The Professional Learning and Development of Principals and Assistant Principals

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Auburn University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Auburn, Alabama
August 6, 2022

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Abstract

Continued professional learning and development of school leaders is a way to improve

schools and promote positive organizational change (Andreoli et al., 2020; Kim, 2020; Rieckhoff

& Larsen, 2012) as well as and a way to support sustainability in a profession with high rates of

turnover (Levin et al., 2020). Although principals and assistant/associate principals (APs) are not

the only leaders in a school (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008), their positional influence is significant

(Leithwood et al., 2020). As organizational leaders, the development of principals and APs

warrants attention, particularly since there is reason to believe that as these administrators

continue to learn, their practices become more effective (Bickmore, 2012; Kim, 2020). Authentic

learning opportunities for school leaders has been connected positive student outcomes;

however, as Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) noted in their recent report, most administrators

encounter obstacles in their professional development. Authentic learning opportunities are

essential for principals and APs because they are in positions that benefit from further learning

and training require after assuming their roles (Armstrong, 2015; Peters et al., 2016; Oleszewski

et al., 2012) and throughout the duration of their administrative careers (Cardno & Youngs,

2013; Duncan, 2013). Without well aligned professional learning support from school districts

and university partnerships, research has shown that school leader development can be stifled

(Barnett et al., 2017); leaders can have detrimental gaps in their knowledge (Acton, 2021), and

their personal motivation to pursue professional growth may lessen (Honig & Rainey, 2014). A

lack of attention towards school leader learning has undesirable outcomes, yet research has not

focused on continued principal and AP learning and development to the extent that it attends to

teacher professional development (Ford et al., 2020). In response, this multi-article study

examined the topic of school leader learning and development in three independent, but

conceptually connected, papers. Through a systematic literature review and two narrative studies, this research aimed to explore and document the professional learning preferences, needs, and experiences of school leaders, with a focus on principals and APs at distinct stages in their careers. Article one showed the characteristics of selected empirical studies published between 2011-2021; it revealed how school leaders learned and which approaches were effective or meaningful, as well as how school leader learning has been supported and hindered. This study identified learning topics offered to leaders and addressed the alignment between what was offered and what school leaders wanted and needed to learn. Article two explored the perspectives and experiences of ten experienced principals in Alabama and showed that established school leaders desired ongoing, social learning opportunities that offered applicable content and was led by experts who were relatable and transparent. Although they described a lack of time, money, and district support as hindrances to their professional learning, experienced principals believed their further development was connected to overall school improvement. Article three explored the perspectives and beliefs of 5 APs in Alabama and showed that novice APs desired local level, context specific learning opportunities as they navigated their transition into formal school leadership. This study showed that new school leaders contended with more personal change than organizational change or school improvement, and they sought out social examples from which to model their early efforts towards managing a school. Each of these studies offer insight into the perceived professional learning and development needs of principals and APs from which school districts and professional development facilitators can work towards supporting. It contributed towards a gap in the literature and illuminated opportunities for future research.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the deep support and sustaining assistance I received from my dissertation committee throughout the course of this research and during my time completing graduate coursework at Auburn University. I would not have been able to accomplish this study apart from the expertise, guidance, connection, and encouragement that I received from my advisor, Dr. Lisa Kensler, and from professors Dr. Andrew Pendola, Dr. Jason Bryant, and Dr. Amy Serafini.

In the fall of 2019, Dr. Bryant and Dr. Serafini changed the trajectory of my career. I was about to pursue the PhD in English and was only vaguely considering education. However, our meeting on an October afternoon in 2019 opened my eyes to what could be done in education, and the vision you shared filled me with hope and excitement for the program. That pivotal meeting led me to make one of the best decisions of my life. I am so grateful to you for helping me to choose the PhD in education.

Dr. Bryant and Dr. Serafini, your classes were among the very first I took in the program, and from the very beginning of this journey, both of you have continued to make yourselves available to me in and outside of class. Dr. Bryant, I appreciate how you are always so quick to respond to my emails and requests. When I did not know anyone at Auburn, you fielded all of my questions, and you have generously continued to give me your time again and again over the past several years. Thank you for your kindness. Dr. Serafini, in my first class with you, you shared your journey to the professorship and your experience earning a doctoral degree. You said, "People in your life aren't going to understand why you are pursing this degree", and remembering this helped me tremendously. Many times, I thought back to your story and reminded myself that you made it through the things I faced. Thank you for being authentic.

Dr. Pendola, I have learned so much from you. I have really enjoyed our time working together in QMER and on our mixed methods study and conference presentations. You are not only an innovator, but you are also a lot of fun to be around. I appreciate your energy and willingness to create space to try new things. I am grateful for the insight you've shared with me and for helping me to improve as a scholar by pushing me to think of things I had not considered. I hope we will be able to continue to work together in the future. Thank you for being a true mentor.

Dr. Kensler, I am so thankful that you became my advisor early in my program. I believe our connection has grown into a relationship that has made a profound impact not only on my research, but also on me as a person. For over two and half years we've met nearly every week to discuss and work through projects, writing, research, and life. Regardless of what was happening professionally or personally, meeting with you each week, Dr. Kensler, always left me feeling revived and ready to take my next steps. I appreciate the great lengths you went to so that I could gain scholarly experience and have publishing opportunities, and I am thankful for the knowledge you contributed to these studies and for direction you have provided at every point along the way. I know that not only has this research has benefited greatly from your involvement, but personally, I have grown so much because of our time together. Thank you for your expertise and thank you for being a precious friend.

. Finally, I would also like to thank my children, Audrey and David, for never complaining about the time I needed to devote to research. Without your understanding and acceptance, I would not have attempted such an effort as this.

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School Leader Professional Learning and Development

School leaders are positioned to guide the trajectory of their schools towards successful outcomes through practices that promote vibrant, thriving learning organizations. While it is understood that leadership in schools is not exclusive to one or two positions (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008), principals and assistant/associate principals (APs) provide unique and far-reaching influence within a learning organization. In the American system of education, both are entrusted with significant leadership and management responsibilities. They are in strategic roles that require the implementation of best practices and the ability to navigate the changing needs of a school in relation to its local community and larger social context.

Research continues to affirm that building level leaders, particularly principals, are highly influential in ensuring positive student outcomes (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2020) both in student achievement (Dhuey & Smith, 2014) and in social-emotional wellbeing (Jones & Cater, 2020). School leaders impact students by establishing positive school environments (Sebastian et al., 2016) with climates of high expectation (Katterfeld, 2013) and collaboration (Tschannen-Moran, 2001). It is the local leader who is positioned to align and communicate mission and purpose (Stemler et al., 2011), leverage vision (Kose, 2011), integrate instructional strategies (Day et al., 2016) and build trust within faculty and staff (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Considering the far-reaching influence of school leaders, Grissom et al. (2021) noted, "It is difficult to envision an investment with a higher ceiling on its potential return than a successful effort to improve principal leadership" (p. 43). Because of their organizational position of influence, it is critical to support the continued professional learning and further development of these administrators.

Across the country, principals and APs need updated knowledge and access to high quality and targeted learning experiences that generate fresh perspectives and approaches after they have completed their college degrees and credentialing programs. Research has shown that administrators require considerable training after assuming their roles (Armstrong, 2015; Peters et al., 2016; Oleszewski et al., 2012), and throughout the tenure of their careers (Cardno & Youngs, 2013; Duncan, 2013) to establish and maintain their effectiveness. When school leaders are left without appropriate learning support from a school district or university partnership, their overall development may be limited (Barnett et al., 2017); they may have knowledge gaps that impact their ability to implement school improvement initiatives (Acton, 2021), and they may take a less proactive approach to their own professional improvement (Honig & Rainey, 2014). Ultimately, there are undesirable consequences for individuals and for schools when learning opportunities for school leaders are lacking or misaligned.

Cardno and Youngs (2013) asserted that while, "development is inherently a personal responsibility…it is also an organizational obligation" (p.258), and as such, educational systems should support the development of school leaders. As adult learners, it may be assumed that effective principals and APs will pursue the knowledge they need to solve problems of practice (Knowles, 1978); however, that does not imply that supervisors, scholars, or policy makers need not attend to the continued learning of the adults in schools. Teacher professional development is widely funded and discussed as the literature reflects an eager and committed interest in their learning. A multitude of recent literature reviews have focused on the topic of teacher development (e.g., Bascopé et al., 2019; Compen et al., 2019; Philipsen et al., 2019; Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). School leader development merits the same level of attention, yet administrator learning has not been prioritized to nearly the same extent. As noted in Hall et al.'s

(2015) discussion of their leadership development framework for principals, "Just as we must build teachers' capacity to support ongoing growth and effectiveness, so must we build leaders' capacity through continuous learning and reflective practice" (p.5)

Thus, because of the importance of continued principal and AP professional learning, the overarching purpose of this multi-article study was to explore experiences of school leader professional learning and development that occurred while in their leadership positions. Through a systematic literature review and two narrative studies, this research aimed to examine and document the professional learning experiences, as well as preferences, beliefs, and needs of school leaders, with a focus on principals and APs at distinct stages in their careers.

Statement of Problem

Leader Learning and School Improvement

A neglected or haphazard approach to principal and AP learning and development is not in the best interests of learning organizations. Regardless of which improvements are pursued within a school, local level leaders are in some way connected to the work that will be done. Like others, they are interconnected members of their organization, but unlike teachers, staff, students, and families, a school leader has responsibilities that impact the whole school and this person makes decisions that impact all other stakeholders. By virtue of positionality, school leaders, especially principals, touch all areas of the learning organization. Because of the centrality of the position and the decision-making power entrusted to principals and APs, investing in their continued learning and development will have a ripple effect on the organization. It is one viable way to work towards transforming education at the local level.

As school leaders continue to learn professional skills and strategies, their school benefits from leaders who guide them with the knowledge of emerging best practices and strategies.

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Contemporary schools face complicated issues, and students may not be best served by antiquated approaches and mindsets. A growing awareness and conviction that schools need change and improvement is one compelling reason to support those who lead them. Because organizational change includes a personal component and usually starts with a mindset shift (Burke, 2018), transforming a local school requires positional leaders who continue to grow as individuals. Brown and Olson (2014) made a striking observation and stated, "We notice again and again that the developmental growth and increased effectiveness of educational organizations and leadership teams is almost inevitably linked to the growth, evolution, and improvement of their leaders" (p. 182). It is not enough to merely work on outer layer, surface level improvements when seeking sustainable change in schools (Kellar & Slayton, 2016). Kellar and Slayton (2016) suggested that "transformational change needs to occur through changing underlying structures and constructs that impede one's ability to engage at the level of inquiry that leads to the possibility of change" (p. 709). Continued learning is a tool that can dislodge mental structures that block improvement. School leaders who continue to be immersed in authentic and meaningful professional learning that leads to the effective application of knowledge, insight, and skill can be better equipped to address the increasingly complex needs in their schools.

Benefits of School Leader Learning

Ongoing learning for administrators has been shown to help school leaders not only introduce positive, organizational changes, but it has enabled them to make such changes sustainable (Rieckhoff & Larsen, 2012). Much of the deep work that needs to be done at the local school level requires addressing long-standing problems embedded in daily practice. A school leader actively engaged in relevant professional learning will have opportunities to apply

new knowledge to their specific context and in doing so, work towards uprooting issues that limit student success. Andreoli et al. (2020) found that by going through a collaborative, action research process, a school leader could learn to "not look at [school problems at the] surface level, but to really look down deeper into what the underlying causes may be" (p.534). Through their qualitative study of administrators in rural, high poverty schools in the South, Andreoli et al. (2020) showed that school leaders participating in learning through inquiry projects were able to take off "blinders" and engage in "noticing and addressing problems of practice" (p.533).

Furthermore, school leader learning can improve schools because it is often "a conduit for extending development to others" (Cardno & Youngs, 2013, p. 267). In this way, school leader learning is not limited to the betterment of one individual. Literature has shown that collaborative professional development has helped administrators more aptly meet the needs of their teachers because their learning enabled them "to provide more informed support" to their faculty (Hilton et al., 2015, p. 12). Collaborative professional development has enabled school leaders to learn how to get teachers involved in school leadership teams (Rieckhoff & Larsen, 2012), and project-based learning has been shown to improve principals' ability to "critically reflect on assumptions" and to build capacity in others by learning to distribute leadership and trust their faculty teams (Andreoli et al., 2020, p.535). Furthermore, Mahfouz (2018) showed that a district supported training program could increase self-awareness and self-reflection in school leaders and could "elevate and improve their leadership skills" (p. 610). Even informal learning for leaders has shown to benefit other stakeholders. Bickmore (2012) suggested that such "learning experiences embedded in the school provided principals with the time and interaction necessary to learn about teachers, students, and the school's contextual needs" (p. 107).

An investment into school leader learning and development also meets needs in principals and in APs at the individual level. The school leader role has been characterized as stressful and isolating (Mahfouz, 2020), but social learning experiences have been shown to foster wellness in leaders (e.g., Connery & Frick, 2021; Gümüş, 2019; Hayes & Burkett, 2021; Mahfouz, 2018). Learning through mentorship relationships has been shown to enhance feelings of wellbeing in administrators in Connery and Frick's (2021), and mentorship relationships provided social emotional support for school leaders in Gümüş (2019). Likewise, mindfulness training has provided school leaders with tools to increase their self-care (Mahfouz, 2018), and Hayes and Burkett (2021) found that cohort learning through district and university partnership programs helped relieve loneliness in participants.

Furthermore, learning from other administrators has shown APs how to take a growth mindset approach to their professional growth and believe that they can improve (Barnett et al., 2017). Participating in an ongoing learning program designed specifically for the experienced APs has provided a lane towards career advancement as shown in Hayes and Burkett (2021), and mentors have helped APs develop and learn "how to enhance decision-making skills, improve people and communication skills, reflect on their personal qualities and capabilities, and clarify their values and beliefs" (Bennett, 2017, p.285). Similarly, professional development through mentorship has been shown to assist new principals in becoming more self-reflective (Connery & Frick, 2021), and the mentorship process itself has helped principals "to self-discover and be aware of their own strengths and weaknesses" (Gümüş, 2019, p. 31). As this current study will show, there are considerable benefits to ensuring the continued learning and development of school leaders through intentional professional development and by accommodating quality informal learning experiences.

Barriers to School Leader Learning

Effective learning experiences build administrator competencies, yet there is evidence showing that school leaders face considerable barriers to their professional development. According to a recent report by Darling-Hammond et al. (2022), "Across the country, most principals reported wanting more professional development in nearly all topics, but they also reported obstacles in pursuing learning opportunities, including a lack of time and insufficient money" (p. vii). Additionally, there are issues are connected to misfitted learning options that do not meet the needs of adult learners in professional contexts. As found in Cardno and Youngs (2013), learning programs that lack relevancy or do not attend to the individual needs of the participants are likely to fail in further developing school leaders, particularly in the continued development of experienced principals. The authors explained that "experienced and long and serving principals need attention paid to the personal and relational capabilities that will help them deal with the complexity of their roles and sustain them over extended service" (Cardon & Youngs, 2013, p. 258). Additionally, when professional development was considered "not very impactful or relevant to practice", principals were disappointed and disengaged (Acton, 2021, p.35).

Hindrances to school leader learning have been largely attributed to the approaches school districts take towards professional development for administrators (Ford et al., 2020). A lack of school district support for leader learning has been identified as a hindrance to school leader growth (Hayes & Burkett, 2021) when it was experienced as mandated, but not personally meaningful (Mahfouz, 2018), and when school leaders did not trust their professional development presenters (Paulsen, 2019). In addition, time constraints that interfered with meeting mentors was a challenge for administrators in Connery and Frick (2021) as well for

middle school principals in Gümüş (2019). Similarly, Huggins et al. (2021) found it was "easy to 'fall out' of coaching when a process does not exist in which to engage on a regular basis" (p. 99).

Furthermore, APs contend with additional barriers to participating in targeted learning opportunities that are appropriate to their role and responsibilities. Allen and Weaver (2014) recognized that district provided professional development was typically not directed at APs, and in response, they recommended "educational leadership programs or other professional organizations begin to offer more PD to assistant principals targeting their specialized needs" (p.25). More recently, Barnett et al. (2017) affirmed that most school districts still do not provide professional development specific for APs, even though structured learning is needed for the novice leader. Bennett et al. (2017) concluded, "Formal learning structures need to be developed to support assistant principals rather than solely relying on informal or happenstance occurrences for professional development" (p.297). Intentional professional development focused on the AP may be most necessary since APs do not necessarily have opportunities to experience all responsibilities of a school leadership in their position (Allen & Weaver, 2014).

Supporting professional learning that better equips school leaders to apply new knowledge and skill is one way to improve schools and promote sustainable organizational change. Research has shown that school leader learning has significant benefits for schools and individuals, yet there are serious barriers that constrain the further professional learning and development of principals and APs. While the interest in school leader learning is increasing, as evidenced by the publication of at least ten recent studies (e.g., Acton, 2021; Andreoli et al., 2020; Connery & Fick, 2021; Cothern, 2020; Hays & Burkett, 2021; Huggins et al., 2021;

Lazenby et. al., 2020; Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2020; Serrão et al., 2020; and Westberry & Zhao, 2021), the literature on this topic is limited (Daniëls et al., 2019; Ford et al., 2020).

Statement of Purpose

This multi-article study sought to explore school leader professional learning and development through a synthesis of school leader learning literature published over the ten-year period of 2011-2021, and then to examine the topic through the two narrative research studies. These two studies aimed to build upon the limited school leader literature by describing the self-reported learning experiences, preferences, and beliefs of fifteen participants who were principals and APs in public Alabama schools. This research intended to fill a gap in the literature by distinguishing between principal and AP perceived learning needs by showing what these leaders believed they needed to know at their specific career stage as well as what and how they learned in their positions. This research intended to contribute towards solving a problem of practice by illuminating discrepancies between the opportunities that practitioners considered valuable contributors to their leadership capacities and the learning options to which they had access. The guiding questions for each article in this study were as follows:

Table 1 Multi-Study Research Questions

Article One	Article Two	Article Three
School leader learning and development: Systematic literature review 2011-2021	**The further development of experienced principals in Alabama: Professional learning needs and preferences**	**Experiences of learning for newly positioned assistant principals in Alabama**
(1) What are the characteristics of studies regarding the learning and development of school leaders?	(1) How do experienced principals in Alabama describe their learning and development experiences and preferences?	(1) What do novice assistant principals in Alabama learn about their role during their first years in formal school leadership?

(2) In what ways does the research literature report that school leaders continue learning and developing, and how has this been supported or hindered? (3) In what ways does the research literature report what school leaders learn and how has this aligned with what they want and need to learn?	(2) How do experienced principals in Alabama connect their professional learning and development to their ability to improve their schools?	(2) How do assistant principals in Alabama describe valuable professional learning experiences for novice school leaders?

Research Design

Article One

Article one was a systematic literature review (Gouch, 2007) orientated towards the exploration of school leader learning studies published between 2011 and 2021. Using Hallinger's (2013) literature review framework of five guiding questions to ensure methodological rigor, this study sought to synthesize the ways in which school leaders have continued to learn professionally and how that learning has been supported or hindered. It focused on empirical studies that examined school leader learning and development that occurred after a preparation program and outside of college degree completion. Additionally, I sought to explore the characteristics of recent studies into school leader learning research by documenting trends in study designs and the growth trajectory of literature on the topic. The theoretical framework of this study relied upon Knowles's (1977) concept of andragogy and Merriam's (2008) discussion of adult learning. I expected studies to show how school leaders, as adult learners, were self-directed and took an active role in pursuing the knowledge and skill that they deemed relevant to problems of practice. I anticipated that the literature would reveal that school

leaders, as adult learners, participated in learning experiences that they judged as meaningful to the practical improvement of their practice. The guiding questions for this study were:

(1) What are the characteristics of studies regarding the learning and development of school leaders?

(2) In what ways does the research literature report that school leaders continue learning and developing, and how has this been supported or hindered?

(3) In what ways does the research literature report what school leaders learn and how has this aligned with what they want and need to learn?

To answer the research questions, twenty-seven primary source, peer reviewed, full text, empirical studies on school leader learning and development in academic journals found in ERIC (Ebsco) and Google Scholar were selected for inclusion in the review. An inductive analysis was conducted allowing topics and themes to emerge from the literature, and results were presented as a narrative and structured according to each research question.

Article Two

Article two was a narrative study (Clandinin, 2016) that sought to understand how ten experienced principals in Alabama continued to learn professionally and how they thought their development improved their schools. Experienced principal participants were sought because the school leader learning literature has largely overlooked the learning preferences and needs specific to this group (Lazenby et al., 2020), even though experienced principals are expected to be agents of change within their schools (Acton, 2021). To study the continued learning and further development of experienced principals, the guiding research questions asked:

(1) How do experienced principals in Alabama describe their learning and development needs and preferences?

(2) How do experienced principals connect their learning and development to their ability to improve their schools?

The theoretical framework of this study relied upon Knowles' (1977) concept of andragogy where adult learning was described as "life-centered" and focused on "life-situations, not subjects" (p.12). This theoretical lens suggested that experienced principals would seek meaning in their professional learning and would seek skill development that they could use professionally, particularly in their efforts to improve their schools. In addition, Earley and Weindling's (2007) principal career stage descriptions were used to define an experienced principal as one who held the role for at least three years. To answer the research questions, ten Alabama principals with three or more years of experience were individually interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. The narrative approach to data collection facilitated the documentation of participants' stories of their continued professional learning and development experiences. Data was transcribed and coded (Saldaña, 2013) and was presented as four key findings.

Article Three

Article three was a narrative study (Clandinin, 2016) that aimed to understand how five practicing APs in Alabama experienced professional learning in their role as a novice school leader. In comparison to the principal role, the position and responsibilities of the AP are typically quite different (Barrett et. Al, 2012), and yet the literature tends to reference both roles as one group (Goldring et al., 2021). Thus, it was important to examine the experiences of the AP as a distinct position apart from principals. The purpose of this study was to better understand novice AP learning experiences as they navigated their entry into administration and to describe the learning that they believed was necessary in their position. I sought to explore

how new APs connected their role and responsibilities to their learning experiences and opportunities, and I intended to examine what these participants believed about their learning needs as school leaders. To do this, the guiding research questions asked:

(1) What do novice assistant principals in Alabama learn about their role during their first years in formal school leadership?

(2) How do assistant principals in Alabama describe valuable professional learning experiences for novice school leaders?

The theoretical framework that guided this study was Van Maanen and Schein's (1977) concept of organizational socialization. This lens provided a way to understand the learning experiences of a novice AP who had transitioned out of teaching and into administration. I anticipated that by studying the novice AP role, a role that was markedly different from teaching (Armstrong, 2012), unique learning needs and desires of the entry level school leader would emerge. To answer the research questions, five participants were interviewed, four of whom were novice APs with less than two years of experience. One AP participant with eight years of experience was invited to participate to provide a reflective and seasoned perspective on what a novice AP may need in their professional learning. Each participant was individually interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol in the effort to promote dialogue between the researcher and participant (Clandinin, 2016). Data was transcribed and coded (Saldaña, 2013), and the research questions were answered through six assertions.

Methodological Approaches

Article One

The literature review presented as article one is a synthesis which employed a predetermined, systematic methodology (Hallinger, 2013) that summarized "studies narratively,

rather than by meta-analysis" (Wolgemuth et al., 2017, p.132). A systematic method was used to establish methodological rigor (Hallinger, 2013) and to minimize subjectivity and researcher bias, which Ferrari (2015) noted as being the "main weakness ascribed to [narrative reviews]" (p. 231). The narrative approach was most appropriate for this study as it accommodated a review on a broad topic with multiple research questions (Ferrari, 2015). In alignment with the description of the narrative research synthesis offered by Wolgemuth et al. (2017), article one did not include "a critical analysis of constructs" nor was it a critique of literature included or excluded in other literature reviews (p.132). Instead, as an exploratory review, the narrative approach was used to "integrate findings" (Hallinger, 2013, p. 138).

Articles Two and Three

Narrative methodology was appropriate to answer the research questions for study two and three as it supported the exploration of participant experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016) that were lived embedded within social and institutional contexts (Clandinin, 2016, p.18). The expression of narrative inquiry applied to these studies drew from the perspective "rooted in John Dewey's (1938) pragmatic philosophy" (Clandinin, 2006, p.46). This method assumed that knowledge is created from a collection of experiences people live within multi-layered contexts, and from an ontological position, it assumed that the ways in which a person stories their life will provide practical and useful information. Both article two and three prioritize what participants believed helped or hindered their professional learning and development, and their remembrances and perspectives were considered real and valid. Thus, conversations with participants through the interview process provided space for principals and APs to share stories of how they believed their experiences in schools shaped what and how they wanted and needed to learn as professionals.

Significance

Attention toward the continued learning and development of school leaders contributes towards improving schools by building capacity in those who have significant influence in them. Professional learning can lead school leaders to see different perspectives (Gümüş, 2019; Hilton et al., 2015), and to make changes in their practices (Hilton et al., 2015). Meaningful learning opportunities meets a desire of practitioners (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Levin et al., 2021) and has been shown to support administrator retention (Jacob et al., 2015). Ultimately, understanding and supporting the continued learning and development preferences and needs of the principal and AP serves both the individual and the larger learning organization.

