



# The development of assistant principals: a literature review

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Received 24 June 2011  
Revised 1 July 2011  
12 November 2011  
1 January 2012  
Accepted 4 January 2012

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this review is to add to the discussion of assistant principals (APs), a position that has been under-represented in the professional literature.

**Design/methodology/approach** – An extensive search was undertaken on assistant principals, vice principals, and deputy head teachers from various sources, including journals, conference papers, doctoral dissertations, ERIC documents, articles from professional publications and organizations, and relevant books and chapters. Each document was thoroughly analyzed and common themes were identified.

**Findings** – The assistant principalship is a unique entity because the position lacks a precise job description yet entails numerous tasks to ensure the success of a school. Although the assistant principal is a critical leader in schools, the position is underutilized and under-researched. This review analyzes the roles, responsibilities, training, socialization, and typologies of the assistant principal.

**Research limitations/implications** – As a result of this research, it is suggested that the role of the assistant principal needs to be reconfigured. Additional research is needed in the areas of training, professional development, and transition to the principalship.

**Originality/value** – This article presents a unique comparison of the roles of APs throughout the past 30 years both in the USA and abroad. In addition, after examining the lack of university training and professional development for the assistant principalship, suggestions are made as to how APs can be better prepared for this critical leadership position.

**Keywords** Assistant principal, Educational leadership, Socialization, Roles, Student management, Instructional leadership, Career development, Self development

**Paper type** Literature review

No Child Left Behind has placed external pressure on public schools in the USA to improve student achievement for all students across demographic backgrounds. As a result of this and other legislative actions, schools must demonstrate student progress toward learning and achievement and hold educators accountable for their instruction. Furthermore, there has been an increased demand to prepare students to be twenty-first century learners who are college and/or workforce ready, having the ability to perform in a highly competitive, technological and globalized society. In order to meet these needs, schools require a new generation of leaders who can transform schools and provide instructional leadership unlike previous generations.

Research has shown that leadership is one of the fundamental elements that influences school effectiveness. A recent longitudinal study of distributed leadership found that principals directly impact the school's academic capacity and indirectly influence student growth (Heck and Hallinger, 2009). Similarly, after reviewing the available research on this topic, Leithwood *et al.* (2009) identified four pathways in which leaders can influence student performance:

- (1) rational;
- (2) emotional;



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- (3) organizational; and
  - (4) familial.

In addition to Leithwood *et al.* (2009) work on a leader's influence on achievement, Robinson *et al.* (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of 27 studies on the relationship between leadership and student outcomes. Their analysis revealed that the more educational leaders focus on teaching and learning, the greater the influence on student performance. Recognizing the impact of school leaders, this review focuses on the extant literature on assistant principals, a leadership role that has been severely understudied.

It is evident that the school leader or principal is a necessary and instrumental role. However, a large number of principals are expected to leave the profession in the near future. John Howson, managing director of Education Data Surveys, predicted schools will encounter difficulty finding principal replacements in 2010 and 2011 because of the large number of retirements (Maddern, 2009). Similarly, Fink and Brayman (2004) expected that 70 percent of private and public leaders would retire within the next ten years. A survey of principals confirmed this estimate; 70 percent of the participants anticipated retiring in ten years (Frankel and Hayot, 2001). Frankel and Hayot (2001, p. 74) accurately interpreted this finding: "The implications of this finding for senior administrators at the assistant or associate head level must, then, also be considered [for the position of principal]".

As a growing number of principals retire, the need for a new generation of principals who can positively influence a school and provide instructional leadership is paramount. One source for replacing principals was assistant principals (APs), who serve as a steppingstone to the principalship (Daresh and Voss, 2001). It follows that the position as assistant should serve as an effective training ground for the principalship. Unfortunately, research has shown that this is not the case (Koru, 1993; Kwan, 2009; Mertz, 2006; Webb and Vulliamy, 1995). Hence, the assistant principalship often does not prepare someone to assume the principalship. This is dependent on the experiences and responsibilities that the assistant principal has (Barnett *et al.*, 2012).

Until recently, assistant principals have been an underutilized resource in schools. They have been described as the "forgotten man" (Glanz, 1994, p. 283) and a "wasted educational resource" (Harvey, 1994, p. 17). In addition, assistant principals have been underrepresented in the professional literature (Glanz, 1994; Kaplan and Owings, 1999; Marshall and Hooley, 2006; Ribbins, 1997). As schools continue to face demands to improve student performance, the role of the assistant principal can be critical for school improvement. The job description is becoming more complex as assistant principals strive to be an integral part of the instructional program to transform twenty-first century schools. Given the impact of school leadership on academic performance and the natural progression from AP to principal, the activities and job responsibilities of an AP do not prepare leaders for the principalship. With this knowledge, contributions can be made to theory and practice to improve the training of future principals.

### Methodology

Because this article is intended to be a comprehensive review of assistant principals, numerous strategies were used to locate and synthesize information. As suggested by

the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre, 2009), studies were located using electronic database searches, specialist web sites (such as web sites for national administrative organizations), general internet search engines (such as Google scholar), and discussions with personal contacts, authors, and experts in the field. In each of these methods, the key search terms included assistant principals, vice principals, and deputy head teachers. Of all the search results, empirical studies conducted within the past 20 years and published in peer-reviewed journals were the predominant sources for this review. However, some conference papers from leading conventions in education, doctoral dissertations from major research institutions, ERIC documents, and relevant book chapters were included. The dates of the articles and studies reviewed ranged from 1970 to 2011.

