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**PERCEPTIONS OF THE ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL'S**

**ROLE IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP**

A Dissertation in

Educational Leadership

by

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## ABSTRACT

This research study examines the perceptions of the assistant principal's role in school leadership in an effort to understand the opportunities and constraints inherent in current configurations of the assistant principal position and whether and how those opportunities and constraints might affect an instructional leadership role. The study is organized around the following key research questions: (1) What does the current role of assistant principals look like? (2) How are the role requirements and responsibilities determined and what is the intent? (3) In what ways, or to what extent, can these assigned tasks and responsibilities be seen as preparation for the principalship? (4) What trainings and experiences do assistant principals perceive to be missing from their current role that could assist them in assuming a principal position? This study concluded that although the role of the assistant principal still remains mired in managerial and clerical duties, such as attendance and discipline, the role of today's assistant principal appears to have expanded to one that includes staff supervision, instructional leadership, and curriculum development. Results from this study suggest that while the principal is still a strong influence over the role requirements and responsibilities of assistant principals, this influence is more positive rather than negative. While the respondents identified finance, school law and special education as key areas that are still largely missing from their work assignments, the data from this study showed that principals are currently providing instructional leadership opportunities that allow for their assistant principals to grow their leadership skills and be seen as leaders.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

As Barack Obama embarked on his second half of his first term in office as President of the United States of America, he continued his support for Congress to invest in education and technology to help the nation compete in a global marketplace. During his 2011 State of the Union address, he emphasized that “our schools need to share the responsibility with parents to provide the best education possible for American children.” President Obama stated that “when a child walks into a classroom, it should be a place of high expectations and high performance. But too many schools don’t meet this test,” he announced (Obama, 2011).

The President used a school in Colorado as an example. He explained that the school was one of the worst schools in the state, a school situated on turf between two rival gangs. “But last May,” he continued, “97 percent of the seniors received their diploma. Most will be the first in their families to go to college.” Mr. Obama described how after the first year of the school’s transformation, the principal who made it possible wiped away tears when a student said, ‘Thank you, Ms. Waters, for showing that we are smart and we can make it.’ That’s what good schools can do, and we want good schools all across the country” (Obama, 2011).

We tend to be crying out for more leadership in schools and asking for it more quickly, but good schools need excellent leadership. A strong consensus has emerged around the importance of the principal in the school improvement process (Rice, 2010). The most important factor for school effectiveness is principal leadership (Petzko, 2008).

That is why we must have principals fully prepared to lead a faculty of teachers and staff members in a way that produces opportunities for students to achieve. We cannot afford to have principals placed into such critical positions without appropriate and effective training. Leadership can be demonstrated by not one person alone but by a united front of individuals in leadership positions (Harris & Spillane, 2008). More importantly is the idea that those individuals in leadership roles should assume the moral obligation to develop the talent of those in assistant roles (Harris & Spillane, 2008). Leadership has a strong impact on teaching and learning; therefore, it matters (Rice, 2010).

Although we may agree on the importance of effective leadership, the role of the assistant principal has been largely overlooked in providing leadership for the school. In the literature dating from the 1950s to the 1990s, the job of the assistant principal is consistently bound to being mostly “responsible for administering student discipline, supervising teachers, and monitoring student activities and attendance” (Kaplan & Owings, 1999). It would seem in an era wherein leadership is so widely recognized as critical to school and thus student success that assistant principals should be encouraged to walk out of their offices and step into roles more oriented to instructional leadership (Shoho, Barnett, & Tooms, 2012).

As can be seen as far back as an article from 1984 by Iannacone & Podorf, the idea of the assistant principal position changing was being proposed. As they noted then, “The assistant principalship in the next 5 to 10 years is about to undergo rather dramatic changes. The position will no longer be thought of as a bridge to the principalship. It will no longer be able to be perceived as a position that only handles student discipline. Society is changing and as individuals change, so will the position” (p. 118).

If one fast forwards to 2014, three decades later, the pressing question is--has the position significantly changed? Thus, at this point it seems important to explore the rarely examined experiences of assistant principals and how they are prepared to become instructional leaders. If the assistant principal position remains little more than a narrow and more restricted version of the principalship with menial duties, then it seems unlikely that these individuals will have the opportunity to see the big picture of school leadership because of their limited responsibilities and experiences (Johnson & Martin, 2007). It would seem to be crucial for current principals to provide opportunities for the assistant principals under their direct supervision to balance mundane supervision responsibilities with duties and activities that will grow leadership skills that are essential for contributing to a shared leadership team and a future position as an effective principal. In order to prepare assistant principals for the role of principal, it is important to understand what the current role of the assistant principal looks like and how the principal can positively influence the assistant principal's experiences as preparation to assume the future role of principal and instructional leader.

### **Statement of the Problem and Research Questions**

As the focus on the leadership of the principal continues, there needs to be a concomitant emphasis on the preparation of assistant principals for leadership positions. As far back as 1987, there were calls for the position of assistant principal to be revisited and redefined in order to recognize it as an inherently valued and individual role of instructional leadership within school organizations, rather than as an inconsequential

steppingstone or mundane training ground to a principalship (Hartzell, 1993; Kelly, 1987). Levine (2005) noted that society is undergoing rapid and tremendous changes, which in turn are causing changes in what schools do, how they operate, and how they are governed. Such societal changes dictate that our conceptualizations of what school leaders do must also change, as should the ways in which they are prepared to fill such dynamic and shifting roles (Grogan & Andrews, 2005).

The role of the assistant principal holds the potential to be an excellent educational resource; however, there continues to be a lack of clarity as to what defines and constitutes the role of the assistant principal (Shoho, et al., 2012). The purpose of this study was to examine and gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of those currently serving as assistant principals regarding their role. Specifically, this study sought to understand the kinds of opportunities and constraints inherent in current configurations of the assistant principalship position and whether and how these might enhance an instructional leadership role.

The following guiding questions were addressed in this study:

- What does the current role of assistant principals look like?
- How are these role requirements and responsibilities determined and what is the intent?
- In what ways, or to what extent, can these assigned tasks and responsibilities be seen as preparation for the principalship?
- What trainings and experiences do assistant principals perceive to be missing from their current role that could assist them in assuming a principal position?

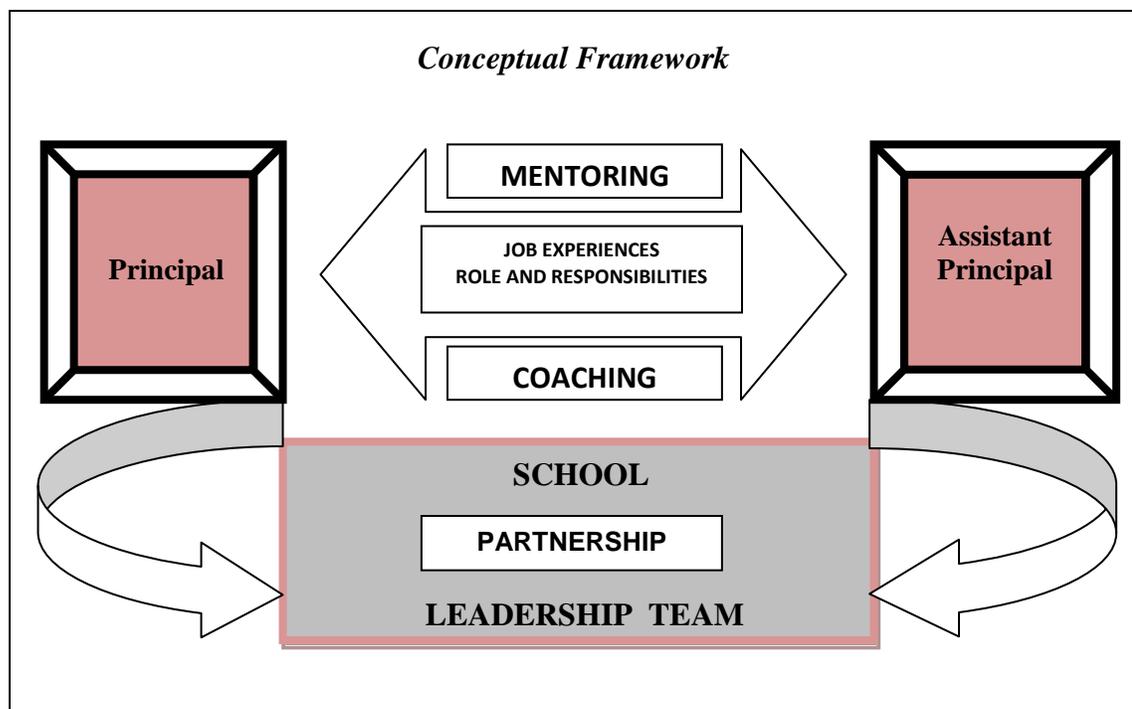
## Conceptual Framework

The quality of school leadership is increasingly gaining recognition as a significant factor in the improvement of student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Huber, 2004). However, debates over what constitutes effective leadership have long focused on school principals and teachers, and until relatively recently have ignored the roles and contributions of other school leaders, such as assistant principals (Muijs & Harris, 2002; Weller & Weller, 2002).

Such a claim is substantiated in a study by Smylie and his colleagues (Sun, 2012). They searched the major academic educational leadership and administration journals on the ERIC and EBSCO databases in 2005 and found that “there is relatively little research on the development of assistant principals” (Smylie, Bennett, Konloll, & Fendt, 2005). In a search of the major academic, peer-reviewed journals and databases in educational leadership and administration from 1994 to 2009, 35 times more articles were referenced when the keyword “principal” was used rather than “assistant principal.” Noting this gap, this study contributes to the body of research on the assistant principal and focuses on the contributions that the role of the assistant principal can make as part of an effective leadership team.

This study is grounded in the belief that the principal has an essential role to play in providing the assistant principal with job experiences that will frame his or her professional growth and build a shared leadership team that will contribute to effective school leadership and improvement (See Figure 1.1). One of the principal’s responsibilities is to grow their assistants into future principals (Bloom & Krovetz, 2009).

In doing so, the principal can learn from the assistant principal as well. Additionally, it is the hope that assistant principals will advance into a principal position and model the same meaningful and engaging experiences in designing similar experiences for their assistant principals.



©Figure 1.1 *Conceptual Framework*

The assistant principal is a critical partner in creating a professional learning community that serves all students well. Unfortunately, the distribution of leadership activities and responsibilities often entails the principal attending to instructional activities while the assistant principal attends to the management and clerical aspects of the school, performing such tasks as scheduling, managing facilities, ordering materials, and handling discipline problems (Chirichello, 2003). Thus, principals may need to reevaluate the manner in which the expertise and potential contributions of the assistant principal are utilized (Pellicer & Stevenson, 1991; Stein, 2006; Sutter, 1996) and

recognize that the assistant principal should be involved in as many aspects of school leadership as possible (Kelly, 1987). In the best of all worlds, assistant principals can provide professional support while partnering with their principals to create high-performing schools (Shoho et al., 2012).

