roles include instructional leaders of grade levels and departments and evaluators of faculty and staff. They provide leadership for building and maintenance and lead the safety and security initiatives for the schools. APs conduct data analysis as well as serve on district committees and PLCs. Developing master schedules, supervising and monitoring students and extracurricular activities, and monitoring textbooks are also the responsibilities of APs. They manage budgets and communicate with stakeholders as well as serve as crisis managers and aid in social work.

The preceding list is not exhaustive but reflects the number of roles that APs play. One role that all APs emphasized in this study is their role as instructional leaders for grade levels or departments. Instructional leadership is birthed out of the belief in success for all students (VanTuyle, 2018). That is not only the emphasis for ECSD leadership but also a premise that many school districts are embracing. The change is precipitated by recent school reforms requiring that schools respond to the new level of educational accountability for student learning (Searby et al., 2017). The participants in this study shared that instructional leadership is one of their predominant responsibilities; they are expected to increase student growth and achievement. They lead, support, and monitor the instructional practices of teachers and student performance to support student achievement.

However, many of the APs do not feel that their educational leadership preparation programs prepared them for the various roles and responsibilities in their leadership. Several

APs mentioned that their leadership certification programs of study did not prepare them for the rigors of AP leadership. While some appreciated the theoretical knowledge in their programs of study, most of the APs did not find their educational leadership programs to be practical, especially for some of the roles and challenges that APs encounter. Many factors contribute to the disconnect between practice and theory regarding AP leadership preparation. One reason is because AP roles are not clearly defined. Research reflects that AP roles can be ambiguous (Celik, 2013; Hutton, 2014; Marshall & Davidson, 2016). This is evidenced by the lack of studies and programs that focus on AP leadership. Most programs of study emphasize principal leadership (Armstrong, 2015) and do not point to AP leadership, yet the APs in this study recognized that their contributions are concrete, detailed, and essential in school operations. Sun and Shoho (2017) credited APs as being valuable assets who promote school success. Educational leadership programs should place more emphasis on meaningful learning for the contemporary context of AP leadership. APs in this study acknowledged their significance and contributions to leadership. Several APs stressed the need for additional training and support of the role of APs. This notion is not readily accepted in current research or practice as is evidenced by the lack of studies and professional learning for AP leadership. What challenges APs in the performance of their roles and execution of their leadership is a systemic failure to endorse AP leadership as a separate and viable leadership role.

Theoretical

The theoretical framework used in this study was Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory, focusing on leadership that is needed for certain situations (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982; Northouse, 2018). It is the premise of this theory that leaders adjust their leadership style based upon the needs of those whom they lead (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982).

Situational leadership theory is applicable in that the needs of those being led are not monolithic. Just as situations change, so do the needs of the those being led by APs. Needs are based on the readiness levels of individuals (Hersey, et al., 2001). Hence, APs must ascertain where the stakeholders are in order to be able to effectively support them. The continuum ranges from constituents who are developing, and the goal is to move them to developed (Blanchard et al., 2013). It is incumbent upon APs to build relationships with the constituents to assist in their development. In the context of AP leadership, APs must build relationships to ascertain their needs.

Research regarding situational leadership theory reflected that leaders must provide followers with direction, support, and oversight (Hersey et al., 2001). The participants in this study acknowledged that APs offer appropriate and varying leadership for the stakeholders whom they manage. Ms. Jordan, one of the participants in this study, humorously noted that a one size fits all approach does not work with leadership of others. Mr. Kimble explained his belief that varying leadership styles are applicable to all stakeholders: students, teachers, staff, parents, and community members. During a focus group discussion, participants emphasized how varying situations impact their day-to-day activities. They surmised that AP leadership is fluid. Because of the unpredictable nature of AP leadership, they never knew what type of leadership would be needed. That is why they believed it to be important to connect with those whom they lead. Consider the following examples the participants shared:

