

**PERCEPTIONS OF ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS OF CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION
REGARDING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THEIR ROLE**

Patton Furman, *Magic City Acceptance Academy, Homewood, Alabama*
D. Keith Gurley, *University of Alabama at Birmingham*

Abstract

This article describes findings from a qualitative phenomenological study that explored the perceptions of assistant principals of curriculum and instruction (APCIs) regarding the effectiveness of their role. The APCI is an emerging role in school administration. Such nascent change in the role of an AP aptly represents the theme of this journal edition, *Leadership in a Time of Change*. There needs to be more research involving APCIs, including whether the position is effective in practice. Findings from this study explicate the duties of an APCI and a lack of specific training provided to individuals assuming this role. Advantages of the role include increased consistency in messaging and working with teachers to improve practice. Perhaps the most concerning finding is an implication that adding an APCI to a school's administrative team provides a reason for building principals to abdicate or minimize their role in instructional leadership. The article concludes by discussing the findings and implications for future practice.

Author Note: The authors provide permission to publish this manuscript. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Patton Furman at patton@mcaabhm.org.

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Introduction

In response to the theme of this journal edition, *Leadership in a Time of Change*, this article describes an important change in thinking about the role of the assistant principal relative to that of the principal and to instructional leadership. Modern principals have a wide range of responsibilities, but their primary task is increasingly focused on improving teaching and learning in their schools (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Edmonds, 1979; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Gillat & Sulzer-Azaroff, 1994; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Kafka, 2009; Marks & Printy, 2003; Murphy, 1988; O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022; Provost et al., 2010; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). This responsibility has shifted principals' focus from the general management of a school to one centered on improving student learning and instructional capacity building for teachers. The principal's role has shifted to one of the chief instructional leaders. Researchers have developed a sharpened focus on developing principals' ability to lead instruction in response to recently increased accountability for principals as instructional leaders (ESSA, 2015). This task is essential to schoolwide improvement.

This focus is important as new principals are often selected from candidates serving in an assistant principal role. This job traditionally shares different responsibilities than that of the principal. In this study, we explored how school assistant principals (AP), specifically how they perform in a newly defined role as assistant principals for curriculum and instruction (APCI), perceive their roles as APCIs and how they prepare for their future as aspiring school principals.

Very few school principals are full-time instructional leaders. Instead, they are often required to conduct operational tasks such as communicating with parents, managing the school's operations, and attending meetings (Fink & Resnick, 2001). These tasks are necessary, but they take time away from instructional leadership, which, several researchers have demonstrated, can serve to improve student achievement (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Edmonds, 1979; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Gillat & Sulzer-Azaroff, 1994; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Kafka, 2009; Marks & Printy, 2003; Murphy, 1988; Provost et al., 2010; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012).

Principals are primarily responsible for leading instruction because they are ultimately responsible for student success. A principal has to ensure that students learn the prescribed curriculum at high levels, graduate, and are prepared for their journey in a postsecondary educational setting or by entering the workforce. However, these learning goals can only be met if the school's operational functions are addressed. Early in the 20th century, the position of Assistant Principal (AP) was created to assist the principal in completing all aspects of building leadership, especially those of a managerial nature (Austin & Brown, 1970; Glanz, 1994).

For this reason, many schools have hired at least one AP, while larger schools may hire several APs to address these responsibilities. The work of most APs focuses on the operational side of the administration, typically fulfilling duties in organizational and management roles such as supervision, student discipline, and attendance (Austin & Brown, 1970; Glanz, 1994; Kwan, 2009; Scoggins & Bishops, 1993) but not on leadership for instruction and learning. Thus, there is a disconnect between the functions of an AP and those of the building principal. This disconnect can be problematic as most building principals are hired by schools and districts drawing from the pool of experienced APs, even though some APs, especially those functioning solely in operational and managerial roles, may not be sufficiently prepared to assume the role of principal and its accompanying expectations for instructional leadership (Austin & Brown,

1970). This reality has caused some researchers to question whether the AP role is a sufficient training ground for the principalship.

This situation became critical when Oleszewski et al. (2012) reported that 70% of principals they surveyed considered retiring within the first 10 years of their appointment to the principalship. With a resultant increase in principal vacancies, it becomes incumbent on schools and districts to locate and hire suitable principal candidates who can inspire and engage teachers toward improving instruction and increasing student learning (Shoho & Barnett, 2010). As stated above, most of these principal positions will be filled from the pool of APs, thus creating a need for APs to expand their traditional roles and become competent instructional leaders during their tenure as assistants to the principal.