After collecting the studies, each article was reviewed systematically. Information regarding the purpose, research questions, research paradigm, method, sample, data collection tools, method of analysis, theoretical framework, findings, and conclusions was gathered for each study. From this information, the studies were arranged by topic, which eventually became the headings for the review.

The structure of the article follows the progression of the AP into the principalship. It begins by investigating the preparation of the assistant principal. Because much of the research indicated that APs are not prepared for their futures as principals, we examined training and development opportunities that may serve as preparation such as internships and professional development. Then, we gathered research regarding the socialization of the AP into their role. Once we established how APs are prepared and socialized into the position, the specific job responsibilities were examined. It became evident that three major job tasks appeared repeatedly throughout the literature – student management, instructional leadership, and personnel management. As a result, these roles formed the subheadings for the section. Finally, the literature concluded with the classification of APs who pursue the principalship (upwardly mobile) and those who remain an assistant (career).

This article presents a unique comparison of the roles of APs throughout the past 30 years both in the US and abroad. In addition, after examining the lack of university training and professional development for the assistant principalship, suggestions are made as to how APs can be better prepared for this critical leadership position. For the purpose of this article, an assistant principal (AP) is operationally defined as a person who serves directly underneath the principal. The terms assistant principal, vice principal, and deputy head teacher are used interchangeably throughout the paper.

### **Preparation for the principalship**

Many current APs have expressed that they did not feel prepared for their role (Busch *et al.*, 2010). In addition, an AP is not involved in activities that provide training or experience in areas essential to being an effective principal (Koru, 1993). APs or deputy heads in England and Wales confirmed these concerns; if the principal or headmaster should be absent for an extended period of time, they did not feel confident taking over the school, especially regarding administrative and financial matters (Webb and Vulliamy, 1995). Similarly, vice principals in Hong Kong found their experiences did not prepare them for the principalship (Kwan, 2009) and “the preparation of this potentially ready source of principals results in neither a ready source nor one that is prepared to lead schools in different ways than that which they are currently being led”

(Mertz, 2006, p. 669). Furthermore, there was no evidence that the principals thought of their assistants as potential principals (Mertz, 2006). Despite the variety of responsibilities assigned to an AP, these tasks do not serve as preparation for the role of principal.

Therefore, practicing principals advise those pursuing the assistant principalship to gain as much knowledge as possible (Busch *et al.*, 2010). Although university programs provide training for the principalship, most educators do not move directly into this position (Hartzell *et al.*, 1994). University educational administration programs do not provide courses specifically designed for the assistant principalship (Marshall and Hooley, 2006). As a result, many APs gain experiences through on-the-job training or internships.

### *Internship*

In addition to gaining new knowledge, assistant principals must be given an opportunity to practice these skills. Internships can provide important knowledge regarding building operations, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, time-management techniques, and reflective thinking (Barnett *et al.*, 2009; Marshall and Hooley, 2006). Some APs acknowledge the internship as enabling them to become “proficient administrators” (Bartholomew and Fusarelli, 2003). However, the effectiveness of the internship experience is based on the quality of the program (Barnett *et al.*, 2009).

There are several types of internship designs that are used in administrative training programs. Barnett *et al.* (2009) grouped administrative internships into the following categories: full-time job-embedded, detached, and course-embedded field experiences. A full-time job-embedded internship, the most ideal, occurs when an aspiring principal is immersed in on-the-job training. The detached internship, the most common, requires the aspiring principal to spend a certain number of hours working with a principal. Sometimes these internships include working with multiple principals over more than one semester. Finally, in the course-embedded field experience, the aspiring administrator must observe or be involved in a specific experience that is aligned with the course content.

### **Professional development**

Not only are APs lacking preparation from their university coursework, there are few professional development programs designed for this group of administrators. In one study, only 29 percent of the APs were aware of programs specifically designed for them (Marshall *et al.*, 1994). One way that current and aspiring APs can ensure continual growth and effective leadership is through clearly defined professional development (Jayne, 1996). Marshall (1993) found that specific training targeted at assistant principals is meaningful and necessary. While this sounds common sense, assistant principals are rarely afforded the breadth of professional development opportunities that teachers and principals receive. This section explores the content of AP professional development, common professional development program activities, providers of professional development, learning processes, and the benefits of professional development for assistant principals.

### *Professional development content*

Professional development for assistant principals needs to encourage skill development and instill a desire for the principalship (Oliver, 2005). After reviewing

the literature, it became evident that professional development fulfils either one of the two purposes suggested by Oliver (2005): skill development or career advancement. Each of these issues is explored next.

*Skill development.* Many programs incorporate this goal through an inservice component to expand APs' knowledge and skills. In order to be most effective, skill development should be focused on areas of need. Research has identified several areas of need for APs. For example, a survey of APs found they desire training for problems encountered on a daily basis, especially community relations, discipline management, staff evaluation, program evaluation, instructional management, legal issues, emergencies, drug education, computer, facilities and fiscal management, bus scheduling, fundraising, and extracurricular supervision (Marshall *et al.*, 1994).

Besides training for daily tasks, there were several broad categories in which APs have expressed need. First, an important area of focus is instructional leadership (Bartholomew and Fusarelli, 2003; Oliver, 2005). APs indicated that they would like professional development in teacher supervision, personnel matters, curriculum, instruction, and student learning, all tasks related to instructional leadership (Oliver, 2005). A similar study of APs found that instructional leadership was one of the top five areas of needs for professional development (Owen-Fitzgerald, 2010). Perhaps if APs had more training in this area, they would feel more ready and prepared to serve in instructional leadership roles and subsequently, when they become principals.