Ms. Jordan noted that one teacher she supervised only required minimum instructions to perform tasks whereas a different teacher needed detailed instructions and frequent checks to make sure she met the expectations. Ms. Johnson, who works in an elementary school, expressed during this past year she had to put procedures in place for both secretaries and parents

because neither seemed to understand the importance of scheduling appointments to meet with her as opposed to demanding immediate attention. One of the secretaries understood and informed parents of the new policy. The other secretary was reticent to comply with the new procedures and sought the AP instead of adhering to the new expectations. One secretary prioritized the parent requests while the other secretary needed additional support. Many of the APs explained that their leadership is always based upon the needs of the those whom they lead, and they seek to help people show growth so that they grow and gain independence. This is indicative of Hersey and Blanchard's (1982) situational leadership theory in that it characterizes the leadership style of the leader and the tasks of the followers. Blanchard et al. (2013) updated the categories to define the leaders as directing, coaching, supportive, and delegating. The tasks of followers were divided into four levels of readiness ranging from unable and willing to able and willing (Blanchard et al., 2013). The APs in this study articulated that they approached leadership in this manner. They gave more support to those who needed it and autonomy to those who were more independent.

An aspect that has not been examined is the discussion of AP PLCs. Research does not reflect that many school systems provide PLCs for their APs to collaborate and receive information to support their leadership. However, Marshall (1992) indicated that APs need training to support their leadership. ECSD not only provides monthly (at minimum) PLC time for APs to meet and collaborate, the school system also developed an online resource that houses information to support AP leadership. APs in this study reported that ECSD is making efforts to support APs by creating AP PLCs. PLCs were originally designed to encourage "collegiality" and "shared accountability" (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016). The expansion of PLCs has supported collaboration amongst all specialty groups. APs in this study met frequently to receive

training just for APs and their leadership. APs expressed appreciation for the opportunity to

collaborate with colleagues during the PLC meetings. While some APs in the study felt that the

school system's previous attempt for AP PLCs provided information that would have been better

disseminated via emails, others noted that the school system's reorganization of the AP PLCs

provided helpful information and resources. APs appreciated that the time commitment for the

PLCs was not as long as previous years' meetings. Several expressed appreciation for not being

taken out of the building for too long. The APs shared that the resources within the AP PLC

online platform gave APs access to helpful information to support their leadership. APs also

advised that the AP PLC meetings allow for collaboration with colleagues within the same grade

bands. Participants also welcomed the school system's efforts to upload information to the

platform that informs the APs of the leadership direction and allows the ECSD APs to have

input, albeit limited. However, some participants noted that APs need to be more a part of the

decision making process and not solely the enforcers of district-led initiatives.

APs in this study also discussed the significance of mentors and supports for APs in their

leadership. Hutton (2014) suggested APs' "principals also have a responsibility to mentor their

assistant principals and develop their leadership capacity." While Hutton (2014) argued that it

will help APs ultimately become effective principals, APs in this study reported that mentors

helped them navigate during their beginning of their AP careers. This help was not to prepare

them for principalship; rather, it helped them to navigate AP leadership. Some APs in the study

acknowledged that they do not have a desire to further their careers as principals. Hence,

mentorship and support are helpful in the performance of AP roles, particularly with novice APs.

Cohen and Schechter (2019) stated:

For the new assistant principal, the knowledge that there is a professional figure who is

accessible and emotionally available for the sharing of feelings, difficulties and doubts

and even mistakes, and that would nonetheless offer emotional support and a sense of

safety, is important for the development of a sense of professional capability. (p. 105)

A few of the APs in this study attested that the support they received from mentors assisted them

in their new AP roles. One AP acknowledged that she relied on her mentor to affirm her

leadership choices. Another AP appreciated having someone outside of her school with whom to

have transparent reflections.

In addition to mentors, APs find support amongst fellow APs. They shared that the

camaraderie amongst colleagues makes it easier for APs to collaborate. Ms. Bryson described

that there are three APs in her school, and they are like family. Members in both focus group

sessions expressed that they relied on fellow APs to navigate the various roles of AP leadership.

Because of the fluidity of the position, the environment for APs to thrive comes from aid of

mentors and supports. That is why ECSD's commitment to AP PLCs aids in APs developing

relationships with others.

Implications

The purpose of this section is to discuss the theoretical, empirical, and practical

implications of this study of APs' leadership and their perceptions of their roles.

Recommendations are also made regarding AP leadership and the roles APs play in educational

settings.

Theoretical

Hersey and Blanchard's (1982) situational leadership theory emphasized that leaders

choose their leadership styles based upon the needs of those whom they lead. This theory is

birthed out of business leadership practices, but it is applicable to AP leadership. This study

used situational leadership to examine APs' leadership and their perceptions of their roles. The

participants of the study confirmed that they vary their leadership to support the needs of those

whom they lead with the goal of moving from needing support to independence.

