# Novice Assistant Principals' Perceptions of Professional Learning Experiences

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how novice Assistant Principals (APs) perceived administrative professional learning experiences. Data came from twelve first-year APs in two Southeast United States public school districts during the 2017-2018 academic year. Through use of semi-structured interviews, a description of how the APs developed as school leaders, their feelings about their challenges and needs during the transition into an administrative role, and a depiction of the school districts' intentions behind the professional learning offerings were revealed. The data were analyzed with the constructionist epistemology and combined theoretical framework based on Mezirow's transformative learning theory and Savicka's career construction theory. The findings showed that that professional learning that is intentional to new APs' specific needs is beneficial, with collaboration, mentoring, networking described as favorable professional growth opportunities.

*Keywords*: professional learning, professional development, assistant principals, novice school leaders

Assistant Principals (APs) are valuable members of most public school systems. Although there is a wealth of research on the benefits of school leadership, research on APs is underdeveloped. The role of an AP is ambiguously and inconsistently defined across school sites. Opportunities for professional learning, in its many forms including coaching and mentoring, is inconsistent for APs, as most schools and districts focus on teacher professional development. Thus, APs may be trained and licensed, yet few are prepared to assume the myriad tasks required of a school leader.

This qualitative study examined the professional learning support of nine (n=9) novice first-year K-12 public school APs in two urban districts located in the southeastern United States. The study made sense of APs' experiences while participating in professional learning, with a focus on how leadership skills develop. In-depth, semi structured interviews about professional development experiences were conducted with first-year novice APs. Through a constructionist epistemological lens and the dual theoretical framework of career construction theory and transformative learning theory, data analysis sought to present how APs attribute meaning to professional growth as development of leadership skills.

## Statement of the Problem

The research problem is related to gaps in educators' understanding of the professional preparation and development of APs for career ascension. Numerous researchers have validated strong, competent school leadership, second only to teaching, as a significant contributor to increased student achievement and school success (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013; Davis, Gooden, & Bowers, 2017; Grissom, Loeb, & Master, 2013; Leithwood, Sun, & Pollock, 2017; Nichols, Glass, Berliner, 2012). Despite the impact of leadership in schools, administrators are leaving positions every year for retirement, transfer opportunities at other schools, and offers for different career tracks (Hill, Ottem, & DeRoche, 2016). A possible solution to attract and sustain highly qualified administrators is to offer support for the purpose of fostering development of school leaders throughout their careers (Pounder & Crow, 2005).

## Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the professional development experiences of novice APs working within two urban school districts in the southeastern United States. This study defined professional learning and professional development as activities providing educators with the knowledge and skills to enable students to succeed in a well-rounded education and meet challenging academic standards (Learning Forward, 2017). Another purpose was to examine the professional development opportunities presented by the districts' professional development programs addressing the unique challenges first-year APs encounter when transitioning from other roles to school administration. The study was guided by one research question and three sub-questions: (1) How do novice APs perceive professional learning experiences?, (1a) What influence, if any, did formal district level professional learning programs have on novice APs?, (1b) What influence, if any, did informal district level professional learning have on novice APs?, and (1c) What influence, if any, did prior education have on novice APs? The research question was used to analyze the overall perceptions of APs' professional learning experiences while each subquestion focused on a different form of professional learning APs typically experience. While overlapping of categories had the potential to occur, I distinguished the forms of professional learning described by participants in my theme descriptions and findings.

## Overview of Theoretical Foundation

Two theoretical frameworks were used as interpretive lenses through which to view the perceptions and experiences of novice AP professional development participation. Mezirow's transformative learning theory was the primary lens through which to view the meaning-making process of novice APs' experiences during the beginning of their leadership careers (Mezirow, 2006; Taylor, 2008). To narrow the area of interest, career construction theory helped to understand the perceptions of novice APs who underwent professional development, specifically mentoring or coaching. Transformative learning theory and career construction theory were used together as interpretive lenses through which to view the perceptions and experiences of novice AP professional development participation. As the researcher, I embodied the epistemological stance of APs creating their professional learning, perspectives, and goals based on internal constructs. Under this lens, I believed APs must be open to recreating new perceptions as they encountered new experiences and knowledge during the critical shift from former positions to novice APs. Transformative learning theory addressed the adult learners' sense of emotional preparedness, openness to encountering new knowledge, and preparation for the standards associated with their new role, whereas career construction theory considered the choices individuals make and express based upon goals and self-concepts. The combined theories provided a means to interpret the retrospective thoughts and perceptions of novice APs, in terms of current professional development and former opportunities that served as preparation for the role.