Assistant principals would also benefit from additional training in budgeting and finance. In England and Wales, APs did not feel confident taking over the school – especially regarding administrative and financial matters – if the principal should be absent for an extended period of time (Webb and Vulliamy, 1995). Likewise, APs expressed budgeting was the greatest area of need for professional development (Owen-Fitzgerald, 2010). This training would help prepare APs for the principalship role. No matter the topic, APs feel the need for additional training to prepare them for the numerous roles and responsibilities required by the principalship.

*Career advancement.* In addition to developing their skills, many AP professional development programs aim to prepare them for the principalship. Often districts create such opportunities, also known as “grow your own” programs, to prepare their APs for a principal position within the same district (Marshall and Hooley, 2006). Both the district and the AP benefit from these programs. Viewing APs as principal apprentices, these programs “ensure that each assistant principal develops complete knowledge of districtwide operations, policies and procedures” (Lovely, 2001, p. 7). Many districts have found their “grow your own” programs to be successful and effective. In speaking of the Future Principal Academy in Fort Bend, TX, the superintendent commented:

The assistant principals gain valuable visibility as well as specific training to further prepare them for the principalship in ways that far exceed credentialing. We find that our assistant principals interview better in most cases than sitting principals from other districts when we have job openings to fill (Hooper, 2001, p. 12).

In addition, APs who participate in professional development for career advancement within their district feel adequately prepared for the interview process and experience a reduction in transition time to the principalship because they are familiar with the district's policies (Hooper, 2001; Lovely, 2001).

After reviewing several “grow your own” programs, Marshall and Hooley (2006) identified the common features of programs for career advancement: university

training, mentoring relationships, regular reviews, expanded and broadened tasks, opportunities to thrive, and additional professional development. Additionally, many school districts that wish to develop their pool of potential principals offer internship programs, which focus on the principalship, the superintendency, and other central office positions (Marshall, 1993). As Marshall and Hooley (2006) identified, many schools districts form partnerships with universities to prepare APs for the principalship. The features of these partnerships may include personalized learning, flexible class scheduling, and discounted tuition (Lovely, 2001).

### *Professional development activities*

No matter the content of the professional development, research suggests several characteristics of professional development for assistant principals. First, it is important that the professional development training programs are personalized to meet the specific needs of each assistant principal (Garrett and McGeachie, 1999). In addition, the professional development plan should be sustainable and supported by the professional development community (Jayne, 1996). Some effective professional development activities include management development opportunities and peer support groups (Jayne, 1996) as well as mentoring and coaching, which are described next.

*Mentoring.* Mentoring is an important part of professional development. Assistant principals have identified the principal as a facilitator of professional growth (Marshall, 1993; Marshall and Hooley, 2006; Paskey, 1989). In fact, Daresh (2004, p. 97) stated that having a mentor is “the single most powerful thing an assistant principal ... can do to enhance personal survival and effectiveness”. Not only does the principal-mentor facilitate development and growth, but a positive relationship with the principal has been found to positively influence the level of preparation for the principalship. In other words, APs who have a positive relationship with their principals are slightly better prepared for the principalship (Retelle, 2010). Principals that positively influenced APs succession to the principalship became known as “principal-makers” (Retelle, 2010).

Understanding the role that the principal plays as a mentor, several programs include mentoring as a form of professional development. In the professional development program in Canada, each participant is assigned a mentor who works in a similar type of school. The mentor acts as a peer coach sharing knowledge, acting as a role model, and answering questions (LaRose, 1987). In addition, each participant observes his/her mentor, two assistants at the same level, and an assistant at each of the other school levels. The principal can further facilitate the professional growth of APs by providing time and funds for the AP to attend professional development activities (Gorton, 1987).

### *Professional development providers*

In general, there are three groups that provide professional development for educators (Davis *et al.*, 2005):

- (1) school districts;
- (2) universities; and
- (3) professional associations or third party associations.

It is very common for these providers to form collaboration and partnerships thus providing joint professional development programs (Davis *et al.*, 2005).

Professional associations are a major source of growth for assistant principals. Marshall and Hooley (2006) suggest that the growth of association-sponsored conferences is a positive development in professional development. Similarly, career APs cited the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) as making the most contributions to their growth and development (Marshall, 1993). Many states, such as New York, North Carolina, Florida, and Pennsylvania, have organizations specific for assistant principals, but there are no national organizations solely for APs. Unlike the US, most APs in New Zealand are part of the National Association of Secondary Deputy and Assistant Principals. Organizations such as these provide resources and support for assistant principals.

#### *Effectiveness of professional development*

The benefits of professional development programs are mixed. Camburn *et al.* (2003) suggested that staff development was an effective way to encourage assistant principals to engage in instructional leadership tasks. The results of their research indicated that “active communication of expectations through staff development may be a more effective way of encouraging particular kinds of instructional leadership practice than the more passive means of role definition” (Camburn *et al.*, 2003, pp. 366-367). On the contrary, a study conducted by Hausman *et al.* (2002) found that higher levels of professional development did not lead to greater success as an assistant principal. As part of a larger survey, assistant principals were asked to rank what had contributed to their success as an administrator. Assistant principals attributed experience as a teacher and in management significantly higher than graduate training, principal internship, professional readings, and professional development. More research is needed in the area of professional development to determine the efficacy and benefits to assistant principals.

#### **Socialization**

Not only must APs be prepared for their role, they must learn the norms and expectations of the organization, often referred to as career socialization. Socialization theory has been defined as “the process of learning and performing a social role” (Marshall and Greenfield, 1987, p. 37). Mertz (2006) created a definition of career socialization that reflects the experiences of schools administrators: the organization’s norms and expectations create opportunities and limitations, which socialize the new school administrator. Numerous studies have examined the socialization of school administrators. For example, Hart (1993) outlined three stages of principal socialization:

- (1) encounter;
- (2) adjustment; and
- (3) stabilization.