Conceptual Framework

Based on their study of effective schools, Hallinger and Murphy (1985) developed a framework and definition for instructional leadership. These researchers asserted that the principal's instructional leadership duties include any function that impacts teaching and learning. Hallinger and Murphy found that effective principals focused their attention and leadership on several categories, including: (a) *defining the school's mission*, which included narrowing learning goals for the school and communicating them to and among stakeholders; (b) *effective instructional leadership* through managing the instructional program, including supervising teachers, giving feedback, and analyzing student achievement data; and (c) *promoting a positive learning environment* in the school, including building relationships, creating professional development opportunities, and protecting instructional time. Our research team adopted Hallinger and Murphy's instructional leadership framework for this study to guide our data collection, findings, analysis, and interpretation.

Purpose Statement

The role of AP is multi-faceted. It consists of various operational and managerial jobs (Gurley et al., 2015). Marshall and Greenfield (1987) reported that when APs spend years doing these roles exclusively, they lose enthusiasm and knowledge for instructional leadership. This may negatively impact those leaders when they assume the principal role. More recently, APs are becoming aware of this disconnect between their chiefly operational job duties and those expected of them in the principal role. Glanz (1994) argued that a conflict exists in the role of AP. Glanz surveyed APs to determine the importance of their daily tasks and the actual use of their time and found a disconnect between what APs believe are valuable roles of their jobs and where their time is spent. Most APs participating in the study reported that, though they perceived time spent in instructional leadership would be more valuable to them, their time is primarily spent supervising students during lunch and addressing student discipline issues. This imbalance and disconnect between what APs valued and what they did daily in their jobs led Glanz to foresee a potential for burnout among APs, among other problems.

Gurley, Anast-May, et al. (2015) discussed how because the roles differ between APs and principals, the skill bases required by APs and principals are also different. Hartzell's (1993) research about first- and second-level managers supports Gurley, Anast-May, et al. (2015) observations). APs must build lateral relationships with other APs. They must also work with those below them in the hierarchy, with one person above them. This life in the middle level requires a different skill set than the principal, who is solely at the top. These researchers found that APs spend a minimum amount of time discussing instruction with other professionals, which

may dull their skills in this area. These instructional skills are central to the principal position and prepare an AP to take that next step as a building principal. Therefore, researchers have suggested a need to rethink and redefine the traditional role of an AP to include work and development in the instructional leadership realm (Gurley et al., 2015; Hartzell, 1993).

Some districts have begun this process by shifting the traditional roles of the AP to focus on instruction. These districts have hired assistant principals of curriculum and instruction (APCIs). These positions are a departure from the traditional division of duties. For this research, we use the term APCI as inclusive of any assistant principal whose title specifically designates their primary duty as instruction. Those holding the position may have other duties, but their title identifies them as curriculum and instruction leaders. In this study, we examined the actual and perceived duties of APs with a defined instructional leader role. Gurley et al. (2015) have identified this as an area for further research.

Literature Review

Traditional Roles and Responsibilities of School Leaders

The role of the principal is to lead efforts to improve the quality of learning, but this is only a fraction of the responsibility. Principals also spend much time scheduling, reporting, handling parents and community members, and handling crises (Fink & Resnick, 2001). Other traditional roles of principals include: “building and resource management, public and community relations, fund-raising, administering buses and meals, managing discipline, while tending to school finances” (Lemoine et al., 2014, p. 17). The most profound change in the role of the principal has been from management to instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2003; Horng & Loeb, 2010; Lemoine et al., 2014). These managerial or operational tasks include those necessary to operate an organization. By contrast, instructional functions directly involve instruction, such as leading professional development and coaching teachers on classroom strategies.

Instructional Roles of the Principal

Petrides et al. (2014) described school leaders' responsibilities as complex and varied. They explained that school leadership is expected to involve school employees in the quest for constant improvement. Teachers should be engaged in creating a vision to strengthen teaching and learning. Sebastian and Allensworth (2013) wrote that school leaders' responsibility is to “support and develop a strong school organization where students are engaged and learning” (p. 1). This organization encompasses everything that affects learning in the classroom, albeit indirectly. The principal affects instruction by creating an atmosphere of protection and respect for instructional time. This includes communicating an effective mission and vision, having a strong school-parent relationship, and creating a set of transparent discipline guidelines. These leadership behaviors lay the foundation for a school where academics and learning are priorities. Researchers have found that school leadership duties tend to fall into two categories: operational and instructional (Cotton, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005; Oleszewski et al., 2012). The operational functions of a school principal or leader are more managerial. These tasks are critical to an effective school and may indirectly affect culture and learning but do not directly impact the primary outcome of a school. Instructional functions are tasks directly related to learning, such as providing professional development for teachers and instructional observations and coaching.