A synthesis on school leader learning revealed approaches school districts and university partnership programs can take to ensure school leaders have quality learning opportunities that align with their preferences and needs. Recent literature reviews have explored school leadership topics such as principal identity (Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021) and instructional skills (Hallinger et al., 2020), and reviews have discussed characteristics of effective professional development (Daniëls et al., 2019), and district support of principal professional development (Ford et al., 2020). However, school leader learning and development was not the primary purpose of these reviews, and thus, an overview on the topic that included both principals and APs was necessary. In the current literature review of twenty-seven empirical studies, this research suggested that school leader learning and development can be supported through on-going profession development and networking experiences that accommodates active, collaborative, and relevant learning activities that lead school administrators to actionable next steps. It also detailed study characteristics and suggested that future research attend to the learning at the AP level and seek to incorporate mixed method approaches.

Furthermore, researchers have affirmed the need for a deeper understanding into school leader learning needs, programs, and practices, and the two qualitative articles in this research contributed to such research gaps identified in the literature. Acton (2021) called for more research into support of professional development by districts and noted an "urgent need" to "review ongoing professional learning practices" of principals (p.49), and Hilton et al. (2015) recommended that future research look at "ways of delivering professional development so as to facilitate leaders' attendance" (p. 19). These qualitative studies provide valuable insight into practitioner learning practices, and by exploring the preferences and perceived learning needs of school leaders, these findings can inform professional development so that it attracts participation. Additionally, the literature has affirmed the necessity of differentiating learning and development opportunities for school leaders according to experience level (Cardno & Youngs, 2018; Duncan et al. 2011; Duncan, 2013; Montecinos et al., 2018). Yet, researchers have noted that more investigation should be done into professional learning that is appropriate to levels of experience (Acton, 2021; Lazenby et al., 2020). Notably, Lazenby et al.'s (2020) study of experienced Australian principals established that principals with five or more years of experience have unique learning preferences and needs, and the authors asked for more investigation into this group. Lazenby et al. (2020) concluded that "more needs to be known how principals develop and change as they progress into their mid and late career stages, understanding how experienced principals take control of the selection, development and participation in effective PD programs" (p.11). A close look at the learning preferences of experienced principals in this current study served to address this literature gap. Furthermore, as Honig and Rainey (2014) suggested future researchers conceptualize their studies of principal

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learning communities with theories of adult learning, this study used an adult learning framework.

In addition, research has also established a gap in literature specifically concerning the development of APs. In response, the third article of this study is focused solely on the AP role and its unique learning needs. Referring to APs, Allen and Weaver (2014) concluded that "further work needs to be done to address their unique needs, ongoing professional development, and career advancement" (p. 26). Similarly, Barnett et al. (2017) spoke of the need for studies to differentiate between mentoring benefits at the new and experienced AP levels and encouraged more studies that could provide insight into AP career development. This research addressed the unique learning needs that five APs perceived as necessary as new administrators and examined what they learned as they transitioned into their position. Craft et al. (2016) suggested that more information was needed "about the induction and acclimation experiences of newly assigned assistant principals" (p. 17), and by exploring the organizational socialization of these APs, insights into their professional learning emerged. Connery and Frick (2021) concluded that, "For novice school administrators to mature into successful, reflective leaders, they need to be nurtured and supported in their beginning years" (p.17), suggesting that research into meaningful learning was one way to do this. This research acknowledged that school leader learning is a topic in need of further attention, and it aimed to contribute to the knowledge, discussion, and practical improvement of school leader learning by focusing on the principal and AP. Considering the benefits attained through attention towards professional learning and development for local level leaders, this research intended to illuminate practitioner perspectives on the topic in an effort to improve schools and support those with considerable influence in them.

List of Terms

1. **Administrators—**principals and/or assistant/associate principals

2. **Andragogy**—adult learning; referenced as Knowles' (1977) discussion of adult learning

3. **AP/APs**—assistant/associate principal(s)

4. **Assistant—**assistant/associate principal

5. **Authentic learning—**any type of professional learning that is relevant, applicable, and perceived as valuable by school leaders

6. **District/University professional development programs or partnership programs or university partnerships**—professional development or leadership development partnerships or academies that support principal and/or AP learning; does not include credentialing programs or preparation programs

7. **Independent learning**—professional learning and development that occurs through the independent, and often private and informal, efforts of self-reflection (Andreoli et al. 2021; Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2020) and reading (Bickmore, 2012; Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2020)

8. **Leader professional learning and development**—professional learning opportunities and experiences that include both formal and informal learning that takes place after a leader is positioned as a principal or AP. It includes "continuous professional development (CPD)" and workplace learning and to reference the professional growth and capacity building that comes from learning efforts (Daniëls et al., 2019, p.119). School leader learning includes any learning and development activity or experience that a positioned building level leader participated in after completing a preparation program and outside of university coursework

9. **Meaningful learning or meaningful professional development**—a learning

   opportunity or experience that is considered valuable to the participants or to school

   leaders in general

10. **Novice**—a school leader with less than two years of experience in the role

11. **School leader**—references to school leaders includes building level leaders in either the

    principal or AP position; does not reference district/central office school leaders

12. **Support for/Supportive professional development/learning**—support is

    conceptualized as ensuring quality learning opportunities for school leaders. This could

    include providing resources and/or ensuring quality content that is aligned with a school

    leader's needs and preferences. It references a risk-free learning culture (Paulsen &

    Hjerto, 2019)

13. **Workplace learning**—informal learning that occurs in context and by situational

    experiences (Duncan et al., 2011)

Organization

This research consisted of three separate studies that were designed to stand alone and relate to each other through the conceptual theme of school leader learning. These articles are presented as chapters two, three, and four. As separate articles, each of the following three chapters has its own literature review, framework, data, methods, results, and discussions sections. While remaining independent papers, these studies were intended to complement each other, and consequently, they have some overlap in literature, theory, and approach. Chapter two is a systematic, narrative literature review. Chapter three is a narrative study that focused on experienced principal learning and development. Chapter four is a narrative study that focused on novice AP learning and development. Chapter five provides a conclusion of implications and recommendations.

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School leader learning and development: Systematic literature review 2011-2021

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Schools need effective leaders who are equipped to support improvement, not only in student outcomes and teacher practices, but also in their own professional capacity. School leader learning can be a pathway to positive organizational outcomes and overall school improvement (Andreoli et al., 2020). Efforts into continuous leader development have the potential to be highly beneficial because principals have unique and far-reaching influence in schools (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2020). As school leaders, they are expected to move their organizations successfully through continuous improvement initiatives and mandates (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2020), be a catalyst for change (Ni et al., 2018), be an instructional leader (Day et al., 2016), tend to the wellbeing of children (Bartanen et al., 2019), develop teachers (Ford & Ware, 2018), steward financial resources (Pendola, 2020), and make community connections (Green, 2018). Principals, as well as assistant/associate principals (APs), are entrusted with significant leadership and management responsibilities. They are in strategic roles that require the implementation of best practices and the ability to navigate the ever-changing needs of a school, and thus, it is a role that demands updated knowledge and learning experiences that encourage continuous improvement.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this exploratory literature review was to synthesize what the educational leadership literature showed regarding the characteristics of recent studies, the types of meaningful learning for school leaders, and the ways in which school leader learning and development has been supported or hindered. Currently, the field of educational leadership has

literature reviews that incorporate school leader learning by way of discussing how leaders developed in relationship to characteristics of professional development (Daniëls et al., 2019), to learning a specific skill (Hallinger et al., 2020), and to learning a leadership identity (Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021). We also have reviews of rural principal development (Preston et al., 2013), assistant principal learning (Oleszewski et al., 2012), and district support for principal learning (Ford et al., 2020). Ford et al. (2020) provided a literature review of district support for leader development and by connecting motivation theories to leader learning, and they identified types of climates that could increase a leader's motivation for professional development. In Oleszewski et al.'s (2012) review of assistant principal development, they found that APs needed to receive job specific professional development and training and noted that more research was needed in this area. Preston et al.'s (2013) review of rural principal roles in Australia, Canada, and the United States found that access to professional development was among the main challenges that principals in rural locales faced, although school leader learning was not the focus of the review.

Likewise, several systematic literature reviews have looked at how school leaders developed specific attributes (see leadership identity in Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021) or skills (see instructional leadership capacity in Hallinger et al., 2020), although learning and development was not the primary purpose of these literature reviews. Daniëls et al. (2019) reviewed seventy-five studies on leadership theories, effective principal practices, and characteristics of principal professional development, and regarding school leader learning, they found five characteristics of professional development for principals.

While these studies were not presumed to be the only literature reviews connected to school leader learning, they show that further research is needed. Specifically, there was a need

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for a systematic review centered on school leader learning that synthesized the effective ways school leaders learned and how that learning has been supported or hindered. A close analysis of what studies show school leaders have learned compared to what they wanted and needed to learn highlighted problems for districts and university/district professional development programs to consider.

Current Study

Systematic Framework

The aim of this systematic literature review (Gough, 2007; Hallinger, 2013) was to identify meaningful professional learning experiences for school leaders. Thus, an exploratory review of literature was conducted to locate primary source, empirical studies on school leader learning in peer reviewed academic journals. This review employed a predetermined, systematic methodology (Hallinger, 2013) that summarized studies narratively (Wolgemuth et al., 2017). A systematic method was used to establish methodological rigor (Hallinger, 2013) and to minimize subjectivity and researcher bias, which has been identified as a weakness in narrative reviews (Ferrari, 2015). The narrative approach of using language to describe the findings was most appropriate for this study because it accommodated a broad topic with multiple research questions (Ferrari, 2015).

To employ a rigorous methodology and trustworthiness, Hallinger's (2013) concept of systematic literature reviews in educational leadership and management was drawn upon as a guiding framework. The five guiding questions of Hallinger's (2013) literature review framework were: 1. What are the central topics of interest, guiding questions and goals? 2. What conceptual perspective guides the review's selection, evaluation, and interpretation of the studies? 3. What are the sources and types of data employed for the review? 4. How are data

evaluated, analyzed, and synthesized in the review? 5. What are the major results, limitations, and implications of the review? See Appendix 1.

Research Focus

This study synthesized research on how school leaders have continued to learn and develop once in their leadership positions. This review intended to highlight what is known about the learning experiences, needs, and preferences of principals and APs and discuss how school leader learning has been supported or hindered at the organizational or individual level. I sought to investigate what school leaders have learned from formal and informal experiences and how those topics and skills aligned with what practitioners desired and needed to learn. Additionally, to map characteristics of school leader learning research, I examined the study designs and frameworks of school leader learning literature. This focus was expected to reveal effective and meaningful learning activities for principals and APs as well as potential problems in the further development of these school leaders.

Research Questions

> *(1) What are the characteristics of studies regarding the learning and development of school leaders?*
>
> *(2) In what ways does the research literature report that school leaders continue learning and developing, and how has this been supported or hindered?*
>
> *(3) In what ways does the research literature report what school leaders learn and how does this align with what they want and need to learn?*

Conceptual Perspective

Daniëls et al. (2019) found the terms "continuous professional development, (CPD)" and "workplace learning" to be most frequently used in reference to the variety of ways school

leaders "keep knowledge, skills and/or attitudes up to date" (p.119). For this study, school leader learning was used to include CPD and workplace learning and to reference the professional growth and capacity building that comes from informal, self-selected/self-managed improvement efforts. School leader learning included any learning and development activity or experience that a positioned leader participated in after completing a preparation program and outside of university coursework. In this review, the terms "leader" and "school leader" are used interchangeably to reference the building level leadership positions of principal and AP together, although care was taken to distinguish between these two roles when they were separate in studies.

Theoretical Framework

This literature study was framed with Knowles' (1977) discussion of andragogy which characterized adult learning as an effort where autonomous learners take initiative to acquire knowledge and skill in their interest areas and in what they believed is immediately applicable in their personal and professional contexts. Consequently, adult learners are described as goal oriented and motivated to acquire relevant knowledge and skill (Zepeda et al. 2014) and can be highly self-directed in these efforts (Ross-Gordon et al., 2017). Self-directed learning appears to connect to transformative learning in adults (Taylor, 2008) which suggests that adults seek meaning in their learning and can use their learning to develop and change themselves. As adult learners, this study expected school leaders to pursue and participate in learning they judged as meaningful to the practical improvement of their practice.

<div align="center">

Methods

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3. What are the sources and types of data employed for the review? (Hallinger, 2013)

Primary source, peer reviewed, full text empirical studies on school leader learning and development in academic journals were sought for inclusion in this review. Three selection phases were used to determine inclusion. First, articles were identified through ERIC (Ebsco) and Google Scholar using search terms aligned with RQ2 and RQ3. This review was bound by time (Hallinger, 2013) to the period of January 2011 through December 2021 to focus on recent learning practices and trends in the field. This review was also bound to Western cultures in the US and abroad in the effort to synthesize results coming from similar structures of education.

In ERIC, record abstracts were searched by the following search terms: "principal or school leader or administrator" AND "learning" OR "professional development". This search yielded 672 results and the first 200 titles and abstracts were carefully read for phase one inclusion and exclusion criteria shown in Table 3. Criteria were selected to identify records related to the research question and aligned with criteria used in other systematic reviews of educational literature (see Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021). Abstracts not meeting phase one criteria were excluded from further consideration at this point. Thirty-eight records from ERIC were selected for full text reading and further consideration.

In Google Scholar, the same terms were used and were used together in one search. This yielded about 19,900 hits and the first 200 abstracts were carefully read for phase one inclusion and exclusion criteria. Duplicates were identified and removed. From Google Scholar, thirty-three unique records were selected for further consideration. This initial search resulted in a combined seventy-one records that moved into phase two consideration.

Second, each of the seventy one articles was read in its entirety and thirty one articles remained under consideration after phase two inclusion and exclusion criterion were applied. Third, the results and discussion portions of the articles were read for a second time for relevance

to research questions two and three. At this point, twenty-seven studies were selected for inclusion in this review. See appendix 2.

4. How are data evaluated, analyzed, and synthesized in the review? (Hallinger, 2013)

An analysis was conducted to allow topics to emerge from the literature under review. The results have been structured according to the research questions. Research question one was answered in three blocks: (1) study designs (2) theoretical frameworks, and (3) location and participants. The results for research question two are presented in three blocks: (1) how school leaders learned and why that approach was effective or meaningful, (2) how leader learning has been supported, and (3) how school leader learning has been hindered. Research question three was answered in three blocks: (1) what school leaders learned through development experiences and activities, (2) what school leaders wanted to learn through development experiences and activities, and (3) what school leaders need to learn according to practitioners and researchers.

5. What are the major results, limitations, and implications of the review? (Hallinger, 2013)

Findings

Overview of Studies

Overall, there was a nearly equal distribution of qualitative and quantitative studies and fewer mixed methods designs among the literature reviewed. Surveys generating quantitative data and interviews generating qualitative data were the most common sources. Seventeen studies had identifiable, theoretical frameworks with learning theories, leadership development/career models, and types of learning being the most frequently incorporated. Based on the research reviewed, there appeared to be an increasing interest in school leader learning as ten of the studies were published in the two-year period of 2020 and 2021. See Appendix 3 and Appendix 4.

Study Designs

Out of the twenty-seven reviewed studies, eleven studies used qualitative methods (Acton, 2021; Andreoli et al., 2020; Barnett et al, 2017; Connery & Frick, 2021; Craft et al. 2016; Gümüş, 2019; Hayes & Burkett, 2021; Honig & Rainey, 2014; Huggins et al, 2021; Mahfouz, 2018; Parylo et al. 2012). Methodology included seven studies using interview data, three using case or multiple case study data, and one using observation and interview data. Ten studies used quantitative methods (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Bickmore, 2012; Duncan et al., 2011; Duncan, 2013; Paulsen & Hjertø 2019; Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2020; Shepherd & Taylor, 2019; Spanneut et al., 2012; Stewart & Matthews, 2015; Westberry& Zhao, 2021). All quantitative studies used surveys or questionnaires as data sources. The remaining six studies employed a mixed methods design (Cardno & Youngs, 2013; Cothern, 2020; Hilton et al., 2015; Lazenby et al., 2020; Rieckhoff & Larsen, 2012, Serrão et al., 2020).

Study Frameworks

Not all studies had an identifiable theoretical framework. Those with an explicit theoretical framework were: adult learning (Connery & Frick, 2021; Duncan et al., 2011), career socialization (Craft et al., 2016), Earley and Weindling's (2007) career stage model (Duncan, 2013), Constructivist theory of adult learning with transformative learning (Huggins et al., 2021), Educational Leadership Policy Standards ISLLC 2008 (Allen & Weaver, 2014), Huber's (2011) model of key professional learning methods (Acton, 2021), formal and informal learning (Bickmore, 2012), informal learning (Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2020), Cark and Hollingworth's (2002) Interconnected Model of Teachers Professional Growth (Hilton et al., 2015), Groves' (2007) leadership development and succession planning (Hayes & Burkett, 2021), Green's (2010) leadership development theory (Rieckhoff & Larsen, 2012), prosocial classroom model

(Mahfouz, 2018), school leadership domains (Westberry & Zhao, 2021), sociocultural learning theory (Honig & Rainey, 2014), social constructionism (Parylo et al., 2012), social constructivism with transformational learning (Andreoli et al., 2020).

Study Locations and Participants

Seven of the reviewed studies were conducted abroad and include: Australia (Hilton et al., 2015; Lazenby et al., 2020), Canada (Acton, 2021), New Zealand (Cardno & Youngs, 2013), Norway (Paulsen & Hjertø, 2019); Portugal (Serrão et al., 2020), and Spain (Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2020). Within the US, twelve studies indicated specific states where the research was conducted: Georgia (Bickmore, 2012; Gümüş, 2019; Parylo et al., 2012), Kentucky (Allen & Weaver, 2014), Louisiana (Cothern, 2020), Missouri (Connery & Frick, 2021), New York (Spannneut et al., 2012), Pennsylvania (Mahfouz, 2018), South Carolina (Westberry & Zhao, 2021), Texas (Hayes & Burkett, 2021), Utah (Stewart & Matthews, 2015), and Wyoming (Duncan et al. 2011). Three studies identified regions: South (Andreoli et al. 2020), Southwestern region (Barnett et al., 2017), and Western state (Duncan, 2013), three studies only identified their locale as urban (Honig & Rainey, 2014; Rieckhoff & Larsen, 2012; Shepherd & Taylor, 2019), one identified only as rural (Huggins et al., 2021), and one study (Craft et al., 2016) did not specify its location.

Among all studies, fourteen focused solely on principal participants (Acton, 2021; Bickmore, 2012; Cardno & Youngs, 2013; Cothern, 2020; Duncan, 2013; Duncan et al., 2011; Gümüş, 2019; Honig & Rainey, 2014; Lazenby et al., 2020; Paulsen & Hjertø, 2019; Parylo et al., 2013; Serrão et al., 2020; Spanneut et al., 2012; Stewart & Matthews, 2015), one focused on principals and superintendents (Westberry & Zhao, 2021), one focused on principals and teachers (Rieckhoff & Larson, 2012), one focused on principal coaches who were either

practicing principals or district leaders (Huggins et al., 2021), four focused solely on APs (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Barnett et al., 2017; Craft et al., 2016; Hayes & Burkett, 2021), one study focused on principals and APs (Shepherd & Taylor, 2019), two studies focused on school leaders that included principals and APs (Andreoli et al., 2020; Hilton et al., 2015), one study identified participants as school leaders (Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2020), and two studies identified participants as administrators (Connery & Frick, 2021; Mahfouz, 2018).

Research Question Two

Sources of Professional Learning

Among the studies reviewed, six main sources of learning for school leaders emerged. While overlap and interconnection exist among the methods, the following categories were evident in the literature: 1) mentorship, 2) professional networks, 3) partnership programs, 4) professional meetings/workshops 5) workplace learning, and 6) independent learning.

Mentorship

Mentorship has been identified as a valuable way to learn as it provided school leaders with a framework of support and became a catalyst for professional growth (Connery & Frick, 2021). Cothern (2020) showed that new APs sought out informal mentorship from peers, and Barnett et al.'s (2017) study highlighted the ways experienced APs learned from mentor insights. While APs and beginning principals commonly rely on mentors (Cothern, 2020; Duncan et al., 2011), Gümüş (2019) found that the principal participants serving as mentors perceived they learned from the "different perspectives and ideas of fresh minds" of the mentee (p.31). In a study of the mentoring experiences with sixteen principals in Georgia, Parylo et al. (2012) reported that participants saw mentoring as a form of professional development that promoted reciprocal learning and role socialization and concluded that mentor relationships are "in the

center of leader development and professional growth" (p.130) because they are a "type of principal development valuable for leaders at all stages of their leadership career" (p.131).

Mentoring was documented as a meaningful learning experience for school leaders because it provided individualized attention from mentors (Cardno & Youngs, 2013), encouraged learning from other perspectives (Connery & Frick, 2021), provided feedback (Hayes & Burkett, 2021), and offered social emotional support (Gümüş, 2019). Mentoring helped new principals overcome feelings of social isolation, and peer mentoring promoted relationship building (Parylo et al., 2012). Mentoring, along with coaching, has been identified as a preferred way of learning for elementary principals (Spanneut et al., 2012), and notably, in districts with formal principal mentoring programs in place, "principals reported higher levels of satisfaction with the mentoring they received" (Parylo et al., 2012, p.130).

Professional Networks

Second, professional networks were another way school leaders learned. The literature showed that these networks were formed in a variety of ways, including cross-district learning communities (Andreoli et al., 2021), leadership teams led by immediate supervisors (Paulsen & Hjertø, 2019), small group (cohort) networks (Hayes & Burkett, 2021), and online professional groups dedicated to a specific purpose, such as supporting the AP (Allen & Weaver, 2014). In Shepherd and Taylor's (2019) study of how principals learned to be digital instructional leaders, networking with colleagues was found to be most influential in their capacity development. Professional networks of trusted colleagues have been identified as a primary learning resource for principals (Acton, 2021) as well as a way for APs to learn by asking questions (Cothern, 2020), working with other leaders to learn practical skills (Craft et al., 2016), and engaging in "collaborative learning and reflexive thinking" (Hayes & Burkett, 2021, p. 514). In addition to

AP learning, Lazenby et al.'s (2020) study of 147 established principals in Australia found that "collaborative, peer network learning is a powerful professional learning strategy for experienced principals" (p.10). Their study showed that experienced principals looked to professional networks for learning opportunities outside of their employing agency, and Lazenby et al.'s (2020) asserted that their "data revealed a need for networking to be recognized as a basis for building collective principal efficacy and to become a major professional learning strategy for experienced principals" (p.1).

Professional networks were found to be important to school leaders largely because practitioners desired social examples and often sought to interact with trusted and respected colleagues (Barnett et al., 2017). Networks have functioned as professional learning communities (Cothern, 2020) and have provided leaders with peers with whom they could talk and share concerns (Gümüş, 2019), thereby lifting some of the perceived isolation and pressures of the job (Lazenby et al., 2020), not only for principals, but also for APs (Hayes & Burkett, 2021). Due to the ways professional networks can share reflection, resources, and expertise, Lazenby et al. (2020) concluded that "self-initiated, self-directed, and self-managed principal network leaning is seen by experienced principals as providing the kind of learning that is most effective, beneficial, and relevant" (p. 10).

University Partnership Programs

Third, university partnership programs, either between a university and school district or between a university and individual school, appeared in four studies under review. The literature showed that university partnership programs can meet the learning needs of a specific demographic, such as rural leaders, mid-career APs, and experienced principals. Notably, Stewart and Matthews (2015) found that leaders in medium sized, rural schools considered

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university partnerships the most useful form of professional development. Partnership programs have been ways to support the leadership development of APs who desired to advance to a principal role (Hayes & Burkett, 2021) and for the further learning of experienced principals as Cardno and Young's (2013) study with 300 New Zealand principals showed. Research on university partnerships focused on program outcomes over time as in Andreoli et al.'s (2021) study of a two-year leadership program focusing on rural, high poverty school leaders in the South, and as in Rieckhoff and Larsen's (2012) study of a three-year school and university partnership for administrators in an urban setting.

Professional Meetings/Workshops

Fourth, professional development in the form of professional meetings, including conferences and workshops, were common school leader learning activities documented in the literature (Duncan et al., 2011; Stewart & Matthews, 2015). Bickmore (2012) found that district conferences and seminars were the most common formal learning experience for the 167 middle school principals in their study. Cothern (2020) found that when rural districts did not offer principals professional development, the study participants tended to find their own learning opportunities and sought out conferences and workshops, with workshops being the most sought activity for these principals. Abroad, Serrão et al. (2020) noted a high demand for workshop learning among principals in Portugal, and Lazenby et al. (2020) explained that conferences were sought by Australian principals and were used as an opportunity to network.

Learning experiences in the form of university partnership programs and professional development through conferences, workshops, and administrative meetings have been viewed as valuable development experiences when the learning activities are differentiated (Acton, 2021) according to gender (Duncan, 2013), individualized (Serrão et al., 2020), personalized to the

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learning style of the leader (Cardno & Youngs, 2013; Honig & Rainey, 2014), aligned with the career stage of the leader (Duncan, 2013; Duncan et al., 2011), and varied depending on school level—elementary, middle or high (Spanneut et al., 2012). While Acton (2021) found that school leaders considered workshops to be of little impact or relevance to their practices, other studies have shown that workshops are a preferred way to learn for middle and high school principals (Spanneut et al., 2012) and are valuable when school leaders can link the content to their school setting (Cardno & Youngs, 2013). In addition, ongoing development has been found to be the most important aspect of professional development for leaders (Cothern, 2020), where highly relevant content is spread over time, presented in different forms, and designed in a "relational context" (Cardno & Youngs, 2013, p.263). Studies have found that professional development for school leaders was meaningful when it was flexible, in-person, led by those with principal experience (Cothern, 2020), and collaborative (Andreoli et al. 2021; Bickmore, 2012; Cothern, 2020; Serrão et al., 2020). Professional development that accommodated active learning and job shadowing and where administrative topics were covered and linked to the larger educational context have also been found preferable by practitioners (Lazenby et al., 2020; Serrão et al., 2020).