## Review of Related Research and Literature

### Assistant Principals

The literature review began with a comprehensive account of research about APs in public schools within the United States to describe the importance and value of additional research on this unrepresented population. Even today, the AP role is typically inundated with managerial tasks (Celikten, 2001; Holland, 2004). Such tasks consume the workload, limiting time for on-the-job professional development for school leadership growth (Marshall & Phelps Davidson, 2016). Instructional leadership literature reveals the lack of professional development for APs (Good, 2014; Hunt, 2011). Research is needed to determine which forms of preservice training and professional development might contribute to better prepared school leaders with a stronger propensity to remain in the school leadership field.

Many researchers and scholars agreed that coaching or mentoring can make a tremendous impact on the career trajectory of the AP and create positive long-term effects for the school climate (Goodman & Berry, 2011; Stevenson, 2009). In this study, coaching was defined as a supportive relationship providing a means to grow personally and professionally by a holistic self-improvement process (Bloom, 2005) and mentoring was recognized as a form of support, typically over an extended time period, in which a protégé is paired with a mentor to receive assistance, feedback, and guidance in his or her field or area of desired growth. Evidence from the education field and other fields (Bond & Naughton, 2011) have shown leadership coaching to produce significantly positive results on participants' academic, professional, and personal experiences (Franklin & Franklin, 2012; Wise & Hammack, 2011). Including coaching or mentoring in transformational efforts can aid school leaders in building a culture of success.

**Transformative Learning Theory**

Mezirow defined transformative learning theory as "the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference—sets of assumption and expectation—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow, 2006, p. 92). Mezirow's theory was selected as the study's primary theoretical framework because its formula focused on how adults encounter new knowledge and make meaning perspectives from the learning. Transformative learning theory was used to analyze how APs encountered professional development and to determine whether or not they made meaning from the information presented.

**Career Construction Theory**

Career construction theory (CCT) is used to conceptualize how people make meaning out of vocational behavior. Savickas's (2001) career construction theory is a "process of evolving and implementing the vocational self-concept through the exploration of work roles and life experiences" (Grier-Reed & Conkel-Ziebell, 2009, p. 24). The novice APs experienced a transition from other career roles, which resulted in a new paradigm shift. CCT was applied to this study as the lens through which APs' first-year administrative experiences and interpretations of professional development opportunities were explored.

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**Research Design and Methodology**

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This qualitative study was a basic interpretive study with focus on novice APs' retrospective and current thoughts regarding participation in professional learning, including professional development, training, university preparation, and coaching or mentoring as new school administrators. Merriam distinguished the researcher of basic interpretive research as being "interested in understanding the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved" (Merriam, 2009, p. 22).

**Participants**

Nine novice APs within two southern Atlantic school districts were interviewed using a semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol. During the summer, May-July 2018, data collection began by recruiting six participants from a large school Southeast United States district, Crawford County[1], serving more than 200,000 students. Prior to applying for an assistant principalship, Crawford County employees with a leadership certificate were invited to apply for an aspiring leadership academy: a 3-month cohort program offering professional development training, authentic leadership experiences, and mentoring support to prepare for the AP role (Crawford County, website redacted). I reached saturation of APs at nine ($n = 9$) participants by recruiting three additional APs in a smaller, neighboring district, Harbor County[2], serving over 70,000 students, to reach saturation. Table 1 displays the time of each interview, participant names (pseudonyms), genders, grade levels of students served at the schools, number of months the participants worked as APs at the time of the interview, the name of the school district

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[1] Pseudonym to protect confidentiality
[2] Pseudonym to protect confidentiality

(pseudonym), and whether the APs were hired at the traditional time of year (summer) or midyear, after the school year had begun.

**Table 1**
*Participant List*

| Time of interview | Pseudonym | Gender | Grade | Months as AP | Hire Time Traditional (T) or late (L) | AP had prior experience at same school level yes (Y) no (N) | District Crawford (CCPS) Harbor (HCPS) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Summer | Armando | M | 6-8 | 10 mo. | T | Y | CCPS |
| Summer | Alexis | F | K-5 | 10 mo. | T | Y | CCPS |
| Summer | Lionel | M | 6-8 | 5 mo. | L | Y | CCPS |
| Summer | Judy | F | 9-12 | 5 mo. | L | Y | CCPS |
| Summer | Larry | M | 6-8 | 9 mo. | L | Y | CCPS |
| Fall | Darnell | M | 6-8 | 6 mo. | L | Y | CCPS |
| Fall | Thomas | M | K-8 | 8 mo. | L | Y | HCPS |
| Fall | Lynn | F | K-5 | 11 mo. | T | Y | HCPS |
| Fall | Laureen | F | 9-12 | 11 mo. | T | Y | HCPS |