“School leadership has a substantial effect on student achievement,” an effect second only to teacher quality (Bloom & Krovetz, 2009). Never before has the need for effective mentoring programs for principals been more urgent (Malone, 2002). Record student enrollment, an anticipated retirement of about 40 percent of principals, and a shrinking pool of those who aspire to be principals has brought about a shortage of principals and an alarming lack of qualified applicants (Malone, 2002). It is imperative that these leaders be properly mentored.

### **Significance of the Study**

Despite the fact that the assistant principalship has been an important leadership role for decades, the role continues to be marginalized to a great degree within the field of educational administration (Armstrong, 2009; Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Very few researchers have studied the role of the assistant principal; it is the least discussed topic in professional journals and books focusing on educational leadership (Weller & Weller, 2002). More specifically, little is written on the preparation that these individuals need in order to move into the position of “real” school leadership and be able to perform effectively.

A recurring recommendation in the field of educational leadership is to conduct research on ways in which assistant principals are being delegated instructional leadership responsibilities. An additional area to look at is the way in which the role requirements and responsibilities are determined. The principal's role in the growth and development of the assistant cannot be overstated. The principal has the ability to create learning opportunities for the assistant principal. As the immediate supervisor, it is incumbent upon principals to insure that they provide meaningful experiences for their assistant principals and mentor them to become future principals (Bloom & Krovetz, 2009). We would be remiss if we did not attempt to understand the ways in which principals engage their assistants in an effort to better guide and support them while creating an effective leadership team. Additionally, it is important to understand what the role of the assistant principal looks like and what leadership experiences are missing from the everyday practices of the assistant principal position, as those missing experiences are important contributions to building leadership skills at the assistant level. Thus, it is worthy to explore the rarely examined experiences of assistant principals.

The increased job demands placed on school principals by the more rigorous requirements of the Pennsylvania Core Academic Standards and the new school evaluation system called the School Performance Profile, as well as the restructuring of schools in terms of size, organization, and increased diversity, may call for a new view of the assistant principal and his or her roles and responsibilities. According to Matthews and Crow (2003), "assistant principals have a significant leadership role to play that is often ignored." Far more attention must be devoted to building assistant principals' instructional leadership capacities if they are to impact school improvement and student

learning outcomes. It is because of the call for highly effective instructional leadership that I have conducted additional research.

Focusing on the role of assistant principals is timely for two reasons. First, one of the most alarming developments challenging schools is the limited pool of applicants (Boske & Benavente-McEnery, 2012, p. 122). Because a shortage of school leaders exists, looking at the contributions that the assistant principal can make to a school organization is worth consideration. Second, beginning with the 2014-2015 school year, the job performances of principals in Pennsylvania will be evaluated using a rubric that includes attributes such as building a collaborative and empowering work environment that supports continuous professional growth of self and others through practice (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013). The principal will be judged whether he or she can develop a culture of collaboration that empowers staff and contributes to shared leadership. Sharing power may be both difficult yet necessary, and in order for principals to make the biggest and most difficult changes in schools, new school leadership models must be based on trust, redistribution of power, meaningful relations, and a shared purpose in order to cultivate assistant principals.

Unfortunately, the ideals and actual roles that assistant principals exercise often create a gap that seethes with disillusionment and dissatisfaction. The challenge for the profession is to better align the roles and expectations of the assistant principals so they can experience the best of being a school leader. This qualitative study addressed the role of the assistant principal and provided an understanding that an effective leadership team is a sharing of responsibilities and experiences that will develop leadership for the changing and demanding functions of the assistant position. Additional research may

identify some of those reasons why principals do not do more to develop their assistant principals' skills. A look into those experiences may provide effective training opportunities. Additionally, future study may investigate the ill effects of those who wait for their turn with little preparation once they get there. By sharing the voices of the assistant principals, we may also be able to determine what aspects of leadership preparation are useful and what aspects need to be reconceptualized and changed.

## Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

This chapter is a review of the literature already studied on the role of the assistant principal. Chapter 2 provides an historical overview of the position specific to how the position developed. Two major themes are discussed: the misalignment between what assistant principals believe their roles should be and the actual tasks assigned to them and how that misalignment and job dissatisfaction may adversely affect the position. The literature continues to emphasize how the hierarchy style of principals and assistant principals hurts the effectiveness of the position and whether the position is truly effective training for the principalship.

The literature suggests that the current way of thinking is not an effective use of the position, and the role of the assistant principal holds the potential to be an excellent educational resource. However, there continues to be a lack of clarity as to what defines and constitutes the role of the assistant principal (Shoho, et al., 2012). The purpose of this study was to examine and gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of assistant principals regarding the role of the assistant principal. Specifically, this study sought to understand the kinds of opportunities and constraints inherent in current configurations of the assistant principalship position and whether and how these might enhance an instructional leadership role.

### **Historical Overview**

Historically, the position of assistant principal came into being in the United States in 1867 as a “head assistant...capable of handling the master’s work during his

absence” (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1970, p. 4). As schools expanded so did the educational bureaucracy and the speed at which the job of the school principal was becoming impossible for just one person to handle (Scoggins & Bishop, 1993). Educators accounted for this increase with industrial metaphors. Willard S. Elsbree and E. Edmund Reutter in 1954 explained the role and function of principals as follows: “The principal was looked upon as a kind of foreman who through close supervision helped to compensate for ignorance and lack of skill of his subordinates” (Hartzell, Williams, & Nelson, 1995, p. 231). Due to increasing administrative duties, however, the principal gradually shifted away from direct inspections, classroom supervision, and instructional development, and assumed a more managerial position. Consequently, other supervisory positions were established to meet the demands of a growing and increasingly more complex school system.

In addition to the building principal, a new cadre of administrative officers emerged, assuming major responsibility for day-to-day classroom supervision (Shoho et al., 2012). Two specific groups of supervisors were commonly found in schools in the early twentieth century. First, a “special supervisor,” most often female and chosen by the building principal with no formal training required, was relieved of some teaching responsibility to help assist less experienced teachers in subject matter mastery (Shoho et al., 2012). Larger schools, for example, had a number of special supervisors in each of the major subject areas. Second, a “general supervisor,” usually male, was selected not only to deal with more general subjects such as mathematics and science, but also to assist the principal in the more administrative, logistical operations of the school (Shoho et al., 2012). The general supervisor, subsequently called assistant principal, would

prepare attendance reports, collect data for evaluation purposes, and coordinate special programs, among other administrative duties. Assistant principals were a phenomenon of secondary schools at the turn of the century and were created to manage increasingly larger enrollments in consolidated schools. The increased workload and responsibilities of the principal due to the postwar baby boom demanded that the position of the assistant principal become more formalized and more widely utilized (Panyako & Rorie, 1987; Shockley & Smith, 1981). Given that the position grew out of need and expediency rather than clear and thoughtful planning, as a result, the position is characterized by role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload (Marshall, 1992). To this day, the ambiguity and the random nature of school need, or perception of need, seem to direct the evolution of the assistant position more than any clear data or research (Shoho et al., 2012).

While the original intent in creating the position was to provide assistance to the principal so that he or she would have more time to devote to instructional leadership (Austin & Brown, 1970), once created, the role of the assistant principal was quickly relegated to limited managerial responsibilities. The literature indicates that the assistant principal is generally assigned tasks the principal finds undesirable (Chirichello, 2003; Kelly, 1987), such as bus duty or discipline (Buckner & Jones, 1990). Carl Glickman, however, communicates the importance of an assistant principal to a school as the “glue” that binds a school together (Glanz, 2004). Although not a very appealing metaphor, “glue” accurately portrays the assistant principal as undervalued, unseen, and often unacknowledged, yet the cohesive element that contributes to an efficient and effective school (Glanz, 2004).

The literature of the 1970s began to reflect the importance of the role of assistant principal (Matthews & Crow, 2003). Much of the research, however, was descriptive, anecdotal, small-scope and nonempirical (Greenfield, 1985; Hausman, Nebeker, McCreary, & Donaldson, 2002) and largely examined the basic work activities that assistant principals performed. Austin and Brown in 1970 conducted the first large-scale study on assistant principals, which surveyed 1,127 high school principals and 1,207 assistant principals in seven geographical regions and provided a basic understanding of the role of assistant principals (Glanz, 1994; Greenfield, 1985). They saw assistant principals' responsibilities as largely custodial in nature, and questioned "the efficacy of the predominance of the paired duties of student attendance and discipline" (Greenfield, 1985, p.14).

During the mid-1980s, researchers in the United States started looking at roles and responsibilities of assistant principals in specific setting and examining how they functioned in their schools (Marshall, 1992). In 1985, in support of Austin and Brown's view, Reed and Himmler conceptualized the role of assistant principals as establishing and maintaining organizational stability (Celikten, 2001).

Among the limited number of studies on assistant principals, there are two major themes. The first theme is on assistant principals' job satisfaction and their desire for the principalship (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). The other theme examines the misalignment between the ideal roles and responsibilities that assistant principals consider important to the success of their schools and the tasks they actually undertake (Cranston, Tromans, & Reugebrik, 2004; Garrett & McGeachie, 1999; Glanz, 2004; Harvey, 1994; Hausman et al., 2002; Norton & Kriekard, 1987).

## **Job Satisfaction**

People pursue the position of assistant principal for many reasons. For some, it represents an opportunity to earn a salary that is higher than one makes as a classroom teacher (Daresh, 2004). For others, they see the role of assistant as a necessary first step toward eventually becoming a school principal (Daresh, 2004). After becoming an assistant principal, some people realize that the job is sufficiently rewarding or challenging, and they no longer see a principalship (Daresh, 2004) in their future. But regardless of what the short-term or long-term goals of any single aspiring assistant principal may be, most people who take on the job make the assumption that it is an important leadership role in schools. People discover quickly, however, that the assistant principalship is very demanding in terms of time, energy, and personal dedication, and they find out that it can be a frustrating role (Daresh, 2004).

Not all assistant principals have reported experiencing job satisfaction. Thirty-seven years ago, Austin and Brown (1970) asked assistant principals to compare their job satisfaction as an assistant principal to their job satisfaction as a teacher. In seven out of nine categories, the study participants experienced more job satisfaction as teachers as opposed to assistant principals. The two categories that the participants ranked higher as assistant principal were salary and amount of assistance received from immediate supervisors. In addition, one of the general conclusions drawn by Austin and Brown from this study was that the satisfactions to be found in the assistant principalship are few and unimpressive to most in that position. However, when assistant principals are given the opportunity to work to improve curriculum and add to the success of a school as well as

tackle more challenging tasks such as creating budgets, the level of job satisfaction increases.

Kwan and Walker's study also examined the relationship between the job satisfaction of assistant principals and any gap in roles and responsibilities. The findings suggest that the gap did not have an appreciable effect on one's job satisfaction (Kwan & Walker, 2012). The factors that did affect one's job satisfaction were age and career ambition (Kwan & Walker, 2012). The older and more ambitious, assistant principals were more likely to display greater levels of job satisfaction than their younger and less ambitious colleagues (Kwan & Walker, 2012). This finding might adversely impact the future of the principalship if this misalignment between ideal and actual roles of the assistant principals is not addressed, because like new teacher attrition, if younger and less ambitious assistant principals do not find satisfaction or meaning in what they are doing, they may decide to leave the profession for greener pastures or become ineffective supports for their principals (Marshall & Hooley, 2006).