Significance of the Study

There is a need for more research on the role of the AP (Petrides et al., 2014; Oleszewski et al., 2012), particularly the AP's involvement with instruction. Gurley et al. (2015) suggested that it is time to redefine the role of APs "due to the excessive workload demands placed on APs and the substantial challenges these leaders experience in managing their time and completing the multitude of tasks assigned to the job" (p. 144). These scholars suggested that new research should more clearly define this important role in schools and improve educational leadership programs to prepare candidates. The current study furthered the research base by understanding how some schools have started to rethink the role of AP.

Method

In conducting this study, we sought to understand the perceptions and experiences of APCIs. We seek to contribute to the gap in the literature pertaining specifically to APCIs, and, more specifically, their role as instructional leaders. There has been an abundance of literature surrounding the principle. However, the literature addressing APs and their job duties need to be developed more. Researchers have called for a more robust study of the AP role (Gurley et al., 2015; Oleszewski et al., 2012).

To explore APCI perceptions, we used qualitative research methods, including interviewing those currently holding the position. Creswell (2013) described the qualitative phenomenology approach as exploring a group's lived experiences of a particular situation. This approach focuses on those perceptions of individuals in the role and provides information regarding what individuals who share a similar life experience perceive to be reality (Creswell, 2013). The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the duties of assistant principals of curriculum and instruction, and what are their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the role?
2. What experiences helped prepare APCIs for the role?
3. What are the advantages of having an assistant curriculum and instruction principal?
4. What are the disadvantages of having an assistant principal of curriculum and instruction?

Sample Selection and Data Collection

Participants were selected from a large metropolitan area in central Alabama. We compiled a list of the public schools in the area with an AP over curriculum and instruction. We selected participants to include secondary and elementary school APCIs in the area. Twelve APCIs agreed to participate in the study. The authors acknowledge the limitations represented by the sampling for this study. Only larger, more affluent districts can afford to add a position of APCI to their administrative roles. Such a limitation may exclude smaller and more rural districts than any of those represented by this sample.

Individual Interviews

We conducted 12 semi-structured. Individual interviews to explore perceptions of the effectiveness of the role of APCIs. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. To protect the

confidentiality of the interviewees, we assigned each participant a pseudonym consisting of a numeral to represent the school district in which the ACPI was employed and a letter to represent the individual ACPI participant. The researchers recorded and transcribed each interview verbatim and analyzed using initial and axial coding (Saldaña, 2009; Yin, 2011). Our team used member checking (Miles et al., 2014) to validate the interviews transcribed interview content.

Document Review

We also reviewed the written job descriptions for each study participant obtained through participants' district human resource departments. Job descriptions were reviewed to inform and deepen our understanding of the phenomenon under study and served to triangulate study findings.

Findings

This section reports the study's findings, organized by research question. We turn first to report the demographics of the school districts and individual study participants. Next, we turn to findings that provided insight relative to each research question.

Demographics

The State of Alabama has 139 school districts. Of these city and county school districts, 15 reside within the county where this research was conducted or in the county immediately adjacent. All 15 school districts lie within a 30-mile radius of the major metropolitan area and can be considered urban, suburban, or rural. We began by searching for all school districts in the area that employed APCIs. We identified only four districts with at least one ACPI in their building-level administrative staff in P-12 schools.

We invited all APCIs to participate in the study as interviewees from these four districts. Out of 20 APCIs identified, we identified 12 APCIs who agreed to participate. These 12 APCIs represented elementary and secondary schools. Table 1 summarizes the demographics of the four participating school districts represented by the 12 participants. Table 2 presents some demographics of individual APCIs.