It is significant in that this theory is applicable to all the stakeholders whom APs

encounter. One AP in the study explained that she reprioritizes what she does based upon the

needs of the staff. Another stated that she adapts her leadership to meet the needs of the people

whom she supports.

The theoretical implications of this study demonstrate the necessity of APs building

relationships with their constituents. Leaders make concessions and decisions based upon the

needs of the teachers, students, staff, parents, and community members that they lead. In order

to identify the needs, situational leadership theory prompts leaders to examine the readiness of

those whom they lead, and that coincides with the directive, coaching, supportive, and delegating

aspects to leading the stakeholders (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982). Moreover, ascertaining the

readiness level places stakeholders on the continuum from unable and insecure, to unable but

confident, able but unwilling, able but insecure, and ultimately, able and confident (Hersey &

Blanchard, 1982). APs' abilities to identify the needs of constituents and move them along the

aforementioned continuum require AP training or professional learning and this is significant for

district level leadership and principals to consider.

ECSD provides professional learning for the APs within the district. While some

participants in the study implied that some of the information received in their PLCs would be

better disseminated in an email, most appreciated being afforded the opportunity to receive

professional learning to support their leadership. Hence, another theoretical implication of the

study is evidenced through the professional learning that district level leadership and principals

should initiate for APs and stakeholders. APs can benefit from professional learning that is

designed to support APs in their leadership. Emphasis on connecting with stakeholders, building

relationships, and ascertaining the needs of those whom they lead are professional learning topics

that could support AP leadership. Situational leadership theory promotes growth of the

stakeholders in that leaders must identify where their constituents are and develop strategies to

help them improve. In the annals of education, situational leadership lends itself to professional

learning and training to support stakeholders into moving towards becoming able and willing as

Blanchard et al. (2013) characterized. Situational leadership is quite applicable for educational

leadership training and support. This study does not purport that all stakeholders can grow as a

result of the leadership style that an AP utilizes; rather, it is realistic in addressing that APs must

build relationships in order to connect with and identify the needs of those whom they lead. If

APs do not get to know their constituents, then they will not be able to effectively lead them.

The school's grade level in which an AP works does not influence the AP's leadership style as

much as the relationship or connection that dictates whether APs can effectively lead their

stakeholders. Mr. Gordon stated, "You have to figure out different personalities and what they

need and how to best get what they need from different personalities to the extent that you can."

This is best done through APs building relationships. Increased attention on professional

learning to support AP leadership is a theoretical implication that needs to be addressed through

research.

Empirical

The empirical implications of this study suggest that the roles APs play are traditional in

that they serve as managers and vast because they perform a myriad of other duties. Tikkanen et

al. (2017) indicated that AP leadership roles are too broad and do not use the talents of the APs effectively. Cohen and Schechter (2019) found that many APs identify as disciplinarians along with several other responsibilities associated with their AP leadership. Only one person in this study indicated that she was not responsible for discipline. An additional study found that APs serving as disciplinarians is a waste of their time; the author implied that APs would be more effective serving as instructional leaders (VanTuyle, 2018). A paradigm shift must take place in how APs' leadership and roles are viewed, used, and supported by school system leaders and principals. In addition, it is recommended that college and university leadership programs should incorporate courses that support AP leadership and respond to the significant roles of APs in schools. Schools are tasked with improving the overall academic achievement and growth of students; hence, another empirical implication is that principals must utilize APs as instructional leaders (Peters et al., 2016; Sun & Shoho, 2017). Traditionally, principals alone were considered as the instructional leaders of the building, but the task is too great for one person to use their leadership to support the instruction of students (Lim, 2019).

Research studies that focus on AP leadership are limited. Given the significance of the roles AP leaders play, it is evident that additional research on AP leadership should take place. This study emphasized AP leadership and their perception of their roles. However, the considerations for AP leadership research are expansive and necessary to examine because of the relevance of APs in schools.

Practical

The monotony of some of the roles can cause some AP stagnancy and/or burnout (Celik, 2013; Karakose, et al., 2016; Tikkanen et al., 2017). In the push for APs to serve as instructional leaders, it is necessary for APs to be relieved of some of the perfunctory roles such as

disciplinarians (Lim, 2019). School county officials and principals should seek to clarify the roles of APs and allocate resources to assist APs with some of their responsibilities. For example, schools could employ intervention specialists to students who may have issues with discipline.