Recent research and policy concerns about the administrator shortage should highlight the dissatisfied assistant principal. It would make sense to pay special attention to those who are feeling unappreciated or underpaid, needing a wider vision, and/or underperforming. Rather than lose those underachievers, special supports could transform them into high-capacity leaders (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Knowing what contributes to job satisfaction for career assistant principals is especially important in light of Pellicer and Stevenson's (1991) conclusion that it is vital for experienced assistant principals to be available to share in the principal's burden.

### **Misalignment of Ideal Role and Actual Tasks**

The role of an assistant principal can be open to interpretation by principals and central office personnel alike. Armstrong (2009) links this idea to the following overarching assumptions:

- “School leadership only occurs at the top of the organizational hierarchy;
- Leadership is disassociated from management;
- Individuals’ lived experiences can be adequately understood through an organizational lens;
- The assistant principal position is primarily a transitional role; and
- Preparatory coursework for principals is adequate for assistant principals” (p. 122).

The assistant principalship is a critical leadership role in the school and deserves innovative leaders (Matthews & Crow, 2003). But when one takes on an assistant principal role, he or she enters a “gray world” between teacher in the classroom and administrator in the office. This separation and isolation is felt abruptly as informal and social conversations with teachers tend to cease (Daresh, 2004). Additionally, a perspective that often comes from veteran administrators is that the new administrator is “only an assistant principal and not one of them yet.” (Daresh, 2004). For the most part, assistant principals will work with principals and other administrators who are sympathetic to their colleagues and their roles, but some may encounter a principal who truly believes that it is best to treat assistant principals in the way that new army recruits are treated during boot camp meaning that they need to “learn it the hard way – on their

own” – and use that as justification for making less than optimal learning experiences for assistants (Daresh, 2004, p. 4).

The work of Bray and Brawley (2002) with athletic teams and perceptions of role clarity on performance demonstrates that if a role is not well defined, then the member tends to perform less well. Thus, newly appointed assistant principals whose expectations for their new roles are far different from the reality may experience confusion regarding their role expectations. For example, during their formal training, they expect to participate in curriculum and instructional leadership and become agents of change and innovation (Begley & Slater, 2003; Hartzell, 1993; MacDonald, 2004; Marshall, 1985; Marshall & Greenfield, 1987; Smith, 1987). Instead, they find themselves functioning as disciplinarians and custodians of the status quo (Hartzell, 1993; Kelly, 1987; Smith, 1987).

Unfortunately, the assistant principalship has been and continues to be a poorly defined position (Shoho et al., 2012) primarily due to the extent to which assistant principal duties are assigned by the principal. According to the literature, few states have clearly defined roles and responsibilities for the assistant principal (Shoho et al., 2012). Teachers know what they are supposed to do every day—they teach—and principals are hired to lead, or at least run the school. Counselors counsel. Assistant principals, on the other hand, do a lot of things that do not appear on the list of normal, routine activities of any school (Daresh, 2004). “For the assistant principal—whose daily tasks and roles are ambiguous, whose function is ill-defined, who is caught between students and teachers, school and community, teachers and higher administrators, who are expected to implement change policies whether or not there are adequate resources—the stress must be

multiplied” (Marshall, 1985, p. 56). Then when it becomes impossible to perform the duties adequately, role overload occurs (Marshall, 1992). In most instances, the roles and responsibilities of the assistant principal are dependent on the needs, perspectives, and dispositions of the principals with whom the individual is working (Retelle, 2010; Terry, 1998), thus contributing to the job’s unpredictability. Roles are varied among schools, districts, and states, making comparisons difficult, as the role often varies according to the size of the student population, the organizational structure of the school and district, and the leadership of the principal with regard to his or her willingness to share responsibility with the assistant principal (Shoho et al., 2012). The assistant principal is often considered as “Jack of all trades” who is not granted the same decision-making authority, power, or influence as the principal.

The ambiguity in the role of assistant principal allows for the ineffective use of this position, which should be a vital link between the principal and teachers, parents and students, and an extension of the principalship in promoting effective, quality-oriented outcomes (Weller & Weller, 2002). The role is filled with many contradictions. For example, in many schools, when a parent or a community member wants to speak with an administrator, that administrator is typically the assistant principal. When that happens, the assistant principal is a visible person representing the official interests of the school. Yet assistant principals at many schools are often virtually invisible to the public. They do their work in their offices, or as members of committees, or with individual students. They rarely get the recognition and appreciation commensurate with the work that they do for schools (Daresh, 2004). This discrepancy between the assigned duties of assistant

principals and their public importance is another example of the mixed messages that are often given regarding their educational role.

Celikten (2001) supported Marshall's work and reported that one of the biggest challenges of being an assistant principal is the lack of a job description. He cited the feeling of frustration that many assistant principals had as a result of a poorly defined job description. The elements that now make up an assistant principal's work life are complex and intertwined (Hausman, Nebeker, McCreary, and Donaldson, 2002). Other authors have long commented on the many roles that assistant principals assume and the frustration involved with the lack of a clear job description (Marshall, 1992; Scoggins & Bishop, 1993; NASSP, 1991; Norton & Kriekard, 1987; Celikten, 2001).

The reality of the kind of work most assistant principals do, however, is different from what they would prefer to do. For instance, in 1994, Glanz surveyed 200 New York City assistant principals at both elementary and middle schools seeking to identify what assistant principals think their duties should be and what their actual duties are in their workplace. He noted the lack of an instructional leadership role in assistant principals' work. The Glanz's findings showed that over 90 percent of the respondents indicated that their chief duties included handling disruptive students, dealing with parental complaints, supervising lunch, scheduling coverages, and other kinds of administrative paper work. It was also noted that assistant principals ranked instructional leadership fifth among the 25 duties they think they should do, but only 20<sup>th</sup> among the 25 duties they actually do.

On Glanz's ranking in the pre-No Child Left Behind era, there was no listing of any duties dealing with the collection of data. The No Child Left Behind Act mandates the procedures by which schools and districts must report to the state, which requires

schools to spend more time on data collection, research, and analysis-tasks that are likely to transfer to the assistant principal's job list. A 2010 study (Sun, 2012) supported that idea when eight of ten assistant principals were interviewed and reported spending a great amount of their time on state assessments, including administering tests, collecting data, and analyzing results.

In 2000, L. David and Sylvia J. Weller surveyed 100 assistant principals serving in rural, suburban, and urban schools, and reported similar results to those of the Glanz study. Of those 100 assistant principals, 77% reported that discipline and attendance were their major duties, while 13% reported their major duties as improving instruction or overseeing vocational programs (Weller & Weller, 2002). The assistant principals also reported that in schools that had at least two assistants, one was in charge of attendance and discipline while the other was in charge of curriculum issues (Weller & Weller, 2002). Other duties listed by the respondents included acting as a liaison to the community, developing the master schedule, preparing the school budget, performing clerical duties such as writing reports, enforcing school and system policy, supervising students, participating in faculty selection, evaluating faculty and staff, coordinating and leading staff development, student mentoring, and peer tutoring, placing student teachers and paraprofessionals, writing grants, and representing the principal (Weller & Weller, 2002). Twenty-five percent of those assistant principals surveyed felt that they lacked the leadership skills needed to complete some of their assigned duties (Weller & Weller, 2002).

Another way the role of the principal and the assistant principal has been characterized in the literature is requiring either management or leadership skills. Weller

and Weller (2002) explained, “The terms leader and manager tend to be used interchangeably, but major differences exist” (p. 4). According to these authors, managers often make things happen, while leaders provide vision and inspiration. Weller and Weller (2002) also stated that in many schools assistant principals take on the role of manager while principals assume the role of leader. “Assistant principals need to learn essential leadership skills if they want to move higher in administration, to move into other leadership positions, or to remain as an assistant principal but elevate themselves to a much higher plateau in the organization” (Weller & Weller, 2002, p. 5). Smith (1987) concluded that assistant principals want to be leaders but often end up as managers. Thus, the lack of effort to address the differences in the complexities of the assistant principal’s role, as opposed to the principal’s might lead to an inability to create constructive change within schools (Weller & Weller, 2002).

In addition to the work of Glanz (1994) and Weller and Weller (2000), Paula Kwan and Allan Walker are among the few researchers who have devoted a sustained effort to studying and understanding the roles and responsibilities of assistant principals. Their 2011 international and cross-cultural study sought to determine what the general responsibilities of secondary school assistant principals were and if there was a gap between the ideal and actual roles assumed by assistant principals. The findings suggest that there is a misalignment between what assistant principals would like to do and what they actually do (Kwan & Walker, 2012). Kwan and Walker sent out a questionnaire to all secondary school vice principals in Hong Kong and found that they devoted most of their time to staff management, which encompassed supervising teachers, followed by strategic direction and policy environment and quality assurance and accountability. They

also found that principals often used their vice principals to deal with difficult situations involving teacher grievances and assignments. Their findings support previous research on the scant involvement of assistant principals with financial and management issues. Lankford, Connell, & Wyckoff's (2003) work also ascertained that assistant principals should be better prepared in financial and facilities management. Additionally, Kwan and Walker found that assistant principals have little involvement in teacher/leader growth, and curriculum (Kwan & Walker, 2012). This is striking, given that Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) found that leadership involvement in professional development was one of the keys toward improving student outcomes.

### **Hierarchy Style Hurts the Effectiveness of the Position**

Old research found that assistant principals had few tasks that allowed problem-solving and discretionary action. Even today, principals have considerable autonomy not only in assigning tasks to assistant principals but also in defining the style of the working relationship between the principal and the assistant principal. Generally, the assistant principals' tasks require them to work closely with their principals. Thus, they must work well on a team, be flexible, make quick decisions, and anticipate needs and problems (Austin & Brown, 1970). Personal and professional disputes, value conflicts, and different styles and philosophies can be disastrous in such tight quarters; the assistant must often adopt or adapt to the style and philosophy of the principal (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Risk-taking must be limited; assistants must confine themselves to supportive tasks, leaving visible leadership to the principal (Marshall & Hooley, 2006).

In no other positions does one walk such a fine line between the maintenance and survival needs of the school and the needs and demands of the students, teachers, and principal. In addition, the position of assistant makes the leadership role of the assistant principal and this “between” position a difficult one. The effectiveness of those in this position depends on the ability to master and apply salient leadership knowledge and skills (Weller & Weller, 2002). Such a “do-as-you-are-told policy” in assigning duties to members of an administrative team is a very short-sighted one as measured by the well-being of the school (Austin & Brown, 1970).