Four P-12 school districts were represented in the study (see Table 1). All districts represented in the study are classified as large suburban districts. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2023), a large suburban school district is defined as a territory outside a principal city and an urbanized area with a population of 250,000 or more. All participating districts were relatively affluent, with median home values ranging from \$280,400 to \$602,200 (U. S. Census, 2023). Socioeconomic status among district students ranged from .32% to 23.8% of students identified as economically disadvantaged (ALSDE, 2019). Districts varied, with student enrollment ranging from 4,500 to 14,000 (ALSDE, 2019). All school districts represented enrolled predominantly Caucasian students. A partial breakdown of ethnicity is provided for each district in Table 1, along with information regarding how many schools at each level (i.e., high school, middle school, and elementary) are included within the individual school districts.

Table 1*Demographic Profile of School Districts Represented by Study Participants*

District	K-12 Enrollment	Schools/Levels	% Race/Ethnicity	% Low SES	Mdn Property Value
1	4,244	1 – High 1 – Middle 3 – Elementary	72 – Caucasian 17 – African American 11 – Other	23.8	\$333,600
2	14,000	2 – High 0 – Middle 1 - Elementary	59 – Caucasian 25 – African American 16 – Other	25.67	\$280,400
3	4,500	1 – High 1 – Middle 0 - Elementary	97 – Caucasian 3 – Other	.32	\$602,200
4	7,164	2 – High 1 – Middle 0 - Elementary	84 – Caucasian 6 – African American 10 – Other	7.82	\$364,000

Table 2 provides information about each study participant, the district represented, and the school level where the participant served as APCI. Individual school enrollment and the total number of assistant principals on staff at each school are also presented. All 12 of the APCI's participating in the study were female. Regarding the number of years of prior administrative experience before assuming the role of APCI, years of experience ranged from two to nine years. We also asked the APCI to estimate the percentage of time they spend dedicated specifically to instructional leadership in their daily roles as APCI's. These percentages also ranged widely from 50-100%.

Table 2*Demographics of APCI Participants*

District	Participant	School Level	School Enrollment	Total APs in School	Years of Prior Adm Exp	% Time in Instruction
1	A	High	1210	5	8	70
1	B	Elementary	789	1	5	75
1	C	Elementary	680	1	5	80
1	D	Elementary	544	1	4	50
2	A	Elementary	742	1	3	100
2	B	High	2841	7	9	85
2	C	High	1589	3	2	70
3	A	Middle	1004	2	5	75
3	B	High	1054	2	6	100
4	A	High	2001	5	4	50
4	B	High	2001	5	3	90
4	C	Middle	1163	2	7	85

Duties of the Assistant Principal for Curriculum and Instruction

Our first research question posed, “What are the duties of the role of assistant principals of curriculum and instruction, and what are APCIs’ perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the role?” We address these findings first from the review of documents (i.e., job descriptions) and then from the words of the participating APCIs from interview data.

Document Review

We initially explored duties enacted by APCIs by reviewing job descriptions provided by district human resources divisions—all four districts provided job descriptions for the Assistant Principal role. However, only District 1 provided a job description developed specifically for an APCI. District 1 titled this position “Assistant Principal for Instruction.” This job description for an Assistant Principal for Instruction began with a list of 14 performance responsibilities that were identical to the job descriptions of any Assistant Principal in the district. Following this, the document included 20 additional duties assigned to the APCI. These duties are listed in their entirety in Table 3.

Table 3

Job Description for Assistant Principal for Instruction Responsibilities from District 1

Assists with curriculum development, implementation, and assessment
Utilizes assessment data, specifies strengths and weaknesses, and develops growth plans
Works with teachers and media specialists to provide and develop instructional resources
Facilitates peer observations, peer collaboration, and focused observations to help teachers with specific needs
Helps plan engaging, authentic delivery of instruction
Assists in accommodations for students and modification of instruction
Assists teachers in using a variety of instructional strategies and accommodates a variety of learning styles and student needs
Assists teachers with using a variety of assessments
Assists with the integration of technology into the curriculum
Helps plan and implement professional growth opportunities
Locates exemplary programs for benchmark/visits
Assists in interpreting and enforcing federal and state laws and state and local board policies
Assists the principal in personnel functions
Assists in preparing and administering the school budget and supervising school finances
Assists the principal in assuming responsibility for scheduling
Plans and accomplishes personal and professional growth and demonstrates professional ethics
Demonstrates proficiency in written and oral communication
Assists in communicating and clarifying the school’s mission to students, staff, and community
Assists in providing a safe, orderly environment that facilitates teaching and learning
Assists in providing a climate of high expectations for staff and students

Job descriptions for Assistant Principals in District 2 were differentiated by school level (i.e., elementary, middle, high). However, the job qualifications and list of responsibilities in the

different descriptions were virtually identical. None of the job duties in these generic descriptions addressed instructional leadership functions. Rather, all the 19 duties listed are related to school operations and management, including student discipline, scheduling, personnel management, supervision, handling logistical matters, safety/crisis management, and professional development activities. One item from the list stated that APs were assigned responsibilities for instructional and/or extracurricular activities but did not provide further explication of such duties.