As depicted in Table 1, four of the participants were females whereas five were male, thereby offering a balanced variation of data in terms of gender. Although only three participants had elementary school experience, seven had secondary experience (Thomas worked at a community school serving K-8 students). The participants were classified as traditional hires if they started the position during the summer before the academic year began and late hires if they started the position after the school year had already begun. Five of the nine participants began the AP position after the start of the academic year, August 2017. The table lists the participants in order of interview time. All five Crawford County Public School (CCPS) participants were interviewed during Summer 2017 and the four Harbor County Public Schools (HCPS) participants were interviewed in Fall 2017. In the summer, participants opted for face-to-face interviews whereas participants in the fall chose to be interviewed by phone. While interviewing the participants, during my memo writing, and while coding the transcripts, I considered the degree to which the participants utilized self-reflective practices to construct meaning contributive of further career development. I was interested in learning about the perspectives of the participants during their first-year AP experience; I paid special attention to their preestablished self-concepts of the social reality surrounding the AP role. Thus, I interpreted the APs' narratives for themes that patterned their work lives and professional learning during the first year as school leaders. The voices of these nine APs offered rich data on the experienced faced during the first year as school leaders.

**Data Sources and Data Collection**

Data sources included semi-structured interviews for novice assistant principals.

*Semi-Structured Interviews*

To investigate the phenomenon and make meaning of the participants' first-year experiences as APs, I collected data through semi-structured, open-ended interviews. Creswell (2013) and Merriam (2016) both indicated that the data collection methods utilized in basic qualitative studies were semi-structured interviews guided with a series of open-ended questions. I elected this data collection method because the process provides a conversational, two-way approach that allows for new ideas to be shared as a result of participant responses and accommodates shifts as the conversational interviews progress.

Before beginning the interviews, participants signed informed consent forms and agreed to be audio recorded. Using a peer-reviewed protocol, I interviewed each participant in one 45-60-minute session to gather perspectives on the professional learning that occurred during the first year in an administrative role. Initially, I embedded my theoretical framework into the questions I developed for the interview protocol. Then, I incorporated reflective, open-ended questions to provide opportunities for participants to describe learning experiences as first-year APs. One such question was "How has your participation in [professional development] supported preparation for your current and possible future school leadership roles?" The question not only integrated the critical self-reflection elements of both theories but it also probed to determine the participants' learning experiences and potential recognition of identity shifts. While developing the protocol questions, I considered how the perspective dimensions of transformative learning theory could be reflected upon according to participant responses. For instance, I wanted my questions to offer opportunities for participants to reflect upon how professional learning facilitated an identity transformation on the levels of self, belief systems, and lifestyle changes.

I collected data by digitally recording each interview on two devices and taking written notes. To maintain confidentiality, I assigned a pseudonym to each participant. After all of the interviews were completed, I audiotape recorded each interview and used an advanced speech recognition software service to transcribe the interview. All documents were saved with a password protected digital system and backed up on an external, password protected, hard drive. The recorder and hard copies were stored under lock and key.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis began with reading each interview transcript in its entirety to gain a sense of the participants' perceptions of professional learning experiences as beginning APs. As I reviewed the transcripts, I also read my interview notes and wrote reflections in the margins to add to my future coding processes. I used thematic analysis as my analytic strategy (Bernard & Ryan, 2010) because it works well with basic qualitative design (Merriam, 2009). Creswell described thematic analysis as "extensive discussion about the major themes that arise from analyzing a qualitative database" (Creswell, 2013, p. 266). I utilized a detailed approach to thematic analysis of the data, reading and analyzing participant responses recurrently to gain an in-depth understanding beneficial to producing accurate findings to answer the research question and sub-questions. My thematic analysis process involved first- and second-cycle coding methods to generate answers to

the research question and sub-questions. Using the guidance of Saldaña (2016), I carefully selected descriptive and in vivo coding methods to develop a comprehensive understanding of the data.