Workplace Learning

Fifth, workplace learning, which was learning that occurred in context and by situational experiences, was another way school leaders developed (Duncan et al., 2011). In some studies, workplace learning was a formal, school-based action research or inquiry project supported by a university partnership program (e.g., Andreoli et al., 2021; Cardno & Youngs, 2013). Workplace learning was also expressed as informal interactions such as in Rodriguez-Gomez et al. (2020), where the authors identified talks with colleagues, local collaboration, and reviewing school

documents as ways school leaders learned. Connery and Frick (2021) asserted that "job embedded, authentic and interactive learning experiences…were instrumental in developing novice administrators" (p.14). In their study, most professional growth for participants was experiential; new learning occurred when leaders encountered unique situations in their school setting. For the AP, job-embedded learning was shown to be an important way for assistants to develop because as Allen and Weaver (2014) hypothesized, college course content, such as finance and budgeting, may be too abstract when not applied in practice. Additionally, APs may be particularly reliant upon experiential learning because they generally do not receive specific professional development targeted at their role (Barnett et al., 2017).

Independent Learning

Finally, the literature showed that school leaders learned and developed through the independent efforts of self-reflection (Acton, 2021; Andreoli et al. 2021; Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2020) and reading (Bickmore, 2012; Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2020). Reflecting on problem solving experiences promoted growth and development among participants in Cardno and Youngs's (2013) study, as did critical reflection on daily actions and experiences in Connery and Frick (2021). In addition to self-reflection, independent learning took the form of reading professional journals, which was the most common form of informal learning among principals in Bickmore (2012), and online learning, which included internet searches and reading blogs and tweets, as identified by Rodriguez-Gomez et al. (2020).

Independent learning opportunities that promoted reading and self-study have been found valuable by school leaders (Acton 2021), as well as activities that provided opportunities to reflect (Cardno & Youngs, 2013; Cothern, 2020; Gümüş, 2019; Serrão et al., 2020) and training that taught self-reflection (Mahfouz, 2018) have been documented as meaningful. In their study

of experienced APs in a partnership program, Hayes and Burkett (2021) found that these leaders were eager to receive and reflect on feedback concerning their personal strengths and limitations in order to move forward in their careers.

Leader Learning and Development Supported

School leader development was shown to thrive in "a learning friendly organizational culture" (Rodriguez-Gomez et al. 2020, p.250) where school leaders, specifically APs, were encouraged to seek formal and informal learning and view their development as continuous (Barnett et al., 2017). A supportive group climate was strongly related to school leader learning in Paulsen and Hjertø (2019) who affirmed that risk free learning allowed principals to "address real life problems in schools" (p.948). Paulsen and Hjertø's (2019) study of 854 principals in Norway found that principals needed to trust in the collaborative professional development led by their supervisors. They needed to believe their school system was competent because principal trust "at the individual level was related to principals' learning experiences" (Paulsen & Hjertø, 2019, p.945). In situations where direct supervisors lead leader learning, Paulsen and Hjertø (2019) recommended supervisors take a coaching approach towards principal development to help mitigate the imbalance of power.

Ongoing professional development and university partnership programs were also identified as supportive approaches to leader learning. Sustained participation in a university partnership program was shown to accommodate leader learning (Cardno & Youngs, 2013; Rieckhoff & Larsen, 2012) because it made time for leaders to reflect and evaluate their decisions (Andreoli et al., 2021), helped leaders recognize gaps in their knowledge (Acton, 2021; Connery & Frick, 2021), and allowed leaders to work collaboratively (Rieckhoff & Larsen, 2012). Collaborative, action research projects have been shown to promote leader learning

(Andreoli et al. 2021) as was collaborative professional development with teachers (Hilton et al., 2015). Hilton et al. (2015) found that when school leaders were "active co-participants in teacher professional development", the professional growth of both groups was influenced (Hilton et al., 2015, p.2). Furthermore, an ongoing, mindfulness training appeared to "elevate and improve" leadership skills for some participants because it offered principals ways to be "more observant and attentive to others" (Mahfouz, 2018, p.610). Participation in mindfulness professional development was also shown to create a sense of bonding and support among participants by giving leaders opportunities to learn about each other (Mahfouz, 2018). Connery and Frick (2021) asserted that learning opportunities with mentors contributed to the overall wellbeing of new leaders by helping them overcome negative emotions connected to their transition from teacher to administrator.

Professional development promoted growth when it aligned with the needs of adult learners (Duncan et al., 2011) and accommodated leader autonomy and choice as well as school goals (Lazenby et al., 2020). For experienced principals who knew their development needs, Lazenby et al. (2020) found that participants wanted the responsibility of "sourcing their own professional development" and the freedom to seek out learning opportunities that extended beyond their local context (p.6). Professional development that presented content as a systematic process that supported participants in developing actionable, next steps was shown to promote leader learning (Andreoli et al., 2021) as was professional development delivered through university partnership programs that helped leaders focus on school improvement goals (Rieckhoff & Larsen, 2012). Specific to APs, professional development that provided experiential learning, where they encountered a variety of roles and school responsibilities, supported learning and growth (Barnett et al., 2017; Craft et al., 2016).

Finally, learning from mentors has been supported by school districts when formal training for mentors and mentees is provided (Barnett et al., 2017) and when mentors have information on their mentees' development needs and strengths and weaknesses (Gümüş, 2019). Mentors who know how to reflect on their own experience help mentees learn from mentorship (Connery & Frick, 2021), and mentors who make time for school visits and use agendas to cover topics have been found effective in supporting school leader learning (Gümüş, 2019).

School Leader Learning and Development Hindered

First, learning was hindered when districts did not provide adequate support towards leader development. Acton (2021) noted that when a school district did not take a whole systems approach to school improvement, principals perceived that the district leaders did not view themselves as responsible for school improvement, and consequently, the principals' understanding of the school improvement process had gaps. Additionally, the assumption that school leaders knew how to improve a school, even when they recognized what needed to be done, led to a lack of development opportunities offered by a district (Andreoli et al., 2021). Districts that did not address learning gaps after preparation program coursework or recognize that skills gained through coursework may not translate into practice also impeded leader development (Duncan et al., 2011). In general, conflict and communication skills were identified as having not been well developed in neither preparation programs nor in the district professional development leaders received after entering their positions. Furthermore, Acton (2021) found that a lack of formal professional development on the change process left knowledge gaps in this area for participants. In Acton's study, rural principals relied heavily on learning from peer networks and were unaware that they missed steps necessary for successful change efforts to take place (Acton, 2021).

Furthermore, districts that did not provide a framework of support for new principals may stifle development (Connery & Frick, 2021) as well as when district directors were ill-equipped to lead principal professional development. Honig and Rainey (2014) found lower levels of satisfaction with professional development among principals when district presenters had a vague understanding of the content they shared and when learning time was used for paperwork and providing school system updates. Additionally, learning and development was perceived by APs to be weakened by a lack of presence from district leaders in a year-long university partnership program. Hayes and Burkett (2021) reported that participants sought to develop themselves as candidates for principal roles but did have a clear understanding of their district's expectations. Participants desired to develop and advance into a principal role, but due to lack of involvement by their district, they were uncertain about how to do this (Hayes & Burkett, 2021).

Second, misaligned professional development was another barrier to school leader learning that surfaced in the literature. This occurred when the career stage and experience level was not differentiated in professional development activities and content (Acton, 2021; Lazenby et al., 2020) and when professional development topics were perceived to be unnecessary by practitioners (Mahfouz, 2018). Duncan et al. (2011) found a disconnection between the "areas of perceived professional development needs for beginning principals with the areas that the districts provided" (p. 15). At the AP level, Allen and Weaver (2014) pointed out that there was a lack of professional development directed towards their role, and Hayes and Burkett (2021) confirmed that few university/district leadership development programs focused on the mid-career AP. Additionally, in the professional development APs did receive, Barnett et al. (2017) noted that it did not necessarily help them towards becoming future principals. Because APs are not involved with all school leadership tasks and responsibilities, learning can be stiffed by lack

of experience (Allen & Weaver, 2014). Experience is an important way in which school leaders learn and develop, but as Allen and Weaver (2014) explained, the AP role tends to be disproportionately focused on a few management tasks, and consequently, there are aspects of the principal role they likely not to experience and learn. Similarly, Barnett et al. (2017) reported a lack of growth opportunities for APs, and Hayes and Burkett (2021) also highlighted the limited learning opportunities for APs at the school level.

A third way leader learning may be hindered is by the context, choices, or characteristics of the school leaders themselves. Time pressures and constraints were found to limit leaders' ability to learn from reading and self-study (Action, 2021), to meet with mentors (Connery & Frick, 2021), and for APs to have the opportunities they desired with coaches in a partnership program (Hayes & Burkett, 2021). In rural locations, participation in learning communities and partnership programs was difficult due to geographic constraints (Andreoli et al. 2021).

Research showed that leaders generally wanted to gain new knowledge and that doing so was a priority (Connery & Frick, 2021). Duncan (2013) noted that all participants "had a strong interest in further developing their leadership skills, knowledge, and expertise in several different areas" (Duncan, 2013, p.305). However, Honig and Rainey (2014) observed varied participation and preparation among principals in meetings, and in cases with low principal engagement, there was lower satisfaction with the program. Additionally, in Mahfouz's (2018) study of mindfulness training, some participants were resistant to the content because the topic was not connected to their interests or because they viewed training as "imposed on them from distinct administration" as "one more thing to do" (p. 613). Furthermore, Serrão et al. (2020) shared that some principals close to retirement "did not want more training in educational administration and leadership" (p. 7), and Rodriguez-Gomez et al. (2020) noted that higher educated principals (those with master's

or PhD degrees) avoided "further formal learning activities when compared with principals who have less training" (p.64). Duncan (2013) who also found that women indicated a higher perceived need for professional development than men. Similarly, Rodriguez-Gomez et al. (2020) noted that "men in positions of principalship are slightly less likely to resort to informal learning activities either face to face or online than women" (p.248) and concluded that principal learning was influenced by "a clear motivation for the profession, a strong professional determination and a positive perception of personal competencies" (p.250) in the individual.

Research Question Three

Learning Content and Methods

Through the professional development of university partnership programs and ongoing professional training, school leaders learned leadership and school improvement skills, reflexivity, confidence, wellbeing practices, and how to better support teachers. First, school leaders learned a mindset that supported distributed leadership skills and a systematic process for school improvement (Andreoli et al., 2021). Principals were shown to have learned to be more reflective and learned to link research knowledge to their personal practices (Cardno & Youngs, 2013). Participation in partnership programs taught leaders how to improve their school professional development plans and to refine their goals (Rieckhoff & Larsen, 2012). Second, in ongoing professional development training, school leaders learned tools to improve their awareness and wellbeing (Mahfouz, 2018). In a collaborative professional development with teachers, principals gained insight on students from listening to teachers and learned to recognize better ways to support their teachers (Hilton et al., 2015).

The literature also identified what school leaders learned from professional networks and mentoring. From networks, APs learned to take a growth mindset approach to their development

as leaders (Barnett et al., 2017). Mentor insight helped APs learn decision-making skills, people skills, self-reflection (Barnett et al., 2017), and communication skills (Barnett et al., 2017; Connery & Frick, 2021). Mentors helped new principals develop their leadership practices by learning to improve their relational, communication, time management, and situational problem-solving skills (Connery & Frick, 2021). Mentors provided vicarious learning and helped school leaders learn role socialization (Connery & Frick, 2021) and were shown to support middle school principals in learning "to self-discover and be aware of their own strengths and weaknesses" (Gümüş, 2019, p.31).

Desired and Development Learning

The literature identified relational, technical, and leadership skills among the most requested learning needs of school leaders as shown in Appendix 5. For principals, Duncan et al. (2011) found that beginning leaders had an interest in learning to work with difficult staff members and parents. In Duncan (2013) all principal participants wanted development in resolving personnel issues. Serrão et al. (2020) noted that interpersonal and social-emotional skills were high priority topics that principals wanted to learn, and in Westberry and Zhao (2021), the topics of data usage and progress monitoring were desired by school leaders. Among APs, Hayes and Burkett (2021) found that APs wanted to learn communication skills, and specifically, how to give feedback to teachers. APs also indicated they desired more professional development in organization level skills such as budgeting and finance and dealing with teams as well for change leadership and race/diversity issues (Hayes & Burkett, 2021). This aligned with Allen and Weaver (2014), who had previously identified AP learning requests to include: school finance/budget, time management/work-life balance, creating collaborative cultures, instructional leadership, supervision, and curriculum.

The learning needs and desires of school leaders differed according to career stage and by school level and context. In Duncan (2013), the author concluded that the perceived learning needs of men and women school leaders at specific career stages had both similarities and differences. Among these participants, all beginning principals, experienced women principals, and very experienced men principals chose using data as important professional development. All intermediate principals chose personnel issues; experienced male principals and very experienced women principals chose instructional leadership as the most important professional development for them (Duncan, 2013). Overall, Duncan (2013) showed that women leaders perceived a higher need for professional development than did men. Spanneut et al. (2012) found that school leader learning perceived needs were differentiated by school level. Elementary school leaders sought professional development in instruction and monitoring student progress, middle school leaders wanted development in instructional programming, and high school leaders indicated a variety of needs, with program monitoring surfacing as a priority (Spanneut et al., 2012).

Learning and Development Needed

In addition to studies that sought out practitioner preferences, research revealed areas and topics where school leaders needed learning and development opportunities. Andreoli et al. (2021) asserted that learning for school leaders needed to center around problems of practice, and that leaders grew when they learned to recognize the connection between school improvement efforts and the daily issues they encountered. The authors pointed out that critical reflection was needed for leaders to have the ability to notice and address problems of practice. Their study revealed a need to learn professional trust and to distribute leadership to build capacity in their faculty and foster the learning of the adults around them (Andreoli et al., 2021).

Westberry and Zhao (2021) found that instructional leadership was a critical need of principals and concluded that their study "verified that instructional leadership professional development is one of the most needed resources and supports for principals" (p. 11). Acton (2021) found principals needed to learn the steps of the change process; Stewart and Matthews (2015) identified the need to learn to improve staff performance, and Cardno and Youngs (2013) pointed out that leaders needed to learn both leadership and management skills, as opposed to one or the other. Specific to APs, Craft et al. (2017) found that APs had a need to learn to manage the unpredictable nature of their job, to grow in confidence in their decision-making skills, and to manage time. Hayes and Burkett (2021) added that AP professional growth should include "addressing leadership strengths and constraints, enhancing communication skills, and addressing specific professional learning needs" (p. 511-512).

Limitations

This literature review was bound by time and culture and does not represent all that is known on school leader learning and development. While this review considered international studies of school leader learning, it only included studies in Western cultures to represent similar systems of education, leader preparation and practice. Furthermore, the concept of professional development is broad (Daniëls et al., 2019), and it is likely that not all expressions of school leader learning were found in the literature search. Finally, it is assumed that school leaders learned in ways that could not or were not able to be identified in the reviewed studies, and therefore, this literature review does not presume to include all areas and ways that learning and development that have occurred for principals and APs.

<p style="text-align:center">Discussion</p>

Implications

The purpose of this exploratory review was to synthesize research on how and what principals and APs continue to learn one in their position and how their development has been supported and studied. The following paragraphs discuss findings and future research opportunities per research question.

Characteristics of Studies

The studies on school leader learning included in this review were described by their design, including framework, context, and participants. Qualitative and quantitative studies were almost equally represented in the review which indicates a variety of approaches have examined the topic. Mixed method studies, while fewer, have been increasingly utilized as three of the six mixed methods studies in this review were published in 2020. The studies reviewed showed that data was gathered primarily from surveys and interviews; future studies could continue to build mixed methodology and data sources and pursue ethnographic and participatory approaches. The use of theoretical frameworks varied considerably from one another and in whether one was explicitly used and discussed in a study. The field may benefit from consistently linking results to theoretical and epistemological frameworks.

The research represents geographical diversity across the United States, including local and regional contexts, as well as abroad. While urban and rural school locales were identified in the literature, the suburban context was not specifically identified and could be an area of future study. Participant focus was predominantly on the principal with fourteen studies only looking at this role. In comparison, four studies only attended to the AP position. Further research is needed into the AP role as has been indicated by others (Goldring et al., 2021). Some literature offered insight into the learning of leaders according to career stage, gender, and context, but given the strong preference for personalized, individualized, and experiential learning that appeared in the

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research, continued focus should be paid to aligning school leader learning to these characteristics.

Support of Effective and Meaningful Learning for Leaders

Overall, the literature showed that principals and APs are interested in improving their practices, and while they participated in and generally valued formal professional development, they relied heavily on social learning opportunities. Social examples found through mentor relationships, networks, and peer interactions provided reciprocal learning as well as emotional support. Drawing on social insights from relationships and professional connections allowed leaders at various career levels to gain understanding into how to approach and solve problems in their schools. However, discussed in Acton (2021), a leader's overreliance on social networks may create serious knowledge gaps. Small circles of reference could cause limited perspectives, and so practitioners should have access to professional development that accommodates social preferences, but also draws in a variety of perspectives and knowledge.

The literature showed that school leader learning was supported when it was experienced in environments of trust where leaders had the time and opportunity to participate in collaborative professional development that was perceived as relevant and structured to align with adult learning needs. The literature also showed three main ways that school leader learning has been hindered: 1) lack or limited district support, 2) misaligned professional development, and 3) school leader context or personal choices/characteristics. Of these, school leader learning appeared to be most hampered when districts had weak involvement in principal and AP professional development, particularly if there was a district/university partnership. While adult learners are ultimately responsible for their own development (Ross-Gordon et al., 2017), district support and participation in school leader learning was important. There were examples of

resistance to required district training (as in Mahfouz 2018), but largely, when district leaders demonstrated competence leading professional development, aligned development with career advancement, provided time and opportunity to collaborate and reflect, and formally prepared mentors, both principals and APs experienced supported professional development.

Learning Alignment

Among the studies reviewed, there were both areas of alignment and gaps between what school leaders learned and what they desired and needed to learn. Out of fourteen identified learning areas, nine topics connected to school leadership, four were management topics, and two were personal areas. The topics of instructional leadership, people skills/staff performance, and self-reflection/self-development were areas where not only have leaders indicated a desire to learn these things, but they have been found to be needed and identified as learning outcomes. Notably, there were two areas that were desired and perceived as important by school leaders but did appear as either a learning outcome or a learning need. These topics were general management skills, such as budgeting, and race/diversity issues. The topic of change leadership was indicated as a desired topic in one study and knowledge of the change process was found to be a need in another study. There were also four areas of identified learning and development needs for leaders that were not among topics desired by practitioners. These topics included: developing a distributive leadership mindset, school improvement, managing unpredictability, and confidence in decision making skills. There were no areas of documented learning in leaders that were neither desired nor considered needed.

These findings suggest that professional development offered or required for school leaders covers the learning needs of leaders better than the learning desires of leaders. Prioritizing researched based learning needs may be necessary due to constraints on a school

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leader's time for professional development; however, as shown in this review, several topics requested by leaders did not emerge in either outcomes or needs. One surprising finding was that little attention was paid to developing school leaders as change agents or looking into how leaders learn to navigate race and diversity issues within a school. These are areas warranting further research.

Conclusion

Principals and APs hold strategic roles that require the implementation of updated practices and the ability to effectively respond to the changing needs of a school. This requires the continuous learning and development of school leaders. For principals and APs to experience effective and meaningful learning opportunities, school districts need to be actively involved in supportive efforts towards school leader learning. They can do this by forming partnerships with universities and by creating networks that accommodate active, collaborative, and relevant learning experiences and activities that provide action steps towards improvement goals. Districts can identify and train mentors as social examples who model self-reflection and are able to address strengths and constraints in their mentees. This review aligned with other findings that indicated more attention to leader learning is needed to build the literature (Daniëls et al., 2019; Ford et al., 2020).

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The further development of experienced principals in Alabama: Professional leaning needs and

preferences

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There is little question that principals hold a role of significant and consequential

leadership within learning organizations (Leithwood et al., 2020; Liebowitz & Porter, 2019).

These school leaders, although supported and assisted by district personnel, staff and faculty

teams, and community members, are ultimately the ones associated with and responsible for a

school's improvement and progress. Even in contexts with well-developed distributed and

collective leadership constructs, "principals' decision influence does not necessarily diminish

when other stakeholders gain more influence" (Ni et al., 2018, p.217). In the U.S. system of

schooling, it is still the building level leader who is expected to create a positive learning culture

(Thapa et al., 2013), lead instruction (Hallinger et al., 2020), and develop a successful faculty

and staff (Ford & Ware, 2018). This responsibility affords principals an ongoing opportunity to

apply innovative practices that can improve student outcomes and narrow opportunity gaps.

Principals are critical to school success and improvement (Meyers & VanGronigen,

2019), yet retaining quality leaders is a challenge as the demands of the position are inherently

stressful (Mahfouz, 2020). As a profession, the principalship has a high turnover rate (Bartanen

et al., 2019), and while research has looked at why principals leave (e.g., Pendola & Fuller,

2021) and why a principal shortage is expected to increase (Levin et al., 2020), it is also

necessary to study principals who stay and continue to grow and thrive. Experienced principals

have gained insights and implemented approaches that have sustained them and influenced their

schools (Lazenby et. al., 2020). While identifying the successful strategies of school leaders remains valuable, understanding how established principals learn their practices is foundational.

Principal learning and development can be supported by districts and university partnerships, but there is reason to believe that a lack of appropriate learning and development directed towards school leaders has impacted role sustainability. Levin et al. (2020) found that "inadequate access to professional learning opportunities" for principals was among the main reasons why principals intended to leave their position, and "nearly all [principals] indicated a desire for additional professional development to meet their students' needs" (p.4). As principal learning and development is a viable way to improve schools (Andreoli et al., 2020), buffer attrition in the profession (Jacob et al., 2015), improve administrator wellbeing (Connery & Frick, 2021) and meet the desire for development among practitioners (Levin et al., 2020), their learning and development merits further attention.

Purpose Statement

Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) noted, "Because of the significant role school leaders play in shaping learning environments, preparing and developing leaders for today's schools is an essential driver of change" (p.4). Thus, the purpose of this narrative study (Clandinin, 2016) was to understand how experienced principals continued to develop their professional practices by describing the learning experiences they pursued and considered valuable to their work and their ability to improve their schools. By exploring the continued learning and development of ten principals in Alabama who had three or more years of experience in their role, this study sought to deepen our understanding of what established school leaders believed about their professional learning opportunities. The guiding research questions were:

(1) How do experienced principals in Alabama describe their learning and development

needs and preferences?

(2) How do experienced principals in Alabama connect their learning and development

to their ability to improve their schools?

Drawing from Clandidn's (2016) framework for narrative inquiry, ten individual, semi-structured interviews with public school principals were conducted over summer and fall of 2021 and the winter of 2022. Four key assertions emerged from this data: 1). Experienced principals described a need to learn from different perspectives and expressed a preference for learning from professional networks and small, social groups 2). Experienced principals described a need for professional development that was ongoing, relevant, individualized and led by individuals who were relatable and transparent 3). Experienced principals described a lack of time, money, and district support as hindrances to their learning and development 4) Experienced principals connected their individual learning to the growth of their faculty and believed they improved their schools by further developing the adults in their building.

Literature Review

Principal Learning and Development Outcomes

Research into principal learning and development contributes towards school improvement by identifying ways to promote growth in those with substantial influence in a learning organization. Principal learning and development have been associated with positive school outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020), including changes in leadership practices (Bickmore, 2012; Kim, 2020). Evidence from Bickmore (2012) showed "a significant relationship between participation in informal professional learning experiences and principal practice as measured by student, school, and faculty factors" (p.95). From this finding there is

reason to believe that those who continue to learn and develop successful school leadership approaches will be strengthened in their ability to implement efforts towards positive organizational change. In addition to Bickmore's (2012) study, Kim (2020) more recently found that "school principals' transformative learning is directly connected to actual change in leadership practices at both the individual and organizational level" (p.354). Similarly, Andreoli et al. (2020) asserted that principal learning was a pathway to greater organizational outcomes, and Meyers and VanGronigen (2019) noted the important role principals play in overall school improvement efforts. Thus, focused attention towards the further development of principals is a way to improve the larger learning organization.

In addition, meaningful learning and development opportunities may contribute towards better retention of principals. Principal longevity contributes to greater school outcomes, in part, by ensuring the sustainability of positive leadership practices whereas "high rates of principal turnover limit the impact of principal leadership and can threaten school stability" (DeMatthews et al., 2021, p.161). Research has shown that school leaders who participate in quality learning programs may be less likely to leave their position (Jacob et al., 2015). Jacob et al. (2015) found less principal turnover among those who participated in a research-based professional leadership program and credited this, in part, to an increased self-efficacy reported by participants. Retaining principals is an important effort as research has shown that the loss of a school leader is rarely beneficial (Rangel, 2018). Even in underperforming schools where leader replacement is punitive, Herman et al. (2017) concluded that "changing principals does not correspond to achievement gains" (p. 21). While principal learning and development could be a viable way to reduce high attrition rates in the profession, there is limited research into principal continued learning and development. As Ford et al. (2020) pointed out, research has not focused on leader

learning nearly to the extent it attends to teacher professional development and student achievement. By examining how principals continue to learn and lead, school districts and university partnerships may be better able to support and retain these essential leaders.