Austin and Brown (1970) found that principals more frequently than assistant principals believe that assistant principals are invested with a substantial measure of responsibility for important functions of the school that require the exercise of good judgment. Such findings reflect a tendency to keep assistant principals in subordinate positions within a specific chain of command, a hierarchy with the principal controlling the work of the assistant principal. The principal can influence the assistant principal’s socialization in the following three ways: assigning tasks, creating role images, and providing support (Matthews & Crow, 2003) and can, therefore, have significant influence for better or worse (Matthews & Crow, 2003). Unfortunately, assistant principals learn very quickly that to be successful in the organization, they must buy into the system, learn the rules, and think like their boss (Matthews & Crow, 2003). Recent research (Mertz, 2005) and anecdotal evidence indicate that this has not changed. Such a view seems inappropriate for an organization in which the workers are fellow professionals. Emphasis on hierarchical control can subvert efforts to work cooperatively toward common goals.

Another study, conducted in 2010 by Marina and Chance (Melton et. al, 2012) sought to examine the roles and responsibilities, challenges, and preparation of assistant principals in the United States and deputy headteachers in the United Kingdom (UK) and China. When asked what influence the principal/headteacher has in determining roles and responsibilities of the assistant principal/deputy headteacher, all (100% or 5) of UK deputy headteachers and 16.6% (6) of United States assistant principals indicated that roles and responsibilities were arrived at through the democratic process. Other United States assistant principals (83.4% or 30) indicated that the principal has complete authority to determine (assign) duties, which are defined by the local school district with the principal being responsible for implementing and monitoring assistant principals' compliance with and completion of assigned duties.

In the 1990s, when education reforms moved the emphasis on “systemic reform” to looking at efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability (Razik & Swanson, 2001; Youngs, 2007), researchers and educators started to examine the leadership roles of the assistant principal. A 1990 study by Pellicer, Anderson, Keefe, Kelley, & McCleary (Sun, 2012) focused on high school principals showed that assistant principals were identified as major sources of instructional leadership in particular schools (Sun, 2012). The assistant principals in their study expressed great interest in taking on stronger instructional leadership roles (Pellicer & Stevenson, 1991). Additional support came from the NASSP in 1991 in a published report titled, “Restructuring the Role of the Assistant Principal,” which called for changing the assistant principal from a traditional organizational manager role into an instructional leadership position in the school of the 90s.

Despite the absence of the assistant principal's position in the literature and the unattractive tasks the position demands, the role of the assistant principal holds a critical position in educational organizations for several reasons (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). First, it is a frequent entry-level position for administrative careers and is still seen as a transitional stopover on the way to the principalship, despite growing evidence that it is a terminal career for a number of administrators, either through individual or organizational choice (Marshall, 1993). A majority of assistant principals expect to move upward in administration (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). For this reason, assistant principal positions often provide opportunities for observing and interacting with supervisors and learning the behaviors necessary for professional advancement. However, they have a great deal of responsibility but little discretion, and they are under constant scrutiny. Their work is constrained by rules and understanding about their "place" and limits on their range of initiative. Many assistant principals spend their time dealing with discipline, with little opportunity to engage in leadership (Bloom & Krovetz 2009; Chan, Webb, & Bowen, 2003). Second, assistant principals maintain the norms and rules of the school culture. They are usually the first ones to handle the most difficult disciplinary problems. Social issues such as poverty, racism, and family disruption help define the world in which assistant principals find themselves. Except for the superintendents of schools, assistant principals have, arguably, the most unmanageable stress and unanswerable demands (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Their stress and demands are less visible than the principals', but assistants especially as novices, are less experienced at developing coping strategies (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Moreover, as the frontline administrator, they often face the

greatest level of confrontation from students, parents, and teachers (Marshall & Hooley, 2006).

### **Forward Thinking Needed for True Principal Preparation**

Levine (2005) notes that society is undergoing rapid and tremendous changes, which in turn is causing changes in what schools do, how they operate, and how they are governed. Such societal changes dictate that our conceptualizations of what school leaders are and do must also change, as should the ways in which they are prepared to fill these dynamic and shifting roles (Grogan & Andrews, 2005). As early as 1987, there were calls for the role of vice-principal to be revisited and redefined in order to recognize it as an inherently valued and individual role of instructional leadership within school organizations, rather than an ineffective steppingstone or training ground to a principalship (Hartzell, 1993; Kelly, 1987).

Only recently has the literature attempted to characterize the distinctive nature of the assistant principal's role, question whether the activities of an assistant principal actually prepare one for a principalship, and the effectiveness of preparatory courses for the specific role of assistant principal (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Cantwell, 1993; Schmidt, 2000). While some literature implies that the position of assistant principal is good training ground for the aspiring principal, most research indicates that neither employment as an assistant principal nor graduation from a principal's preparatory course adequately prepares new assistant principals for their roles (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Cantwell, 1993; Hartzell, 1993; Kelly, 1987; Levine, 2005; MacDonald, 2004; Peterson,

Marshall, & Grier, 1987; Schmidt, 2000; Smith, 1987). Little has changed since the survey of all university educational administration programs belonging to the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) in 1984, asking whether they provided courses specifically for the assistant principalship. None did, and most did not offer courses on topics of importance to prospective assistant principals. Apparently the assumption is that courses for principals are adequate for assistants. Few assistant principals would agree with that assumption (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Hartzell (1993) is particularly critical of principal preparation courses that prepare teachers for positions and roles (i.e., principalships) they may never get, but do little to prepare them for roles they are most likely to get (i.e., assistant principalships). He strongly recommends that preparation courses be redesigned to address the needs of beginning administrators, such as assistant principals.

Given the challenges in job responsibilities facing assistant principals and the ethical dilemmas demonstrated in the research, it is imperative for school districts and universities to work together in developing new ways to provide meaningful support beyond certification and degree requirements (Melton, T., Mallory, B., Mays, R. & Chance, L., 2012). Authentic leadership training for aspiring leaders also needs to involve formative assessment of leadership beliefs, values, and attitudes (dispositions) to lead, as the large majority of those who ascend to the assistant role plan to become school leaders (Melton et. al, 2012). Investing in the development of the individual who aspires to leadership is critical to leadership sustainability (Melton, T., et. al, 2012).

Lyle Kirtman's research (as cited in Fullan, 2014) concluded that effective leaders are low on compliance for the sake of compliance and high on influence for the sake of

learning. They influence others to learn and to take related action. Michael Fullan (2014) and his colleagues have shown time and again that if you give people skills (invest in capacity building), most of them will become more accountable. Accountability in the end works because people become increasingly committed to results, to their peers, and to the system as a whole. According to Fullan (2014), sound strategies are ones that produce coherence or shared mindsets in the day-to-day lives of teachers and principals. Most teachers want constructive feedback to get better, and most find it lacking in the culture of their profession (Fullan, 2014). Could the same be true for assistant principals?

Several states, including California (Bloom & Kravitz, 2001), South Carolina (American School Board Association, 2007), Oklahoma (King & Smoot, 2004), and Ontario, Canada have developed programs in which assistant principals are mentored to become principals. The notion of mentorship has transferred extensively from the business world to that of educational leadership and is, in fact, one of the more important features of the innovative principal preparation courses in Texas sponsored by the Sid W. Richardson foundation (Wilmore, 2000). This practicum may take many guises, either as a series of job-shadowing opportunities or a discrete project that contributes to the operation of the school, program, or a new initiative. Pounder and Crow (2005) have referred to this as “tapping the talent,” and suggested that the assistant principalship be viewed as a training ground for future principals; however, they contended that to do so, schools must first redefine the role of the assistant principal and promote a system of shared leadership.

Given the fact that the assistant principalship originated as an administrative function, it is not very surprising that the primary responsibilities of assistant principals

have generally centered on routine administrative tasks, custodial duties, and discipline. Assistant principals have not usually been charged with instructional responsibilities, in large measure due to the historical antecedents that led to the development of the position in schools. According to Muijs and Harris (2002), assistant principals should move beyond roles of just ensuring stability and order in schools to roles that respond to needs for long-term improvements in times of educational changes. More recent developments in educational leadership theory call for school leaders to pursue the distributive approach by creating collaborative leadership teams (Pounder & Crow, 2005). For instance, in a study of the assistant principal's role in shared instructional leadership in one high school, Kaplan and Owings (1999) argued that assistant principals can effectively share instructional leadership roles to increase a school's success as a learning organization for students and educators. Therefore, if principals take a collaborative leadership approach and create leadership teams, the team members can share responsibilities, model a distributed approach to leadership, and contribute to a professional learning community (Pounder & Crow, 2005). To take this one step further, Fullan (2014) suggests that school districts provide opportunities for assistant principals to network with principals from other buildings within the district in an effort to build what he has termed "lateral capacity". "When principals and schools work together under the guidance of the system, the whole system improves, in the same way that the whole school improves when teachers collaborate under the guidance of the principal" (Fullan, 2014, p. 106).

Most assistant principals accepted the position with only a general knowledge of leadership theory and a rudimentary understanding of the traits of effective leaders (Weller & Weller, 2002). An in-depth analysis of the stories of new assistant principals

(Hartzell et al, 1995) revealed how little new assistant principals understand the nature of their “concealed” jobs. The research suggests that school administrators need to be mentored and supported during their initial stages of leadership development. For example, the array of assistants’ tasks actually distance them from curriculum and instruction. Yet the assistant principalship could be made into a position in which instructional leadership qualities and skills are supported. The literature on “effective schools” has emphasized the importance of the principal functioning as an instructional leader, yet there are no widespread policy proposals supporting assistant principals’ involvement as instructional leaders. Unfortunately, few studies to date have focused on the assistant principal and instructional leadership.

NASSP’s efforts to include assistant principals on national-level committees signify a major step in recognizing their insights into schools’ needs. District-and state-level committees and task forces should do likewise, as a way of recognizing the value of the assistant principal. The assistant principal’s voice needs to be heard as educators, policymakers, and citizens seek to define the problems in education. Assistant principals see such problems firsthand every day; they cope with the dilemmas of schooling-the dilemmas that cannot be solved by the current ways of thinking.

### **Summary**

Although the position of the assistant principal has become more prevalent in schools, especially at the secondary level, the role of the assistant principal has not changed since its inception in 1867. The literature suggests that the current way of

thinking is not an effective use of the position. The role of the assistant principal holds the potential to be an excellent educational resource; however, there continues to be a lack of clarity as to what defines and constitutes the role of the assistant principal (Shoho, et al., 2012). The purpose of this study was to examine and gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of assistant principals regarding the role of the assistant principal. Specifically, this study sought to understand the kinds of opportunities and constraints inherent in current configurations of the assistant principalship position and whether and how these might enhance an instructional leadership role.

The assistant principal has been described as the forgotten person in educational literature as evidenced by the scarcity of literature on the topic. Throughout the 1900s, the position of assistant principal was generally described in administrative terms—someone to handle discipline, attendance, and managerial tasks that the principals did not have the time or inclination to handle. Assistant principals have a variety of duties but often have no clear job description. Many of these duties fall into categories such as school management, personnel, instruction/curriculum, assessment, innovator, student activities, student behavior, and community relations. Some of the biggest frustrations experienced by assistant principals include an ambiguous job description, amount of work, time spent on managerial tasks, and the middleman aspect of the job.