I followed Saldaña's (2016) manual to develop first-cycle and second-cycle coding methods for this study. I coded the data from the participants' perspectives by studying the interviews transcripts and recordings of the voices to find emergent themes respective to my research questions and theoretical framework. I selected two elemental methods, descriptive and in vivo coding (Chenail, 1995; Saldaña, 2016), which were ideal to analyze the data because they facilitated the identification of themes within the data collected from novice APs participating in professional learning.
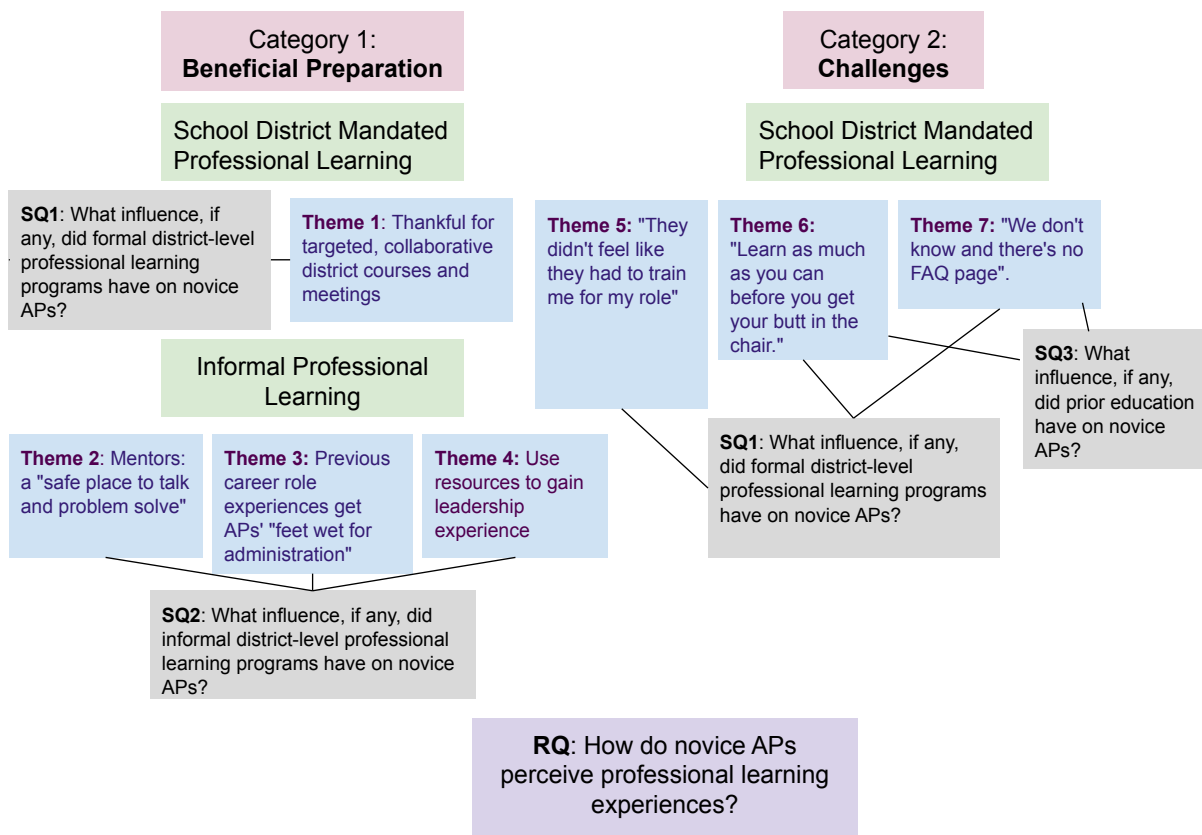
## Findings

Coding the interview data revealed patterns representing seven themes. When coding the data, I considered the needs expressed by the APs, how the participants interpreted their beginning year as school leaders, the theoretical frameworks.

## Themes

Data analysis revealed two categories comprising seven themes. The participants described the strengths and weaknesses of their AP experiences and offered suggestions for improvement of school district professional learning. Thus, the two categories that emerged were *beneficial prep* and *challenges*. The data were coded with the research question and sub-questions in mind. Figure 1 displays how the research question and sub-questions align with the categories and themes. The research question resides at the bottom center of the figure because it is embedded within all of the themes. The sub-questions are connected to the themes that are in alignment.

**Figure 1**
*Categories and themes*



Category 1:
**Beneficial Preparation**

Category 2:
**Challenges**

School District Mandated Professional Learning

School District Mandated Professional Learning

**SQ1**: What influence, if any, did formal district-level professional learning programs have on novice APs?

**Theme 1**: Thankful for targeted, collaborative district courses and meetings

**Theme 5**: "They didn't feel like they had to train me for my role"

**Theme 6:** "Learn as much as you can before you get your butt in the chair."

**Theme 7:** "We don't know and there's no FAQ page".

**SQ3**: What influence, if any, did prior education have on novice APs?

Informal Professional Learning

**Theme 2**: Mentors: a "safe place to talk and problem solve"

**Theme 3:** Previous career role experiences get APs' "feet wet for administration"

**Theme 4:** Use resources to gain leadership experience

**SQ1**: What influence, if any, did formal district-level professional learning programs have on novice APs?

**SQ2**: What influence, if any, did informal district-level professional learning programs have on novice APs?

**RQ**: How do novice APs perceive professional learning experiences?

The themes related to forms of beneficial preparation for novice APs or challenges during their acclimation to the school leadership role. The emergent themes fell under two main categories: beneficial preparation and challenges. The first four themes belonged to the category of beneficial preparation, and the remaining three themes fell under the challenges category. Both categories offered insightful information to serve school districts in providing better preparation for future APs.

The first theme explained the participants' views on authentic district courses that were beneficial for their preparation as new administrators. Participants considered district courses and trainings with planned opportunities to connect and collaborate with colleagues from other schools to be beneficial preparation. Monthly meetings and summer institutes with networking opportunities through which colleagues could learn from one another were described as helpful for their professional learning. The participants expressed a desire for more meaningful, authentic training to meet their specific needs as new APS.