Career Stage Learning and Development

Some school districts attend to the learning and development needs of principals by offering or requiring administrative professional development (Herman et al., 2017), but there is evidence that these options can be misaligned with the needs and preferences of building leaders (Duncan et al., 2011). Most school systems target support on preservice and struggling administrators (Johnson et al., 2016), providing the most concentrated professional development at the time of initial positioning (Herman et al., 2017). However, with this focus on novice leaders, experienced principals are often overlooked (Lazenby et al., 2020), even though continuous leader learning at all levels is crucial not just so that principals acquire updated knowledge and innovative strategies, but also so that "outdated patterns of thinking" can be disrupted throughout a leader's tenure (Huber, 2011, p. 840).

The need to differentiate principal learning and development according to career stage has been voiced by practitioners and affirmed by research. Lazenby et al.'s (2020) study of 147 experienced principals in Australia found that these principals had distinct professional development needs and preferences. Cardno and Youngs (2018) and Montecinos et al. (2018) also suggested that experienced principals would benefit from professional development aimed at needs specific to their career stage. There is reason to believe learning needs change as principals gain experience, and so as Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano (2014) noted, "just as we differentiate our work when trying to help youth grow and develop, we must do the same for adults" (p.117).

The literature affirms that school leaders need individualized development opportunities throughout the duration of their careers (Duncan, 2013), and yet while most of their learning activities happen informally, research has predominantly looked at formal programming (Kim, 2020) and reported on training and preparation programs for future leaders or on a specific method or technique (Daniëls et al., 2019). Useful professional learning aligns to the career stage of the principal, but few studies speak to the learning needs of established principals (Acton, 2021; Lazenby et al., 2020) or compare the needs of new leaders to the needs of mid and late career leaders (Montecinos et al., 2018). Yet, as noted by Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) in their report on developing effective principals, it is critical that "veteran leaders have quality learning opportunities that contribute to coherence in practice that supports systemic change and increased student learning" (p. IV).

Hindrances to Principal Learning and Development

In addition, principals can face significant barriers to their development. Levin et al. (2021) found that eighty-four percent of elementary school principals encountered serious obstacles to their professional development in terms of district support, personal resources, and logistics, with principals of under-resourced schools more likely to contend with such professional learning hindrances. Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) found that nation-wide, principals in low-poverty schools "were much more likely to report that they had learning opportunities in important areas compared to principals in high-poverty schools, and they were more likely to report that they experienced problem-based and cohort-based preparation" (p.vii). Likewise, principals in small districts, particularly in rural locations, often have limited professional development options (Johnson et al., 2016) which could impede their learning opportunities and ultimately their school's improvement. In a literature review of principals'

leadership identity, Cruz-Gonzalez et al. (2021) noted that paperwork, race and gender, and lack of system support were barriers to school leaders' self-perception development, and the authors affirmed that because of the challenges in recruiting and keeping school administrators, "providing training to school principals must be a priority" (p. 42).

Despite the principal's influence in learning organizations, the ways in which their learning and development has been supported and hindered has been largely overlooked in research. As a result, the field's understanding of principal learning and development warrants much more attention. Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) suggested, "Moving forward, improved research can continue to build the field's knowledge about how to best develop high-quality principals, and enhanced policies can create a principal learning system that, as a whole, will better serve principals and, ultimately, all children" (p. iv). This is particularly important since, as Daniëls et al. (2019) concluded from their review of school leadership development literature, "research on how effective leadership development takes place is still in its infancy" (p.119). Thus, this study fills a gap in the literature by attending to the perceived learning and development needs and preferences of ten experienced principals in one southern state.

Theoretical Framework

Adult Learning and Principal Career Stages

Andragogy

Knowles' (1977) concept of andragogy, or adult learning, was used in this study to frame an understanding of the learning needs and preferences expressed by participants. According to Knowles (1977), adult learning is "life-centered" and focuses on "life-situations, not subjects" (p.12) which distinguishes andragogy from pedagogy. For the adult, the motivation to learn is tied to a desire or to gain knowledge and skill that enables them to address a need connected to a

life situation. Knowles (1978) explained that "adults have a deep need to be self-directing", and they seek learning that enables them to analyze their life experiences (p.12). With this understanding, principals were expected to take initiative to acquire knowledge and skill in their interest areas and in what they believed was immediately applicable in their professional contexts. Aligning with Knowles' (1978), Merriam's (2008) noted that in adults, "learning is a multidimensional phenomenon" (p. 95), and professionals with prior knowledge and experience take an active role in interpreting their learning needs. Considering this, it was important for this study to explore how participants interpreted their professional learning and development experiences. Similarly, Zepeda et al. (2014) characterized adult learners as goal-oriented and motivated to acquire relevant knowledge and skill, and Ross-Gordon (2017) described adult learners as highly self-directed in their development efforts. Thus, this study assumed that the learning and development principals pursued and desired would reflect the types of experiences that were meaningful to them.

Principal Career Stage

In addition to the characteristics of andragogy, Earley and Weindling's (2007) description of principal career stages was used to define an experienced principal. The authors distinguished seven chronological levels of principal practice where the last three stages depicted the experienced principal and differentiate these stages as: refinement, consolidation, and plateau. In contrast to the administrator preparation and early stages of the principalship, according to Early and Weindling (2007), from years three and onward, a principal has made changes to the organization and directs those changes from that point forward. Although the authors noted that these time frames vary among individuals (Earley & Weindling, 2007), three years can be considered the experienced level for principal practice.

Table 2 Principal Career Stages

Earley & Weindling (2007) Principal Career Stages		
Stage	**Time as Principal**	**Description**
Entry and encounter	First months	Principal encounters "surprise" and "organizational socialization begins" (p.74-75)
Taking hold	3 to 12 months	Principal identifies organizational issues; "honeymoon" period with staff (p.75)
Reshaping	2 years	Principal initiates major organizational changes
Experienced Principal Levels		
Refinement	3-4 years	Principal makes "fine tune adjustments" to initiatives already in place and gain confidence and effectiveness in the role (p.75)
Consolidation	5-7 years	Principal manages the planned and expected school changes they have implemented
Plateau	8 years and longer	Principal has completed the organizational changes they intended to make and are at a critical point of finding new projects to engage to continue to thrive.

Methods

Research Design

This narrative study (Clandinin, 2016) sought to describe the self-reported learning needs and preferences of ten Alabama principals with three or more years of experience in the role. In this study, three years was used to differentiate between inexperienced and experienced in alignment with Earley and Weindling's (2007) career stage model. Purposeful sampling was

used to invite participants who were public school principals representing elementary, middle, and high schools in rural, town, suburban, and urban/city school locations. An Alabama sample was sought to fill a research gap and to inform a university professional development program in the state. Drawing from Clandinin's (2016) description narrative inquiry, this study sought individual interviews to record stories of personal learning activities and experiences as well as record how participants believed their learning was connected to school improvement and organizational change. Interview data was first analyzed through open coding (Saldaña, 2013) to identify emerging themes and patterns. Trustworthiness was established through triangulation of principal responses with each other, with expert opinion (Merriam, 1998), and peer debriefing throughout the duration of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Participants

Participation in this study was limited to Alabama principals who were in the latter stages of Earley and Weindling's (2007) career stage model with three or more years in their role. Perspectives from school leaders in each urbanicity indicator was deemed necessary to represent diverse school experiences in Alabama. Participants with terminal degrees were preferred in order to explore learning efforts and experiences after university coursework had been completed.

To identify and invite participants, principals were first sought from schools among the four urbanicity indicators (city/urban, suburban, town, & rural) as listed using CCD data of public-school districts for the 2019-2020 school year. Next, principals in each locale subgroup were contracted via email until several participants who met the criteria of experience and education were identified and consented to participate. For the purposes of this study, the terminal degree preference was considered met if a principal had a PhD or if they declared they

did not intend to pursue an additional degree above their current level. After an initial group of participants were interviewed, snowball sampling was used to identify additional participants in order to build the sample so that an appropriate number of elementary, middle, and high school leaders were represented. During the participant recruitment process, care was taken to seek and invite participants who represented diversity in ethnicity/race and in gender when possible.

The participants in the study had between three and eight years of experience as principals. Three participants were in the refinement stage of 3-4 years of experience, five were in the consolidation stage of 5-7 years' experience, and one was in the plateau state of 8 or more years of experience (Earley & Weindling, 2007). Five participants held a PhD, two held an Ed.S, two held a master's degree, and one had a bachelor's degree. Five principals worked in a rural or distant town locale, two worked in suburban schools, and three worked in urban schools. Three high school principals, two middle school principals, four elementary principals and one elementary/middle school principal were interviewed. Among the ten participants, six were women and four were men, and seven were White and three were Black. See Appendix 6.

Data and Analysis

Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each principal over Zoom between July 2021 and February 2022. An interview protocol was created by the researcher and validity was established through peer debriefing and expert opinion (Creswell & Poth, 2016). See Appendix 8. Interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed in their entirety using AI software. Audio recordings were used to reconcile transcripts, and handwritten notes were created to capture reflections during and immediately after the interviews. Each transcript was read in its entirety multiple times.

Using Taguette, qualitative coding software, each transcript was open coded for emerging ideas (Saldaña, 2013). The first round of coding produced 42 unique terms with more than one reference. A second round of coding combined closely related terms and connected emergent ideas in participant responses to the research questions. The highest frequency of code labels for research question one (*How do experienced principals in Alabama describe their learning and development needs and preferences*?) were: networks (24), professional development (24), topics of interest (22), people skills (17), relationships (17), social learning (17), conferences (14). The highest frequency of code labels for research question two *(How do experienced principals in Alabama connect their learning and development to their ability to improve their schools?)* were: change (40), learning (35), teachers (32), growth (24), experience as a principal (17), proactive/take initiative (16), challenges (13). After the codebook was examined, a document of assertions was created whereby participant quotes were organized according to research question and code. Assertions and participant responses were then connected to the theoretical framework and literature review. Research question one had seven preliminary assertions that were supported by participant quotes. These seven claims were condensed into three key takeaways that are presented in the results section. Research question two had four preliminary assertions that were supported by participant quotes. These four claims were condensed into one main takeaway that is presented in the results section.

Limitations

This study was bound to the experiences of ten principals in Alabama which may be a limitation on the results. The participants in this study were predominantly highly educated with half of the participants holding PhD's, two participants with a Ed.S and two with a master's degree, and it may be that principals with advanced degrees value learning and pursue

development opportunities to a greater extent than those with less formal education. Furthermore, I acknowledge that professional experience does not equate effectiveness. While participants discussed their learning in relation to their school improvement approaches, assessing the effectiveness of participants in their efforts towards organizational redesign or school improvement was beyond the scope of this study. Finally, while participants were sought from different geographical locales to represent rural, town, suburban, and urban/city leadership, quantitative methods were not employed to provide descriptive statistics comparing the potential similarities and differences among principals in different school settings.

Findings

Four key topics emerged from the data:

1. Experienced principals described a need to learn from different perspectives and expressed a preference for learning from professional networks and from small social groups.

2. Experienced principals described a need for professional development that was ongoing, relevant, and individualized, and they expressed a preference for professional development leaders who were relatable and transparent.

3. Experienced principals described a lack of time, money, and district support as hindrances to their learning and development.

4. Experienced principals connected their individual learning to the growth of their faculty and believed they improved their schools by further developing the adults in their building.

Key Topic 1

At the experienced principal career stage, there was a perceived need to learn through social connections that formed through professional networks and in small group cohorts with colleagues which provided principals different perspectives into problems of practice.

Principal networks were described as sources of new ideas from "a wealth of people that you can call" (Principal 1). The personal relationships, as well as the insight gained from networking, were valuable to the participants. As Principal 1 and Principal 3 shared, relating through networks provided principals with opportunities to connect and to glean from the experiences of other established leaders in the field. Principal 1 explained, "Once you become a principal, it's all about making connections", and principal 3 reflected,

> Relationships with other principals--a lot of times, you know, if I'm torn on what to do, or trying to make a decision, sometimes I'll just call up another principal and kind of talk it out with them. And kind of hear how they might would handle a situation, and so that's been very beneficial. (Principal 3)

The preference of established principals for learning through networks was also found in Lazenby (2020) whose study revealed that "self-initiated, self-directed and self- managed principal network learning is seen by experienced principals as providing the kind of learning that is most effective, beneficial and relevant professional learning for them" (p.10). As adult learners, participants in this study took initiative to seek out professional networks, at national, state, and local levels, to learn different approaches to problems of practice and to meet new people. Participants considered conference attendance to be a way to build their networks and used this form of professional learning for that purpose. Bickmore's (2012) survey found that 86% principals participated in district conferences or seminars, and in this study, most participants mentioned administrator conferences as their regular professional development activity. Principal 4 shared, "Most [conferences] there's great things that you take away and

some of you sit through, and you don't really get a whole lot out of it, but networking is always

good to meet new people and have those connections". Principal 1 and Principal 3 had similar

sentiments:

> I attend the conferences and professional learning that offer the chance to network with
> people. There might be one thing that really changes my perspective on how to deal with
> the situation or how to deal with a problem that I'm facing. So that's what I seek out when
> I try to go to a conference. (Principal 1)

> Going to a conference…you get a chance to meet people. You know, and people bring
> experiences and opportunities, and they can share collaborative things and what they've
> tried, so I think I find those very helpful just because, you know, you can glean from
> other experiences, and you can have a chance to network and meet people. (Principal 3)

Participants mentioned a preference to interact with people who brought different perspectives

into their decision-making process. Principal 5 drew upon the diverse expertise among a team of

specialists with whom she consulted when making important decisions for the school. She

shared, "You need to have your specialist table with different viewpoints from yours and be

receptive to those with a different viewpoint than yours". Principal 3 commented that he worked

with like-minded people, but he desired to learn from those whose methods were different.

> I'm in a professional learning setting with people that have the same philosophy, style,
> and beliefs that I have. I think if I had an ideal opportunity, it would be to be around a set
> of people that are doing things that I'm not doing. (Principal 3)

Principal 8 discussed the need for experienced principals to learn from people outside of their

local system and geographical location to disrupt limited mindsets. He explained, "I would

almost tend to say I want a mix of in district and out of district people, because we can, you can

get that institutionalized thinking, 'Oh my god, we have to do it this way'". Similarly, Principal 6

described a similar issue she saw when an area lacked divergent perspectives:

> We need a variety of perspectives. I think one thing that happens here in smaller towns,

probably not just in Alabama, but in small towns, there's one pool of people. The leaders of the schools, like, for example here in [--], they just turn out more of the same. You get an error perspective. (Principal 6)

When describing an ideal professional learning opportunity, Principal 8 explained the value he saw in incorporating the knowledge of those outside of education.

I would envision that you would enlist a group of experts, not just education experts, but you've got to have like, a psychological piece, a sociological, a sociology piece and the anthropology piece, because we're dealing with people, right, as leaders, we're learning to manage ourselves just as much as we're learning to manage the physical, social, and emotional needs of the people with us. (Principal 8)

While diverse perspectives were valued by participants, several principals discussed their preference for networking that was local and accommodated in-person interaction and phone calls. This preference was noted in Cardno and Youngs (2013), where the authors found "Principals placed a high value on the opportunities that programme design provided for face to face and relational contexts to be employed" (p. 263). In the current study, Principal 3's comment that a lot of his networking was "just social media" suggested that virtual connections were not equal with relationships that are built face to face. He commented, "I find [networking] very helpful… I have been able to build through a network, but then, a lot of it is just social media".

Participants discussed the importance of learning with people they were in relationship with through their local district and with peers they knew from their graduate university program. These small group networks were knowledge resources for experienced principals. Principal 10 and Principal 2 noted that they primarily interacted with local principals whom they knew well, and Principal 8 saw himself as a relational resource for his peers. Principal 2 noted, "I mostly deal with local principals within my own district", and Principal 10 shared, "I would call

my principal buddies. I was never on an island alone". Principal 8 explained his perspective on helping a peer, "And so, my view on that is my, if my phone's ringing as a colleague, I go into the conversation with--they need help. Let me help them".

Small group networks were described by participants several times as "cohorts". While cohorts have been defined as a group of adults who complete a degree program together (Collins & O'Brien, 2011), several participants extended the concept to include group connections outside of the university context. Principal 1 and Principal 8 both believed professional learning was effective for experienced leaders when it happened through the model of a small group cohort. Principal 1 described effective professional development as "a cohort process…and you meet as a cohort multiple times". Principal 8 described the idea number of participants in a cohort of for experienced principals:

> [Cohorts should be] no more than seven, five to seven. And the reason why is when you start getting a lot larger than that, your web gets big, and you get people on the periphery that you kind of lose face and lose touch, you don't touch base with them. But five to seven people. You know, it's like a group project, you don't want to be that kid who does all the work. And you don't want to be the kid who's a freeloader. (Principal 8)

Tingle et al. (2019) cited multiple studies where cohort learning was found to be a practical way for principals to share ideas and experiences in a supportive forum that allowed for feedback and reflection. In addition, Serrão et al. (2020) found that principals prefer collaborative and reflective methods of professional development, and Shepherd and Taylor (2019) found that collaboration with colleagues was perceived as the most influential factor in principals learning digital instructional leadership. The collaborative component of professional development was valued among participants in this study, and relationship building was even viewed as the primary purpose for professional development. Principal 1 stated, "We go to professional development so we can connect and build relationships. And because I think that's the one most

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important things you can do, as a principal". Furthermore, Principal 1 viewed his role as highly

relational and expressed the importance of central office staff and teachers being able to trust

him with the changes he wanted to make. As an experienced principal, he not only wanted to

learn in relationships, but he also desired to continue learning skills that improved his

relationships. He shared, "I want to learn how to build relationships with [faculty and staff], how

to build relationships in the community".

While the social interaction and perspective sharing that came through professional

networks was described as a practical and preferable way for experienced principals to learn

from their colleagues, Principal 8 did not believe networking was used to its full potential. He

believed it required the intentional involvement of experienced principals. Principal 8 noted,

> One area of professional learning that I don't think we do well enough is networking. I do
> a lot of colleague outreach, I ask and talk to other seasoned professionals, both in my
> district and outside of it and building those kinds of informal networks helps too, and
> then I become that network for other principals who are younger. And that that kind of
> really helps, especially in a district that is in turmoil, or that with a high turnover rate to
> know that I have this group of people across the state. (Principal 8)

Addressing high turnover rates through intentional networking may be one way to increase

principal longevity. As stated in DeMatthew et al. (2021), "Research focused on principal

burnout and coping has revealed that many principals rely on their personal and professional

networks to engage in self-care" although "districts are rarely responsible for creating these

networks with the intention of offering healthy, proactive support" (p.163).

In addition, mentorship was addressed by participants; however, in this study, mentors

were primarily viewed as a learning support for new principals. Principal 5 commented, "There

needs to be mentorship for new principals. Because that's one thing that's really isn't out there;

you get the job, and you're given the building key. And then it's go do your job". One participant

indicated that he tried to help principals who called him, but none of the experienced principals were in formal mentor relationships. This finding aligns with Duncan and Stock (2010) whose survey of principals in Wyoming found that "little formal mentorship occurred for principals with more than three years' experience" (p.302). While the literature shows that mentor relationships offer reciprocal learning benefits (Gümüş, 2019) at all stages of a principal's career (Parylo et al., 2012), participants in this study did not see themselves in need of a mentor.

Reflecting on his early career stage, Principal 4 described a need for an approachable superintendent to foster his development. He discussed his struggle with confidence in decision-making, and though he learned through experience, he may have found success sooner with a superintendent who took a mentoring approach with principals. He shared,

> I didn't have a lot of confidence in what I was doing because I didn't want to make mistakes…My first superintendent is a really nice guy, but there wasn't a lot of communication. You know, the support and growth factor was just kind of out of him. (Principal 4)

Paulsen and Hjertø, (2019) found that "Principal trust in superintendent at the individual level was related to principals' learning experiences" (p. 945), and Principal 4's experience with the lack of mentorship in his superintendent may have influenced his professional growth.

Key Topic 2

Experienced principals described a need for professional development that was ongoing, relevant, individualized to their areas of weakness, and led by those who were experienced, relatable, and transparent.

Participants in this study described a need for their learning to be ongoing and centered on a problem of practice that could be addressed with a systematic, long-term approach. The need and preference for ongoing principal professional development has been established in

research (Andreoli et al., 2020; Connery & Frick, 2021; Huggins et al., 2021). Cothern (2020) found it to be the top response for desired elements of principals in a professional development program, and likewise, the participants in this study connected ongoing learning activities with relevance. Principal 5 explained it this way: "Meaningful learning is anytime that you're learning a new program that's a new skill, but it needs to be ongoing, and it needs to be checked". Similarly, Principal 8 described meaningful professional development as:

> most valuable is when…they may present an issue or a problem and then we may work through the problem even over months, or over weeks or throughout the year. I stink at a one-off PD, for me it is a waste. Because I may take something that I like, but I don't see a way to inject it into my personal daily practice. (Principal 8)

In alignment with the life-centered learning approach characteristic to andragogy, participants desired knowledge and skill that were useful to their practice. While participants identified different learning interests, all agreed that professional development was valuable when it was clearly applicable. Principal 4 commented, "Of course, I think applicability is a big deal. Some things you read and or conferences you go to--it might be a good thing in theory, but it's not something that you might really put into practice" and Principal 3 stated, "It's not really professional learning till you put it into practice and do something with it. So, to me it's you know, taking that and applying it to your job". Likewise, Principal 5 shared, "I'm a strong proponent of professional learning. But make it meaningful to better learning". At the experienced level, professional learning opportunities can become disappointing when perceived as being "not very impactful or relevant to practice" (Acton, 2021, p.35). When material was not considered relevant, Principal 8 described the experience as "sitting in those principal meetings where everybody's eyes glaze over, and nobody pays attention".

Participants identified different professional development topics as meaningful which showed they needed learning activities that could be individualized. Management content was described as a need by some participants since, as Principal 1 pointed out, "A lot of the things that you have to deal with as a principal are more management kinds of issues". Although one participant specifically noted that he did not need another school budgeting professional development, three principals indicated that learning school finance and budgeting was an ongoing need for them. Cardno and Youngs (2013) found that effective learning programs for leaders needed to attend to individual needs and learning styles. They stated, "to sustain and develop experienced principals, leadership development programmes need to be relevant, personalized and unique" (p. 256). Additionally, Honig and Rainey's (2014) study with urban principals also noted the importance of accommodating principals' learning style and preferences in professional development. In this study, the participants' different perceived needs for management content reinforced the importance of individualized learning opportunities for experienced leaders.

Furthermore, several participants believed they needed to learn in their individual areas of weakness and discussed a need to be uncomfortable by taking risks to learn new things to grow. Principal 4 noted, "Professional learning, the most important for me, is for areas in which I'm weak". Principal 8 shared,

> There's no reason to keep working on strength. And for me, that means I need to do a self-assessment, regular self-assessments, what area am I weak in? What area is identified as a weakness by myself, by my staff, by my constituents? Then, I work to strengthen those weak areas. (Principal 8)

Principal 1 and Principal 3 acknowledged that they needed to learn things they did not particularly enjoy to improve their leadership practice. Principal 1 explained,

I have to branch out, and I'd be cognizant of like doing in finding new information in learning about things that maybe I don't know a lot about or I don't like to learn about, but I need to learn about it because it might make me a better principal. (Principal 1)

Similarly, Principal 3 explained,

Sometimes you gotta be willing to take a risk. You gotta be willing to become uncomfortable and accept where you are and then go and find things that's going to help you in those areas and then you'll get better, but sometimes we don't want to accept those things it's hard to acknowledge that we just want to work on our strengths. (Principal 3)

Although participants in this study held a growth mindset that motivated them to continue to learn, Principal 3 and Principal 8 spoke of colleagues who appeared not to pursue professional learning and development to a high level.

I think a lot of principals, and I understand this, they take the path of least resistance, especially once you're established. You're good for five years. So, I have colleagues that'll get five PLUs in that fifth year. What did you do the other four, like you wasted that…Five PLU over a five year period--well, that sounds like a lot. But you can get that done in a weekend if you do it right. So that's fake, that's very shallow. (Principal 8)

Addressing the same issue, Principal 3 commented,

You have to be willing to make a change, I think sometimes you know we get to a place of comfort. And I don't think it's mediocrity, I really think it is comfort, where you have things a certain way, and then you want to just kind of continue there you know but there's a lot of needs out there. And you know things in which people that you're going to have to be prepared for, so you know, I think that you're just gonna have to be willing to continue to want to learn. (Principal 3)

Rodriguez-Gomez et al. (2020) found principal learning could be influenced by an individual's disposition in the areas of "a clear motivation for the profession, a strong professional determination and a positive perception of personal competencies" (p.250). Participants described situations where established principals were not motivated to continue developing their practice, and this aligned with the plateau career stage described by Earley and Weindling (2007). At the late career level, a willingness to take on a "fresh challenge" (p.79) is critical, yet

as found in Serrão et al. (2020) some principals close to retirement "did not want more training in educational administration and leadership" (p. 7).