After reviewing Hart’s work and several other career development models, Shoho and Barnett (2010) synthesized the career stages of principals. Before starting in their role, principals learn their position and the school prior to beginning the job. In the

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encounter stage, principals initiate change and action. Principals redefine their practices during the adjustment phase. Finally, the career is stabilized.

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### *Socialization of assistant principals*

The research regarding the socialization of APs is limited. Nevertheless, the assistant principal position is often a critical transition in career development as many educator's first administrative role is the assistant principalship (Greenfield, 1985). Various studies of the socialization of assistant principals are summarized followed by a discussion of career typologies.

The previously-described career development stages – preentry, encounter, adjustment, and socialization – apply to the principalship and may not characterize the socialization and career development of assistant principals. As has been illustrated in this review, the role of an assistant principal is a unique position, when compared to other educational leaders. Therefore, the socialization of the AP occurs differently than other administrators (Armstrong, 2009). Because APs lack the specific university and professional training related to the assistant principalship (see Professional Development), the informal training and enculturation that occurs through socialization is critical to the career development (Marshall and Hooley, 2006). Several scholars have described or characterized the socialization of assistant principals, which fall into two categories:

- (1) characteristics of socialization; and
- (2) socialization process.

*Characteristics of socialization.* Understanding the unique socialization process of assistant principals, Greenfield (1985) described the following characteristics of career socialization: individual, informal, random, variable, serial and involving divestiture processes. In the individual stage, the “socialization agent” (in most cases the principal) greatly influences the AP. The socialization of APs is informal because it involves trial and error. As a result, the AP may make inappropriate decisions, take actions that will not be beneficial, or form role models who will not be helpful. Because the socialization process is random, it is difficult for both the AP and the organization. The assistant principal cannot anticipate the socialization stages and the organization is not able to effectively influence the AP in the early stages. In addition to being random, the time needed to socialize an assistant principal is variable. According to Greenfield (1985), the randomness and variability of socialization can increase anxiety. Marshall and Greenfield (1987) further described anxiety as professional shock resulting from entrance into the administrative culture. New APs are often shocked by the demands and compromises in administration. Marshall and Greenfield (1987, p. 45) stated:

Assistant principals encounter and have to learn to manage these shocks without formal training, alone, with no real defined path to follow and not set time or method for evaluating their development.

Greenfield (1985) also described the socialization process as serial enabling the organization to “groom” the new administrator. Finally, in the divestiture process of socialization, assistant principal begin to lose their identities as teachers and develop the identity of an administrator.



*Socialization processes.* Whereas Greenfield (1985) enumerated the characteristics of career socialization, Marshall (1985) described the socialization processes of assistant principals as a series of enculturation tasks. The first task was deciding to leave teaching. APs leave teaching because they see an opportunity, they have roles models that encourage them, or it has been a personal career goal. After deciding to leave, the future AP analyzes the selection process. In doing this, APs learn “what they should and should not be, what is possible, district priority and valued [sic], and what is not” (Marshall, 1985, p. 38). Marshall described the third enculturation task as maintaining a calm front in face of culture shock. As previously described, the administrative culture can be a shock to new APs. During socialization, novice APs learn that they need to hide their shock, and be united with the principal and other administrators. In uniting with administration, APs must redefine their relationships with teachers. Marshall (1985) described that new assistant principals develop an “us versus them” relationship with teachers so they can feel comfortable evaluating teachers and enforcing policies. This relationship with teachers develops as the new AP loses his/her teacher identity in the divestiture stage as described by Greenfield (1985). Next, Marshall (1985) suggested that APs learn the art of the street-level bureaucrat. In this stage, APs learn to apply and interpret policy and prioritize tasks all the while applying their personal values and the values of the organization. The next enculturation task is to assertively select areas of responsibility. As was previously described, the duties of an AP are primarily determined by the principal. APs often want “tough tasks” to establish their authority and abilities as assistants, yet they are limited by what the principal assigns. The final enculturation task in the socialization of assistant principals is adjusting modes and attitudes for discipline management, the primary task of APs. Yet, because there is no specific training for assistant principals, they are not learning how to manage the discipline responsibilities. As a result, a major part of socialization into the position of assistant principal is learning how to manage discipline and conflict (Barnett and Shoho, in press).

In a more recent study, Mertz (2006) described how APs learn such tasks as managing discipline, selecting areas of responsibility, and bureaucratic leadership. Mertz (2006) found that APs learn through what is lived, by example, and what is or is not reinforced. According to Mertz (2006, p. 660), learning through what is lived is “one of the most powerful sources of socialization”. From lived experiences, APs learned what “was expected of them and how they were expected to behave” (Mertz, 2006, p. 661). Principals played an important role in lived experiences of assistants because they assign duties, priorities, and power to the assistant. In learning by example, the assistant principal learned from the principal and other colleagues. From these examples, administrators learned what it meant to be successful, what is acceptable behavior for an administrator, and ways to advance in the field. Finally, these socialization processes helped assistant principals learn the organizational norms, the boundaries of appropriate behavior, and the ways to conform to the organizational expectations.