District 3 job description for Assistant Principals included some language relative to instructional leadership. Included in this list were expectations for AP leadership in “planning, developing, implementing, and evaluating the instructional program.” Further, APs were expected to assist the principal with curriculum development and implementation and with the selection, supervision, and evaluation of certified and support staff. Some instructional management duties were delineated, including textbook management, budget management, and provision of professional development for staff members. All other AP duties listed involved general (and traditional) management and operational functions. An important difference in the description was that APs in District 3 report to the principal and work with the Director and Assistant Director of Instruction.

Job descriptions provided by District 4 were differentiated by level (i.e., elementary and secondary). However, they needed to be more relaxed in outlining any instructional leadership duties to be performed by the AP. Such duties for APs, at the elementary level only, included coordinating professional development for teachers, providing curriculum and instruction orientation for new teachers, and ongoing provision of updated information relative to curriculum and instruction to teachers. Secondary-level APs in District 4 had only one responsibility listed related to instructional leadership. This duty was to “assist the principal with performance assessment of instructional personnel in the school and make recommendations for performance improvement of the staff to the principal.” All other duties described traditional operations and management functions.

Individual Interviews

APCIs listed their most frequent tasks as classroom observations and instructional coaching functions. Nearly all APCI participants said that instructional supervision duties were shared with the principal. Most participants mentioned observing classrooms as being a priority for them. However, Participant 1B described this process as more than simply observing classes. She stated,

People think that [APCIs are] in the classroom providing teacher observations and feedback. That’s a part of it, but it’s so much more than just that. Assistant principals of curriculum and instruction should be in the classroom, observing teachers, providing feedback, and helping develop plans for more effective teaching. I would say that’s a small part of what I do...I also organize those supports to put in place and make sure that everything is running the way it should in their classrooms before a kid ever walks into their door.

This APCI spent time observing the classroom alongside her principal, but she also helped support teachers by providing resources needed for meaningful lessons for students.

Participant 3A suggested that she and her principal worked together to create a vision for instruction in their building. She stated that the staff development specialist carries out their vision: “I work with her on our goals and things that we’re doing as well as our principal, so she facilitates all that professional development.”

Participant 1C explained that her principal was responsible for building a positive culture in the school. This participant described shared instructional leadership in her elementary school. She said they had a team approach to instruction and other functions of administration.

Participant 1A described instructional leadership in District 1. She said the vision for the instructional program came down from the district level. She shared,

In our district...we have monthly meetings where the five assistant principals for curriculum and instruction, our director of student services, and then our director of instruction--we all get together. We troubleshoot. We talked about the district’s beliefs, and our assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction [now retired] was the keeper of the vision for what we believe here in [our district]. She made sure that the people in these positions know what that vision is, and know what our core beliefs are, and then entrusts us to make the decisions that align with those core beliefs.

In this case, the district created and monitored the vision for instruction, and the school intends to communicate that vision and carry it out.

Preparing for the Role of Assistant Principal of Curriculum and Instruction

In interviews with participants regarding their preparation to become APCIs, we found that 7 of the 12 interviewees assumed an administrative role in the school where they had been teaching. Many mentioned entering an assistant principal role at the urging of their principal. For example, participant 4B recalled, “I was in the classroom for about six years, and then got pulled out of the classroom by that principal to assistant principal.” After hiring her principal in a new district, he contacted her to join him at his new school. Another participant who did not get hired as an AP where she had taught mentioned that her principal served as a mentor to her. Participant 2C said her principal saw something in her and encouraged her to go into administration. Several interviewees reported that someone saw their leadership potential while teaching and encouraged them to enter instructional leadership.

Several participants spoke about their passion for teaching and learning from early in their careers. They felt that this passion alone prepared them to become APCI. Participant 2A said:

I want students to learn more than they ever thought they could learn, and I'm eager to learn about how teachers can facilitate student learning. I want to know what works best, and I want to equip teachers on how to successfully implement instructional strategies.