Schools must also implement AP PLCs. The research indicates that the APs responded to being able to collaborate with their peers. It is also a tool that school district leadership can use to disseminate and house pertinent information for leaders. The support and collaboration in PLCs can support AP leadership and growth (Hutton, 2014).

Delimitations and Limitations

This study's delimitation was a case study of APs in a suburban school system in southeastern United States. I selected APs because not much research is conducted on this population. Focusing on AP leadership offered their unique perspective on their leadership and perception of their roles. The location of the school system was small enough to be able to find a consortium of participants who could easily be gathered.

The limitations of the study were impacted by the policy of ECSD that required the principals' permission to contact their APs for participation in the study. Some principals did not want their APs to participate. Eventually, seven principals agreed to allow me to ask their APs to participate in the study, and 11 APs consented to participate in the study. Although all 11 agreed to participate in both the interviews and focus groups, 10 participated in the individual interviews and seven participated in the focus groups. Initially, the interviews and focus groups were going to be in person; however, that had to be changed because the school system transitioned to virtual learning. Hence, I had to amend the IRB application to include the

synchronous interviews and focus groups. The four participants who missed the focus groups

and one participant who missed the interview were unable to reschedule due to personal reasons.

Another limitation was that I had only one elementary and one middle school participant.

I would have preferred to have more representation from elementary and middle schools, but the

AP experiences were similar to APs working in high schools and nontraditional schools.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to examine AP leadership and APs' perceptions of their

roles in a southeastern school system in the United States. A gap in the literature on AP

leadership exists. Additional studies on many aspects of AP leadership would bridge the gap in

literature and offer different perspectives on AP leadership. The potential studies of AP

leadership are myriad. This study was a single case study; however, examining multiple cases

could render replication of the study and/or offer additional results. Specifically, I would like to

see future research conducted on AP leadership and perceptions of APs' roles in other contexts

and settings to include AP leadership in elementary schools, middle schools, and private schools

since most of the participants in this study were high school APs. It would also be beneficial to

see AP leadership within various contexts such as other geographical regions and school districts

located in large metropolitan areas and rural areas.

AP leadership educational preparation and support was one of the themes in this study.

Research that examines APs' educational preparation and subsequent support in the school

systems would provide information about AP training and the impact on their effectiveness in

their roles. School leadership programs and degrees often neglect AP leadership. It would be

effective to conduct studies on AP perceptions of their school preparation programs and the

programs' effectiveness. Studying the aforementioned would give insight on AP leadership.

Another consideration for future studies is AP retention and burnout. Participants in this study expressed frustration with the stress associated with AP leadership. Their responses warrant further examination of AP retention and burnout within various contexts. What are the causes? Does role ambiguity contribute to burnout? Does the lack of support negatively impact AP leadership? During the course of this study, some participants expressed that they do not have a desire to pursue principalship; hence, that would be an effective topic. An examination of career APs and their effectiveness or lack of in their roles is also worth researching. Sometimes APs stay too long in positions. Future research could also investigate stakeholders' perceptions of AP leadership in the context of their roles and their effectiveness. Stakeholders such as teachers, parents/guardians, and staff would offer insight into AP leadership.

School leaders are expected to increase student achievement. Many principals rely upon APs to support the demands for improved student achievement. Future studies could examine AP roles as instructional leaders within various contexts such as elementary, middle, and high schools and within various geographical settings.

A final consideration for future studies on AP research is based upon district leaders and principal perceptions of APs leadership. My research came from the focus of APs; however, principals and district leadership perceptions could allow a better understanding of the decisions that school principals and district leaders make regarding APs. This study could be in the context of leaders within several settings.

Summary

The purpose of this case study was to examine AP leadership and APs perceptions of their roles. The study was located in a suburban school system in the southeastern United States. Eleven APs participated in interviews and focus groups. Documents were also used as data for

this study. The theoretical framework was Hersey and Blanchard's (1982) situational leadership theory. The APs in this study discussed their leadership and perceptions of their roles. The themes emerged from this study were (a) managers and supporters, (b) AP leadership educational preparation and support, (c) mentorship and peer support, (d) relationships influence leadership style, (e) surprising challenges to AP leadership, (f) flexibility and time management, and (g) AP leadership insight. A tremendous gap in APs' leadership exists. Therefore, the research possibilities on AP leadership fall on a broad spectrum. However, the participants in this study expressed the significant impact of AP leadership and the reliance upon APs developing relationships with the stakeholders whom they lead. Researchers can take any of these themes and expound upon them in AP leadership.

Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory was used to conduct this study on APs leadership and APs' perceptions of their roles. Situational leadership notes that APs are responsive to the needs of those whom they lead, and that includes all stakeholders. For this reason, APs modify their leadership to support the needs of those whom they lead. This requires versatility and attentiveness to ensure that those whom they lead get what they need.

One takeaway from this study involves the role of discipline. Although discipline is an aspect of AP leadership, it is neither the total sum of what APs do as leaders nor is it the only role that APs should fulfill. Maintaining day-to-day operations and supervising teachers and staff are also significant aspects of their roles.

Another key element of AP leadership is the need for APs to serve as instructional leaders. That way they can be used more effectively to support the education of students. APs also need to collaborate with stakeholders to consider next steps in their practice as APs. This is most evidenced by the collaboration they are afforded when they work within their PLCs.

Finally, APs recognize their value and contributions to the schools they lead. Research should examine the leadership and roles of APs because of the importance of AP roles.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 25, 2020

Pheneik Baskett
IRB Approval 4180.022520: Assistant Principals' Leadership and Perceptions of Their Roles: A Qualitative Case Study

Dear Pheneik Baskett,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

> 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

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Appendix B: Assistant Principal Recruitment Letter

March 9, 2020

Dear Assistant Principal:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctorate in Educational Leadership. The purpose of this research is to examine assistant principals' (APs) leadership and perceptions of their roles, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

Participants should be APs with a minimum of one-year of experience as an assistant principal in the school system, and participants should be willing to participate in an individual interview and one online focus group. Both the interview and focus group should take approximately one hour each. Your name, the number of years of AP experience, and the grade level that you serve will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential and participants will be assigned pseudonyms.

If you are interested in being considered as a participant in this study, please complete the screening survey, which is found in this link. Assistant Principal's Survey. I will review the screening survey responses and contact APs who are selected as participants for this study. At that time, eligible participants will be provided with consent information and additional instructions on study participation.

Sincerely,

Pheneik Baskett

Appendix C: Screening Survey

Below are survey questions for this research study on assistant principals' (APs') perception of their roles. The purpose of this survey is to determine your interest in participating in the study and to assess if you meet the requirements for the study. The data collected will remain confidential. If you are selected to participate in this study, your consent will be obtained, and a pseudonym will replace your name.

1. What is your name?
2. What grade level do you work with as an AP?
   o Elementary
   o Middle
   o High School
3. How many years of experience do you have working as an AP in the current school system?
   o Less than one year
   o One year
   o More than one year
4. Are you willing to participate in the research study on APs' perceptions of their roles?
   o Yes
   o No
5. Are you willing to participate in a one hour interview and one hour focus group?
   o Yes
   o No

Appendix D: Email to Selected Participants

Dear [Recipient]:

I am writing to inform you that you have been selected as a participant in the study: An Assistant Principal's Perception of Their Roles: A Qualitative Case Study. I am attaching a copy of the informed consent. Please sign the consent form electronically and send it back to ███████████████.

I will communicate with you via email to schedule a time for our interview and online focus group meeting opportunities.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.

Sincerely,

Pheneik Baskett

Appendix E: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM
ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS' LEADERSHIP AND PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLES:
A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY
Pheneik Baskett
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study on assistant principals' leadership and perceptions of their roles. You were selected as a possible participant because you are an assistant principal (AP) within ████████████████ district with a minimum of one-year experience in this school district. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Pheneik Baskett, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to research APs' leadership and perceptions of their roles.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a one-hour audio recorded individual interview.
2. Participate in a one-hour audio recorded focus group session with other participants who also serve as APs. Three different focus groups will be available for you, as the participant, to select a date and time that is convenient to your schedule. The focus groups may occur in either a face-to-face setting or through an asynchronous online format such as Skype. You will be allowed to select the format that suits you the best.
3. Review the transcripts of your interview and your part of the focus group to ensure their accuracy. This should take about 15 minutes.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: There will be no direct benefits to participants for being part of the study. However, participants may benefit from taking part in the collaborative conversations with other APs that will take place in the focus group. Society may benefit from the study on APs because a lack of AP research exists. This study adds to AP research.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report, I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. Data will be stored on a password locked

computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted. Interviews and focus groups will be audio recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings. I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group, but they will be encouraged to obey the confidentiality.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or your school district. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact me at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, (apart from focus group data) will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Pheneik Baskett. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ███████████████████. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Gail Collins, at ███████████████.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at ████████████.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Signature of Participant   Date