In addition to individual preferences and characteristics of the principal learner, the background and teaching style of who led their professional development mattered to some participants. Several principals described ideal professional development as being presented by those with an administrative background or from industry experts outside of education. Participants described a preference to learn from individuals they viewed as credible, authentic, and transparent. Someone who would admit to struggling and making mistakes and "now knows how to do it better" was preferred above someone who "quickly ran through all the steps" (Principal 8). Ideally, professional learning would be led by people who had principal experience and recent school involvement. Principal 8 described this:

> When somebody is presenting, and they say, I've been a principal, here's where I've been, this is what I've done. It's not someone who quickly ran through all the steps and is going to be the sage on the stage. It's somebody who's like, 'Look, I've struggled with this, too, I've messed this up, we can all mess it up, here's how we do it better'. It's not learning if somebody is up there, just Charlie Brown's teacher telling you what you should be doing that's miserable. Because my first question to that person is and when was the last time you were in a school? And how long have you been out of the classroom? Or how long have you not been in the field? Because you lose your credibility and your validity. (Principal 8)

A principal's need for competent professional development leaders has been affirmed by Honig and Rainey (2014) who found cases where professional development leaders offered a vague definition of what they were teaching and where time was used on paperwork and compliance, the principals' view of and participation in the learning group diminished.

Key Topic 3

Experienced principals described a need for time, funding, and district support to help them overcome hindrances to their professional learning and development.

Participants discussed the choices they needed to make when limited resources became constraints to their pursuit of and participation in professional development opportunities. Principal 3 described how his professional development cost time. "There's so much that we have to do during the school year. When you have to take time to do something, it takes time away from something else". This experience aligns with Action (2021) who noted that principals "benefited from...reading for self-study and reflection" but this was prevented by "time pressures" (p.35). Coordinating schedules among several principals to collaborate in professional development was a challenge as well. Principal 4 pointed out this challenge, "I think that would be principals being able to come together and meet. With everybody being so busy if you tried to get one date and time that worked for several principals that would probably be difficult". At times, Principal 8 felt he needed to choose between his need to grow professionally and meeting the needs of this faculty and staff by being present with them.

> Do I want to be closed off to my people, to better myself, so I can then be better for my people? Or do I put my own needs on the backburner and maybe not grow as much professionally because I'm more available to my people? That is a very difficult balance. And we are all facing that right now. (Principal 8)

In addition to time, a school's financial resources were identified by some participants as a hindrance to their professional learning. Principal 2, whose district provided professional learning opportunities for leaders, noted that beyond participating in district meetings, attending additional development opportunities was a "financial challenge". Principal 8 commented that money was "always an issue" with leader professional development, and so he had to "find free PD first". He explained,

> I'm trying to be the best leader I can be. So, what money I have dedicated to professional development, I will refuse to spend it on myself, I would rather spend it on my teachers. A lot of times districts want to give money for teachers to do professional learning, but not necessarily administrators. (Principal 8)

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District support for professional development was desired by participants, but it was described by some principals as lacking, and thus, a hindrance to their further learning. Cothern's (2020) study showed that rural principals wanted district lead professional development because "the district understood the climate and culture" (p. 12), yet district provided professional development can vary. Principal 2 saw her large, suburban district's professional development offerings as sufficient for her, but Principal 1 did not have the same experience in his small rural district. She commented,

> [--] county is wonderful about providing professional development throughout the school year as well, so I also participate in as much as I can, within my, you know, the district. It's definitely an advantage being here in a bigger district, where we do have all those resources. (Principal 2)

Principal 1 described his need to be proactive in training himself and his faculty because his district did not always recognize the need to support the further development of adults.

> The central office--they just said 'hey here's the modules that we want you to make sure your teachers are watching to get ready for [--] implementation, but we're not going to provide any training for you guys'. So, we have to be proactive, sometimes with a lot of things, because a lot of times, you know, I'm not knocking our central office, but they're removed from it, so it's not like high on their priority list. (Principal 1)

In response to a lack of training provided from the central office, Principal 1 "went a step above and signed up for multiple trainings" in his effort to learn for himself and to facilitate training for his teachers. Principal 1 explained that at the building level, he would "have teachers freaking out that they're not going to know how to do it" and consequently, he needed to learn what teachers needed to know and do.

Key Topic 4

Experienced principals connected their learning and development to the growth and effectiveness of their faculty and viewed this capacity building in others as their approach to school improvement and organizational change.

Overall, experienced principals believed they improved their school by directly investing in the improvement of their faculty. Several participants explained why they made efforts to learn and develop professionally. Principal 4 commented, Making the people you lead better, so being a resource for them and Principal 2 stated, "Helping the teachers learn". Principal 9 commented, that as a principal, "You have to train the teachers; you have to train the faculty and staff. You want them to produce and set those high expectations, you've got to invest in professional development". As noted in Beabout (2012), "continuous learning by groups of educators is essential for sustainable improvement" (p.19), and in this study, participants prioritized teacher learning. Principal 1 explained that he became an online teacher while working as a principal to better understand the struggle his faculty would have with virtual teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic.

> I had to become an expert in [online teaching] so I could then, you know, have those conversations with our teachers and empathize with them. So, one of the things I did was I went and signed up to teach [--], and so I became an online teacher myself. (Principal 1)

Hilton et al. (2015) noted that "leaders and teachers contribute to one another's professional learning" (p. 15), and in this study there was a sense of responsibility among participants for moving their schools forward, in part, by taking opportunities to consistently learn and develop themselves in ways that uplifted other adults. Specifically, principals spoke of capacity building in others to make positive and lasting changes at school. Principal 5 explained,

> You can't make these changes by yourself. You got to get buy-in, you got to get people to work along with you. You gotta build that capacity in the building. As long as you

build capacity in that building. The change that you've created will remain the same. (Principal 5).

In addition, a lack of meaningful principal learning was viewed by several participants as a factor that could limit how well a school performed. Referring to a school, Principal 3 stated, "You're only as good as the leader". Principal 8 commented on how a lack of learning and growth in a principal hurts a school:

> And if you didn't grow for four years, your staff didn't grow for four years, your students didn't grow for four years, your school climate and culture didn't grow for four years, like I would venture to guess that your metrics by which we score effectiveness in schools over that four years went down because you weren't learning. (Principal 8)

Several participants acknowledged that as an established principal, their school would only improve if their pedagogy and leadership knowledge stayed current. They did not expect their teachers to improve if they, as the principal, were not learning new approaches too. This finding aligned with Hilton et al. (2015), who showed that when school leaders did not embrace new ideas, teachers felt limited and isolated. Principal 1 commented, "And we had to be a step ahead as far as knowing about different things as far as technology. We have to go out and, you know, really close the gap for our kids". Principal 2 talked about the need to know the trends and stay ahead in their knowledge. He shared, "Later [in your career] you've got to stay on top of things, and you've got to stay up to date on all the current trends".

Experienced principals discussed their need for interpersonal skills to better introduce and implement initiatives towards change at school. This perceived need to improve their relationships with faculty members motivated Principal 3 and Principal 4 to build their knowledge through independent learning. Principal 4 identified reading as a way to "get some new knowledge", and likewise, Principal 3 shared that a desire to improve people skills "forced"

him to "read more and read more leadership books. You know, just try to study how to be a better leader".

Participants saw relationship building, particularly with their faculty, as vital and desired further development in that area. Duncan (2013) who found that all principals wanted professional development in "resolving personnel issues" (p.293), and in this study, relationship building and interpersonal skills were valued and associated by participants with being a better leader. Principal 1 stated, *"Professional learning as a principal is like developing your skills, with* people, developing your skills. Building relationships is vital in this business". Principal 2 commented that he had "learned through my experiences as a principal in [--]. and here, you have got to have relationships at all levels". Principal 3 stated,

> My leadership style is people driven. You know I want to do what's best for people. We get so caught up in what curriculum we are going to do and who's going to teach it and who we can hire. And who's going to do this, that we skip the point of, do I know the people I'm working with? (Principal 3)

Furthermore, participants believed they improved their schools by building trust with teachers and staff and thereby protecting a school from resistance and turnover. Principal 2 stated,

> In order to effectively make change within a school you have to have positive relationships with your staff, and you've got to have their buy in. You know, because if they're not on board it's going to make it very hard, you know, to move forward with changes. (Principal 2)

Principal 4 described his desire to build relationships with teacher:

> That's something I want to learn more about because. You know, we want to make student learning the focus, but if we are not tactful about the way we do that with teachers, they can get turned off. They may be compliant, but they may not want to buy into your vision. They may try to work against you just because they're angry. (Principal 4)

Principal 3 made noted,

And so, you have to, you know, provide validation for [teachers], and that's done in a relationship and working on that as a leader, you know, learning different skills, how to do that is very important. So, whether that's, you know, reading a book or going into professional development, or having a conversation with a colleague--how do you do that at your school? (Principal 3)

Building capacity in their faculty through collaborative approaches to school leadership was a way participants worked towards school improvement and organizational change. Recognizing the ripple effect of change in a school, Principal 3 approached school improvement efforts with an include approach that considered the ideas of his faculty and staff. He described his approach with teachers as "Give me your thoughts on that, you know, like prior to anything happening".

Similarly, Principal 9 explained,

Some people love that idea of leadership, right? It's very dogmatic, very like, 'Okay, you're the boss, and I got it, let's go, and I'm on your side no matter what'. But the majority of people in education, and people in general, if you come at somebody with guns blazing, they're going to retreat, and they're going to put a wall up. (Principal 9)

Principal 1 and Principal 3 discussed the challenge and risk involved when a principal initiates change among faculty. Principal 1 noted,

It's hard to get people to buy into things, especially when you're just a new guy at the school and everybody else is the same. They have been doing the same thing for a long time. It's hard to introduce a new program to them. Why do we need to do it like this differently? (Principal 1)

Principal 3 revealed,

It's been a risk in doing those things [that create organizational change], because you have people who've been in a building for 20 plus years are used to doing things a certain way, and now, things are changing. (Principal 3)

Participants spoke of working towards school improvement and organizational change by taking a team approach to improvement goals. From Principal 4's perspective, input from others was necessary, He noted, "I'm a principal doesn't mean that I know everything so give me your input on what you think and honestly if you feel like something else is better. That's fine we'll do that".

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Principal 1 shared that his approach as collaborative. In reference to working with facult and staff, he explained his approach this way, "You know, there's our goal, and we got to work toward it. We have to go through this hard stuff, and we're doing it to reach our goal.". Likewise, Principal 9 stated, "You have to bring others up, you know, bring them on board, right and making sure that they are part of the team".

Participants worked towards the development of their educators and held expectations of growth for themselves. The concept of professional learning was described as continual, lifelong learning that resulted in growth, improvement, and advancement. Although they each were established in their position, there was a consensus that they still had a need for professional learning and development. Several participants exemplified this mindset towards continuous learning: Principal 1 shared, "I do love to learn, I think, and that's why I went into education--the learning…There's so much to learn. There's so many things that you can get better at as a principal". Principal 4 explained, "I'm still evolving as a leader trying to get better", and Principal 5 stated, "I am a big proponent of learning. I love going to PD. I love growth in anything that's going to help me improve my craft". Acknowledging that learning happens daily, Principal 3 described professional learning and development as professionally purposeful. He stated,

> Consistent growth, you have a desire to be better, you know as a professional. We learn a lot of things and we're around a lot of things but is that something that's going to allow you to advance as a professional…I don't think there's any point in time where we can stop studying, learning and growing. (Principal 3)

Discussion

Given that "there is substantial research evidence demonstrating that school leaders are a powerful driver of student outcomes", Herman et al. (2017) recommended addressing the

improving of principals through resources and policy (p.3). Well-aligned learning opportunities is a way to improve principals and ultimately the larger learning organization. In this study, participants exhibited the characteristics of adult learning by being proactive, goal-oriented and motivated to find meaningful knowledge that they could apply to their daily practice (Ross-Gordon, 2017; Taylor, 2008). Experienced principals connected their professional learning to the growth of others, and several participants described a need to be uncomfortable and be honest about their own weaknesses in order to further develop professionally. Participants preferred learning activities that were ongoing, individualized, and kept their knowledge current. Several experienced principals indicated a need for further learning in topics of school management, such as school finance, but the majority were focused on improving their interpersonal skills. These principals preferred to learn from social networks and cohorts and from individuals with expert experience. Principals connected their efforts towards school improvement to their ability to develop their faculty and several individuals connected school improvement to their willingness to take risks, investing in relationships, and refining their leadership skills through formal professional development and informal efforts.

Implications

At the experienced principal career stage, participants needed opportunities to participate in professional networks and collaborative groups and to learn from different perspectives. As noted by Kim (2020), effective principal development that accommodates adult learning needs to be both an "active and interactive" learning process (p.356) and learning through social groups can meet this need. Networking has repeatedly been found a valuable and preferred source of learning for principals (Bickmore, 2012; Cardno & Youngs, 2013; Hayes & Burkett, 2021; Honig, & Rainey, 2014; Parylo et al., 2012), particularly at the experience principal level

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(Action, 2021; Lazenby, 2020). Lazenby' (2020) study of experienced principals showed that "it is crucial for principals to invest time and energies into the development of relationships with colleagues and to establish an environment of shared, reflective discussion and information exchange" (p.9). Yet, often due to a lack of district support, "principal peer support is limited and sporadic" (DeMathews et al., 2021, p.163) and time pressures inherent in the position, principal learning through networking opportunities may be underutilized. Action's (2021) study with experienced principals in Canada affirmed that school leaders need "resources that allow networks to flourish" (p.35), but district involvement of networking appears not to be common.

According to the literature, mentor relationships appear to benefit experienced principals functioning as mentors, as in Gümüş (2021) where the author noted that mentors learned from the "different perspectives and ideas" coming from the "fresh minds" (p. 31) of their mentees. However, the experienced principals in this study were primarily concerned with using their time and resources to build capacity in their teachers, not necessarily of their colleagues or even their assistant principals. Because there was a desire to learn from different perspectives, mentoring relationships may be an under-recognized learning resource for the experienced principal.

Furthermore, because principals were interested in learning that would improve teachers, experienced principals may find regular, ongoing participation in teacher professional development to be a beneficial learning experience. While participants did not speak of their participation alongside teachers in professional development, this opportunity could serve to keep experienced principal pedagogy current and as a way to build relationships with teachers. As Hilton et al (2015) found, when leaders were "active co-participants in teacher professional development" the growth of both was influenced (p. 2).

Rodriguez-Gomez et al. (2020) found that "principals with higher education (master's degree or PhD) often avoid further formal learning activity when compared with people who have less training" (p. 48). In this study, all but one principal held an advanced degree, and district professional development and conferences were mentioned as formal learning activities, but they were viewed by participants as primarily a venue to connect and collaborate with others. Notably, Principal 1 considered relationship building to be the reason to attend professional development as opposed to learning new content knowledge or skill. Networks and local groups are clearly a source of knowledge for principals, however, Action (2021) found that participants overestimated their competency in the change process due to an over reliance on personal experience and local networks. Consequently, principals had blind spots and "knowledge gaps" in which they were unaware (Acton, 2021, p.43). Furthermore, experienced principals should continue to supplement their reliance on networking with ongoing, formal professional development content. Kim (2020) noted that learning for principals included the creation of "environments to facilitate deep learning" (p.356), and for the expert principal who has sought knowledge primarily from peers, new learning experiences may need to be pursued.

Professional development content and activities need to be individualized, on-going and well aligned to the daily practice of an experienced principal. As noted by Kim (2020), effective professional development needs to take "into account learners' diversity of learning styles and backgrounds" (p.356). An expert practitioner "draws on a large repertoire of previously acquired knowledge" (Leithwood et al., 2004, p.68) and thus, professional development leaders want to consider the actual learning needs of participants. One approach may be through action research and inquiry project-based learning for principals. Ford et al. (2020) noted that "Principals are more likely to be interested in professional development when it is job-embedded" (Ford et al.,

2020, p. 287) and action research accommodates contextual learning and relevant application. Job-embedded inquiry projects focusing on a local problem of practice may be a way for these principals to experience meaningful, transformative learning that supports individual needs and links "concrete and real-life experiences to new knowledge" (Kim, 2020, p.356). Andreoli et al. (2020) found the systematic approach of action research, with the support of a university partnership, to be valuable learning experience that helped principals make mindset shifts and distribute leadership to improve their schools. Regarding inquiry projects, Cardno and Youngs (2013) noted, "When principals learn to be critically reflective about the status quo and plan incremental improvement around actual change initiatives they can engage in authentic learning through action research" (p. 260).

Furthermore, several participants identified their need to improve in an area of weakness. As Principal 3 noted, the acknowledgement of and working on one's professional weaknesses can feel like a career "risk" for an established principal. To counter this perception, districts should prioritize the establishment of a work towards learning culture conducive for continuous learning at the experienced level. Furthermore, while some participants in this study could articulate their professional strengths and constraints, this may not be typical. Districts and university partnerships may need to assess this understanding and offer training in self-reflection practices, such as mindfulness (Mahfouz, 2018) and in strengths training. However, as adult learners need "autonomy over deciding learning goals and processes" (Kim, 2020, p.356), districts and university partnerships should be cautious about mandating learning activities and sessions lest trainings are perceived by principals as "one more thing" to do (Mahfouz, 2018, p.613) and consequently, resisted.

Future Research

The continued learning and development of experienced principals is a topic warranting future study. This study focused on Alabama principals, but future research could focus on other states or through a mixed methods approach, examine experienced principals nationally. Future studies should examine the relationships between experienced principals' learning needs and their formal education/degree attained, their years of experience in the assistant principal role, and among groups such as gender or school level. Additionally, while participants in this study spoke of their own learning and development and the growth and improvement of their teachers, there was no mention of mentoring efforts or capacity building for their assistant principals. Further research is needed to explore the relationships between experienced principals and how they view their role in facilitating learning and development of their APs.

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Experiences of learning for newly positioned assistant principals in Alabama

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Introduction

The American school structure generally supports a building principal and one or more

assistant/associate principals (APs), and while these individuals are collectively referred to as

school leaders and administrators (Daniëls et al., 2019), it is necessary to recognize that in

practice, these roles are quite different (Barnett et al., 2012). Notably, research tends to reference

the two positions of principal and AP as one when studying school leadership (Goldring, et al.,

2021), and when distinctions are made between the two, the literature has focused on the

principal over the role of the assistant (Oleszewski et al., 2012). Consequently, to date, APs have

not been afforded adequate attention in research despite their influence within educational

organizations (Goldring, et al., 2021). The ways in which these school leaders learn their work

and develop professionally warrants further investigation in order to ensure appropriate support

for those who have been credentialed to lead as principals, but who typically function in a

different, more ambiguous role.

Purpose Statement

Thus, this study explored the experiences of five APs in Alabama who discussed what

they learned about their role as novice school leaders and who described valuable professional

learning opportunities for newly positioned APs. The purpose of this research was to better

understand how novice assistant principals navigated their entry into administration and to

identify the learning they believed was necessary for their position. It sought to describe what

APs learned about their transition into administration and how they connected this change to

learning experiences that contributed to their leadership capacity and responsibilities. Using narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2016), individual interviews with five participants were conducted to answer two research questions:

(1) *What do novice assistant principals in Alabama learn about their role during their first years in formal school leadership?*

(2) *How do assistant principals in Alabama describe valuable professional learning experiences for novice school leaders?*

Participants were purposely selected for participation based on their time in the position of assistant and their accessibility to the researcher. The novice AP was prioritized in this research because, as entry point leaders encountering considerable change in their roles and responsibilities, their experiences were expected to illuminate the socialization and essential learning and development needs of an AP. For this reason, participants consisted of four novice APs who had less than two years of experience in the role and one established AP with eight years of experience who could discuss experiences of change and learning from the vantage point of his experience.

Findings, presented briefly here, showed that in answer to research question one, newly positioned APs (1) learned their role was distinctly different from their prior teaching/coaching position; (2) they learned to define their role in response to the principal under whom they worked; and (3) they recognized they would navigate comparatively more personal change than organizational change and school improvement during their first years in the role. In answer to research question two, the interview data showed that (1) APs believed prior experience and past leadership roles were the best preparation for their position; (2) they valued learning from social examples and from a variety of perspectives; and (3) they believed mentorship could be a

valuable professional learning experience under the right circumstances. This chapter begins with an overview of literature on the AP role and responsibilities and AP learning and development. Next, the theoretical framework of organizational socialization (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977) is provided along with the study's research design. The findings are detailed and a discussion of the participants' experiences of transition into school leadership and the learning experiences they found valuable is presented. Finally, this chapter concludes with suggestions for how the novice AP can be better supported by supervisors and professional development leaders.

Literature Review

The AP Position

Most aspiring administrators begin as assistant principals (Cohen & Schechter, 2019; Turnbull et al., 2013) considering that over seventy-five percent of US principals have AP experience (Goldring et al, 2021). Thus, while the assistant position can be a career apex for administrators, it is a position usually viewed as training towards the principalship. As the AP is the common point of entry into school leadership (Armstrong, 2015), it is necessary to understand the position of assistant, particularly in relation to their development in the role.

Unfortunately, the AP role has been historically "underutilized" and has "often described as the dumping ground for undesirable tasks delegated by the principal" (Kearney, 2016, p.18). Allen and Weaver (2014) explained that recruiting quality AP candidates is difficult because the role has been associated with undesirable duties. However, some districts have recognized that the AP can be a "linchpin position" that is "essential to the long-term health of the organization" (Conger & Fulmer, 2003, p. 79 in Fusarelli et al., 2018, p.300). Considering that principal turnover is high (Bartanen et al., 2019) and expected to increase (Levin et al., 2020), rebranding the role as an instructional leader (Allen & Waver, 2014) and investing in the development of

these entry level leaders can be an effective way for schools to plan for succession (Fusarelli et al., 2018). In Goldring et al.'s (2021) report, the authors noted, "recent research indicates that a high number of principals leave their positions each year, requiring a pipeline of assistant principals who are well prepared to step into the role" (p.2).

While the purpose of the AP may be to assist the principal and to further prepare for the lead position (Buckman et al., 2017), the roles and responsibilities of the two positions can differ greatly. In Oleszewski et al.'s (2012) review of literature on AP development, the authors asserted that "the activities and job responsibilities of an AP do not prepare leaders for the principalship" (p.265). Likewise, Kearney et al. (2016) recommended further training in the AP role specifically because the position lacked "many of the critical components which are required of the principal position" (p.17). The authors asserted that despite an AP completing a preparation program and certification and even with experience in the assistant role, "there is still often a wide gap between their current job duties and what will be expected of them as principals" (Kearney et al., 2016, p.17). If the AP position is intended to be an effective pipeline to the principalship, it appears the AP experience may not easily translate to the principal role without intentional development support.

There are inherent challenges unique to the AP position that are necessary to consider. In comparison to both the principalship and to teaching, the AP role is more vague and variable (Barnett et al., 2012). For the AP, "many job descriptions are unclear, and the explicit responsibilities of an assistant principal vary between districts and schools" (Barnett et al., 2012, p. 93) depending largely upon which tasks are delegated by the principal (Armstrong, 2015). Oleszewski et al.'s (2012) found the position to be unique in that it contributed towards a school's success and a district's principal pipeline, and yet, the AP job description was not well

defined and the training and professional development they received was under researched. The ambiguity of the role can be particularly challenging for the newly positioned AP who needs to navigate a significant amount of change upon entering administration. Barnett et al. (2012) noted that the "wide expanse of duties" for the AP "creates a position that is crucial to the daily running of the school, but almost unachievable in daily responsibilities" (p. 94). In Armstrong's (2015) qualitative study of four novice APs in Ontario, the author found that participants were "shocked to discover the number and variety of responsibilities and demands embedded in their new frontline position and the dramatic psychological effects that it has on their personal lives" (p.110). The author attributed this shock to "inappropriate preparation for their frontline location between teachers and upper-level administrators, differences between teaching and administration roles, responsibilities, and workloads, and lack of ongoing support and scaffolding" (Armstrong, 2015, p.113). Thus, the literature suggests that as an important but ill-supported role, the experiences and intentional development of APs is critical not only to better prepare them for the principalship, but to also better support them in the unique challenges of their current position.

AP Learning and Development

College degree and certificate and licensing programs credential teachers to be hired as school principals (Grissom et al., 2019), however, program completion does not fully prepare educators for administration. Even in cases where graduates believe their educational leadership program did effectively prepare them for the AP position, research has found knowledge gaps existed between what the participants had learned through coursework and the duties they performed in their assistant role (Peters et al., 2016) In Peters et al.'s (2016) study of Alabama APs, participants confirmed that some knowledge and skill needed to be learned on site and in

context, and the authors concluded that "critical amounts of professional learning indeed occurred for study participants after they were hired into formal school leadership positions" (p.194). Kearney et al. (2016) explained that the AP is not usually well prepared to enter administration after formal education because programs emphasize the theory needed for the principalship and not the practical, experiential learning needed in the AP role. Furthermore, because the AP position is so different from classroom teaching, Armstrong (2015) explained, "even those administrators who feel prepared to perform administrative tasks often find themselves unprepared for the social and emotional changes that accompany both their exit from teaching and entry into administration" (p. 110).

Therefore, after completing formal education, an AP needs additional development and learning support. Research has shown that this professional development should be systematic and planned (Hayes & Burkett, 2021) and well aligned with the tasks and responsibilities of an assistant (Craft et al., 2016). However, "there are few professional development programs available specifically focusing on the needs of assistant principals" (Allen & Weaver, 2014, p.25). It is expected that APs will develop on the job and learn the work of the principal during their time as an assistant (Oleszewski et al., 2012), yet APs do not necessarily get to experience all facets of school leadership as an assistant (Allen & Weaver, 2014). Furthermore, APs must successfully undergo "a process of personal socialization to transition their identity from teacher to administrator" (Armstrong, 2015, p.66) and learn how to "adapt to and make sense of their new administrative roles and contexts" (Armstrong, 2015, p.110). Considering the general lack of targeted professional learning for APs, the further development of an AP may be hindered due to inadequate or misaligned learning support while in the assistant position.