### **Roles and responsibilities**

Once APs understand the expectations of the organization, they must also learn their job responsibilities. However, this can be difficult because the specific role and responsibilities of an assistant principal are not precise or exact (Marshall and Hooley,

2006). In fact, there is no universal role definition for an assistant principal (Weller and Weller, 2002). Instead of a specific job description, the common contractual phrase used for an assistant principal is “performing any and all duties assigned by a superior” (Weller and Weller, 2002, p. xiii). In other words, most assistant principals’ responsibilities are determined and assigned by the principal (Harvey, 1994; Kelly, 1987; Mertz, 2000; Weller and Weller, 2002). As a result, an assistant principal’s job description can vary between schools in the same district, according to each principal, or from year-to-year. Hartzell (1993) accurately stated that “the job description of the assistant principal is a mosaic of partial responsibilities” (Hartzell, 1993, p. 715). The following sections discuss the undefined roles of the AP and the typical span of duties including the role of the assistant principal as a student manager, instructional leader, and personnel manager.

### *Lack of clarity*

The lack of a specific role was confirmed in a review of 57 job descriptions for assistant heads (Watson, 2005). From these descriptions, Watson (2005) developed three categories of assistants:

- (1) quasi-deputy head;
- (2) subordinate deputy head; and
- (3) niche assistant head.

The quasi-deputy head is equivalent to the deputy head. As implied by the title subordinate deputy head, this assistant is below the principal. Finally, the niche assistant head fills a specific need in the school. Several other studies have found that the assistant principal plays a role that is subordinate to the principal. Kelly (1987) found that APs in Canada did not view themselves as co-principals (quasi-deputy heads as defined by Watson), but instead as subordinates to the principal. Finally, Mertz (2000) found that assistant principals viewed the principal as the “supreme authority” (Mertz, 2000, p. 8). It is evident that the job description of the assistant principal varies. However, based on previous research, it is most common for the assistant principal’s role to be subordinate to the principal.

Unfortunately, an unclear job description has been found to impact assistant principals’ emotional well-being and job performance. Assistant principals in England and Wales described the wide expanse of responsibilities as “ridiculous, mind-boggling, impossible and frustrating” because they felt unable to complete all the duties assigned to them (Webb and Vulliamy, 1995, p. 61). Similarly, Ribbins (1997) found that deputy heads described their transition to the position as frustrating. A clearer understanding of the purpose of an assistant principal would help relieve feelings of frustration by enabling those in the position to effectively and efficiently complete their duties and prioritize their time (Harvey, 1994).

The uncertainty in duties is also reflected in the performance of assistant principals. Assistant principals in the UK identified their roles as subject coordinator and staff development coordinator (Garrett and McGeachie, 1999). These roles are typically teacher responsibilities, which indicate that the deputy head teachers lack knowledge and clarity regarding their assistant principal job descriptions. The assistant principals in this study did not clearly differentiate between their previous role as teacher and their current role as deputy head teacher.

It is evident that assistant principals lack a specific job description. Most often, their responsibilities are assigned by the principal or other superiors, which have resulted in a variation of job responsibilities. In addition, the lack of a specific job description leads to feelings of frustration and decreased job performance. Despite the unclear job description, there are several tasks that traditionally characterize the position of assistant principal, which will be examined next.

#### *Span of duties*

Several studies have categorized the most common tasks performed by an assistant principal. According to Marshall and Hooley (2006), the responsibilities of an assistant principal can be grouped into four categories:

- (1) conferencing with students and parents;
- (2) handling behavior problems;
- (3) developing the master schedule, registration, and attendance; and
- (4) counseling students.

Similarly, Kwan (2009, p. 202) conducted an in-depth study regarding the role of the assistant principal and categorized the roles of the assistant principal into seven dimensions:

- (1) external communication and connection;
- (2) quality assurance and accountability;
- (3) teaching;
- (4) learning and curriculum;
- (5) staff management;
- (6) resource management;
- (7) leader and teacher growth and development; and
- (8) strategic direction and policy environment.

Kwan's (2009) study parallels the work of Hausman *et al.* (2002). In one of the most recent studies on assistant principals in the US, Hausman *et al.* (2002) studied assistant principals in Maine to determine how they spent their day. They concluded that the duties of the assistant principal include student management, instructional leadership, personnel management, interactions with the education hierarchy, professional development, resource management, and public relations. Table I summarizes the results of the previously described studies and others regarding the duties of assistant principals.

When reviewing the AP duties throughout the decades several themes emerge. First, student discipline/management has remained one of the top ten duties throughout the years. In fact, student discipline was the number one duty of most APs in the US. Interestingly, student management was not the top responsibility of APs in the UK or Hong Kong. In addition, instructional leadership activities did not appear as an AP duty until the 2000s. The job categories that are most prominent in the literature, including student management, instructional leadership, and personnel management are used as the basis for further analysis.

Author (year)	Sample	Total number of duties <sup>a</sup>	Assistant principal duties <sup>b</sup>
Austin and Brown (1970)	100 + APs Secondary US	29	Student discipline Special arrangements Student attendance Emergency arrangements School policies Orientation programs for new teachers School public relations program Teacher "duty" rosters School dances Faculty meetings
Garret and McGeachie (1999)	100 + Deputy Heads UK	1996 – 12 1997 – 10	1996 Survey: Curriculum/subject coordinator INSET/staff development coordinator Working with head as senior manager Supporting staff and acting as role model Deputising for head Pastoral care and discipline Communication with staff Working with newly qualified and student teachers Year group coordinator Assessment 1997 Survey Subject coordinator INSET coordinator GEST budget coordinator Appraisal Governor (full member of governing body) Finance Assessment Curriculum development Student teachers Governor (observer of governing body)
Glanz (1994)	200 APs New York	25	Student discipline Lunch duty School scheduling (coverages) Ordering textbooks Parental conferences Assemblies Administrative duties Articulation Evaluation of teachers Student management Interacting with the education hierarchy Personnel management Public relations Professional development Instructional leadership Resource management
Hausman <i>et al.</i> (2002)	125 APs Maine	7	