The second theme related to how organic mentoring relationships benefited new APs. The APs described mentoring as an effective form of professional learning that helped them improve their job performance and confidence as school leaders. Participants described trusting mentorships that developed naturally as beneficial for their professional learning. They described mentors as safe places to which new APs could turn when they had uncertainties and unanswered questions.

The third theme shared the participants' views about previous career experiences that served as administrative training grounds. The participants reflected upon opportunities to observe and practice administrative tasks while teaching, which offered exposure and low-stakes chances to practice aspects of the AP role. All of the participants had served as teachers during their careers and described their teaching experiences as beneficial professional learning for their current role as APs. All of the participants had served as a dean or instructional coach, or both, prior to becoming APs. Other former career roles were also noted as beneficial professional learning for the AP role, including military and university police work. In all cases, the participants described how the positions gave them chances to hone their leadership skills in real-world contexts.

The fourth theme detailed the resources used by new APs to gain leadership experience that served them well in their current role. Many participants resorted to self-initiated means of professional learning. They used their resources to find answers to questions they did not know, including former job role experiences and job shadowing. Some of the APs shared examples of information they wanted to learn for professional growth that was determined through observing more experienced school leaders. Job-shadowing opportunities, especially prior to becoming an AP, were of tremendous value to several participants. The APs who had multiple experiences from which to draw and watched how veteran school leaders solved problems had beneficial professional learning experiences through resourceful means.

The fifth theme fell under the challenges category. It encompassed the participants' opinions regarding missed opportunities for authentic leadership preparation tailored to their immediate needs as new APs. Effective communication with stakeholders, especially parents, was an area in which most participants felt inadequate and underprepared to navigate. This theme illuminated how professional learning offered by the school districts was not authentic to the specific needs of novice APs.

Issues with establishing and maintaining work–life balance were mentioned by many of the participants. Managing and devoting time for relaxation were challenges for the APs under study. Goal setting for career development were deemed unrealistic. Although the theories pointed to self-reflection and goal setting for personal growth, the participants did not have time to embed these practices into their daily lives. As a result, their reflections were limited to long-term plans with few aspirations to move into other roles in the near future.

The date of hire was another predominant concern of participants. Although the traditional hire date was before the school year began, APs often started the role after the school year had begun, sometimes midyear. Some participants found the traditional start date to be advantageous, yet others preferred a midyear start date. A common reason for preferring to start midyear was for APs to observe the daily operations of the school and grow accustomed to the school culture before the following school year began.

The sixth theme entailed the participants' desired need for more formalized training and mentoring. The numerous unanticipated concerns of novice APs were transitional concerns. APs noted how transitional challenges were unforeseen problems with no form of preparation. Several participants described a lack of support when transitioning in the AP role for the first time. A need for more support and tailored professional development content from their school districts was expressed. Moreover, the need for additional opportunities for networking and mentoring was shared as a dominant concern. Embedding more intentional preparation into school district training might help APs to learn the essentials of their new role and ease their transition into school leadership.

The final theme described the desire of several participants for more managerial preparation. They aired complaints about hindrances to their ability to excel as APs resulting from a lack of preparation for daily requirements of the role. A focus was placed on leadership and preparation for the role of principal rather than preparing APs for the immediate tasks at hand.

The majority of participants raised concerns related to facilities issues. Few participants had a working contact list to call for each type of facility problem. The participants noted how the contact list was frequently updated and therefore unreliable. Several APs noted how simple yet effective having an updated contact list would have been as they transitioned into the role.

While their training was focused on future goals or untimely topics, the participants wanted to receive more training to help them handle managerial issues they were facing. Attention to specific needs could enhance the daily experience of novice APs learning all of the various requirements of their new role.

## Discussion

According to the findings from this study, district-offered professional development sessions are rarely useful to novice assistant principals, whether it be redundant, offered at inappropriate timing, uninformative, or nonexistent. The district-level professional development that is helpful comes in the form of on-the-job experiences in leadership roles before becoming an assistant principal, leaders' seeing potential in candidates and allowing job-shadowing opportunities, and mentorship opportunities. Participants described school district trainings and meetings as preparation for a future principalship rather than support for the current AP role.

All but one of the participants specified the principalship as a long-term goal, but they recognized how much other preparation they needed prior to the aspired principal role. Despite the school districts' focus on principal duties and the participants' expressed desires to become principals in the eventual future, the participants described immediate needs left unmet. The participants used self-initiated modes of professional development to prepare for the AP role. According to the Gates and et al. (2019) Principal Pipeline Initiative research, providing preservice and on-the-job supports, such as mentoring and principal preparation programs (PPI), are supports used in PPIs that have positive outcomes with regard to limiting principal turnover. Although on-the-job training can "provide APs with the knowledge base for making quality decisions and opportunities to apply theories in daily school operations" (Kwan, 2011, p. 194), participants from both Crawford County Public Schools and Harbor County Public Schools described school district-offered professional development during the first year as an AP as unreliable. Thus, the findings suggest that school districts are confronted with a missed opportunity to support new APs by offering professional development on topics they immediately need to be successful as school leaders; if school districts support APs by providing training in the areas causing stress and uncertainty, their staff may have energy to reflect and grow as authentic school leaders. This study provides more information to the body of literature supporting the need for authentic, meaningful school district-offered professional development.