Although APs share in the responsibility of school improvement and are a critical component of current and future school leadership, their role is under-researched (Goldring et al., 2021). Goldring et al.'s (2021) report suggested that future research explore how APs could be better prepared to lead and manage a school in the assistant role. In their synthesis of 79 studies that examined the role of APs, Goldring et al. (2021) concluded that "to date, a robust body of research about the role has yet to be developed" (p. 5). In response, this study aimed to fill a gap in the literature by contributing to the research on learning and development in the AP role. By focusing on novice assistants, this research intended to deepen our understanding of how APs experience their initial transition into administration and how they believe they need to learn to be effective in their new role.

Theoretical Framework

This study was framed with Van Maanen and Schein's (1977) concept of organizational socialization. According to Van Maanen and Schein (1977), organizational socialization can be defined as the process whereby "an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role" (p.3). This socialization begins as an individual prepares for and then enters and learns the expectations of their work (Greenfield, 1985). In the context of school leadership, socialization provides a useful lens by which to study this early level of school leadership because it "may be viewed as an individual in a transitional role, moving from membership in the teacher group toward membership in the administrative group" (Greenfield, 1985, p.7). This transition into school leadership is "complex" and marked by "personal and professional changes" (Armstrong, 2012, p. 404). The role of teacher and administrator are markedly different, and so "changing educational careers exposes novices to new responsibilities, the norms and expectations of a different reference group, and higher levels of

scrutiny and accountability" (Armstrong, 2012, p.399). As Connery and Frick (2021) explained, "Working through the transition from the classroom to an administrative role created excitement, fear, and apprehension of the unknown but also served as a platform for learning" (p. 13). Understanding AP learning experiences and needs during this transitional time through the theory of organizational socialization was expected to provide insight into participants' stories.

Methods

Research Design

This study relied upon narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2016) to better understand the lived experiences of participants. The study presented is a description of the self-reported experiences of learning and development of five assistant principals in three Alabama schools. As qualitative inquiry seeks to understand the perspectives of participants (Merriam, 1998), individual perspectives were sought. Using narrative inquiry, personal stories were documented through dialogue between researcher and participant (Clandinin, 2016) using a conversational approach to interviewing (Merriam, 1998). Purposeful sampling was used to identify five APs participants. Four participants were selected as novice practitioners with less than two years of experience as APs, and one AP was selected as an experienced practitioner with more than two years of experience as an AP. Interview data was first analyzed through open coding (Saldaña, 2013) to identify emerging themes and patterns. Trustworthiness was established through triangulation of AP responses with one another and with expert opinion (Merriam, 1998) and through peer debriefing (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Participants

Of the five participants, four participants were current APs with experience ranging from 2-15 months at the time of interview. Assistant 1, Assistant 2, and Assistant 3 worked at the

same suburban middle school, although Assistant 1 and Assistant 3 did not work together at the same time. Assistant 4 and Experienced Assistant 5 worked in different school districts. The researcher knew the novice assistant principals in advance of the study and was a teacher in the school of Assistant 1, Assistant 2, and Assistant 3 at the time of interviews.

Assistant 1

Assistant 1 was a first-year AP during the 2020-2021 academic year, and was interviewed in March 2021, ten months into her position. Assistant 1 was in her forties, a White woman who came to the position after working as a PE teacher and coach at a suburban school outside of her district. She held an administrative certification from an online university program and a master's degree in education from a local university. At the end of the school year, she accepted an AP position at a middle school outside of the district. Assistant 3 replaced her in summer of 2021 after being a first-year assistant principal at a district elementary school.

Assistant 2

Assistant 2 was a first-year AP who started in August of 2020 and was interviewed in October 2021, fourteen months into the position. Assistant 2 was a White man in his thirties who began his career in education as a high school science teacher for a neighboring, but out of district, school after obtaining a degree in meteorology. Assistant 2 held an administrative certification and completed his Ed.S degree at a local university.

Assistant 3

Assistant 3 was interviewed in October 2021, five months into her role at the middle school. Assistant 3 was in her thirties, a Black woman who began her career in education as an English teacher and also worked as a district level, elementary curriculum coach prior to

becoming an administrator. She held an administrative certification and was pursuing an Ed.S at a local university at the time of her interview.

Assistant 4

Assistant 4 was in her late twenties, a White woman who came to her position in early October 2021 after being in the seventh year of teaching fifth grade. Assistant 4 was interviewed in November 2021, nearly two months into her role at a suburban middle school. Assistant 4 held an Ed.S from a state university and was pursuing a PhD from a state university at the time of interview.

Experienced Assistant 5

Experienced Assistant 5 was in his forties, a Black man who was interviewed in November 2021 in his eighth year as an AP. Experienced Assistant 5 had previously worked in a behavioral unit within the special education department of a rural high school and was pursuing his PhD from a state university at the time of interview. Table 9 provides participants' characteristics.

Data and Analysis

Individual, semi-structured interviews lasting approximately one hour each were conducted with each AP between March 2021 and November 2021. Interviews with Assistant 1, Assistant 2, and Assistant 3 were conducted in person, privately at the school site, and interviews with Assistant 4 and Experienced Assistant 5 were conducted over Zoom. See Appendix 9 for interview protocol. All interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed in their entirety using AI software. Audio recordings were used to reconcile transcripts, and handwritten notes were created to capture reflections and insights during and immediately after the interviews.

Each transcript was read in its entirety several times and then open coded for emerging ideas, themes, and patterns (Saldaña, 2013). Using Taguette, qualitative coding software, the first round of coding produced 24 unique terms with more than one reference. Next, an additional round of coding combined related terms and connected emergent ideas in participant responses to either research question one or two. The highest frequency of code labels for research question one (*What do novice assistant principals in Alabama learn about their role during their first years in formal school leadership?*) were: responsibilities (25), challenges (16), principals (14), and self-perception/change (11). The highest frequency of code labels for research question two *(How do assistant principals in Alabama describe valuable professional learning experiences for novice school leaders*) were: leadership opportunities (27) professional development (26), mentorship (20), social learning (19), and job embedded (11). Next, the codebook was reviewed, and a document of assertions was created. Assertions and participant quotes were organized according to research question and then assertions and participant responses were connected to the theoretical frame and literature review. Each research question had three assertions that were supported by participant quotes. These six findings are presented in the results sections.

Limitations

The small number of participants in this study is a potential limitation to the research as a larger sample size would presumably provide additional insight into the experiences of learning and change for novice APs. Furthermore, each participant was highly educated with two participants holding an Ed.S, one participant working towards it, and two participants were in a PhD program at the time of the study. As highly educated APs, their perspectives of learning may not reflect the values of other APs in Alabama with less formal education.

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Findings

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RQ1: What do novice assistant principals in Alabama learn about their role during their first years in formal leadership?

In answer to research question one, the interview data showed that newly positioned APs (1) learned that their role was distinctly different from their prior teaching/coaching roles; (2) they learned their role was influenced by the principal under whom they worked; and (3) they learned they would navigate more personal change than organizational change or school improvement in their first years.

(1) Newly positioned APs learned their role differed from their prior teaching/coaching position in that they had to make decisions from a whole school perspective; they had to spend considerable time managing student behavior, and they had to interact differently with parents and teachers.

First, participants described their need to acquire a comprehensive perspective of the needs within the school and develop different priorities once in the AP role. Assistant 1 and assistant 2 explained that their responsibilities at the school level required a change in mindset. Assistant 1 stated, "You know, it's not me getting my classes outside to the fire drill, or the severe weather drill or the lockdown. It's all 1000. So, it's a whole different mindset. Principal 2 explained, "When you fly it a little bit higher level, you know, when you become an administrator from a teacher, you see a little bit more broader perspective". As an experienced AP, Assistant 5 spoke of the importance of shifting from the teacher perspective to the administer view and warned that the AP job would not "work out" without making this shift. He noted, "It's a totally different ballgame when you get to this side. But if you try to handle it as though you are still a classroom teacher, it's not going to work out too well for you". His comment of "this side", referring to the administrative role in a school, showed that he believed

there to be a marked distinction between the two positions. According to Experienced Assistant 5, new administrators could not handle AP responsibilities from a teacher mindset; there must be a marked change.

Novice APs recognized that as a school leader, they needed to be future-minded because the decisions they made would have long-term consequences for the school. Assistant 2 shared that he had to be "really cognizant" of how his daily decisions set precedents and would inform future school policy. Assistant 2 stated,

> The decisions that we make, they don't only impact the moment, but they ultimately impact the decisions that are going to be made across the entire school year. And so, a decision that you make in August, is going to impact how you make a decision in May. And so, what you have to be really cognizant of is, when you look at decisions in the moment, taking a step back, and trying to understand what the moment means on a bigger scale. (Assistant 2)

Yet, being aware of how a response in the moment could impact the big picture later could be a challenge for a new administrator. Assistant 3 explained, "As an admin, you're so caught up in the moment sometimes that you don't really get to see how it all works together until later". According to Experienced Assistant 5, the whole school perspective is not something teachers are easily able to see until they enter the AP position. He provided an example of a current teacher who saw her recommendations for school improvement through the lens of a teacher:

> We have this teacher right now, for instance, like she's working on her admin degree, right? And every time she wants to give these suggestions to us, and we're like, we hear you, but it's not as easy as you think it is. Like, I don't think people understand it. We're on this side of it. Whenever we make decisions, like those decisions affect more than just you. They affect everybody. (Experienced Assistant 5)

In addition to a change in perspective, participants discussed how dealing with student behavior as an AP was much different from classroom management as a teacher. Each of the female participants described their AP role as being one that supported teachers. However, that

support primarily came through correcting student behavior and not through instructional

leadership. Assistant 4 discussed her struggle with student behavior and how that duty consumed

her time. She shared, "The biggest thing I'm working on is trying to get these kids to start acting

right. I probably handle 70% of the discipline, probably". As Muñoz and Barber (2010) pointed

out, "presumably, few persons go into educational administration out of desire to deal with

discipline" and so understandably, "individuals are more attracted to an AP job containing

instructional duties rather than discipline duties" (p.141). Assistant 4 desired to be an

instructional leader, but because of the time she spent on student discipline at her middle school,

she spoke of "never" getting to do the "fun part" of her job. She explained:

> I would love to be able to be an instructional leader. Like, that's the fun part. Like, it's, I mean, going into the classrooms and helping teachers, like, with their instruction, that's so much fun. But I never get to do that because I'm dealing with discipline. And if we don't have the discipline under control, instruction is not going to happen. Right. So, I mean, until we get discipline, you know, you can't have instruction unless the discipline is, you know, good. Until unless the management is where it's supposed to be. (Assistant 4)

Similarly, Assistant 3 expressed her frustration with student discipline responsibilities that

looked different from what she had experienced as a teacher. As a teacher, student behavior was

viewed as a teaching opportunity instead of an enforcement of consequences.

> Like I'm just sick of dealing with discipline. In the AP role, the thought process is well, my job is just to discipline, my job is not really to teach how to behave. And I think that's a messed-up way of viewing the role of assistant principal. (Assistant 3)

Although Goldring (2021) found the AP role has become less focused on discipline, Assistant 4,

Assistant 3, and Assistant 1 each believed their job was primarily linked to student behavior

problems and discipline. Furthermore, these participants expressed weariness from this duty and

appeared to struggle with managing the behavior in their middle schools. Experienced Assistant

B, however, believed he did not struggle with discipline as a new AP the way most novice

leaders did because he had atypical experience in a "special education behavior unit". He believed his behavior training gave him an advantage and speaking of student behavior, he explained, "That [behavior] training kind of prepared me to deal with a lot of the things that I would encounter as a first-year assistant principal".

In addition to a changing role with students, the novice participants identified that interacting with adults at school was notably different as a new administrator. Assistant 1 found it challenging to see professional boundaries violated by angry parents. This new leader described her response to an interaction with a hostile parent whose threats and "dog cussing" violated her sense of acceptability in public interaction. Assistant 1 shared, "And that is hard to stay professional. When someone is attacking your integrity. They feel like they have the right to curse you when I'm like, you know, people, my family don't--we don't interact that way". Armstrong (2015) noted that the work of APs occurs "primarily at the organizational frontlines of their particular school" (p. 111) which contrasts to the typical work of the teacher. The AP role has the potential to bring many more encounters with difficult stakeholders. Assistant 4 discussed the toll of contacting parents where there is a problem with their child:

> So, there's not a lot of validation, because I'm really dealing with, you know, because the, you know, not great kids and the parents that when I call, you know, when I call parents, it's usually not a very good thing. (Assistant 4)

In addition to having difficult conversations with parents, novice APs discussed the challenge of supervising and leading faculty and staff. Commonly, APs do not have experience managing adults upon entering their position, and Assistant 4 found this to be an area where she needed development:

> The biggest area of growth is managing people…adults have been a challenge and figuring out how to do that and figuring out my leadership style with adults because managing students and managing adults is a lot different. (Assistant 4)

Navigating this complexity was described by Assistant 1 as well. She struggled with trying to support teachers while also holding them accountable.

> You know, I want to be intentional to help [teachers]. But I also have the mindset that this is your job. And these are your responsibilities, and you have to make it work. But how can I help you make it work? How can I help teachers understand that you have a voice in this? (Assistant 1)

Assistant 1 explained that she tried to "shift the monkey" back on teachers and not try to resolve every issue brought to her. She explained as an AP, "You learn you have to 'adult' adults when you're in this role". While APs have positional authority over other adults in the building, they may not encounter human resource issues the same way as a principal. Assistant 4 described how the faculty and staff tried to bypass her and deal directly with the principal:

> And they're like, 'Well, I'm gonna talk to [---]', who's my principal. And I'm like, 'Well, he's busy. He's got meetings today; you're talking to me'. And so, and then same with like, teachers and all that, like, they go to him typically. (Assistant 4)

Novice APs learned that their interaction with adults changed when they entered administration, and participants were in the process of forming their identity by distinguishing themselves from teachers. The novice participants primarily focused on how they were different and separate from the teacher group they left. Assistant 3 shared, "There are some things I can't go to the teacher and say, today is really rough…You really don't want to go to a teacher because that's a conflict of what they need to see us the strong one." Assistant 4 shared her perspective of the difference between a teacher and AP. She noted, "I'm no better than any of them. I mean, yeah, I'm getting paid more and more responsibility, but like, we're all in this together". The comments of Assistant 3 and Assistant 4 suggested that they were concerned with how teachers viewed them in the AP role and wanted to be thought of as "the strong one" and as "no better than". Assistant 1 differentiated herself from teachers by connecting teachers to a particular school and viewing

herself, in contrast, as temporary and transient. Assistant 1 stated, "Because I'll come and go,

assistant principals and principals come and go, [teachers] are the ones that stay. [Teachers] are

the ones that keep the school together".

Each of the women assistants emphasized how change in their relationships with teachers

impacted them after becoming an AP. Assistant 3 and Assistant 4 described how their position

separated them from their "best friends" and from people with whom they could relate. Assistant

3 shared, "The admin world can be very lonely…So there's so much that you deal with that

either you can't talk about or if you tried to explain it, people don't get it". Assistant 4

commented,

> I love my principal, and we just get along great. But at the end of the day, as much as
> like, he and I have a great relationship, like, he's my boss. Yeah, you know, whereas like,
> when I was teacher, I worked with my best friends. Well, they weren't my boss at the end
> of the day. (Assistant 4)

This change in relationships created a sense of isolation and loneliness in these participants.

Assistant 4 described the loss in relationships she experienced when she perceived those teachers

did not want to talk with her in the lunchroom. Assistant 4 shared,

> You know, and to really feed into [teachers] and pour into them. And encourage them.
> And, and that's been hard, you know, because, like leaving the classroom and now being
> on the leadership side, like, no one's asking me how my weekend was, you know, no
> one's asking me what I'm doing for Thanksgiving, you know, when like, we're in the
> lunchroom, like, people don't really want to talk to me. (Assistant 4)

Armstrong (2015) explained that "the change in teachers' attitudes and expectations also made

the new vice-principals' aware that they were now outsiders to the teaching culture" (Armstrong,

2015, p. 113). The women participants in this study not only saw themselves as separate from

teachers but also suggested that the teachers related to participants differently. Assistant 1 stated,

> But essentially, I'm the boss…you have to make sure you keep that in check, but also
> know that we're human, you know, but that's, I've missed that part of it. I'll tell you, it's

kind of like you're on this little island. And you have your people up here. But the teacher friends go away. (Assistant 1)

Assistant 1's self- perception of "boss" emphasized the tension between the emotional longing for closer relationships and a perceived need to keep roles "in check". As Armstrong (2012) explained, the "passage across unfamiliar organizational territory [from teacher to AP] affects newcomers socially and psychologically" (p.399). Assistant 1 shared, "The biggest challenge for me is my friends. Relationships change. I go from colleague- friend to colleague. Yeah, and I missed that. I can't, I still try. But now I'm not the equal". Assistant 1's comment of not being equal with teacher friends suggested she held a hierarchical concept of school leadership that puts one above the others. As a position where social support is needed, Assistant 1 believed she "can't" be friends with teachers in the same way she had been before.

(2) Newly positioned APs learned to define their role in response to the principal under whom they worked.

In describing their experiences with the school principal, APs distinguished themselves from the principal primarily through their different duties and responsibilities. Experienced Assistant 5, however, saw his role and principal role more similar than the novice APs did. He commented,

> To be honest with you. I think the only difference is, of course, he [the principal] sees more than we [the assistant principals] see-- fires, emails, and what's coming from the central office. But when it comes to like, the different duties, he doesn't handle a lot of that because we handle it. So, he's doing what he has to do. That's pretty much it. (Experienced Assistant 5)

When asked what the principal does, Experienced Assistant 5 identified school finance as the principal's responsibility. At his school, assistants were not involved in school funding decisions. He stated,

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> Now there are some things that as a principal he'll see, like the finances, you know, we don't get it, we're not privy to see that. I think a lot of it is kind of he's been so used to doing it, and he just kind of takes care of it. He will take care of that. (Experienced Assistant 5)

Assistant 4 saw a collaborative factor in her relationship with her principal, an individual she had known for many years. She shared, "We work really, really well together. And we kind of just, like, feed off each other". Yet, she also clearly saw the principal as the boss and the one who had to "handle" what she could not. She shared a time when she needed the principal to handle a situation with middle school boys by stating, "I'm like, I cannot--like you're the boss. I can't, I can't, you know, like, I'm 29 years old, like, I'm single, like, yeah, you handle that".

Furthermore, Assistant 4 believed the responsibility of the principal was to pass information to her. The principal would be the connection for the district, and she would learn from him. She stated that her district does "a lot more with the principals and the principals share with their assistant principals". As noted in Barnett et al. (2012), "principals have the power to provide meaningful growth and development opportunities for their assistant principals, especially in building their capabilities to become future principals" (p.97). Growth and development opportunities could come via sharing information and in mentorship between a principal and assistant who had a close professional relationship. However, not all APs have this type of working relationship with the principal. Assistant 3 recognized that she had responsibilities that she could not address with her principal. She noted, "There are some things you can't go to the principal about because they're dealing with principal things".

(3) Newly positioned APs learned they would navigate personal change more than initiative organizational change during their first years.

Presumably most educators aspire to work in administration, at least in part, for the opportunity to positively influence a school. Yet, for these novice APs, there was no indication of their plans for organizational change projects or initiatives. The biggest changes they made were not towards school improvement, but rather, self-improvement. Assistant 2 described that he learned more about himself than he did about his school during his first year. He commented, "The first year is really the biggest change…you progressively learn, not so much more about what's going on inside of your building, but more about yourself" and added, "In the administrative world, you change when you start to lead people and see the different needs that people have. Your ability to grow and change and adapt to an ever-changing world, especially in education is huge". Part of that change was the defining of a leadership style and an awareness of how others viewed them. Assistant 2 described how he wanted to be viewed in his role.

> Being able to kind of be the person that people could go to, if they needed help either problem solving or trying to empower them to be able to be a better person. I always want people to say that they can trust me, and that I'm somebody who's going to communicate with them when they need communication. (Assistant 2)

While some areas of their leadership were growing, novice APs realized that other areas of their lives needed to be put on hold. Some personal plans had to be reprioritized because novice APs experienced new demands on their time. Assistant 4 gave an example. She shared,
My [PhD coursework] stuff--that's something on such the back burner this semester, because I'm just like, this job's been so busy". Armstrong (2015) found that AP "participants attributed their feelings of cultural and role dissonance to increases in the intensity, pace, and volume of their daily work" (p.114). Referring to the intensity of her work, Assistant 3 stated, "You're always putting out fires". As an established school leader, Experienced Assistant 5 described how his personal priorities changed from the time he was a novice AP. At the beginning of his tenure, he

felt obligated to be at every school function and event, even while living an hour away from his school. Later, he felt more comfortable declining requests. He explained:

> My priorities used to be "I gotta, I gotta". Now, I get to do it. Now, I'm just kind of like, it can wait, let me finish one thing at a time, take the time. I don't have to attend every play that's going on. I can attend this when I can. I can make my own schedule. (Experienced Assistant 5)

Novice AP 4 experienced self-doubt in her new role as she took on different responsibilities. She stated, "I'm trying to prove myself" and expounded:

> You know, I questioned myself all the time. I'm like, am I even making a difference at all now? Two of our biggest behavior issues have left since I've been here. And I don't know if it's because those parents got tired of hearing from me. I don't know. (Assistant 4)

When asked what her main responsibilities were as an AP, Assistant 4 identified, "Discipline and attendance, which is like, not doing a good job with that". Low self-efficacy in school leaders has been connected to a variety of detrimental outcomes for the individual and the larger school organization (Kearney et al., 2016), and a novice AP may experience low confidence in the new position. Effective teachers and curriculum coaches are often recruited for leadership and upon entering administration, they are likely leaving a position in which they experienced high self-efficacy. There is a confidence that comes from being successful in one's work, and here, a promotion repositions APs in an unfamiliar role. Assistant 1 expressed her approach to learning her new responsibilities, she stated that as an Ap, "You learn by doing. You fake it till you make it". The comment of "faking it" seemed to speak to a low self-efficacy that caused her to feel fake in her position. The pressure to conform to role expectations and context demands can move new leaders to forfeit transparency in themselves, thus losing authenticity. As Assistant 1 considered the biggest change in herself as she transitioned to administration, she reflected that she had an "intense" part of her personality that she could not bring to her AP role.

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Assistant 1 confined, "To be honest…You kind of take that part of your personality and you bury it."

RQ2: How do assistant principals in Alabama describe valuable professional learning experiences for novice school leaders?

In answer to research question two, the interview data showed that (1) APs valued their prior leadership experience and context specific, local level learning above formal education; (2) APs valued learning from social examples and from a variety of perspectives; and (3) APs believed mentorship could be a valuable professional learning experience under the right circumstances.

(1) APs did not believe formal learning prepared them for their position, but instead credited their prior experience as preparation and valued learning that was local and context specific.

Each of the participants held advanced degrees and completed an administrator credentialing program. However, none of the participants connected their formal education to valuable preparation for the AP position. Instead, each participant identified previous leadership roles and opportunities as their best preparation for their work. Experienced Assistant 5 believed his unique positional experience before taking the AP role made his transition successful. He explained,

> I think working [in special education] kind of prepared me to be an assistant principal, just kind of dealing with a lot of the discipline issues that we had there. And just having that experience, I think that's what really, you know, kind of gave me an edge before I transitioned into the assistant principal role. So, it was kind of a smooth transition. For me, it wasn't hard at all, just because like I said, I had already had that experience. (Experienced Assistant 5)

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Novice APs described feeling underprepared and undertrained for their work. Experienced Assistant 5 explained that being an effective AP required on-the-job training that could not be gained as a teacher or through a book. He stated,

> But there's really no particular way to prep yourself. It just comes through experience because as a schoolteacher, you're not going to encounter the same things that we deal with as administrators, you know, are you not going to even handle those things to gain that experience. (Experienced Assistant 5)

And added,

> But books or none of that stuff could really prepare you. Like I said, theory is always good, and they'll tell you the things that you're supposed to do. But you have to actually be in the job to really be prepared--that's going to be the best training ever. (Experienced Assistant 5)

Assistant 1 described the feeling of being unprepared as being "thrown into" her position even though she completed her preparation program that included a ten-day internship experience. She commented, "You know, so you get, you get thrown into this position. And then all the little intricate details that are really the most important, kind of like they always say, do the little things. We don't get trained on that". Reflecting upon her master's degree and leadership certification coursework and concluded, "I don't think there is any class that is going to teach you for this [AP] position…I can't say there is an instructional leadership class that I took...that can teach you everything…it just can't".

Considering the responsibilities of an AP and her required school district professional development, Assistant 1 added, "Well, they don't train you for that. Classes don't train you for that. PD doesn't train you for that. You're just learning it". Assistant 2 and Assistant 3 discussed their preparation for school leadership, and Assistant 2 stated, "I don't know that anything necessarily prepares you...I think previous leadership experience really, really helps". Assistant 3

commented, "There's no research to tell us how to make it through this". A possible explanation

for the belief that formal learning does not teach or train an individual to be an AP may connect

to divergent priorities between program objectives and new leader experiences. Preemptive

course work intended to prepare school leaders may emphasis theory and leadership

development (e.g., visionary and transformational leadership, change agency, organizational

theory, etc. as in Daniëls et al. 2019, Huber, 2011), yet Assistant 1 believed she primarily needed

to know context level policy and procedures. She stated,

> We [APs] just kind of learn...we wish we had training for this...I think it's almost more
> like this local level training because...we go to those [assistant principal] meetings...but I
> guess you just learn about doing--you just like, again, sink or swim. You just gotta figure
> it out. (Assistant 1)

The feeling of needing to "figure it out" implies that she judged her preparatory knowledge to be

insufficient to meet the practical needs of first year administrators. This sentiment was expressed

by Assistant 3 as well. She commented, "And it's not okay to just say, well, you're an admin

because you are great in the classroom, or you are great at the district level. So, you got it. We

don't got it, for lack of better words". The assumption that effective teachers and curriculum

leaders are prepared to successfully the role of building level leader was brought out in Assistant

3's statement.