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**Table I.**  
(continued) Assistant principal duties

Author (year)	Sample	Total number of duties <sup>a</sup>	Assistant principal duties <sup>b</sup>
Kwan (2009)	331 Secondary APs Hong Kong	7	Staff management Strategic direction and policy environment Quality assurance and accountability Teaching, learning, and curriculum External communication and connection Leader and teacher growth and development Resource management
Pellicer <i>et al.</i> (1988)	509 APs Secondary US	33	Student discipline School policies Evaluation of teachers Special arrangements Student attendance Graduation activities Emergency arrangements Building use-school related Orientation program for new students Assemblies
Sun (2011)	133 APs Elementary and Middle New York	25	Instructional leadership Evaluation of teachers Student discipline Administrative duties (paperwork) Formulating goals Curriculum development Teacher training Staff development (in service) Counseling pupils Teacher selection

Table I.

Notes: <sup>a</sup>Only the top 10 duties are listed; <sup>b</sup>Listed in order of most common to least common

*Student management.* It has been said that assistant principals fill their days with three Bs – “books, behinds and buses” (Good, 2008, p. 46). Although this saying is simplistic and facetious, it sheds an accurate picture on the common duties of an assistant principal. Throughout the literature, it was found that most professionals within the field of education commonly view assistant principals as disciplinarians. As the “daily operations chief” (Porter, 1996, p. 26), assistant principals tend to perform a caretaker role (Harvey, 1994). Koru (1993) compares the role of the assistant principal to a policeman on duty; as this analogy suggests, it is the responsibility of the assistant principal to enforce the rules of the school, ensure student safety, mediate conflicts, and patrol the halls (Kaplan and Owings, 1999). Glanz (1994) found that 90 percent of assistant principals surveyed in New York said that their chief duties included student management tasks such as dealing with disruptive students and supervising lunch duty. Similarly, assistant principals in Maine reported devoting the largest portion of their time to student management (Hausman *et al.*, 2002). Finally, vice principals in Hong Kong spent a disproportionate amount of time on student management, which they considered to be the least important role they performed (Kwan and Walker, 2008).

It is evident that the research has negatively portrayed the assistant principal as a disciplinarian. Unfortunately, discipline is a necessary responsibility in education. However, an overwhelming amount of tasks related to discipline and student management can have negative effects on assistant principals' effectiveness and job satisfaction. A study of New York assistant principals indicated dissatisfaction with discipline and student management tasks. Those involved in these roles found their job to be thankless, with low morale (Glanz, 1994). Instead, these assistant principals indicated that they would prefer to be involved in instructional and leadership roles (Glanz, 1994).

In order to improve morale and increase available time for other tasks, several strategies have been suggested to reduce the number of discipline-related tasks. In a study of Midwest junior high assistant principals, the assistant principals decreased discipline referrals by increasing classroom visibility (Keesor, 2005). If assistant principals can decrease discipline, then they will have more time to focus on other duties and responsibilities (Keesor, 2005). In addition, Porter (1996) suggested that assistant principals change their view of student discipline. Assistant principals should focus on the positive impact they could make in a student's life by building relationships with students who need it the most (Porter, 1996). Another strategy to reduce the student discipline responsibilities of an assistant principal is to disperse discipline responsibilities or create another position to handle discipline issues. Marshall and Hooley (2006) suggested assigning specific roles to assistant principals, then rotating these roles annually. Mertz (2000) confirmed that discipline-related tasks did not overwhelm or consume assistant principals who shared these responsibilities with other colleagues. While discipline was a part of every day for the assistant principals, the time spent on discipline throughout the day was reduced.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that student management is a time-consuming responsibility for assistant principals in the US and abroad. Although this is a necessary responsibility, it can lead to decreased job performance and satisfaction. Strategies have been suggested in order to decrease the amount of time spent on student management, such as increasing assistant principal visibility and dividing discipline-related tasks between leaders. By reducing time spent on student management, assistant principals can have more time for other responsibilities, including instructional leadership.

*Instructional leadership.* An instructional leader is a crucial role in the twenty-first century school, and many principals are being required to take on this leadership role. However, as accountability demands increase, assistant principals have also been asked to share the instructional leadership role. Some common duties of an instructional leader include designing the vision, setting goals, coaching and evaluating teachers, creating the master schedule, developing and managing curriculum and instructional programs, communicating with stakeholders, evaluating teachers, using data to make decisions and facilitating the professional development program for teachers and support personnel (Kaplan and Owings, 1999; Lashway, 2007). All of these tasks impact classroom instruction and student learning (Robinson *et al.*, 2008).

Numerous assistant principals would like to perform the duties of an instructional leader. In a study of New York elementary and middle school assistant principals, 90 percent of the assistant principals indicated they would prefer to perform instructional

tasks instead of managerial and discipline-related duties (Glanz, 1994). However, studies show that few assistant principals actually take on the duties of an instructional leader. For example, vice principals in Hong Kong indicated that they spend very little time on teaching, learning, curriculum, or teacher growth and development, tasks commonly associated with instructional management (Kwan and Walker, 2008). Similarly, assistant principals in Maine spent the least amount of time in instructionally oriented activities (Hausman *et al.*, 2002).

There are several reasons why assistant principals do not regularly engage in instructional leadership tasks. First, Kelly (1987) found that the only assistant principals who completed instructional leadership tasks were those who specifically asked to conduct these duties. In this case, if assistant principals were reluctant to volunteer, they would not gain this experience. In addition, those with less teaching experience spent less time as an instructional leader. Assistant principals who moved into the assistant principalship within five years of teaching had less ability to understand, enact and be successful as instructional leaders (Hausman *et al.*, 2002). Those with less teaching experience may not have the skills, knowledge, experience, or confidence to act as instructional leaders, especially when working with older and more experienced teachers. If they lack the skills and experience, assistant principals may not feel comfortable asking the principal for these tasks.