University preparation was another form of self-initiated professional development. Although participants positively noted previous experiences in other roles or university preparation for school leadership, they negatively pointed out redundancies in school district training. The repetitive topics were deemed a waste of time for new APs with many questions about the daily tasks they were seeking support to handle. The positive comments about former training from participants were incongruent with the literature on university preparation for school

administration; the participant commentary does not align with the literature's statement that many APs reported feeling ill prepared by university school leadership programs for their current position (Busch et al., 2010; Levine, 2006). Davis et al. (2005) suggested that university preparation programs are not teaching relevant, real-world skills to future school leaders. School districts may use this information to deepen new administrators' former training rather than repeating the same information from university preparation programs.

Authentic mentors and coaches were also sources of learning for the participants. Although some researchers advocated that "the principal has a strong responsibility to serve as a mentor for the AP" (Calabrese & Tucker-Ladd, 1991, p. 67) and another asserted that "the most logical mentor for the [AP] is the senior principal with whom he or she works" (Marshall & Phelps Davidson, 2016, p. 6), not all principal–AP partnerships are intentional or successful. The typical AP's daily job responsibilities are significantly impacted by the principal under whom he or she serves (Calabrese & Tucker-Ladd, 1991). Principals placed with novice APs should anticipate mentoring or coaching as part of the transition, but this is not always the case. The participants' lack of support and communication from the principal can cause challenges for new APs in need of guidance and mentoring. Coaching can make a tremendous impact on the career trajectory of the AP as well as create positive long-term effects for the school climate (Goodman & Berry, 2011), and mentoring is an important method for aspiring principals to practice leadership skills (Daresh, 1995). I found the terms mentoring and coaching to be used interchangeably and almost synonymously by my participants. It appeared that although school leaders and school districts recognize the importance of mentoring or coaching on professional development, the specifics of what mentoring or coaching entails has not been clearly defined.

Beginning any new job has its challenges; the AP role is not excluded. APs described the numerous challenges and uncertainties faced during their shift into the new role. As high-stakes testing standards increased the demands for student performance, accreditation standard requirements caused the job of school leaders to become more public. The overwhelming burden of new tasks was exhausting the participants and preventing them from honing new skills for growth as school leaders. Transitioning to the AP role from previous roles within school systems required adaptation and adjustment for all of the participants. An AP's first year presents numerous challenges, some anticipated from university school leadership coursework and observations of supervisors and other APs, but many unexpected, without forewarning or opportunities for preparation. Many new APs experience a learning curve when entering their first school leadership position and therefore are not fully prepared for the job (Mitchell, 2015). For instance, the participants pointed to facilities issues and communication with stakeholders as two reoccurring daily challenges for which they wished they had been better prepared. Several participants described not knowing whom to call for various school facilities problems and suggested that a contact list provided by the school district would be a tremendous help to first-year APs. Several participants suggested providing new administrators with updated contact lists. Because such a contact list is likely to change frequently as transitions occur within staff, it would be logical for the school district to provide assistance in directing administrators to the appropriate contacts.

All the participants were expressive of the lack of time available in the workday and the struggle to balance their personal life with the inundation of work expectations. Further, school districts could help new APs in navigating tactful communication with parents; the participants had not anticipated the high degree of parent communication that persisted throughout their first year on the job as administrators. Nevertheless, it must be noted that the perceived challenges

experienced by one novice AP might vary from those of another AP, causing complications for school districts in providing adequate, timely professional development and professional learning opportunities for all first-year school leaders.  For instance, for one AP, being a parent herself helped her transition into communication with parents within her new AP role, but not all new administrators have that perspective upon which to rely.  Another participant mentioned a shift in school districts' training on soft skills for administrators, which could benefit new leaders seeking to determine appropriate parent communication methods.  Such issues point to the professional development needs and sense of preparedness of first-year APs as they transition into their initial role as school leaders.  Mizell (2010) emphasized that school leaders must develop and maintain a diverse repertoire of current essential skills such as academic instruction, data assessment, and professional development for teachers.  In reality, the participant responses reporting overwhelming, overworked sentiments resulting from time management concerns of APs transitioning into this administrative role for the first time cannot be left unmentioned.  The participants' sentiments aligned with Celikten's (2001) and Holland's (2004) earlier works, which spoke to the issue of managerial duties' dominating AP workload.  More recent qualitative research about AP perceptions of current jobs conducted by Militello et al. (2015) also concluded that APs spend most of the work time on managerial tasks.  The participants perceived that feeling overworked was just part of the job but balancing personal and professional life was very challenging for the majority in this role.