Some teachers have a real drive to learn about what makes learning work for students. These teachers are genuinely interested in instruction and seek opportunities to learn more about instruction. Participant 4B stated, “I was always looking for ways to make instruction better in my own classroom. As an [assistant principal] that continued, the more I read and learned, the more I could help guide others. It just fit right for me.” She expressed that instruction came naturally to her and chose a professional learning path centered on instruction.

Participant 4A(1) spoke about being a teacher and planning engaging daily lessons that prepared her to become an APCI. “I feel like teaching prepared me to be a great assistant principal.” This APCI, who recently won a state teaching award, expressed a natural love of teaching and learning more about being a great teacher. She said being a great teacher prepared her for this role at APCI. Participant 3A also attributed her preparation to be APCI to her experience in teaching and leadership. She said,

The greatest preparation for me as an APCI has been experience – first as a teacher and then as the 12th grade assistant principal in a very large high school. I have much to learn still but exposing myself to all of the state courses of study, course adoption schedules, etc., is also necessary.

Many APCIs attributed their instructional knowledge to their own love of teaching and learning and concluded that this teaching experience was the source of preparation for their current roles as APCIs. Other participants credited a building principal for helping prepare them for the APCI role. Participant 3B said that working directly with her principal helped her understand her principal’s vision of instruction and his job. She claimed that her principal was a strong instructional leader and mentor to her. She felt that working with him made her better prepared to enter the principal role in the future. Participant 2B also spoke about her principal preparing her for the APCI role:

The principal helped to develop me into a school leader. That's when she planted the seeds for school administration. I worked side-by-side with her for many years, filling several different roles. I was [assisting] in [the] curriculum whenever she needed me to [while I was in the counselor role]. I was helping her with school leadership.

Participants in our study did not credit preparation to assume the role of APCI to taking classes or obtaining degrees in curriculum and instruction. They should have explicitly stated that their prior experience as a school administrator prepared them to assume the role of APCI and as an instructional leader. Rather these school leaders felt that the best preparation they had to assume a role of instructional leadership stemmed from their experience as classroom teachers, their passion for teaching and learning, and from the encouragement, and sometimes direct mentoring, from principals with whom they worked.

Advantages of Assistant Principal of Curriculum and Instruction Role

Study participants identified three advantages to a school employing an assistant principal whose primary role is the support of curriculum and instruction. These advantages included *consistency* relative to the communication of expectations, *rapport-building* between instructional leaders and instructional staff, and the ability of the APCI to *share instructional expertise* with teachers on a regular basis.

Consistency. A total of 7 of 12 participants cited consistency as the primary advantage of having an APCI. Participant 4B said this:

There is a level of consistency over time with how course selection is done...with how you handle recommendations for levels of classes, [and] how we do scheduling, with how we answer to parents who are angry about a grade situation, things like this, with how we conduct meetings between parents and teachers, or even between teachers and Special Education who aren’t seeing eye to eye on things. To me, having someone devoted to that role brings a level of consistency with how those issues are handled.

When questions about instruction are addressed by a single assistant principal, responses will be consistent. Participant 2A(1) explained that, with six APs in her building, she felt there had to be a leader of instruction to maintain consistency. APCIs mentioned that the same was true with messaging about the school's mission, especially the instructional vision.

Building Rapport. Five participants said that the primary advantage of having an APCI is building rapport with teachers, facilitating communication regarding improving instruction. Interviewees believed that teachers felt more comfortable going to an assistant principal with questions and tended to trust their opinions. Several participants stated that the APCI, being a step closer to the teacher role, felt more accessible to teachers. Participant 1B made the connection to her previous role as a teacher. She talked about rapport in terms of building a climate that values learning. She said that teachers see her working by their side on improving instruction instead of with operational tasks, which helps build rapport with them. Several APCIs talked about walking next to teachers, so they feel comfortable taking their advice for classroom activities and strategies. In this sense, assistant principals were closer to teachers than the building principals. This might give APCIs an advantage in building rapport with and coaching teachers for improvement.

Sharing Instructional Expertise. Part of building rapport with teachers comes from trusting that the APCI has a breadth of knowledge that can help the teacher. Participant 2B discussed the large size of her school and said that having the APCI role gave her time and focus on building expertise in improving instruction, which helped the teachers respect her ideas. She explained that because of her focus on improving instruction, "It creates a depth of knowledge. That person [APCI] can learn how not just to give the information to teachers, but also help teachers understand, take ownership, and pull that information out of teachers."