Some assistant principals have shared that when they do engage in instructional leadership tasks, they do not have adequate time to complete these duties. For example, in Texas, assistant principals are required to take part in teacher observations, a duty that is associated with an instructional leader. Even though they are involved in observations, other responsibilities often prohibit the assistant principal from effectively pre- and post-conferencing with the teacher or assisting with instructional improvement (Koru, 1993). In order to be a true instructional leader, the assistant principal should aim to improve instruction by focusing on best practices, supervising instruction and providing regular and constructive feedback to teachers (Kaplan and Owings, 1999).

Unlike time devoted to student management, time spent on instructional leadership tasks can directly lead to positive student achievement results. Those engaged in these tasks described their work life positively because they believe they are impacting their schools (Hausman *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, time spent on instructional leadership is positively linked to efficacy and commitment. Assistant principals who devoted more time working with adults and focusing on teaching and learning felt greater rewards (Hausman *et al.*, 2002).

*Personnel management.* Large numbers of assistant principals cited personnel management tasks as a major responsibility (see Table I). Pellicer *et al.* (1988, p. 39) defined these tasks as “duties relating directly to securing and maintaining the human resources necessary to carry out the school’s program”. These responsibilities include designing the teacher schedule, planning orientation for new teachers, planning and leading faculty meetings, and managing substitute teachers (Pellicer *et al.*, 1988). Assistant principals in Hong Kong identified staff management as the most common responsibility (Kwan, 2009). Similarly, personnel management was among the top three duties for assistant principals in Maine (Hausman *et al.*, 2002). Finally, scheduling coverage was among the chief duties described by New York assistant principals, a task associated with personnel management. Whether engaging in student

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management, instructional leadership, or personnel management, APs need purposeful professional development to further serve as preparation for their responsibilities.

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### Career typologies

As APs become involved in various tasks, some elect to remain in the role while others begin preparing to move into higher positions of leadership. Marshall *et al.* (1991) conducted a field study regarding the enculturation and socialization of secondary assistant principals. After an in-depth comparative analysis, they developed an administrative career adjustment model. This model identified the influences that impact an AP's decision to pursue the principalship. These influences occur at an organizational, site (i.e. school), principal, and personal level. In addition, they sorted the assistant principals into five specific career types:

- (1) upwardly mobile;
- (2) career;
- (3) plateaued;
- (4) shafted; and
- (5) considered leaving.

Their research indicated a sixth type of administrator, the downwardly mobile, but this typology was not included in the five career types.

The upwardly mobile assistant principal has an active network of colleagues at all levels in the district including a strong mentor. This assistant principal is involved in professional associations and essential district committees. He or she "can manipulate political situations to his/her advantage" (Marshall *et al.*, 1991, p. 14). The upwardly mobile assistant principal takes limited and careful risks and engages in tasks that will have a positive impact on his/her career. He/she aims to exceed the expectations of superiors and avoids defiance in all tasks including student discipline and teacher supervision, assistance, and evaluation. In order to be upwardly mobile, an assistant principal cannot become complacent. Finally, this person aligns with the district's image of an administrator physically (i.e. dress) and personally.

The career assistant principal is highly satisfied in the role. This person is satisfied and comfortable with his/her job, taking pride in the role. Priority is given to personal life, and seeking a principalship is not desired. A career assistant principal has a positive relationship with the principal, teachers, and parents. As a result, he/she is often given preferential assignments, authority, and participation in decision-making. In addition, the career assistant principal volunteers for tasks. Unlike the upwardly mobile assistant principal, this person is not as involved in professional organizations but his/her involvement is focused on the individual school.

The plateaued assistant principal desires the principalship, but has been denied the chance to advance. As a result, he/she is dissatisfied with the selection process and is at odds with the administration. Unlike the upwardly mobile assistant principal, plateaued assistant principals do not have a mentor. Sometimes, this assistant principal has made critical mistakes or social errors, which may have cost him/her a promotion. This person lacks skills in student discipline, instructional evaluation, and community relations and does not respond positively to feedback or criticism. Most importantly, a plateaued assistant principal does not fit the district's profile of an



administrator. As a result, the plateaued assistant principal often accepts his/her status and becomes a career assistant principal. However, one is left to wonder if this assistant principal takes pride in his/her job as was characteristic of the career assistant principal.

The shafted assistant principal has met most of the criteria of the upwardly mobile assistant principal but has not been promoted. There are many reasons this AP might be "shafted." First, he/she may be inappropriately placed in a position. In addition, the school district may have undergone changes that have limited opportunities for promotion. This assistant principal may not meet unstated expectations (i.e. affirmative action programs, instructional leadership prowess, emotional intelligence, communication skills, etc.). Often times, the shafted assistant principal loses his/her mentor because he/she retired or was promoted. Another reason an assistant principal may be "shafted" is because he/she openly defied administrative or district values. In summary, the shafted assistant principal was on the track to be upwardly mobile "but lost out due to some circumstance not totally within the candidate's control" (Marshall *et al.*, 1991, p. 18).

The assistant principal who considers leaving feels "overqualified as an assistant principal and undervalued for his/her contribution" (Marshall *et al.*, 1991, p. 18). However, this assistant principal is young and skilful enough to pursue an alternative career. Often times, a lack of mentorship and/or administrative support and the assignment of menial tasks contribute to the desire to leave.