Marshall (2016) described AP role ambiguity as the unstated rules and norms existing within the school's culture and posited that role ambiguity can limit how the AP does the job.  The participants specified some of the unexpected first-year challenges as time management issues, the lower than anticipated pay raise from instructional to administrative classification, anxiety related to possible work site impermanence, and tactfully navigating social interactions with stakeholders. As I was analyzing the data to seek how APs constructed career goals, it was apparent that the lack of time for reflection and planning prevented the AP position from serving as a transformative learning opportunity.  Although Petrides et al. (2014) affirmed that long-term school leadership can improve student learning, a need exists for more professional development geared specifically toward immediate, pressing needs to better prepare aspiring and novice school leaders so they can apply the information directly to urgent challenges and focus on other growth opportunities. Oleszewski, Shoho, & Barnett (2012) reiterated that quick turnover rates promulgate the need to tap and develop competencies in the AP position. In the July 2019 brief on principal turnover, the NASSP and Learning Policy Institute (LPI) confirmed that principal turnover continues to be a serious issue throughout the nation (Levin, Bradley, & Scott, 2019). After a year-long study on principal turnover, the NASSP and LPI named inadequate preparation and professional development as one of the top five reasons why principals leave their jobs (Levin, Bradley, & Scott, 2019).

Moore (2009) asserted that consistency could improve AP job experiences, creating a more uniformly prepared population of candidates, ready to assume principalship opportunities when they arise.  He stated, "Establishing more uniformity among [assistant principalship positions] would increase productivity and establish more consistent norms" (Moore, 2009, p. 1).  The participants' experiences, however, align with the literature describing managerial tasks as dominating the AP workload (Celikten, 2001; Holland, 2004).  Although many researchers, including Van Cleef (2015), validated the connection between stable leadership matters and improved student performance, this research highlighted the fact that a lack of authentic professional development to help maintain school leaders is prevalent. Although experiences from

previous roles provide insight, prior on-the-job training, and at times, empathy, when deciding how to move forward from the new school administrator lens, gaps in training exist for almost all new APs. Thus, the participants' views aligned with the literature stating that job-embedded professional development has focused on teachers and principals, with little mention of APs (Oleszewski et al., 2012).

The research questions were directed at school district professional learning, but the participants did not perceive that this form of training was impactful toward their growth as novice APs. APs lacked opportunities to reflect on the information gathered and provided to them, thereby causing a sense of confusion and disarray. All the participants described school district-offered professional development as unreliable and considered networking to be a critical component for success in the AP role. Aside from one AP who transitioned into the role from another state and therefore lacked a network of colleagues to call on within the district, eight of the participants considered the networks previously established in their former roles to be indispensably beneficial in their first-year transition to AP. School district professional development typically was geared toward satisfying principal licensure requirements. During the first year, APs needed actionable support for immediate problems. Previous experience in dean and teacher roles was more helpful for APs.

Although the sample was small and less diverse than I had intended, the voices of participants are clear in these findings. Their voices and stories help fill the gaps in the literature on APs, professional development, and transitional challenges of first-year school leadership administrators. APs described the challenges associated with beginning an AP role and reflected on the first-year experience career development goals. The professional development needs of first-year APs were illuminated.

## Implications for Practice

It is important for school districts to know how their APs make meaning from the first year as school leaders and how the professional development offered to them, or lack thereof, is encountered. The participants noted specific areas of need, which resulted from school districts' not offering timely, practical professional development. The mentioned areas in which participants expressed a need for support included authentic professional development topics such as facilities, stakeholder communication, key contacts for various problems, and instructional leadership. The findings suggest that school districts are confronted with a missed opportunity to support new APs by offering professional development on topics they need immediately to be successful as school leaders; if school districts supported APs by providing training in the areas causing stress and uncertainty, their staff might have energy to reflect and grow as authentic school leaders. The school districts under study design the AP role as a steppingstone to become a principal; APs hired in Crawford and Harbor counties are expected to become principals after about 3 years, when the principal certification program is completed. Professional development is designed to prepare APs for principal roles, rather than for the current needs of the AP role.

More professional development geared specifically toward the needs of new APs is needed to better prepare aspiring and novice school leaders for immediate, pressing needs so they can apply the information directly to urgent challenges and focus on other growth opportunities. Walker and Kwan (2009) recommended on the job training to support school leaders in preparation for the myriad tasks required of them. School district professional development cannot make the mistake of assuming that further training is not necessary for novice school leaders. University

preparation and prior career experiences, such as teachers and pseudo-administrators (deans, instructional coaches, and CRTs), provides several necessary skills sets but gaps still exist in each APs' preparation. Marshall and Hooley (2006) referenced role ambiguity as a leading cause of APs' feeling negatively about their job performance and burnout. Each path to preparation does not prepare new school leaders with the exact skill sets but team-based leadership can complement each school leader's specific area of expertise. Colwell (2015) recommended that APs serve as leadership colleagues to the principal. My research compliments this idea and supports the potential benefits of principals and APs working alongside on another to achieve the same vision and goals for the ultimate benefit of their students.