Five participants discussed having the time to focus on instruction as an important benefit of having an APCI. Others said it gave them time to focus on instruction, which often gets pushed aside in schools.

Disadvantages of Assistant Principal of Curriculum and Instruction Role

Three themes emerged as we explored what study participants perceived to be disadvantages of the role of APCI. Participants expressed concerns about *time constraints*, *loss of interaction with students*, and *a diminished role of the principal* that they experienced as APCIs.

Time Constraints. Participant 1D shared, "I would say the disadvantage is that there are so many other things, day-to-day things, to do as well. It's overwhelming." This leader was the only AP in her building because it is a smaller campus. However, she said she spent about 50% of her time working on curriculum and instruction and described the other 50% as operational tasks. Other APCIs mentioned time as being a disadvantage. Participant 1B spoke of the responsibilities that were management tasks related to curriculum and instruction, but that took her away from spending time in the classrooms helping teachers. Several other participants shared similar concerns about their ability to address the many responsibilities of the role.

Loss of Interaction with Students. Finally, several participants shared that they were disappointed with the loss of connection they felt they had with students. The role of APCI requires administrators to work closely with teachers, preventing them from working directly with students. That connection can be lost because APCIs are removed from discipline,

attendance, and other duties that give administrators the ability to connect with kids. For example, participant 1A who works in a high school, said, “I spend probably 95% of my time dealing with adults. And they are truly not as fun as the children.”

Diminished Role of Principal. Three APCI's said that they created the vision for instruction in their schools. Participant 1A said, “I am truly the leader of curriculum and instruction in this building.” She stated that she is the leader of professional development and that the principal knows what she is doing but does not deviate from what she has planned. She works with an instructional coach, but her vision guides instruction. She elaborated,

I go to him and tell him what's going on and we talk it out, and then I'm kind of the face of that, which really frees him up to deal with the plethora of things that he has to deal with.

Participant 1A is the APCI at a high school. She works with four other APs in her school. When asked about her role versus her principal's role as an instructional leader, Participant 1A shared,

The way that [my principal] sees it, I'm the first line of defense. I'm the first in line to work with teachers and doing this. And he knows what I'm doing, and we share a lot of the same beliefs. But it's almost like I do it, and then if there's an issue with what I did or what I said, then [teachers] can go to him. And I'll also say I'm the leader of [instruction] in this building because I have that time face-to-face with the teachers.

Participant 1A described the instructional leadership at her school as being tiered. She is the person supporting teachers in their classroom instruction. She makes decisions, and because the principal trusts her judgment, the principal believes he does not have to be involved.

Participant 1C also stated that she is the sole instructional leader in her elementary school. She expressed that she is “over instruction and all professional development that we do, as well as meeting with teachers once weekly.” When asked to explain the difference between her role as an instructional leader and the principal, she said that the principal handles discipline, safety, and student incentives.

Participant 2A described her role as spending most of her time with teachers in curricular areas and professional development. She explained that she spent almost all her time working on matters of curriculum and instruction. She said her principal is focused on discipline and getting the reports filled out correctly more than on instruction.

[The principal is] dependable and wants good things for our school, but in terms of setting a vision, setting expectations for teaching and learning, empowering others, and helping them to learn more about curriculum instruction...that's not really there. [Our principal is not adept at] digging into data, looking at trends. He would not be against that, but there's no time made for that.

Discussion and Implications

For this study, and in keeping with the edition theme *Leadership in a Time of Change*, we looked at APCI's perceptions of their duties, their preparation for the role of APCI, and the advantages and disadvantages of the inclusion of an APCI in the administration of their individual P-12 schools. Here we discuss each of these categories of findings.

Duties of the Assistant Principal for Curriculum and Instruction

First, we found that only a very minimal number of districts in the area have taken steps to include an APCI in the administrative personnel of their schools. Only 4 of the 15 districts examined in this study included such a role. A review of the job descriptions from these four districts indicated, however, that only one district has given much attention to specifically describing the duties of an APCI. However, those duties seem to have been merely added to the duties of a traditional AP in their district. The implication is that an APCI is expected to perform all the traditional functions of an AP while also focusing on instructional leadership functions.