Adding to the belief that assistants need contextual learning opportunities, Assistant 2

pointed out that as a new administrator, there were practical management protocols of which APs

were not aware. He stated, "I think for new school leaders, it's really tough, And I will just say

this...there's a lot of you don't know what you don't know...some of the nuts and bolts of what it

means to be a building leader". Stein (2016) differentiated between management and leadership

by identifying the primary efforts of each and noted, "...management is the application of social

scientific principles with a focus on planning, organizing, directing, and controlling. Leadership...goes much further by taking on the vastly more important and difficult task of influencing people and inspiring them to succeed" (p.22). This difference between school leadership and school management might not be immediately apparent to those entering the role. At the early career level, it is possible that administrators were trained in leadership when in practice, their role is primarily management. Assistant 2 discussed this as it applies to school culture. He explained, "creating a vision, and you know, as an assistant principal, we don't really create the vision. We help create the vision, but the culture and the climate is really developed by the building principal". Assistant 2 discussed the abundant training he received on the topic of culture and climate, and yet, he believed he did not have a way to put that learning into practice because that was not his job.

Assistant 3 touched on this role distinction when describing her experience with district lead professional development. She stated,

> They pull in new admin, and monthly they're meeting and they're coaching them and they're teaching them and they're training them for that principal seat. But even just to be an effective AP because the work is very different from the work of a principal. (Assistant 3)

Principal 1 commented that "there is nothing more frustrating...to go to a PD that is like… I'm not learning one thing". Both Assistant 3 and Assistant 1's comments suggested that valuable learning should be relevant to the AP position, not be far removed from personal experience, but rather, it needed to be connected to personal involvement and action. Assistant 3 believed she learned her job through practice and modeling that aligned with the school's context and population. Assistant 3 stated,

> You know, we get all these great books about, you know, what a PLC is, and you need to implement PLCs in your building, and you need to be supporting your teachers and instruction. But then, what does that really look like and making it specific to the

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demographic in which you serve? So, like what I need here at [--] is very different than what the AP at [--] may need. (Assistant 3)

Describing professional development, Assistant 2 emphasized the activities he participated in during local meetings and appeared satisfied with "all day activities where we're doing jigsaws, or we're doing chapter book studies, or we're doing talk and turns", but he pointed out the need to be proactive in looking for other learning opportunities as well. Principal 2 stated, "And so, it really is about taking what the district gives you, but also trying to find some of the things that you're interested in to kind of guide your own way and own path". Similarly, Assistant 3 found her own ways to learn and sought out topics she needed. She shared,

> I watch a lot of videos; I like TED Talks. I like listening to audio books. I like sitting and just listening to people who have done what I'm doing for a long time just kind of told me about the ways to let things roll off my back, or the ways to be okay, not being okay. (Assistant 3)

Both Assistant 2 and Assistant 3 mentioned the need for new leader preparation into a holistic, cohesive perspective that enables assistants to see how individual topics, such as budgeting and planning, discipline, school safety, or case law, fit together and influence a school. Assistant 2 explained,

> You don't really get to bring all of that together into one cohesive vision for what you feel like a school should look like...we talk about what culture is or what the definition of culture is, we talk about all the individual pieces a lot, but we never summarize all of them...or bring them together into what a full building culture would look like or what part we play in it. (Assistant 2)

Experienced Assistant 5 stated that professional development needed to be centered on problems of practice that administrators could relate to in their schools. He noted,

> I think the best, the best, the best experience and the best professional development would be giving you a real-world scenario. But when it's all said and done, like give me some actual things that's actually happening in the school system. You know, let's talk about how COVID really affected the school. Let's talk about how [--] sucks. So, let's talk about how parents are upset about [--]. (Experienced Assistant 5)

Assistant 3 made the point that new leaders are pulled out of their building to attend district meetings but learning that way that seemed superficial to her. She expressed a desire for district leaders to spend time in the building with her. She commented,

> I feel like pulling those fresh outs, you know, one to five year or one-to-three-year admins, and just doing some very deep, introspective work with them. That's not just the surface. You know, we thank you for the work that you do and reach out to another AP when you're struggling but being intentional about growing leaders. (Assistant 3)

(2) APs valued learning from social examples and from a variety of perspectives

Novice APs sought out informal, social learning experiences where they could learn strategies and approaches from other practitioners. Assistant 1 and Experienced Assistant 5 mentioned how they learned from other administrators at an annual administrators' conference. Assistant 1 stated,

> Oh, I love the panels, when they do the panels with administrators now have one at each level, elementary, middle and high school, and different districts and urban and suburban and rural. And that is really very meaningful, where we can just ask questions. (Assistant 1)

Experienced Assistant 5 shared,

> Trying to hear different assistants, as well as principals, perspectives on how they handled certain situations, how they handle, you know, the different laws and how to interpret different things or whatever. (Experienced Assistant 5)

Participants expressed a preference for in person learning and explained that due to Covid-19, each of the districts had transitioned to online administrator meetings and professional development. Assistant 4 explained the problem with professional development delivered to schools during the workday. She felt the need to prioritize the issues unfolding at the school above her own training. She explained, "Well, when you're in the building, you know, you're still there. And so, you have the constant interruptions. And so, I mean, we're constantly getting pulled during those meetings". She added, "If I'm in some training about something, and there's

an emergency and like, you know, my kids acting like a fool, like, I'm gonna go help that teacher. I'm not sitting here in a training". Assistant 1 voiced a similar sentiment in regard to online professional development. She commented, "The only thing this year that I missed is again, the interaction because everything we're doing is online, which is great for time. Yeah, it's more efficient. But you don't get that one on one. And you need that".

Each of the women APs discussed a desire for social networks and relational learning and each mentioned feeling lonely and isolated. The novice man participant mentioned relationships in terms of something to do after surviving the first year as an administrator. Assistant 2 stated, "After you've kind of gotten through and survived that first year, you start making connections with people that are long lasting. You can take that survival mode off". However, in contrast to postponing social networking, Assistant 1 intentionally sought social networks to build her competency and efficacy as an administrator. In this role, there was a strong need to interact with others in order to learn. She shared that the AP position is "a job where you need to be with other people". When discussing how she learned during her first year as school leader, Assistant 3 described the proactive steps she took with her social support and networks. She stated that she did this by:

> Leaning on other APs, like we would call each other, you know, and going to my principal and saying, 'hey, what can I do to be better? Tell me the things that I don't know and let sit down and learn things together'. (Assistant 3)

She added,

> And so, there's a lot of days where you know, you will just pick up the phone and call another AP because you just need to hear somebody else say it's as hard where they are as it is where you are. (Assistant 3)

Referring to residency requirements in the instructional leadership program, Assistant 1 recognized that social learning would benefit her future practice. She shared, "I wanted to get out and see what the different city systems and schools do. That was--that was big those 10 days".

One of the benefits of networking is the multiplied perspectives and potential for diverse

thinking and solutions to common leadership challenges in schools. Her reflection showed an

awareness of the value in partnering with other school leaders for the purpose of seeing

alternative approaches, and ultimately learning one's role. This value is echoed in a comment

regarding a conference that placed her in a geographically distant setting. Assistant 1 explained,

> I went to [a conference] in [--] ...you get a different perspective...we can just bounce those ideas off of each other. How are y'all doing…It's good to be able to open up and see what other folks are doing in their district. (Assistant 1)

The ability to interact with different personalities in the context of school leadership offered

perspectives that built knowledge. Assistant 1's comments showed an eagerness to connect and

add to her current understanding of how things are done in a specific location. The desire to learn

from others demonstrates the high value Assistant1 placed on social learning as experienced in

professional networks as a new administrator.

(3) APs believed mentorship could be a valuable professional learning experience under the

right circumstances.

Strategic mentorship can bridge the leadership/management divide for new

administrators and provide the management piece a new leader perceives as missing from their

preparation (Cohen, 2019). While Assistant 1, Assistant 2, and Assistant 3 were connected to

experienced APs who served as their formal mentors, Assistant 3 felt her assigned mentor did not

have the time to support her and a more intentional form of mentorship was needed. She shared,

> I say it over and over again, I feel like new admin need mentors. And I believe that districts should invest in that. I feel like if you want your schools to be successful, if you want your teachers to feel supported, and to build capacity in them to increase student achievement, you need to support your leadership. (Assistant 3)

In Assistant 1 believed her assigned mentor needed to be local to be meaningful. A formal

mentor at another school did not provide the attention and direction that a physically near mentor

could offer. She commented,

> My mentor was at the high school. Well, that doesn't make any sense...She's at the high
> school. She's running her own show up there...whereas the lady who sat in my office [at
> the middle school] ...she's the one who's mentoring me. (Assistant 1)

The lady in the office could guide her in daily operations and context specific expectations.

Assistant 1 found this valuable, and she also believed her principal was a mentor to her. She

explained, "[Principal G], he's different from any other administrator in the fact that he puts his

trust in ...[me] without a lot of training, and it's kinda like--this is what you're in charge of. And

it's almost a sink or swim mentality". The reference to a "sink or swim mentality" suggested that

Assistant 1 saw opportunities to rise and meet the challenge of her position despite her

inexperience. However, the approach that creates a "sink or swim" feeling in this novice AP may

not be perceived as mentorship in another. Assistant 3, who also worked under Principal G, did

not feel principals could adequately mentor their assistants. She stated,

> And so, and you know, when you're in the building, and you're doing the daily grind of it,
> the principal doesn't have time to mentor the AP. And that's what is perceived to be how
> it works. And that's not the reality. (Assistant 3)

This commented suggested that the leadership styles and relational fit between mentor and

mentee are more important than the fact that a formal mentorship was in place. Assistant 2 spoke

of his assigned mentor and mentioned the informal coaching support provided from the district

office. He stated that his mentor was "another assistant, and that person has now become a

principal. So that assistant principal was great for me". Assistant 3 also mentioned the

responsibility of the district in creating mentor programming for new APs. She emphasized that

other assistants do not have time to be mentors, but she suggested the district create a cohort of

mentors from district leaders with administrative experience. She stated that "there are people at

the district level who went from AP straight to the district, and they never were as principal.

They know that they didn't want to aspire to that, but they can coach one". She also found

mentorship in relationships outside of her assigned mentor connection. She shared,

> You know, one of my closest mentors is actually a professor at [--]. And she leads in that capacity. And so, for me, just watching her and modeling her has been a huge influence for me. And then, you know, as an instructional coach working along program areas specialist and coordinators, those district leaders who were once administrators and are now working at the district level, they've also been inspirational and have helped grow me as a leader. (Assistant 3)

Experienced Assistant 5 explained that APs were not assigned formal mentors by his district

because APs work closely with other administrators, at least a principal, if not other APs, who

should be able answer questions and provide direction. He explained,

> And I guess the mindset is, hey, you got three or four other colleagues that you can, if you need to, you know, need some assistance you need to get with them, or whatever. We have a new assistant principal at my school, and you know, I pretty much mentor her. (Experienced Assistant 5).

However, the issue of who should be providing mentoring surfaced as Assistant 3 and

Experienced Assistant 5 noted that APs need mentor options besides the principal. Assistant 3

commented,

> And so, I feel that on the district level, there should be a cohort where they pull in new admin, and monthly they're meeting and they're coaching them and they're teaching them and they're training them for that principal seat. But even just to be an effective AP because of the work is very different from the work of a principal. And so, I do feel like that's the missing link. (Assistant 3)

Experienced Assistant 5 commented that APs "really need to probably find that assistant

principal that you can kind of latch on to because, of course, the principal's always busy". While

Experienced Assistant 5 suggested finding another assistant to become a mentor, Assistant 3

stated that she did not have time to mentor another assistant. Furthermore, Experienced Assistant 5 noted that the mentor needed someone who was doing quality work. He explained,

> But I would say if you don't have a mentor, you need an effective assistant principal. And what I mean by effective is someone that, you know, for a fact is actually trying to do the job and not just wants the title because a lot of people just want the title. They don't actually want to go through that and go through doing the actual work or whatever. I had a former colleague who was like that--who enjoyed the title of it but didn't really get down and really do the dirty work of what needs to be done. (Experienced Assistant 5)

Experienced Assistant 5 further acknowledged the political considerations of mentoring by recommending that APs seek out a mentor in a way that would not make the mentor feel threatened. He suggested that APs

> Make sure that whoever that that assistant principal mentor is someone who's going to be effective, and that's going to actually help you and not feel threatened that you're trying to take their job, they just want to, you know, they want you they want some guidance or whatever and pretty much go from there. (Experienced Assistant 5)

Discussion

Overall, entry into the AP role is complex and marked by dramatic changes in responsibilities and relationships. To better support novice APs in the socialization process into leadership, reframing the role as an instructional leader may help new APs bridge the transition from teacher to administrator in a more positive and sustainable way. Novice APs may feel underprepared for their new role and desire highly specific, site training that could be accommodated by a local, well aligned mentor who is able to make time for the new AP. Districts and university partnerships should target professional development to the AP that accommodates adult learning needs and is social, site-specific, and experiential.

Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore what five APs in Alabama learned about their role as novice school leaders and to understand which learning opportunities were most valued

by newly positioned school leaders. Because school leaders are uniquely influential in their position (Leithwood, 2020), and their professional learning can be a pathway to greater organizational outcomes and overall school improvement (Andreoli et al., 2020), novice and emerging school leader development at the AP level is meaningful to examine. As Connery and Frick (2021) concluded in their study of mentorship and wellbeing for APs, the first years of practice are critical as "experiences during this time can play a large role in whether an administrator chooses to remain in the field or move on to something else" (p.17)

Defining the AP Role

First, as described in Armstrong (2012) and Greenfield (1985), participants in this study encountered significant professional changes after their transition from teacher to administrator. Immediately, they needed to hold a mental model that accommodated the needs of a whole school which was markedly different from their teaching perspective. APs encountered a heavy load of student discipline which for two participants, made their work less enjoyable because it meant less time was available for them to practice instructional leadership. In this way, these novice leaders may have been "underutilized" as noted by Kearney (2016, p.18), as their recent experience with expert instruction as successful teachers was not at the forefront in their AP role. Based on the findings of this study, instead of linking APs with the "undesirable tasks" (Kearney, 2016, p. 18), districts and principals may consider socializing the AP into the role by emphasizing the instructional leadership dimension of the position. Armstrong (2015) recorded that new APs were shocked by the demands of their position, and in this study, findings suggested that APs may be better supported by allowing them to begin with responsibilities closer to teaching. Emphasizing the instructional leadership responsibilities for the novice AP

may also address some of the relational loss APs experienced during their socialization out of teaching.

Each of the women commented on the loss of teacher friendships and the loneliness they felt in their role. Each woman also articulated a marked distinction between themselves and teachers which may also have contributed to the sense of separation they experienced. They viewed themselves as "the boss", "the strong one", and "not an equal", and while they believed they needed to support teachers and spoke of what they needed to do for teachers, there was no discussion of collaborating with teachers. If the position of AP is clearly defined as an instructional leadership role, the novice AP may be better able to partner with teachers and experience close co-working relationships.

Supporting Learning Opportunities

Novice participants expressed a desire for local level, contextual learning opportunities that were informal and social. As adult learners, APs desired learning that addressed their felt needs as newly positioned leaders. Huber (2011) explained:

> Adult learners select what they learn, they filter information, consciously or subconsciously. Thereby they proceed in a way that is much more problem-oriented than theme-centered and the effects of learning are more sustainable when there is the possibility to apply in practice what they have learned. (p.839)

A feasible way to provide this type of practical, job-embedded learning support for positioned APs is through mentorship. However, while mentorship for school leaders is supported in literature (Barnett et al., 2017; Connery & Frick, 2021), this study found that it can be problematic in practice. First, the question of who should provide the mentoring may complicate

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this method of AP development. As several participants pointed out, it is assumed that the principal mentors the AP, but two participants perceived that their principals did not have time to do this. In one distinct, experienced APs were assigned as mentors, but they too had time constraints, and as Experienced Assistant 5 noted, there can be political issues at play that stifle mentorship between two APs. Furthermore, of the three APs in this study who had a district assigned, formal mentor, only one individual was satisfied with his mentor. The other two participants supplemented their assigned mentorship with informal relationships they pursued on their own. For these reasons, this study recommends that districts take an intentional approach to the facilitation of mentors for novice APs and seek out mentors who can be present in the local context and who have the availability to make time for the newly positioned AP. In alignment with participants in Hayes and Burkett (2021), one participant in this study recommended these mentors be district personnel with administrator experience. Participants in Gümüş (2019) recommend that districts retain retired principals as mentors "since they had crucial experiences and flexible time" (p.17).

Learning in Context

Participants emphasized the importance of prior experience in their preparation for the AP role and placed a lower value on their formal education, including district provided professional development, particularly virtual professional development. These practitioners believed experience in the role of administrator was the best preparation for the role because each of the APs valued the learning they gained from working in a school. This aligns with Cosner et al.'s (2018) assertion that adult learners rely upon "practice development" (p.240) in authentic contexts as ways to learn and improve their abilities. As found in Armstrong (2015), there was a description of feeling unprepared in three of the five participants. Notably, the three

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women APs had the least amount of leadership experience and the shortest administrative internships, and they were the participants who expressed feeling under-trained and isolated in their position. In Duncan's (2013) study of professional development needs according to gender, the author found that women administrators desired comparatively more learning and development than men. The author hypothesized that this need resulted because women, on average, spend more time as teachers and have less leadership experiences than men (Duncan, 2013). Considering the practical value these participants placed on their local experience, districts and university partnership programs may consider redistributing credentialing requirements and professional development to give greater priority to the field experiences both before and after a candidate is placed into position. They may also want to focus on the learning needs of women.

While these leaders did not describe their university college coursework or their district professional development content as meaningful to them, that does not mean there is little value in formal learning. A possible explanation for the belief that formal learning does not teach or train an individual to be an AP may connect to divergent priorities between program objectives and immediate AP experiences. Preemptive course work intended to prepare school leaders may emphasis theory and leadership development (e.g., visionary and transformational leadership, change agency, organizational theory, etc. as in Daniëls et al. 2019, Huber, 2011), yet in the moment, new leaders may feel the urgency to know context level policy and procedures. If assistants are viewed solely as pre-principals, their prescribed learning may arch above them and not be fit for their current role.

Yet, since the AP position generally leads to the principalship (Goldring et al., 2021), early career practitioners will need to be equipped for their future role as there is no other formal

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schooling or certification between the level of assistant and principal. For this reason, university

programs and districts may want to emphasize local experiential learning, but not to the extent

that the theoretical underpinnings of leadership are dismissed. While development building in

emerging leaders may need to focus on what supports and promotes informal, context specific,

experiential learning, there are implications of doing so exclusively. School leaders are positional

change agents who can disrupt the status quo and reshape education. One issue with minimizing

research based, formal education is that practitioners may rely fully on local mindsets and

structures that might perpetuate some of the very problems education needs to address. Formal

learning generally attempts to lift leaders out of the narrow, site specific, task dominated mindset

to see a fuller picture of what students need and how they personally play a part in restructuring

of schools.

Future Research

This study focused only on the self-reported experiences of APs and future work could

pair participant responses with data from school administrators and current supervisors. Future

research could look at AP experiences of learning in other locations around and outside of

Alabama and could combine findings in a mixed method approach that would survey an entire

state or region. A case study approach that explored the principal's perspective of their APs

learning and development would provide additional layers of understanding to AP studies. An

examination of what professional development districts specifically provide for APs in

comparison to what APs desire and request in their professional development would be another

area for deeper inquiry. Finally, this study found notable differences between the preparation

experiences and feelings of connection and competence between the men and women

participants. Although the different experiences of participants by gender was beyond the scope

of this work, further research could explore this issue.

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Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore school leader learning and development through a review of literature spanning from 2011-2021 and by two qualitative studies that examined the phenomenon of professional learning and development described by ten experienced principals and five APs in Alabama. Each article aimed to contribute to knowledge on school leader learning in a way that stood alone and linked together in concept. The systematic literature review (Gouch, 2007) described the characteristics of recent studies and used Hallinger's (2013) five guiding questions to examine how school leaders continued to learn and develop and how has this been supported or hindered as well as what school leaders learned in professional development and how that aligned with what they wanted and needed to learn. The two qualitative, narrative studies offered insight into the lived experiences of practitioners in Alabama who spoke of their professional learning experiences, needs, and preferences in connection to their school leadership role.

Systematic Literature Review

The systematic literature review showed that school leaders participated in formal professional development provided by school districts and university partnership programs, and they value the social interaction these opportunities provided. School leaders relied on social learning through relationships and peer examples found in mentorships, networks, and professional meetings (Barnett et al. 2017; Connery & Frick, 2021; Cothern, 2020; Gümüş,2019; Lazanby et. al, 2020). They learned from experience in their position (Connery & Frick; 202; Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2020), and they sought to learn through independent efforts, such as reading and self-reflection (Andreoli et al. 2021; Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2020). Individual characteristics appeared to account for some reasons why a school leader did not pursue

professional learning opportunities (Duncan, 2013; Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2020), but overwhelming, the hindrances to school leader learning came from district approaches.

To support school leader learning, the literature showed that districts needed to be engaged in professional development for leaders (Andreoli et al., 2021; Connery & Frick, 2021; Hayes & Burkett, 2021), be competent when they led it (Honig & Rainey, 2014), and proactive in establishing collaborative opportunities for leaders to learn in a risk free (Paulsen & Hjertø, 2019), learning friendly environment (Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2020). While some districts assigned formal mentors to administrators, it is important that mentors and mentees receive training (Barnett et al., 2017) and that mentors be aware of their mentee's weaknesses and needs (Gümüş, 2019).

The literature showed that districts and university partnership programs needed to provide professional development that was informed by adult learning needs and preferences (Duncan et al., 2011) by offering choice, flexibility, and autonomy (Lazenby et al., 2020). School leaders needed individualized learning experiences that account for their experience level and career stage (Acton, 2021; Lazenby et al., 2020). Furthermore, professional development for principals and APs should be individualized (Cardno & Youngs, 2013), emotionally supportive (Gümüş, 2019), relational (Parylo et al., 2012), collaborative (Hayes & Burkett, 2021; Lazenby et al., 2020), ongoing, systematic, and relevant (Acton, 2021; Andreoli et al., 2021).

This review showed that the learning school leaders received has been mostly in line with what practitioners desired and with what researchers identified as needed with the exception of the desire for more learning about race and diversity issues (Hayes & Burkett, 2012) and organizational skills, such as budgeting and finance (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Hayes & Burkett, 2012). The literature showed that school leaders learned leadership and management skills, and

they learned about their own mindsets, strengths, and weaknesses. Leaders learned how to improve their schools (Andreoli et al., 2021), reshape their school goals (Rieckhoff & Larsen, 2012), and how to better support teachers (Hilton et al., 2015), and they improved their communication (Barnett et al., 2017) and time management skills (Connery & Frick, 2021). Overall, school leaders wanted more learning in areas of interpersonal and people skills (Duncan, 2013; Duncan et al., 2011; Hayes & Burkett, 2021; Serrão et al., 2020). Researchers recognized that school leaders needed more learning in implementing change connected to school improvement (Acton, 2021; Acton, 2021), instructional leadership (Westberry and Zhao, 2021) confidence for decision making, time management, and role management (Craft et al., 2017), and staff performance (Steward & Matthews, 2015).

Experienced Principals

This narrative study revealed the perceived learning needs and preferences of ten experienced principals in Alabama and showed that these school leaders connected their learning to the betterment of their faculty, and ultimately, to the improvement of their schools. In alignment with the systematic review of literature in article one, experienced principals believed they needed to learn through their peers, and they sought out social opportunities to connect with other administrators through professional networks and small groups. Participants spoke of the need to be with others who held different perspectives and learn different approaches from stakeholders outside of the school and beyond the local community, as well as from experts in other fields. Furthermore, professional development was viewed by these participants to develop relationships collaboration opportunities were valued.

These experienced principals valued their professional learning experiences and described professional development that was ongoing, relevant, individualized to address their

areas of weakness, and led by those who were experienced, relatable, and transparent as most desirable. Just as shown in article one, these participants articulated a preference for professional learning that was sustained, practical, and accommodated the needs of an adult learner. Furthermore, several participants discussed their desire to grow professionally by taking risks in learning content they did not necessarily enjoy or that was not in an area in which they had proficiency. Participants also acknowledged that they have colleagues who do not take the same proactive approach to continued learning and growth as they did. Two participants spoke of colleagues, who at the experienced level, had become complacent in their continued learning and were comfortable with the minimum professional development required to maintain their principal credentialing.

In addition, participants expressed a need for resources and district support to help them access opportunities for professional development and to overcome obstacles to their learning and development. Allocating time to devote to professional learning was an issue for participants, and for some, a lack of funds prohibited them from attending the professional development opportunities they desired. The problem of lacking resources moved some principals to forgo their own opportunities in order to be present at their school and to forward professional development funds to teachers. All participants expected their districts to be involved with professional learning; some participants considered their district professional development adequate, while others described their district leaders as disconnected from the needs of adults in a school. In one case, a participant described how his district gave mandates for program implementation without any training for administrators or teachers.