_____

Signature of Investigator   Date

Appendix F: Email to Thank Participants Not Selected

Dear [Recipient]:

I am writing to express my gratitude in your willingness to participate in my study. I have the required number of participants for the study, so I will not require your participation. However, I truly appreciate your consideration.

Sincerely,

Pheneik Baskett

Appendix G: Researchers' Reflective Journal

Date	Potential Biases
1/24/2019	I am committed to writing my dissertation on APs, but as I conduct research, I am noticing that there are not a lot of current resources. I feel like I know about the topic, but I work in one context, so l have to maintain a neutral lens when I look. I am concerned that I will not be able to find enough source materials. I also question whether the sources will represent my context. APs are not readily researched so that is the focus. However, I have changed from a multi-case study to a single case study because I am focusing on one school district.
3/01/2020	I am having trouble getting principals to agree to let me ask APs in their schools to participate in the study. I think principals may also worry that their APs' perceptions may reflect negatively on their principals' leadership. That is not the premise of my study. I do believe that in order for APs to be effective, principals need to be effective. My bias is that it is not always possible—especially when both the AP and principal are novices. However, I am casting a broad net and hope that principals with all types of experience will consider allowing their APs to participate in this study.
3/30/2020	I am an AP, and I am interviewing other APs. I know the challenges that APs encounter. I agree with so much of what the interviewees are saying thus far. Am I being objective enough especially when I share similar experiences and thoughts?
8/1/2020	I have found that many of the experiences and observations I have are similar to those of APs in the study. However, the way I processed those experiences differ from other APs. Many factors influence perceptions. Context is one of the factors. Thus, APs' experiences are not monolithic, and my perceptions do not represent others' experiences in totality.

Appendix H: Interview Questions

Interview Questions

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. What is your current position? How long have you been in your current position? How long have you been at your current school?

2. What are your specific areas of responsibilities or leadership as an AP at your school?

3. What are the various roles that you know that APs may serve at your school or from talking to APs who serve in other schools?

4. How do you perceive the roles of APs?

5. What surprised you about the roles of APs?

6. How would you describe your preparation to become an AP?

7. How effective are you at fulfilling your specific areas of responsibilities? Explain why.

8. What are the greatest hinderances to you fulfilling your role as an AP?

9. What are the supports that you have experienced in your role as an AP?

10. How do you characterize your leadership style?

11. How do varying situations impact your leadership?

12. How do you determine the leadership needed for those whom you lead?

13. How do you modify your leadership to meet the needs of those whom you lead?

14. How do those whom you lead respond to your leadership?

15. What are the needs of those whom you lead?

16. How does your role as an AP align with your leadership style?

17. How can APs be prepared to fulfill their roles as APs?

18. What role is your most effective and why?

19. What role is your least effective and why?

20. What role do you most enjoy and why?

21. What role do you least enjoy and why?

22. What else can you add that we haven't already talked about?

Appendix I: Focus Group Questions

Focus Questions

Structured Open-Ended Focus Group Questions (Appendix I)

1. How do you characterize the leadership and role of APs?

2. How do you feel stakeholders view the roles of APs?

3. How do determine the type of leadership that is needed for the stakeholders you support?

4. How do you perceive the leadership training program you received prior to becoming an AP?

5. How can the school system leaders support APs?

6. How can AP be more effective?

7. How do grade levels of the student population impact AP roles?

Appendix J: Audit Trail

07/1/2019   APs are not readily researched so that is the focus for this study. However, I have changed from a multi-case study to a single case study because I am focusing on one school district.

08/18/2019   Based upon my research, I have decided to add "Leadership" to the title and research question. It helps to clarify and connect the theory to the purpose of the study. Hence the modified title is Assistant Principals' leadership and perceptions of their roles: A Qualitative Case Study.

11/15/2019   I completed my proposal. I await approval for proposal defense.