While the demands placed on schools command leadership and creative efforts for reform, opportunities for assistant principals are constrained. This presents problems but also policy opportunities. Professional associations and policymakers seeking ways to support new leadership will do well to address such dilemmas for assistant principals but, policymakers do not pay attention to the assistant principals (Marshall & Hooley, 2006).

They do not sponsor studies or even collect data on this position. As a result, they miss rich opportunities to make a difference.

Additional research may identify some of those reasons why principals do not do more to develop their assistant principals' skills. A look into those experiences may provide effective training opportunities. Additionally, future study may investigate the ill effects of those who wait for their turn with little preparation once they get there. By sharing the voices of assistant principals, we may also be able to determine what aspects of leadership preparation are useful.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

Many educators and parents believe that the principal is the key to an excellent school. “Virtually all superintendents (99%) believe that behind every great school, there’s a great principal” (Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, & Foleno, 2001). Significant research exists about the importance of the principalship and the impact school leaders have on student achievement and the wellness of the school community. In her research on highly effective principals, McEwan (2003) commented, “Policymakers have discovered that teachers, tests, and textbooks can’t produce results without highly effective principals to facilitate, model, and lead” (p. xxi). Many fine educators have left the classroom, drawn by the challenges and possibilities of being a principal. They know that being a principal is a unique opportunity to impact the lives of students, teachers, parents, and entire communities. However, is the assistant principal position a viable means of furthering the administrative skill and leadership potential of prospective principals? With the initial elation about their appointment, they may be hopeful, eager, and possibly impatient to get started. They may also be nervous and uncertain. As they begin their new positions, they may wonder how prepared they are for the diversity of demands they will encounter.

The purpose of this study was to examine and gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of assistant principals regarding their administrative role. Specifically, this study sought to understand the kinds of opportunities and constraints inherent in current configurations of the assistant principalship position and whether and how these might enhance an instructional leadership role.

The following guiding questions were addressed in this study:

- What does the current role of assistant principals look like?
- How is the role requirements and responsibilities determined and what is the intent?
- In what ways, or to what extent, can these assigned tasks and responsibilities be seen as preparation for the principalship?
- What trainings and experiences do assistant principals perceive to be missing from their current role that could assist them in assuming a principal position?

### **Logic of and Rationale for a Qualitative Approach**

Selecting a research approach begins with the researcher examining his or her own basic beliefs about the purpose for doing research and the type of knowledge to be gained from the research efforts (Merriam, 1998). In order to answer the research questions posed above, the utilization of a qualitative approach was necessary.

Qualitative research is a form of inquiry in which researchers make an interpretation of what they see, hear, and understand (Merriam, 1998). It was the researcher's intent to obtain a better understanding of human behavior as a rich and elaborate description of the professional experiences in which assistant principals engage on a daily basis is developed. According to Merriam (1998), "qualitative research assumes that meaning is embedded in people's experiences and that this meaning is mediated through the investigator's own perceptions" (p.6). A qualitative design produced a holistic understanding as well as a complete description that allowed for an explanation of

assistant principals' perceptions of the experiences they encounter. This study involved field work and interaction with the participants through interviews, observations and document analysis as a means to obtain a rich, clear picture of the phenomenon, yet another rationale for a qualitative approach.

The qualitative approach contends that to understand the current conditions of education, one must describe and analyze in an ecologically valid manner the values, behaviors, settings, and interactions of participants in education settings (Rist, 1982). "Qualitative research posits that the most powerful and parsimonious way to understand human beings is to watch, talk, listen, and participate with them in their own natural settings" (Rist, 1982, p. 440). According to Creswell (2009), "qualitative researchers tend to collect data in the field at the site where participants experience the issue or problem under study. Such researchers tend to rely on data collection instruments, such as questionnaires that they have developed themselves in order to make sense out of the problem being studied (Creswell, 2009). This up-close information gathered by actually talking directly to people and seeing them behave and act within their context is a major characteristic of qualitative research" (p. 175). Human behavior is so significantly influenced by the context in which it occurs that regularities in those contexts are often more powerful in shaping behaviors than differences among the individuals present (Owens, 1982). Owens (1982) stated that "one cannot understand human behavior without understanding the framework within which the individuals under study interpret their environment, and that this, in turn, can best be understood through understanding their thoughts, feelings, values, perceptions, and their actions" (p.5). A qualitative approach to this study provided the opportunity for the researcher to walk in the

participants' shoes and tell it like it is while investigating actions and beliefs in a variety of categorical themes and behaviors.

A qualitative approach was appropriate for this study's research questions because qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive. In effect, the researcher makes an interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2009). Vital to this study was the understanding of how assistant principals felt about their experiences. Merriam (1998) tells us the key is understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspectives, not the researcher's; therefore, the researcher must keep a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem, not the meaning that the researcher brings to the research or writers express in the literature (Creswell, 2009). A qualitative approach was appropriate and essential as a means to achieve such ends.

### **Delineation and Justification for the Research Design**

This qualitative study utilized a case study design using the role of the assistant principal as the focus. "A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" (Merriam, 1998, p. 21). The use of case study is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals (Stake, 1995). Yin (1994), however, defines case study in terms of the research process. "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p.13).

Merriam (2002) stated that, “the unit of analysis, not the topic of investigation, characterizes a case study” (p. 8). For this study, the unit of analysis was the role of the assistant principal. The researcher chose to explore the perceptions of the assistant principal role. In doing so, she chose to interview five assistant principals in an effort to understand their perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and concerns regarding their reported roles as assistant principals. The intention was to document and understand what they state they do as well as what either hinders or promotes opportunities to engage in meaningful leadership experiences. Their responses were analyzed and presented as one case study.

Both Stake (1995) and Yin (2003) base their approach to case study research on a constructivist paradigm. Constructivists recognize that understanding is developed through one’s perspective and recognizes the importance of the subjective human creation of meaning (Baxter & Jack, 2008). One of the advantages of this approach is the close collaboration between the researcher and the participants that allows participants to tell their stories. This approach has the potential to deal with simple or complex situations. It is through the told stories that the participants are able to describe their views of reality. This enables the researcher to better understand the participants’ actions, so a picture of the people and the locale can be clearly painted with sensitivity (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

According to Yin (2003), “the case study is used in many situations to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena” (p. 1). Yin (2003) emphasized that, “the distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena” (p.2). The case study’s

unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence-observations, interviews, documents, and artifacts. Yin (2003) stated that a case study design should be considered when the behaviors of those being studied cannot be manipulated. It also enables the researcher to gather data from a variety of sources and to analyze the data in order to shed light on the case. Yin added that “the case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (p. 2) and argues that the case study has more far-reaching effects than to be just exploratory in nature, rather it offers a very rich and extensive explanatory and descriptive component as well.

### **Description of the Site and Participant Selection**

There must be reason or justification for why the site and the individuals will provide the best information to address the research questions. The researcher should first establish the criteria that will guide case selection and then select a case that meets such criteria (Merriam, 1998). The context and activities of the research set boundaries for the selection of a site by clearly defining and specifying an appropriate setting offering the likelihood that the phenomenon of interest can be studied (McMillan, 2008). For this study, the site selection was simply the schools in which the participants work.

Participants are selected purposefully in qualitative studies. McMillan (2008) refers to this kind of sampling as purposeful sampling. Merriam (1998) concurred that purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand and gain insight, and therefore, must select a sample from which the most can

be learned. Additionally, Creswell (2009) emphasizes, “the idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research questions” (p. 185).

The focus for this study was individuals who were employed for three years or less as assistant principals at the secondary level in a Pennsylvania public school district within the Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit’s (CSIU) region during the time the research was conducted. The most current CSIU directory that lists all administrators for the school districts within the CSIU was reviewed. The researcher searched for districts that named assistant principals at the secondary level. There were sixteen school districts in the CSIU region. One of the districts was the district where the researcher was employed; therefore, that district was not considered for the research. For that reason, fifteen school districts within the CSIU region were considered for this research.

At the middle school level, two of the fifteen districts had a junior/senior high school configuration. Neither of those two junior/senior high schools employed assistant principals. Nine of the thirteen districts in the CSIU region that had a middle school configuration did not employ middle school assistant principals. Assistant principals from the three of the four remaining middle schools in the CSIU region were not considered for the research for the following reasons: one assistant principal had been employed in the assistant principal position for more than three years; one district employed an assistant principal in an interim position, and one district employed an assistant principal as a dean of students. For the remaining district that had a middle school, the researcher simply chose a high school assistant principal for the research.

At the high school level, the two districts with the junior/senior high school configuration did not employ assistant principals. Two of the thirteen remaining high schools did not employ assistant principals. Eight of the remaining high school assistant principals were not considered for the research for the following reasons: four assistant principals had been employed in that position for more than three years; one district had yet to name a new assistant principal at the time the research was conducted; one district employed its assistant principal as a dean of students; an assistant principal in one district had been previously employed in another district as a principal, and one assistant principal simply would not respond to any of the researcher's attempts to include her in the research. Additionally, one district was in a significant amount of turmoil at the time the research was conducted. That assistant principal had worked under numerous principals during her short tenure that the researcher believed the data would be too varied. For the remaining two districts that had a high school, the researcher chose to include those assistant principals in the research.

The number of assistant principals that were selected to be studied more intensely was dependent on the number of assistant principals employed in the CSIU region. Many of the school districts in the CSIU region did not employ assistant principals for a variety of reasons. Consequently, the researcher was unable to identify any middle school assistant principals to be studied. Only two high school assistant principals matched the criteria of being in the assistant role for less than three years. Those two high school assistant principals were selected to be studied.

For this research, the researcher wanted to study five assistant principals. Based on the researcher's knowledge of the population surrounding the area in which the

researcher lives and works, a decision was made to reach out to assistant principals outside the CSIU region in an effort to include three additional assistant principals. In doing so, the researcher selected districts that were within a sixty-mile radius of her home. In an attempt to provide diversity among the research participants, the researcher chose to include a middle school assistant principal, a junior/senior high school assistant principal, and a female assistant principal. Five assistant principals were studied for this research.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

It is the ethical responsibility of the researcher to protect the rights of the participants and ensure that the research is designed in such a way that unacceptable negative impacts on the participants are nonexistent while maximizing research benefits. Because this study involved human participants, the researcher accepted responsibility for protecting the rights and welfare of human research participants. The researcher followed the requirements set forth by the Pennsylvania State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and policies regarding research with human participants as well as complied with all applicable Federal, state, and local regulations. Prior to conducting human subject research, the researcher submitted an application to the Office for Research Protections (ORP) using the IRB study submission process in the university's CATS-IRB system. Additionally, the researcher submitted the IRB application, a protocol, informed consent forms, and such supporting documents as the interview protocol that was used as the data collection instrument.