Finally, Marshall *et al.* (1991) discussed the downwardly mobile administrator but did not include this as one of the typologies. This is a voluntary or involuntary reverse career move, which may be the result of a reduction in faculty, a demotion, health problems, or a desire to reduce stress and work load. Not surprisingly, these assistant principals have a strong family orientation and aspire to impact the lives of students directly through teaching.

Although these typologies provide a description of the various people in the role of assistant principal, they may need to be updated due to current educational issues such as No Child Left Behind, high stakes testing, and heightened accountability. We might speculate that fewer administrators are choosing to be career APs because of the numerous job challenges, additional responsibilities, and achievement pressures (i.e. numerous student management responsibilities, the desire for instructional leadership duties, the misalignment between the current and ideal role, and limited job satisfaction). Based on the previously presented literature, an assistant principal's lack of professional fulfilment resulting from a desire to spend more time as an instructional leader may be another contributing factor to the assistant principal who considers leaving. Similarly, Marshall *et al.* (1991) found that the downwardly mobile administrator has strong family ties and a desire to reduce stress and work load. This is consistent with the work of Fields and Egley (2005) and Hausman *et al.* (2002) who found that one of the challenges of the assistant principalship is balancing personal and professional lives. This challenge may also contribute to the assistant principal who considers leaving the role.

In updating the typologies, not only should additions be made to the contributing factors, but the downwardly mobile assistant principal could be divided into two groups, voluntarily downwardly mobile and involuntarily downwardly mobile. This distinction is crucial as there is a difference in attitude and work ethic between an

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administrator who chooses to return to the classroom and one who is demoted due to performance issues. Finally, the typologies could be reorganized into two broad categories, APs who stay and those who leave. Among APs who stay are shafted, career, and plateaued assistant principals. APs may leave for advancement or moving out. For example, upwardly mobile leave the position for career advancement. On the other hand, both voluntarily and involuntarily downwardly mobile APs leave the profession. As school districts face economic cuts and challenges, downwardly mobile APs may become more common. Many districts are absorbing or furloughing AP positions.

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### Conclusions and implications

After reviewing the literature regarding assistant principals' roles, professional development, and socialization, there are several recommendations for future practice and research. First, the role of the assistant principal needs to be reconfigured. As was previously described, the role of the principal can vary from each individual school and each school year. Armstrong (2009) suggested that both assistant principals and professional associations should work with district administrators to reconfigure the role of the AP. A clearly defined role, which includes boundaries, needs to be established. As a result, the position of assistant principal can become a "substantive leadership role and connect it to school improvement and organizational change" (Armstrong, 2009, p. 126). In addition, a clearly defined role may help to reduce the number of "consider leaving" and "voluntarily downwardly mobile" APs.

The restructuring of the assistant principalship may take on many forms. For example, instead of having one principal with one or more assistants serving below the principal, a school could consider having co-principals or a shared leadership model (Au *et al.*, 2003; Kaplan and Owings, 1999). Marshall and Hooley (2006) suggested that this configuration would more accurately reflect the administrative roles. A shared leadership team, such as co-principals, would result in shared duties; those serving on the administrative team could share the instructional leadership and discipline duties. As a shared leadership team, principals and assistant principals work collaboratively to ensure student performance and positively impact students' lives (Kaplan and Owings, 1999). Those involved in shared leadership feel satisfied and professionally enriched (Kaplan and Owings, 1999). This team effort not only decreases the principal's responsibilities, but it also prepares the assistant principal for the principalship (Kaplan and Owings, 1999).

In addition to role restructuring, additional research is needed in the area of training and professional development of assistant principals. Potential APs should receive training specific to their position. This coursework or training may include instruction in administrative theory and school leadership, and courses should be taught by those with extensive experience, such as an AP (Armstrong, 2009). Along with initial job training, further research is needed for AP professional development. Professional development should focus on the development of skills essential to the assistant principalship and the preparation for career advancement (Kwan, 2009). These programs may include apprenticeships and workshops that focus on "field practice, collaborative inquiry, case study analysis, self-study, individual and group dialogue, and feedback on performance, and action plans" (Armstrong, 2009, p. 129).

Finally, additional research is needed regarding the transitions experienced by an assistant principal (Armstrong, 2009). It is important that this research is a collaborative effort of scholars and practitioners. Armstrong (2009, p. 125) suggested:

In order to ensure effective, inclusive leadership praxis, school districts, assistant principal's professional associations, universities, and regulatory bodies need to engage in coordinated efforts to address the problematic nature of the assistant principalship as an organizational leadership role to institutionalize enabling supports and structures.

As a result of this research, schools may design newcomer programs or other networks to support assistant principals beyond their initial days as a new administrator.

In addition to recommendations for practice, the literature presented in this review may lead to further research regarding the assistant principalship. A greater analysis may be conducted on the roles of the assistant principal over the past several years. For example, future research may investigate if the roles of the AP have changed alongside with the advancements and development in the educational system. Furthermore, as the role is changing, are APs better prepared for their future positions as principals? With a greater understanding of the roles and preparation of the assistant principalship, administrators will be prepared to lead twenty-first century schools.

The assistant principal is a critical leader in schools both in the US and around the world (Armstrong, 2009). Yet, the position is underutilized and under-researched (Glanz, 1994; Kaplan and Owings, 1999; Marshall and Hooley, 2006; Ribbins, 1997). This review has analyzed the roles and responsibilities, the training, and the socialization and typologies of the assistant principal. With additional research in these areas, the assistant principalship can continue to develop as an integral member of an administrative team that influences school effectiveness and academic performance and is prepared to move into the principalship with confidence.

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