This study showed that experienced principals approached school improvement by building skill and capacity in their faculty and connected their further development as leaders to

an improving ability to support teachers. These leaders did not view their continued professional learning as a siloed, personal endeavor towards further promotion, but instead, they primarily focused on learning what they needed to know and do to help their teachers. There was an awareness that they needed to be up to date in knowledge and skills, but they focused on the importance of relationship building and developing their skills with people in order to implement and sustain organizational changes. These participants largely connected their leadership ability to the ability to foster relationships, primarily with teachers, parents, and community members, in such a way that school improvements could be made.

Novice Assistant Principals

This narrative study revealed the perceived experiences of change and learning for five APs in Alabama who spoke of their needs and preferences for learning during their transition into school leadership. In alignment with findings from the systematic literature review in article one, this study found that novice APs sought out social examples to learn from as they worked to develop their school management skills, they desired to learn from the perspectives of other administrators, and they sought social-emotional support from their colleagues.

Novice APs in Alabama learned that their role was distinctly different from their prior teacher or coaching position and that the way they related to students, parents, and teachers changed significantly. Participants realized the social examples they needed may not necessarily be found in their principal, who was often "too busy" to help, or in formal mentorship if an assigned mentor was not local or if the district did not facilitate mentors for APs. Participants revealed that in their new role, they would spend more effort on self-development instead of school improvement as participants were focused on learning their role and duties and not on their part in creating school culture or initiating reforms.

Participants in this study described meaningful learning opportunities as those which provided site-specific information that APs could immediately apply to practice. There was a strong preference for job-embedded, workplace learning over formal learning formats such as university coursework or district created professional development delivered through administrator meetings. Experienced Assistant 5 particularly emphasized the need for APs to have experiential learning as he deemed this the only type of learning that could prepare an assistant for the role. The three women participants each expressed feelings of being under trained and underprepared for their role, and they appeared to have had less leadership experience, shorter administrative internships, and comparatively, less formal education than the men in this study.

Recommendations

The intersection of study one, two, and three showed that much more attention needs to be given to the continued learning and further development of school leaders, specifically in the groups of experienced principal and novice AP. This study makes the following recommendations based on findings:

School District Support

School leaders benefit when districts take a whole systems approach to leader learning and are invested into the professional development of their positioned leaders. Districts need to address learning gaps in new leaders (Duncan et al., 2011) through frameworks of support (Connery & Frick, 2021). Small districts should connect or partner with university programs to ensure adequate opportunities and resources available for school leader development.

District Professional Development

School leaders need and prefer professional learning that they view as beneficial and relevant, and not necessarily mandated, but accommodated, by school districts. As adult learners, principals and APs need authentic learning choices that address problems of practice and lead to meaningful, professional growth; not a list of required online activities that can be done in a weekend. Principal 8 described the PLU approach to leader learning as "fake" and "very shallow". Instead, formal professional learning needs to be collaborative, systematic, and embedded into inquiry projects that attend to the leader's local school issues. Professional development needs to target knowledge and skill gaps in leaders (Acton, 2021), take a transformative approach (Kim, 2020) and incorporate time for self-reflection (Andreoli et al. 2021; Cardno & Youngs, 2013; Cothern, 2020; Gümüş, 2019; Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2020; Serrão et al., 2020). School leader learning should be differentiated; career stage and experience level needs to be accounted for in professional development (Acton, 2021; Duncan, 2013; Lazenby et al., 2020), and it should attend to the individual needs and weaknesses of participants.

To address weakness in school leaders, the district will need to ensure that a risk-free learning environment has been established and where those in positional power take a coaching approach to the development of subordinates (Paulsen & Hjertø, 2019). School leader growth flourishes in learning friendly settings (Rodriguez-Gomez et al. 2020) where the climate is one of support (Paulsen & Hjertø, 2019), and when this is lacking, administrators may perceive pursuing their further development as uncomfortable. As noted by several experienced principals in article two, at their expert level, working towards the improvement of a weakness was desired, but perceived as a career risk. To attend to the individualized needs of school leaders, districts may need to invest in leader development professionals who are trusted, competent (Paulsen &

Hjertø, 2019) and experienced professional development leaders who can also be relational support for school administrators.

Furthermore, there is good reason to believe that meaningful learning experiences contribute to the wellbeing of school leaders (Connery & Frick, 2021; Gümüş, 2019; Lazenby et al., 2020; Mahfouz, 2018; Parylo et al., 2012). This could have ramifications on administrator burn-out and turnover if professional development is approached to promote job satisfaction through relational connection and improved self-efficacy. Districts must ensure that their principals are not sacrificing their own professional development because of time pressures of lack of funds. A learning friendly district culture must view school leader professional learning as essential and support it accordingly.

University Partnership Programs

University partnership programs support school leader learning in a variety of beneficial ways. These programs are a way to target a specific sub-group of administrators and provide a social cohort approach to learning that connects leaders to those in other districts. This study found that both experienced principals and novice APs desired to learn from people with different perspectives, and district-university partnership programs are positioned to bring diverse thinking and experiences together. Different approaches from outside of one's own district can broaden the understanding and protect leaders from only hearing what like-minded people suggest. Principal 3 acknowledged that he worked with people who had "the same philosophy, style, and beliefs" that he needed to learn through interaction with leaders who took different approaches. Similarly, Principal 6 discussed that in Alabama's small towns, "there's one pool of people" who lead the schools which she believed led to limiting mindsets. University programs can span across geography to connect school leaders in ways a district professional

development or annual conference attendance cannot. However, it is necessary for district personnel to be actively participating in these partnership programs, particularly when they target AP advancement. Districts need to make their expectations for promotion clear when professional development is assumed to prepare APs for the principal role, particularly when leaders are dedicating their time to participate in a multi-year leadership development program (Hayes & Burkett, 2021).

Social Learning through Mentorship

The literature showed that mentoring is a beneficial method of learning for school leaders (Barnett et al., 2017; Cardno & Youngs, 2013; Connery & Frick, 2021; Craft et al., 2016; Gümüş, 2019), and the participants in this study thought that mentorship was an effective way to learn, at least for new leaders. However, while it was viewed as a good method by participants, most of the leaders in the study were not in formal mentor relationships. None of the experienced principals were formally mentoring other administrators, and of the three APs who had been assigned a mentor by their district, only one participant had a positive experience. While school leaders can form informal, self-selected, and self-managed, mentoring relationships that meet their needs, school districts can take steps to ensure that leaders not only have a mentor, but that they have a positive experience in this as well. Because principals have been shown to be more satisfied with their mentoring experience when it was delivered through a formal district created program (Parylo et al., 2012), school districts should consider implementing a mentorship process for administrators that includes adequate training on this process for participants.

The expectation of who should mentor school leaders is another topic for districts to consider. Although it was perceived by participants in this study that principals were too busy to mentor APs, it should be noted that because of the reciprocal learning that happens during

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mentorship (Gümüş, 2019) it is a valuable form of professional development for the experienced and inexperienced alike. For this reason, mentorship could be conceptualized as mutual professional development instead of a learning support for a novice. In this study, novice APs were connected to experienced APs in other district schools. Mentorship of novice APs by experienced APs is an option, but as Experienced Assistant 5 noted, this is a potential political issue. APs are likely to contend for the same principal opening in the future, and a novice AP needs someone who is not threatened by the newcomer. Also, while Experienced Assistant 5 would have been able to mentor a new AP at his school, in the case of Assistant 1, Assistant 2, and Assistant 3, all these individuals were novice APs at the same school and in overlapping years. They could not rely on the experience of one another in this situation. Also, there are plenty of schools in Alabama that are too small to accommodate multiple APs in one school site. Role socialization from local peers cannot be counted on for the AP. One approach to towards overcoming the challenges of establishing formal mentor relationships among administrators is to distribute mentorship among a team of mentors who collectively support a mentee. The "mentor team" approach has potential to alleviate time constraints that limit mentor availability, power dynamics between positions, and the pressure for the mentee to mimic the leadership style of a mentor.

Professional Networks

Learning from professional networks emerged as another important component in school leader development. Networking is influential in specific, practical skill development (Craft et al., 2016) and in aiding in feelings of connectedness (Lazenby et al., 2020). When participants in this study discussed their professional learning activities, attendance at annual conferences and participation in workshops appeared to be the default concept of professional development, and it

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appeared that practitioners valued these events for their networking opportunities. The literature also showed that it was common for school leaders to attend and participate in this type of learning (Bickmore, 2012; Cothern, 2020; Lazenby et al., 2020; Serrão et al. 2020) because they were interested in networking (Lazenby et al., 2020). In the current study, one experienced principal emphasized that it was "always good to network" at a conference even if he did not feel he benefited from the sessions. For this reason, districts and university partnership programs should put resources into network development for administrators.

Experiential Learning

School leaders learn and develop through their workplace experiences (Connery & Frick, 2021), and this is significant when considering the role of AP and the necessity of ensuring an AP has sufficient experiences in school leadership to foster experiential learning. To ensure equal opportunities for advancement and promotion, groups underrepresented in principal positions should be intentionally afforded with experiential learning opportunities. If this is at the discretion of one principal, APs may not be getting the experience they need to move on. In this study, Experienced Principal 5 had eight years of experience in his role, but at his school, the principal handled all school finances, and this participant revealed that APs "can't see" and are "not privy" to the local school budget. Districts should consider ways to not only equip principals to mentor their APs, but also to hold them responsible for allowing access to learning experiences that an AP needs to be ready for the principal role. APs are highly reliant on their workplace learning (Barnett et al., 2017), and intentional on-site learning needs to accommodate this.

In conclusion, this research has sought to deepen our understanding of school leader learning experiences by exploring research literature and through two studies concerned with the

perspectives and experiences of professional learning and development of principals and APs in Alabama. Attention towards school leader learning is one way to work towards school improvement and organizational change as authentic learning opportunities build capacity in leaders who need updated knowledge and awareness of innovated approaches throughout their careers. Additionally, meaningful professional development experiences contribute to self-efficacy in leaders and are believed to support retention (Jacob et al., 2015) in a stressful profession (Mahfouz, 2018) with high turnover rates (Bartanen et al, 2019) as well as meet the desire for professional learning in practitioners (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). Research into the continued learning and development desires and preferences of school leaders ultimately serves both the learning organization and its individual members.

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Appendix 1

Framework for Systematic Literature Reviews

Hallinger's (2013) Framework for Systematic Literature Reviews	This Study
What are the central topics of interest, guiding questions, and goals?	This review intended to highlight what is known about the learning experiences, needs, and preferences of principals and APs and discuss how school leaders has been supported or hindered at the organizational or individual level. I sought to investigate what school leaders have learned from formal and informal experiences and how those topics and skills aligned with what they desired and needed to learn. Additionally, to map characteristics of school leader research, I examined the study designs and frameworks of school leader literature. This focus was expected to reveal effective and meaningful learning activities for principals and APs as well as potential barriers to the further development of school leaders and identify areas for future study. (RQ1)What are the characteristics of studies regarding the learning and development of school leaders? (RQ2) In what ways does the research literature report that school leaders continue learning and developing, and how has this been supported or hindered? (RQ3) In what ways does the research literature report what school leaders learn and how has this aligned with what they want and need to learn?

What conceptual perspective guides the review's selection, evaluation, and interpretation of the studies?	School leader learning included any formal or informal professional development, mentorship, networking, workplace learning, or self-selected/self-managed improvement efforts. School leader learning included any learning and development activities and experiences that a positioned leader participated in after completing a preparation program and outside of university coursework. In this review, the terms "leader" and "school leader" are used interchangeably to reference the positions of principal and AP. Care was taken to distinguish between these two roles when they were separate in the research.
What are the sources and types of data employed for the review?	Primary source empirical studies on school leader learning in peer review journals were sought for inclusion in this review. Three selection phases were used to determine studies for synthesis. This study was bound by time and culture and inclusion and exclusion criteria were based on what was found in other systematic reviews (see Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021).
How are data evaluated, analyzed, and synthesized in the review?	The results were evaluated according to how findings answered research question two and or three. The studies were analyzed through an inductive approach that allowed themes and topics to emerge from the study findings. Research question one was answered by describing study designs, guiding frameworks, contexts, and participants of the studies under review. The results for research question two were presented in three sections: 1) Effective school leader learning 2) Leader learning supported 3) Leader learning hindered. Question three was answered in three sections: 1) Learning topics and skills 2) Desired learning and 3) Needed learning
What are the major results, limitations, and implications of the review	Studies represented a balance of qualitative and quantitative methods, but further work was needed with mixed methods, suburban locales, and in consistently using an explicit,

	guiding framework.
	School leader learning was supported when it was experienced in environments of trust where leaders had the time and opportunity to participate in collaborative professional development that was perceived as relevant and structured to align with adult learning needs.
	Professional development offered or required for school leaders has been covering the learning needs of leaders better than the learning desires of leaders. Prioritizing researched based learning needs may be necessary due to constraints on a school leader's time for professional development; however, several topics requested by leaders did not emerge in either outcomes or needs. Little attention was paid to developing school leaders as change agents or looking into how leaders learn to navigate race and diversity issues within a school.
	This review is limited by selection methods, the concept of professional development, and difficulty in identifying and measuring the learning of principals and APs.
	For principals and APs to experience effective and meaningful learning opportunities, school districts need to be actively involved in supportive efforts towards school leader learning. School leaders need individualized, social learning opportunities balanced with professional development that offers a variety of perspectives and knowledge. This review aligned with other findings that indicated more attention to school leader learning is needed to build the literature (e.g., Daniëls et al., 2019; Ford et al., 2020).

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Appendix 2

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria Flow Chart

Records Identified through 2 databases: ERIC (Ebsco) and Google Scholar

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Search Terms: "Principal" OR "School Leader" OR "Administrator" AND "Learning" OR "Professional Development"

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Phase One Inclusion Criteria:	**Phase One Exclusion Criteria:**
1. Published in a peer reviewed academic journal 2. Published between Jan 2011 and Dec 2021 3. Written in English 4. Records referencing Western contexts	1. Records not meeting Phase One Inclusion Criteria 2. Records focused on teacher professional development 3. Records focused on principal prep programs

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Titles and abstracts read for phase one criteria and duplicates identified and removed
Remaining studies: n=71

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Phase two: Full text studies read for relevance to RQ2 & RQ3
Exclusion criteria: Studies found not to adequately answer either RQ2 or RQ3

↓

Remaining studies: n=27

Appendix 3

Study Characteristics in Literature Reviewed

Study	Sample	Method	Locale	Focus	Framework
Acton, 2021	5 experienced principals	qualitative	Ontario, Canada	principals as change agents	Huber's (2011) model of key professional learning methods
Allen & Weaver, 2014	73 APs	quantitative	northern Kentucky	needs assessment of APs	Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008
Andreoli et al., 2020	16 school leaders	qualitative	rural, high poverty schools in the south	2-year leadership program partnership with university	social constructivism/ transformative learning
Barnett et al., 2017	69 elementary, middle, and high school APs	qualitative	Southwestern region	mentorship and learning experiences of APs	unspecified
Bickmore, 2012	167 middle school principals	quantitative	Georgia	middle school principals	formal and informal learning
Cardno & Youngs, 2013	300 experienced principals	Mixed methods	New Zealand	pilot leadership program Experienced Principals Development Program (EPDP)	unspecified
Connery & Frick, 2021	7 administrators	qualitative	Missouri	mentor relationships of new principals	adult learning through social activity (experiential learning)
Cothern, 2020	10 principals	mixed methods	Rural Louisiana	professional development for rural principals	unspecified
Craft et al., 2016	6 APs with 0-3 years' experience	qualitative	not identified	AP learning needs	career socialization

Duncan, 2013	169 principals	quantitative	western state	career stages and gender	Unspecified
Duncan et al., 2011	286 principals	quantitative	Wyoming	beginning principals	Unspecified
Gümüş, 2019	14 principals	qualitative	Georgia	Mentorship program for middle school principals	unspecified
Hayes & Burkett, 2021	26 APs with 3 or more years of experience	qualitative	urban Texas	district university partnership program for AP leadership development	leadership development and succession planning (Groves, 2007)
Hilton et al., 2015	20 school leaders	mixed methods	Australia	School leaders participating in teacher PD	Interconnected Model of Teachers Professional Growth (IMTPG)
Honig, & Rainey, 2014	80 principals in mid-sized urban district	qualitative	mid-sized urban district	professional learning communities: principals and district leaders	Communities of practice from sociocultural learning theory
Huggins et al., 2021	8 principal coaches who were practicing principals or district leaders	qualitative	rural, high-poverty schools & two universities	3-year, research–practice partnership	constructivist theory of adult learning & transformative learning
Lazenby et al., 2020	147 experienced principals (more than 5 years)	mixed methods	Australia	learning needs of experienced principals	unspecified
Mahfouz, 2018	13 administrators	qualitative	rural Pennsylvania	wellbeing program	pro-social classroom model
Paulsen & Hjertø, 2019	854 school principals	quantitative	Norway	leadership teams	unspecified
Parylo et al., 2012	16 principals	qualitative	Georgia	mentoring	social constructionism
Rieckhoff & Larsen, 2012	administrators & teachers	mixed methods	urban	school/university partnership PD	leadership development theory (Green, 2010)
Rodriguez-Gomez et al. 2020	715 school leaders	quantitative	Spain	informal learning in professional	informal learning

				development	
Serrão et al. 2020	11 principals	mixed methods	Portugal	learning needs and preferences of principals	Unspecified
Shepherd & Taylor, 2019	41 principals & 174 assistant principals (total over 2 yrs.)	quantitative	urban	digital instructional leadership	Unspecified
Spanneut et al., 2012	129 principals	quantitative	New York	self-identified PD needs	Unspecified
Stewart & Matthews, 2015	71 principals	quantitative	Rural Utah	perceived PD needs of rural principals	Unspecified
Westberry & Zhao, 2021	1100 principals & 85 superintendents	quantitative	South Carolina	confidence levels in principals and superintendents	school leadership domains of management, instructional leadership, & program administration

Appendix 4

Growth Trajectory of School Leader Learning Literature

Year	Number of Studies	Study
2011	1	(Duncan, et al., 2011)
2012	4	(Bickmore, 2012) (Parylo et al., 2012) (Rickhoff & Larsen, 2012) (Spanneut et al., 2012)
2013	2	(Cardno & Youngs, 2013) (Duncan, 2013)
2014	2	(Allen & Weaver, 2014) (Honig & Rainey, 2014)
2015	2	(Hilton et al., 2015) (Stewart & Matthews, 2015)
2016	1	(Craft et al., 2016)
2017	1	(Barnett et al., 2017)
2018	1	(Mahouz, 2018)
2019	3	(Gumus, 2019) (Paulsen & Hjertø, 2019) (Shepard & Taylor, 2019)
2020	5	(Andreoli et al.2020) (Cothern, 2020) (Lazenby et. al., 2020) (Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2020) (Serrão et al., 2020)
2021	5	(Acton, 2021) (Connery & Fick, 2021) (Hays & Burkett, 2021) (Huggins et al., 2021) (Westberry & Zhao, 2021)

Appendix 5

School Leader Learning Alignment of Desired and Needed Development

Documented learning & development	Desired learning & development	Learning & development needs
Distributed leadership mindset (Andreoli et al., 2021)		Distributed leadership mindset (Andreoli et al., 2021)
Growth mindset approach to self-development; self-discovery (Barnett et al., 2017; Gümüş, 2019) To be self-reflective/mindfulness (Andreoli et al., 2021; Barnett et al., 2017; Mahfouz, 2018)	Social-emotional skills (Serrão, 2020)	Awareness of strengths and weaknesses (Hays & Burkett, 2021)
Systematic process for school improvement/ link theory to practice (Andreoli et al., 2021)		Learning centered around problems of practice and school improvement (Andreoli et al., 2021)
Role socialization (Connery & Frick, 2021)		Manage unpredictability (Craft et al., 2017)
To improve school professional development and refine goals (Rieckhoff & Larsen, 2012)	Data/progress monitoring (Duncan, 2013; Spanneut et al., 2012; Westberry & Zhao, 2021)	
Decision making skills (Barnett et al., 2017) Situational problem solving (Connery & Frick, 2021)		Decision making skills and confidence (Craft et al., 2017)
People skills/relational skills (Barnett et al., 2017) Ways to better support teachers (Hilton et al., 2015)	Resolving personnel issues, people skills (Duncan, 2013; Duncan et al., 2011; Hayes & Burkett, 2012; Serrão, 2020) Creating collaborative cultures (Allen & Weaver, 2014	Staff performance (Stewart & Matthews, 2015)
Communication skills (Barnett et al., 2017; Connery &	Communication skills (Hayes & Burkett, 2012)	

Frick, 2021)		
Time management skills (Connery & Frick, 2021)	Time management skills (Allen & Weaver, 2014)	
Instructional leadership (Honig, & Rainey, 2014) Gained insight into students (Hilton et al., 2015)	Instructional leadership (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Duncan, 2013; Spanneut et al., 2012)	Instructional leadership (Westberry & Zhao, 2021)
	Organization skills (e.g. budget and finance) (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Hayes & Burkett, 2012)	
	Change leadership (Hayes & Burkett, 2012)	Change process (Acton, 2021)
	Race & diversity issues (Hayes & Burkett, 2012)	

Appendix 6

Experienced Principal Characteristics

Listed chronologically according to interview date

Participant	Interview date	Ethnic	Gender	Experience as Principal	Education	School Level	School Local
Principal 1	July 2021	White	M	3 years	PhD	High School	Rural
Principal 2	July 2021	White	W	3 years	Master's	Elementary School	Suburban
Principal 3	July 2021	Black	M	5 years	PhD	High School	Rural
Principal 4	July 2021	White	M	3 years	PhD	Middle School	Distant Town
Principal 5	September 2021	Black	W	6 years	PhD	Elementary School	Urban
Principal 6	September 2021	White	W	6 years	PhD	Elementary School	Urban
Principal 7	September 2021	White	W	6 years	Bachelor's	Middle School	Rural
Principal 8	October 2021	White	M	8 years	PhD	Middle School	Rural
Principal 9	November 2021	Black	W	7 years	EdS	Elementary School	Suburban
Principal 10	January 2022	White	W	6 years	EdS	Elementary School	Rural

Appendix 7

Assistant Principal Participant Characteristics

Listed chronologically by interview date

Participant	Interview Date	Ethnic	Gender	Background/ Experience	Education	School Context
Assistant 1	March 2021	White	W	PE teacher, college basketball coach	Masters	Suburban Middle School
Assistant 2	October 2021	White	M	Science teacher	Ed.S	Suburban Middle School
Assistant 3	October 2021	Black	W	5th grade English teacher, district reading coach	Masters Pursing Ed.S	Suburban Middle School
Assistant 4	November 2021	White	W	5th grade teacher	Ed.S Pursuing PhD	Suburban Middle School
Experienced Assistant 5	November 2021	Black	M	Special education teacher	Ed.S Pursuing Ph.D.	Rural High School

Appendix 8

Experienced Principal Interview Protocol

Identifier:
Date and Time:

To support notetaking, I would like to record our interview today. All information will be held confidential, your participation is voluntary, and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable. Information collected through your participation may be used to fulfill an educational requirement, published in a professional journal, and/or presented at a professional meeting. Thank you for agreeing to participate.

Introduction

You have been invited to interview today because you have been identified as an experienced principal who has a great deal to share about the learning needs and preferences of experienced school leaders. This study focuses on the beliefs, attitudes, and needs of experienced principals in regard to professional learning. This study is not evaluating your techniques or experiences. Rather, the aim is to learn more about school leader learning preferences and practices.

1. What does professional learning mean to you?
2. What types of learning activities do you participate in?
3. Please describe the learning activities you find meaningful to your leadership practice.
4. What role do relationships and social networks play in your leadership learning and practice? 5. What challenges have you faced when experiencing and managing your professional development?
5. How do you lead change in your school or district?
6. In what ways has professional learning influenced how you lead change?
7. How would you describe your ideal professional learning experience? In other words, what professional learning opportunities would best serve your needs?
8. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Assistant Principal Interview Protocol

Identifier:
Date and Time:

To support notetaking, I would like to record our interview today. All information will be held confidential, your participation is voluntary, and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable. Information collected through your participation may be used to fulfill an educational requirement, published in a professional journal, and/or presented at a professional meeting. Thank you for agreeing to participate.

Introduction

You have been invited to interview today because you have been identified as an assistant principal who has a great deal to share about the learning needs and preferences of new school leaders. This study focuses on the beliefs, attitudes, and needs of novice APs in regard to professional learning. This study is not evaluating your techniques or experiences. Rather, the aim is to learn more about school leader learning preferences and practices.

1. Please tell me about how you got into education.
2. How did you transition into the role of school leader?
3. What prepared you for a school leadership role?
   (Prompt: What experiences, formal learning, informal learning, social networks?)
4. Tell me a little about your development, growth, or change during your time as an AP.
   (Prompt: What were you like before becoming a school leader?)
   (Prompt: What is different about you now?)
5. What are some of the "bigger moments" you've experienced as a school leader?
   (Prompt: Can you share a particular instance?)
6. What types of learning activities do you participate in?
   (Prompt: Which professional development, hobbies, social networks, personal growth)
7. What type of professional development have you found most valuable to your leadership practice?
8. What type of professional development or learning activities do you feel is lacking, missing, or needed for new APs?
9. How do you think school leaders change schools?
   (Prompt: How do you think you have or would bring change to your school?)
10. Is there anything else you wanted to share or anything you thought I would ask you about that I didn't?