The qualitative researcher was the primary means of data collection, interpretation, and analysis. Building relationships with the participants was an important part of the research. Qualitative researchers interact with those under study and actively work to minimize the distance between the researcher and those being researched. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) encouraged researchers to “make your interests known and seek the cooperation of those you will study” (p.74). They stated that one must “communicate clearly to those with whom you spend time that you are there to learn from them how they feel about what they do and what they see as strengths and weaknesses” (p. 218).

Qualitative researchers also face a conflict between conveying detailed, accurate accounts of the social world and protecting the identities of the individuals who participated in their research (Merriam, 1998). In doing so, much work was needed to build trust with the participants. Therefore, prior to any data collection, the researcher informed all participants about the purpose of the research in which they were being asked to participate. Additionally, the researcher was sure that the participants understood the risks they may face as a result of being part of the research as well as understood the benefits that might accrue to them as a result of their participation. It was made clear to all participants that they may terminate their participation at any time without negative consequences. Additionally, the researcher protected the identity of the participants at all times.

The researcher had been in the assistant principal role for almost six full school years in a middle school that included grades six through eight. She was quite dissatisfied during her time there. Her experiences in that role were unfulfilling. She

knew that she could contribute more to the organization than she was being allowed to do. For the most part, she was restricted to processing discipline referrals and working with district and county agencies on attendance matters. Creating student schedules was a significant part of her responsibilities, but the principal always did the master schedule. Clerical work, such as scheduling meetings was an important part of the job as well as supervising students during arrival and dismissal times, lunch, and recess. She stayed after school to supervise after-school detention and tutoring sessions. As a result of such personal experiences, the researcher was concerned that her own subjectivity and preconceived ideas regarding the assistant principalship role could influence the data or the analysis of the data.

The goal was to add knowledge, not pass judgment. In an effort to limit observers' biases, qualitative researchers guard against their own biases by recording detailed field notes that include reflections on their own subjectivity. "The worth of a study is the degree to which it generates theory, description, or understanding" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). It was important for the researcher to explicitly recognize and acknowledge the value-laden nature of the research. In doing so, it was not as difficult for the researcher to focus on the information that the respondents were providing as she had thought it might be because their experiences were so different than her own. She was delighted to know that her experiences may have been an exception rather than the norm.

### **Research Strategies/Instrumentation**

Creswell (2009) explained that gaining access to the research site is typically accomplished with the approval of a gatekeeper, an individual at the research site that allows such research to be conducted. Rist (1982) underscored the importance of gaining access to the research site as well. He says that “gaining entrance, and the conditions under which it is granted, is one of the most critical phases of qualitative research” and “negotiating with gatekeepers for this access is not to be taken lightly” (p. 442). “Seldom can a researcher expect access without conditions of reciprocity. It is agreeing to such contingencies that the researcher must exercise caution and ethical judgment” (Rist, 1982, p. 442). According to Rist (1982), such contingencies may include negotiating certain prerogatives in the areas of defining the focus of the study, the areas of the organization that may be researched, the right for prepublication clearance, ownership of the data, and frameworks for the analysis. Consequently, “gatekeepers seek, to influence research to a greater or lesser degree, so as to have their organization, agency, or institution presented in a favorable manner” (Rist, 1982). The researcher understood and respected the gatekeeper’s concerns.

The researcher gained access to the research site with permission from the participants’ district superintendents and building principals. The researcher was careful to follow the requirements set forth by the university’s IRB and policies regarding research with human participants prior to making contact with the districts’ administrators. Once the research had been approved through the ORP, a letter was sent to the districts’ superintendents where potential participants were employed informing

them of the study and requesting their permission to allow their assistant principals to participate. When permission was granted from the superintendents, a letter was sent to the building principals where the assistant principals worked to inform the principals of the purpose for the study and provide an opportunity to address their concerns.

In an effort to remain compliant with the procedures of the IRB, the researcher sent a welcome letter (Appendix A) to each of the selected participants to provide them with the Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research (Appendix B) as well as the researcher's telephone number so they had a point of contact if they had questions or concerns. Informed Consent is an agreement made voluntarily by subjects to join a research study. The consent form explained all aspects of the research process and listed the requirements for participating in the study. The goal of the consent process was to provide sufficient information about the procedures, risks, benefits, and other relevant topics in the study such that a subject can make an informed decision about whether or not to participate in a study. Being fully informed is a basic requirement in all human subjects research, and the information provided was provided in a manner that was understandable to subjects. Specifically, the participants were assured that their identity would never be exposed and that they may have withdrawn from the research at any time without negative consequences. The researcher contacted the participants to set a date, time and location for the first interview. All participants signed the consent form prior to any data collection.

There was an additional and equally important level of entry to be negotiated, that was gaining the trust and acceptance of those in the setting where the actual work was conducted (Rist, 1982). In order to best understand the culture of the schools and the

assistant principals' perceptions of their role, the researcher needed to get involved in the research to the extent that a trusting, working relationship was established. In doing so, the researcher respected the participants and the sites where the research was conducted. A conflict between conveying detailed, accurate accounts of the participants' work life and protecting the identities of the individuals who participated in the research may have existed. To enhance the integrity of findings from this study, every effort was made to conduct the data collection and analysis with accuracy and rigor. Confidentiality and anonymity were also essential, thus both were maintained by presenting the information in such a way as to not reveal an individual's identity. Neither participants nor their school districts were identified by name, and someone with knowledge of the school district could not identify the research participants based on traits such as age, gender, and number of years with the school district. Given that qualitative studies often contain rich descriptions of study participants, confidentiality breaches are of particular concern to qualitative researchers. Researchers have an obligation to respect the rights, needs, values, and desires of the participants; hence, the reason to comply with the requirements of the IRB.

### **Description of Data Collection Techniques**

Wolcott (1978) emphatically stated that, "the fieldworkers' essential research instrument has always been himself" (p.6). Creswell (2009) concurred that qualitative research is interpretive research, where the inquirer typically is involved in a conversation with the research participants for the purpose of getting information. The

researcher used a case study design to further examine each of the assistant principal's experiences as they described them. Because it would be impossible for the researcher to develop a true picture of those experiences without considering several kinds of data and the context within which the experiences have occurred, the researcher chose to use a variety of evidence to provide descriptive information including interviews, documents such as job descriptions and organizational charts, and published information about the district. Such information, or data, was triangulated in a way to enhance the understanding of the assistant principals' experiences and provide credibility.

Rist (1982) called attention to the importance of stressing the conversational aspect of interviewing as a means to collect data. "In the broadest sense, to conduct a good interview is to hold an interesting conversation" (Rist 1982, p. 443). Interviewing reinforced the notion that qualitative work involves considerable human interactions that are likely to occur over time. Interviews, therefore, were conducted face-to-face in order to hold an engaging conversation where information was shared and perceptions exchanged. The individuals chosen to be interviewed were assistant principals at the secondary level employed in a school district within the CSIU region or within a sixty-mile radius of the researcher's home. The interviews were structured around the role of the assistant principals, and an interview guide (Appendix C) was used.

Those interviewed were asked open-ended questions pertaining to their role as an assistant principal, such as their experiences, actions or behaviors, their opinions or beliefs, and their feelings. In using a semi-structured interview protocol, the researcher began asking the participants questions regarding topics that had been predetermined prior to the interview, but the largest portion of the interview consisted of the researcher

exploring relevant topics as well that might come to light during the course of the interview.

However, Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) suggested placing boundaries on a case as a way to prevent the researcher from going off on tangents that are not related to the research questions and allows the study to remain reasonable in scope. The boundaries of the study simply identified what was and what was not studied. The researcher focused throughout the case study on the leadership experiences in which the assistant principals participated and what experiences they believe may be lacking from their current role.

Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) recognized the importance of effectively organizing data. Each interview was audiotaped with the participant's permission. Audio recording captured the language of the interview, so all the interviewees don't end up sounding like the researcher. A semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix C) served as a guide during the interviews with subsequent questions emerging from the respondents' replies. A qualitative design allowed the researcher to adjust the data collection in the midst of the process so to be sure the participant's perspective remained the focus. Interviews were subsequently transcribed in an effort to retain the accuracy of the information. Participants were able to review the notes and transcripts as a way to verify information. A second interview was conducted as a means to clarify any statements made in the first interview and to answer any questions. The use of more than one interview was important because "interviews are cumulative, each interview building on and connecting to the other" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Field notes were also taken and analyzed.

The researcher conducted observations of the participants at work. The purpose of the observations was to observe the participants in action and serve as a means to validate

what is reported in the interview data. According to Yin (1994), “by making a field visit to the case study site, you are creating the opportunity for direct observations” (p. 86).

After the interview data is collected, Bogdan and Biklen (1998) reminded us to “regularly review your field notes and plan to pursue specific leads in your next data collection session” (p. 161).

In addition to interviewing the assistant principals and observing the participants at work, various school documents and archival records were requested and provided by the school staff to be analyzed. Documents that proved to be most helpful were the district’s goals, objectives, and mission and belief statements, copies of job descriptions, etc. According to Rist (1982), “the use of document analysis provided important insights into both public and private perceptions, rules, guidelines, and images” (p.444). Observers’ comments, field notes during the interviewing process, and document analysis records served as a means of calling attention to speculations or issues to be explored in future data collection and analysis.

### **Description of Data Analysis Strategies**

“Although the most intensive period of data analysis usually occurs near the end, data analysis is an ongoing part of the research.” Bogdan and Biklen (1998) state, “Data analysis is the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials that you accumulate to increase your own understanding of them and to enable you to present what you have discovered to others” (p.157).

Qualitative data analysis was conducted concurrently with gathering data, making

interpretations, and writing reports (Merriam, 2002). The researcher began to analyze the data with the first interview. During the interview process, the researcher not only took notes but also analyzed the information shared and redirected questions to refine the purpose of the question in order to come to a thorough understanding of the response. Simultaneous data collection and analysis allowed the researcher to make adjustments along the way, even to the point of testing emerging concepts, themes, and categories about subsequent data (Merriam, 2002).

Qualitative researchers use an inductive approach to their data analysis as they organize their data into categories and themes while looking for patterns (Creswell, 2009). Creswell (2009) stated that, “the process of data analysis involves making sense out of text and image data. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data” (p. 183). As in any qualitative study, confidentiality and anonymity are essential, thus both were maintained by providing the information in such a way as to not reveal an individual’s identity.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1981) (as stated in Merriam, 1998), the decision to stop gathering data will be determined when any of the following occurs: exhaustion of sources, saturation of categories, emergence of regularities, and over extension. Over extension refers to the sense that new information being unearthed is very far removed from the core of any of the viable categories that have emerged (Merriam, 1998). Bogdan and Biklen (1998) tell us “there is a period when you learn a decreasing amount for the time you spend. The trick is to find that point and bow out” (p. 62).

The ongoing iterative nature of qualitative research was utilized by maintaining a consistent focus on theme-building and analysis throughout the data collection and analysis stages. Weiss (1994) calls this process local and inclusive integration. He stated, “one finds themselves developing, from the very beginning of the study, ‘minitheories’ hypotheses whose aim is to make sense of material dealing with specific issues or material within a particular sector” (p. 159). He went on to say, “this entails a search through the data during which the researcher challenges the understanding, searches for negative instances of the patterns, and incorporates these into larger constructs, as necessary” (p. 157). Howe and Eisenhart (1990) added that, “to establish coherence, data analysis must be driven by the research questions” (p.3). In this study, the research’s questions were coherently linked to the conceptual framework and the researcher incorporated them in tandem to solidify the presentation of the data.