12/5/2019   I successfully defended my proposal.

12/11/2019   I submitted my proposal to the IRB, and I await a response.

02/25/2020   I just received IRB approval. I had to wait almost two months.

03/31/2020   I began conducting interviews and focus groups via Zoom.

04/06/2020   I completed all interviews and focus group meetings.

09/27/2020   I submitted my dissertation for committee member approval.

10/05/2020   I submitted my dissertation for dean's approval.

10/20/2020   I received approval from Qualitative Director.

10/20/2020   I submitted my dissertation to editor.

10/30/2020   I successfully defended my dissertation.

Appendix K: Tough Talks Email

Email Received 4/12/2019

Good Morning,
Please check your summer calendars and let me know if you would like to participate in a training, June 26 & 27, on the topic of having tough talks with others. This is two full days of training (8:00-4:00). Leaders who are not contracted to work on these days are welcome to participate, however, there will not be a stipend available. Additional training opportunities will be scheduled during the 2019-20 school year. We have to order support material for anyone who signs up so I need a firm commitment by April 19.
Thanks,
[Name Redacted]

Appendix L: Training Module

EASTERN CITY D.E.L. TRAINING

Developing **E**ducators in **L**eadership

- ❑ Induction level leaders (Principals and APs – 1 to 3 years)
- ❑ 1-on-1 coaching element via coaches (retired and current high performing principals/district administrators)
- ❑ Use of Leadership Training Modules

DEMONSTRATE
PRACTICE
TRY

Appendix M: Agenda

AP PLC Monthly Meeting March 2020
Learning Targets

Define	Identify	Provide	Provide
I can define success criteria.	I can identify characteristics of effective success criteria.	I can provide teachers with the framework to crafting success criteria during a PLC.	I can provide feedback on teacher's lesson plans related to Learning Targets and Success Criteria.

Assistant Principals' Meeting Agenda
Friday, September 6, 2019

1. **WELCOME:** (9:00 AM) Mrs. Pace

2. **CABINET UPDATES:** (9:05 – 9:25 AM)

Office of the General Counsel	Office of Technology	Office of Operations	Office of Financial Services	Office of Human Resources
Mr. Brown	**Mr. Stone**	**Mr. Rose**	**Mr. Ponder**	**Dr. Morgan**
☐ Contracts *Spending Max at local schools *Lengths of contracts (30 day clause or automatic renewal) *Where do you want to pursue lawsuits?	☐ ClassLink (Features) ☐ Security (phishing emails) ☐ Stakeholders (Survey administered twice) ☐ itsLearning	☐ Work Orders	☐ Safety Net, PL and Title I Funds	☐ HR Organizational Chart ☐ CPI- Roster Verification ☐ HR Timeline ☐ Certification plan schedule ☐ Fall Recruitment ☐ Eastern City newsletter

3. **TEAM LEARNING:** (9:30 – 11:00 AM)

   ☐ Planning & Assessment – Office of Teaching & Learning

4. **TEAM ACTIVITY:** (11:00 – 11:30)
   ☐ Establishing our PLC
   ☐ PLC Leads

Appendix O: ECSD Instructional Wheel

Eastern City Results Wheel

PLC Key Questions:

1. What do we want students to know and be able to do?
   (Steps 2, 4 and 7)

2. How will we know if they have learned it?
   (Steps 1, 3, 5, 6, and 9)

3. What will we do if they have not learned?
   (Steps 8 and 9)

4. What will we do if they already know it?
   (Steps 4 and 8)

Eastern City Results Wheel
(pseudonym)

STEP 1
Collect and Analyze
Multiple Data Sources

STEP 2
Determine Essential
Standards, Learning
Targets and Success
Criteria

STEP 9
Assess for Mastery and
Repeat Cycle

STEP 8
Adjust Instruction:
Align
Intervention/Extension to
Standards

STEP 3
Collaborate on Designing
Common Assessment and
Instruction

Student Achievement

Analyze

Adjust

Plan

Reflect

Instruct

Assess

Step 7
Reflect on Learning Goals
and Make Decisions About
Next Steps

STEP 4
Deliver Tier 1
Standards-Based and
Standards-Aligned
Instruction

STEP 6
Analyze Formative
Assessment Data to
Monitor Progress

STEP 5
Conduct Balanced
Formative Assessments
Aligned to Standards