Further, school districts could help new APs in navigating tactful communication with parents; the participants had not anticipated the high degree of parent communication that persisted throughout their first year on the job as administrators. For one AP, being a parent herself helped her transition into communication with parents within her new AP role, but not all new administrators had that perspective upon which to rely. Another participant mentioned a shift in school districts' training on soft skills for administrators, which could benefit new leaders seeking to determine appropriate parent communication methods. Such issues point to the professional development needs and sense of preparedness of first-year APs as they transition into their initial role as school leaders. Although experiences from previous roles provide insight, prior on-the-job training, and at times, empathy, when deciding how to move forward from the new school administrator lens, gaps in training exist for almost all new APs.

To enhance the organizational experiences of current and future novice assistant principals, there is a need for more consistent pre-service training and job-embedded professional development to support individuals in this fast-paced, multifaceted role, which often serves as a steppingstone to the principalship position. This research may facilitate greater efficiency and effectiveness in the improvement of leadership preparation programs and professional development opportunities for aspiring and current APs. Some skills can only be learned with experience and practice. Creating aspiring AP programs that enable all candidates to practice roles would be a beneficial step for school districts seeking to improve their professional preparation for teachers and staff seeking to become school leaders. A program tailored to each aspiring candidate's unique skill sets, career experience, and needs would help fill in the aforementioned gaps in their path to preparation. Considering Mezirow's transformative learning theory which focuses on adult learning, an aspiring AP program tailored to the candidate's current skillsets and background will help the participant learn new knowledge in a manner differentiated toward them. Moreover, Savicka's career construction theory focused on life design, which gives people the opportunity to create the career they envision for their life. School districts could create AP preparation programs around each participants' background experiences and desires for their career to ultimately form a holistic, comprehensive approach supporting aspiring APs toward long term school leadership paths.

Moreover, aspiring assistant principals must prepare for school leadership before entering the AP role. Once APs have entered the role, opportunities for professional development and training are uncertain. When professional development is offered, the timing of the information received is not always helpful or opportune. Ambitious, resourceful school leaders who have had mentors and completed job shadowing of effective administrators are the most prepared. While mentoring and coaching were identified by participants as beneficial for their professional development, it was unclear whether their mentors or coaches had been trained to serve in that capacity and offer effective feedback for growth. Thus, formal training for mentors or coaches is

a recommendation for school districts preparing effective AP preparation programs. According to the participants in my study, APs are expected to have self-created, previously established network connections to reach out to when assistance is needed. Thus, the mentoring and coaching programs my participants experienced appeared to be less formal or structured than my recommendations would entail.

To enhance the organizational experiences of current and future novice APs, there is a need for better theoretically based constructs that address the unique challenges first-year APs encounter due to transitioning from other roles to school administration. A body of research on career transitions exists in the field of career psychology but there is a lack of research in the field of educational leadership addressing transitional challenges of school leaders.

My use of two combined theories, CCT and transformational learning theory, attempted to address the transitional challenges of novice APs, the new learning constructed during the shift to school leadership, and the new self-concepts APs form when moving into administration. None of the participants entered the AP position with confidence in all necessary skill sets. Previous experience as an instructional coach, dean, and classroom teacher was repeatedly stated as a necessity for success in administration. As the professional development offerings at these two school districts under study stood, aspiring school leaders could not rely on the school district to provide them with all the skill sets needed to be effective school leaders.

## Conclusion

The voices of the nine participants helped me to understand the struggles and needs of novice APs. The AP role is filled with expectations, many of which are unanticipated by new school administrators with limited experience. This study presents the positive areas of professional learning occurring in schools as well as feedback on areas in need of improvement. Further studies of APs as a specifically targeted school leadership subgroup are necessary to continue research on their underrepresented group in the literature.

My study indicated that professional learning that is intentional to new APs' specific needs is beneficial. Participants described collaboration and networking as favorable professional growth opportunities. Moreover, mentoring was described as another source for professional growth. As APs searched for answers to the questions that emerged each day, drawing from previous experience in former leadership roles was found to be helpful. Self-initiated means of problem solving and information seeking were also utilized, but a need for more specific, tailored professional development was the desired alternative form of professional learning.

The participants described challenges encountered during their transitions into the AP role, which can be translated as feedback for school districts seeking to improve their professional development opportunities. Formalized training offering authentic professional learning experiences with a focus on their daily necessities could enhance AP training. Offering mentoring and networking opportunities could also be incorporated. APs expressed a desire to connect with others and learn from people in similar situations as well as experts from whom they could draw ideas. The professional learning experiences of these nine APs were helpful, but improvements could be made to enhance the experiences of future APs beginning the role.

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