In summary, a quality data analysis was achieved through blending all the data collected from the five assistant principals, organizing the data into themes, reducing the data by maintaining a focus on the research questions and conceptual framework, and employing the intuitive skills, experience, and knowledge base of the researcher in the process of data collection. An analysis that looks at similarities and differences among the experiences and perceptions of the assistant principals was conducted for the purpose of looking for any overarching themes that may emerge.

## **Dependability and Credibility**

All research is concerned with the use of credible and dependable information in an ethical manner. Reliability (dependability) and validity (credibility) were concerns that were approached through careful attention to a study's conceptualization and the way in which the data were collected, analyzed, and interpreted, as well as the way in which the findings were presented (Merriam, 1998). A statement of the researcher's experiences, assumptions, biases, was provided at the outset of the study to enable the reader a better understanding of how the data were interpreted.

An important aspect of reading qualitative studies is to judge the overall credibility and usefulness of the results. "Credibility is defined as the extent to which the data, data analysis, and conclusions are believable and trustworthy" (McMillan, 2008, p. 296), which makes it one of the strengths of qualitative research. It is based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account" (Creswell, 2009, p. 190). Owens (1982) accentuated, "in order to avoid unreliable, biased, or opinionated data, the naturalistic inquirer seeks not some "objectivity" brought about through methodology but, rather, strives for validity (credibility) through personalized, intimate understandings of phenomena stressing "close in" observations to achieve factual, reliable, and confirmable data" (p. 10). This study sought to understand how participants perceive their roles and tasks within an organization (school), a reason ideal for qualitative research according to Merriam (1995).

Qualitative research is a lot more open to personal opinion and judgment, and so can only ever give observations rather than results. The researcher did not allow her personal biases and values to interfere with the interpretations of the participants' responses. The researcher was closely involved with her participants throughout the study which can raise ethical and personal issues that can threaten credibility. For this study, the researcher selected participants that met specific criteria and chose to participate.

This study used interviews and observations as means to collect data. During the interviewing process, the researcher interacted with the participants as if it were a conversation rather than a formal question-answer session. To ensure the highest degree of dependability, the researcher maintained original notes, transcriptions, questionnaires, audiotapes and any documents related to the case as a means to develop the rich, deep, detailed picture that will enhance understanding and pave the way for future researchers to understand the data collection techniques used, the data analysis, and the interpretations of the data as information for additional research. A considerable amount of time was spent on site listening during interviews for patterns of information. Data collection took place over a three-month period. The interviews and observations were conducted at the participants' school sites.

The real question for qualitative researchers is not whether the results of one study are the same as the results of additional studies, but whether the results of a study are consistent with the data collected. Qualitative researchers seek to understand the world from the perspectives of those in it. Since there are many perspectives and many possible interpretations, "there is no benchmark by which one can take repeated measures and establish reliability (dependability) in a traditional sense (Merriam, 1998).

Replication of a qualitative investigation will not yield the same results as it might in a quantitative study. Rather, both sets of results stand as two interpretations of the phenomenon.

According to McMillan (2009), one of the most common analytical techniques to enhance the credibility of a qualitative study is triangulation” (p. 296). According to Bogdan and Biklen (1998), the term triangulation “was first borrowed in the social sciences to convey the idea that to establish a fact you need more than one source of information” (p. 104). This study triangulated its data by using multiple sources of data: more than one interview per participant, observations, and document analysis. Additionally, member checks, sending a copy of the interviewer’s notes to each participant and providing them an opportunity to add or revise as necessary, is a way the researcher increased dependability. The researcher asked a peer to examine the emerging results to see if they were consistent with the data collected. In writing the findings from this study, the researcher wrote what the data revealed regardless if the data contradicted the researcher’s thoughts and opinions.

### **Limitations of the Research Design**

The limitations of this study were not unlike those of any other studies that have employed a qualitative design. Yin (2003) acknowledges that “although the case study is a distinctive form of empirical inquiry, many research investigators nevertheless disdain the strategy. In other words, as a research endeavor, case studies have been viewed as a

less desirable form of inquiry than either experiments or surveys” (p. 10). He goes on to explain:

the problem is that we have little way of screening or testing for an investigator’s ability to do good case studies. Somehow the skills for doing good case studies have not yet been defined and as a result, most people feel that they can prepare a case study, and nearly all of us believe we can understand one. Since neither view is well founded, the case study receives a good deal of approbation it does not deserve. (p.11)

Although the researcher followed systematic procedures, the quality of the research is heavily dependent on the individual skills of the researcher. The research design depended heavily on the interpretation of the researcher and/or the selection of information presented, and the researcher easily attached her own meaning or interpretation of the phenomenon being studied. As a result, the data analysis may be oversimplified or exaggerated and lead to erroneous conclusions about what is really going on. Creswell (2009) stated, “Qualitative research is a form of interpretive inquiry in which researchers make an interpretation of what they see, hear, and understand. Their interpretations cannot be separated from their own backgrounds, history, contexts, and prior understandings.” In this study, the researcher, who was an assistant principal for about six years, did not allow her biased views to influence the study. The researcher being employed in a school district within the CSIU region at the time the research was conducted could have presented issues of anonymity and confidentiality when presenting findings. Additionally, it may have been possible that the researcher knew some of the participants in the study; however, that was not true.

As a result of the participant pool coming from the CSIU region and surrounding areas, the participants may be more alike than diverse; hence, they may share similar perspectives. Generalizability of the findings is a concern. Generalizing findings to a larger group is difficult in education because it is difficult to find a single exemplar that is representative of others. It was unclear whether the varying experiences of the assistant principals would be systematic in a larger sample. In a qualitative study, the intent of the inquiry is not to generalize the findings to individuals, sites, or places outside of the study (Creswell, 2009). The value of qualitative research lies in the rich description and common themes developed in context of a specific site. The researcher cannot generalize to other assistant principals' experiences based on the experiences of the assistant principals within the CSIU region and surrounding areas who were interviewed for this study.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine and gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions regarding the role of those currently serving as assistant principals. Specifically, this study was designed as a case study to understand the kinds of opportunities and constraints inherent in current configurations of the assistant principal position and whether and how those opportunities and constraints might affect an instructional leadership role.

The following guiding questions were addressed in this study:

- 1) What does the current role of assistant principals look like?
- 2) How are these role requirements and responsibilities determined and what is the intent?
- 3) In what ways, or to what extent, can these assigned tasks and responsibilities be seen as preparation for the principalship?
- 4) What training and/or experiences do assistant principals perceive to be missing from their current role that could assist them in assuming a principal position?

Five individuals were identified and interviewed for this study. The respondents were assistant principals at the secondary level who were employed in Pennsylvania school districts within the Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit region or within sixty miles from the researcher's place of residence. The table on the next page provides some district demographics for the school districts used as sites for this research:

Table 1-1. Demographics of Districts.

District	District Square Miles	Setting	Classification	Number of Students In District	Diversity ED=Economically Disadvantaged	School Interviewed
A	98	Rural Suburban Urban	2 30,000 - 249,999 Inhabitants	6000	73% White 57% ED	Middle School Grades 7-8
B	36	Suburban	3 5,000 - 29,999 Inhabitants	1370	95% White 35% ED	Junior/Senior Grades 7-12
C	113	Rural	3 5,000 - 29,999 Inhabitants	1571	96% White 36% ED	High School Grades 9-12
D	105	Rural Suburban	3 5,000 - 29,999 Inhabitants	2700	96% White 40% ED	High School Grades 9-12
E	254	Rural	3 5,000 - 29,999 Inhabitants	1430	98% White 31% ED	Junior/Senior Grades 7-12

Each assistant principal interviewed for this study was very early in their careers having been in their administrative positions for three years or less. As I talked with each of them, they all noted a passion for making a difference not for themselves by advancing

their careers but by making a positive impact on the students of their district with the decisions they can influence at the district level. None of them had moved into administration because they no longer enjoyed teaching. On the contrary, every one of them explicitly said that they still enjoy the classroom aspect of their role.

Respondent #1, the only female assistant principal interviewed, worked in a rural junior-senior high school (grades 7-12) setting and was beginning her third school year in that position. She had been a history teacher since 1999 in the same school district where she was currently an assistant principal and had previously taught in the state of New York. She had been in a position of Dean of Students for three years prior to being offered an assistant principal position when a new principal was hired. A Dean of Students position supports students in improving school attendance that enables students to be successful, assists students in resolving interpersonal problems and conflicts, and manages the academic and non academic misconduct referrals. Such a position typically does not allow the individual to perform any administrative or supervisory duties. The timing was perfect because she had been in the classroom for about eighteen years and noted that she was looking to help students on a broader spectrum not just in her own classroom.

Respondent #2 worked in a rural high school (grades 9-12) setting as well. He began his career as a psychology major and reflected on the fact that he believes his foundation in psychology has helped him to understand young people. He worked with children with behavioral needs before moving to Florida to teach at the elementary level. It was there that his principal introduced him to educational leadership. He began taking the required coursework and eventually moved back to central Pennsylvania. He, too,

wanted to have a broader impact on the system and on more students. He taught for a total of eight years before becoming an assistant principal. In his current position as assistant principal, he has begun to view his role from a systems perspective and has been enjoying working with the adults that make the system work for the students. “Even if you are stuck doing discipline and attendance, you realize that these things matter and you can see the change in students,” he said.

Respondent #3 has been an assistant principal for the past three school years in a small junior-senior high school (grades 7-12). Previously, he taught for seven years in the school district where he now serves as an assistant principal. While this district is small, it borders a much larger urban district. His superintendent influenced him to begin a career in educational administration, and he has since enjoyed enlarging the sphere of influence he can make with students. However, he said that he still enjoys getting into the classrooms.

Respondent #4 has been in a high school assistant principal position for one year. He noted that his experiences as a teacher of eight years have truly helped him understand the big picture of being a school administrator so that he can impact more than the 23-25 students in his own classroom. Although he spoke of still loving to teach and sometimes wonders why he left the classroom, he was motivated to move into his current role by others in leadership positions. He spoke of making a strong, positive impact in his large, rural school district. And he believed he could do that by staying close to teaching. He said, “I want to get in the classrooms more. I want to be more of an instructional leader. I want to talk more about engagement and trying to identify risk factors so I won’t need to just sit here and process referrals.”

Respondent #5 was the only assistant principal who was employed in a middle school (grades 7-8). He was also the only assistant principal who served in a larger district in an urban setting. Having only been in his position for one full year after five years of teaching, he was excited to be in an administrative role although he still loved teaching. Despite the fact that both his parents were teachers, he doubled majored in communications and philosophy and later worked in television news in the Philadelphia area before returning to school to get his teaching credentials. He taught at the middle school level for a number of years and became a Dean of Students for one year before being reassigned to the classroom for another year. He said that it would be a valuable experience if everyone could do an extended period of time in administration and then go back to the classroom because he had such a different perspective. Eventually he was called on to move into the assistant principal role and was thrilled to do so.