Individual APCIs interviewed listed many duties for which they are responsible. These duties were generally expected from this role, including establishing and communicating a vision for instruction, observing and providing feedback to teachers, preparing and delivering professional development, and facilitating specific plans for improving instruction. Our findings indicate that the task of school districts creating job descriptions specific to the duties of the APCI is only in the very beginning stages. Districts must do much work to be intentional with what they want from the APCI role. School district personnel must begin to wrestle with whether an APCI is to focus exclusively or primarily on instructional matters or if the APCI is expected to be a “jack of all trades,” performing all traditional AP roles and merely adding the instructional leadership roles on top of that. So far, it appears that little attention has been paid to clearly defining this emergent role in P-12 school leadership.

Preparation for the Role

Regarding how APCIs were prepared to assume a role as instructional leaders, we find that explicit preparation has yet to be provided. Rather, APCIs in our study pointed to their individual personal interest, expertise, and success in instruction as their only source of preparation. Our belief is that individual APCIs would greatly benefit from focused professional development on performing the role’s duties. Whether that training is pre-service, or in-service after assuming the role, would also be an important consideration. APCIs reported that their interest in accepting a leadership role as an assistant principal resulted from the prompting of an individual leader, such as a principal or someone else in a leadership position. This finding points to the importance of mentorship from school leaders to identify and nurture potential leadership in others along the way.

We also note that all APCIs included in this study were female. In fact, no male APCIs were identified. Additionally, APCIs were found only in predominantly White, and relatively affluent school districts, suggesting that more work is needed to encourage more districts with more diverse populations of students and teachers to explore the possibilities and advantages of developing APCIs in their districts.

Advantages of the Role

The advantages of having an APCI on the administrative staff were robust. Such advantages as consistency in messaging and support, rapport-building with teachers, and a focus on sharing the expertise of a highly skilled instructional leader to improve teacher practice are strong reasons why schools and districts might consider including such a role in their school leadership initiatives. It appears that nurturing such strengths and advantages as these could have a positive and important impact on instructional practice in a school building.

Disadvantages of the Role

Identifying the disadvantages of including an APCI on a building administrative team raised the most concern. While disadvantages of time constraints and distancing from direct contact with students seem typical of any move away from the classroom and into administration, the third disadvantage is that of a diminished role of the principal in instructional leadership that raised the most concern.

Despite the presence of an APCI, it remains of utmost importance that the principal of a school retains the role of chief instructional leader. Principals cannot “hand over” instructional leadership duties to someone else on their administrative team, even if that individual is designated primarily as an instructional leader in the building. Educational scholars widely agree that principals are expected to promote best practices in instruction so that all students achieve high levels of academic success (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Edmonds, 1979; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Gillat & Sulzer-Azaroff, 1994; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Kafka, 2009; Marks & Printy, 2003; Murphy, 1988; Provost et al., 2010; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012).

Recently, Shaked (2018) examined principal instructional leadership and why principals “sidestep” instructional leadership duties. Shaked identified several reasons principals do not seriously invest their time in instructional leadership tasks, including lack of time, curricular or instructional expertise, and deep-seated organizational norms that see instruction as the primary domain of teachers, not principals. Shaked added a fourth potential reason, stating that principals often do not see instructional leadership and improvement as the primary goal of schools, citing social and emotional factors as more important.

APCIs interviewed in this study have pointed to a need for more involvement from some of their principals in the daily practice of instructional leadership in their schools. Our research team asserts that it will be critical for school districts and other school leaders interested in expanding the role of APs into instructional leadership not inadvertently provide yet another reason the building principal should have little or no part in leading the instructional environment of their school by creating the expectation that the APCI assume all the functions of leading instructional improvement. In other words, even an APCI, explicitly charged with instructional leadership, should only shoulder part of the load while the principal of the school ignores the role, or focuses exclusively on other functions of leadership. Participants in our study suggested similar responses from principals. It is imperative that the principal maintains primary instructional leadership and provides necessary mentoring, oversight, and vision-setting for the work of their assistants, especially an APCI.

Implications for Further Research

Because the role of APCI is nascent, further research is needed to determine the best duties to assign, their impact on improving teaching and learning, and how individuals within that role interface with building principals. More research on how districts define the role of APCIs would also contribute to the knowledge base by comparing the roles in which the APCI is the only AP in a building with APCIs who work daily among multiple APs. Another area for further research is the study of the effectiveness of the APCI role from other perspectives (e.g., principals, teachers, and other stakeholder groups).

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