All the assistant principals who were interviewed had taught for a significant number of years before entering the world of school administration. Additionally, all of them became assistant principals in the schools where they were currently teaching at the time. Many of them commented that they miss teaching but desired to influence more students in positive ways and believed they can do that as an assistant principal.

Although the assistant principals who were interviewed expected to be responsible for discipline, attendance, and scheduling and the role is still heavily weighted in those areas, the role appeared to be evolving and moving toward one more focused on instructional leadership. This became evident as the respondents spoke of their responsibilities and the kinds of tasks in which they were routinely engaged. Although a few pieces of training in preparation for a principalship while serving as an

assistant principal appeared to be missing, the respondents viewed their current role as meaningful and relevant to preparation for becoming a principal. The data indicated that more principals and district office level staff might be recognizing that it is a missed opportunity if they restrict the growth of their assistant principals and instead are engaging them in ways that develop their leadership capacity.

### **The Current Role of the Assistant Principal**

While exploring the perceptions of the current role of the assistant principal in school leadership, a sense as to what the role currently looks like can be determined. The kinds of tasks in which assistant principals engaged within their role that are common among those interviewed include student behavior management, clerical, supervision, and instruction yet the ways in which they go about their business in those areas look different from the traditional picture.

Each of the assistant principals indicated that he or she was involved in the student behavior management aspect of the role to some degree. According to the data, the student behavior management piece of the assistant principal's role specifically included working with students and families on matters of attendance and discipline as well as creating and maintaining the master schedule for students and staff. All of the respondents indicated that those areas fell under their purview. "I spend a tremendous amount of time working with students and families to increase attendance and resolve discipline issues even still," one respondent commented. Despite the fact that all the respondents indicated that discipline is a significant piece of their responsibilities, all of

them indicated the discipline was a shared area of responsibility between them and their principals. Although the respondents were still heavily involved in those particular areas of attendance and discipline, the data indicated that current assistant principals have developed a leadership role with regard to the way in which the work was handled. Matters of attendance and discipline appeared to be more data driven. Therefore, the role has become more of being a problem solver as the data are analyzed to find patterns for poor attendance and underlying factors that result in disciplinary action. One respondent commented,

My actual day is spent not only with discipline and attendance, but triangulating that data to see where we need to work with more students more closely. So, we are shifting from a more traditional assistant principalship here, and my goal is to have more of an impact in the classroom by looking at at-risk factors and filtering reports that generate red flags sooner so we can do more with a tiered-structured intervention rather than just assign a consequence.

Clerical type work still encompassed a significant part of the role of the assistant principal. Creating the master schedules for teachers and students was mentioned as a big piece of the assistant principal's role. Interview evidence indicated that management responsibilities such as scheduling IEP (individual education plan) and GIEP (gifted individual education plan) meetings for special education fell under the assistant principal's role. Attending to athletic eligibility and maintaining a schedule of building events and use of facilities requests were still embedded in the role of the assistant principal. Another respondent noted that he was in charge of scheduling meetings for

their School-Wide Positive Behavior Support Program, dances, and fundraisers and was the building level administrative representative for the Home and School Association. Another respondent was expected to spend one quarter of his day at lunch duty, although no other respondent indicated lunch duty as an expectation. Nonetheless, he did not view lunch duty as a negative. “The purpose of doing lunch duty,” he said, “is to spend more time with the students and build positive relationships with them rather than maintaining order.”

Despite the traditional student behavior management areas of attendance and discipline, and the clerical type work involving scheduling, the role of the assistant principal has expanded to include a focus on staff supervision as well. Every assistant principal indicated that observation of classroom instruction was a key part of their everyday professional lives. They were expected to conduct a certain number of walk-through observations per week as well as conduct teacher evaluations. One assistant principal commented that she and the principal split the classroom observations in half. She did as many as he did. A respondent in another district said that he was in charge of supervision of all math and science staff. Therefore, he attended the meetings for professional learning communities (PLCs) in the morning for math and science to talk about curricular issues, unit mapping, PA Core standards, etc.

The final theme that was evident from the data with regard to what the assistant principal’s role looks like was focused on instruction. It appeared that the assistant principal’s role was becoming more of an instructional leader role. One respondent linked the instructional piece to the discipline piece by saying,

I want to talk more about engagement and try to identify risk factors

so I won't need to just sit here and process referrals. My actual role here is more balanced with instructional leadership and data-driven processes. It's really a staff maintenance approach. You're working on one thing and it's the unintended consequences that are really more authentic. There won't be much of a need for discipline if I can talk more to teachers about instruction and engaging students in the lesson.

All the assistant principals referred to themselves as instructional leaders.

One respondent emphatically said, "I am an instructional leader." She went on to say that her administrative team did professional development with their teachers, and she has led professional development on higher-order thinking and rigor and relevance and has conducted book studies on numerous topics. Another noted that he was the data team trainer and had taken the lead on data team meetings. All the respondents spoke of leading faculty meetings, department lead meetings, education committee meetings, and presenting at Board meetings and work sessions. One respondent said that he was the lead on presenting a new math program to the Board and working with the teachers to implement it in the classrooms. Another respondent said that he was the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) director. As he noted, "Most APs want to aspire to be principals, and I believe it is advantageous to get involved with the curricular side of it."

Thus, the assistant principals interviewed for this study noted that they were still involved with the traditional managerial and clerical aspects of the role of the assistant principal such as attendance, discipline, and scheduling. However, there was a substantive and growing supervision and instructional aspect to their role as well.

### **How the Role Requirements and Responsibilities are Determined**

It was emphasized in the literature review for this study that clear roles and responsibilities are essential in order for individuals to effectively perform within an organization. An analysis of the data from this study with regard to how the role requirements and responsibilities of the assistant principal position were determined revealed the following emerging two themes: principal influence on the assistant principal tasks and the influence of the district's organizational structures.

The notion that principals have the greatest influence on what the assistant principal position entails and how this position is utilized within the school system emanated as a strong theme throughout the interviews. Principals can promote, support and encourage the assistant principal to take on new tasks and responsibilities or they can shut down a new idea because of competing priorities. One respondent spoke about how his principal substantively shaped his role by giving him responsibility for providing professional development for teachers in how to use data to make instructional decisions. As he explained, "The principal knew that I knew what I was doing with data. She said that she trusted me and was learning from me, but she was still there for every meeting I had with teachers and gave me feedback. Because of her support I knew that she had a huge influence on my role as an assistant principal and my responsibilities as an instructional leader."

Another respondent spoke very highly of his principal and the way she provided opportunities for him to grow his leadership skills. For example, he had always assumed the task of preparing the secure testing materials for the Keystone Exams, the

end-of-course exams required for graduation. However, she gave him the opportunity to take that mundane clerical-type role and transform it into a more expansive role that allowed him to work with teachers on larger data-driven objectives, focused on using data from the exams to improve classroom instruction. Essentially, he had been given a blank slate to build programs based on data to change instruction that allowed more opportunities for students to be more successful. He explained, “It comes down to her [principal] willingness to make changes. She has influenced my role by allowing me to set up the data teams in a much different way than has ever been done in the past. I think her willingness to change influences my role. Instructional leadership in the building is growing because of her willingness to change my role.”

One respondent profoundly noted that operating a school is too much for any one person to take on in this day and age of accountability, and it is important for principals to consider what kind of relationship they want with their assistant principals. “Do they [principals] want to work with someone that they constantly have to say what to do or do they want a partnership,” she asked rhetorically during the interview. “Some of what I do,” she said, “he dictates, but he does not micromanage me. If I suspend a student, I do not need to get his approval. He trusts me.”

Clearly, the assistant principals who participated in this study had a positive and productive working relationship with their principals, and evidence of a shared leadership style was apparent. As a result, the assistant principals had been able to connect their day-to-day tasks to instructional leadership. One thing that appeared to be evident is that how assistant principals perceive the role, enjoy the role, and find success in the role is

dependent to a large extent on how the principal shapes that role and how much positive support is provided.

The organizational structures within the system, such as the district's organizational chart, the assistant principal's job description, and the employment contract surfaced as another theme that influenced how the role requirements and responsibilities are determined. Such organizational structures shaped the role of the assistant principal and allowed for the principal to have a significant amount of influence on the role requirements and responsibilities.

An organizational structure refers to the way an organization arranges people and jobs so that its work can be performed and its goals can be met. An effective organizational structure helps to properly define every individual's role in an organization. Despite the fact that many of the assistant principals who were interviewed noted that they perceived themselves in practice as an extension of the principal's role, the district's governing body have clearly defined the principal and assistant principal positions using a hierarchical style of authority. School district organizational charts showed the assistant principal position directly beneath the principal position; therefore, the assistant principal reported directly to the principal. Because of that structure, the principal had direct influence with regard to how the role requirements and responsibilities were determined.

Evidence from this study indicated that the role of assistant principals as instructional leaders has become more commonplace. Instead of using that influence in an authoritarian manner, the respondents in this study noted that their principals have cultivated a partnership with them which in turn had contributed more positively to

overall school leadership. One respondent emphasized that the only difference between the two roles is that he has “assistant” in his title. “Other than that,” he noted, “we go out and talk to teachers in teams. He’ll take one grade, and I’ll take another. We do a lot side by side.” Such a relationship is a remarkable improvement from the older conceptions of the assistant principalship wherein assistant principals were viewed as minions getting the drudge, menial jobs with which the principals did not want to be burdened. Despite such positive progress in the way the role of the assistant principal has evolved, it remains as a subordinate position on the organizational chart.

In addition to the organizational chart, the assistant principal’s job description was also seen as an organizational structure that had influence on how the role requirements and responsibilities were determined. Four of the five respondents had job descriptions that identified the principal as their immediate supervisor. However, there was no conclusive evidence of a specific set of duties and responsibilities for assistant principals. When asked what influence the principal had on the role and responsibilities of the assistant principal, one respondent said, “In this position, with no job description...about 97%. The superintendent has given the principal discretion to use the AP as he wants.”

A third and final organizational structure that surfaced as an influence on how the role requirements and responsibilities of assistant principals were determined is the number of work days identified in the assistant principals’ professional employment contract. More than one assistant principal spoke of the professional employment contract as a struggle. Three of the respondents had a 200-day contract. One of those three respondents pointed out, “That’s only eight more days than the teachers. The contract does not allow a lot of time for leadership development.”

Another assistant principal who also had a less-than-240-day contract noted that at times he has felt as though he was not considered at the same level as the other full-time administrators particularly with regard to decision making because he felt disconnected. "I'm not here for two months in the summer. As a result, I am not present when decisions are being made. I feel like I'm not really part of the team. Other administrators don't treat me as such; it is more internalized," he noted.

Based on the data reported by the assistant principals in this study, it seemed evident that building principals had a significant amount of control over the duties of their assistant principals, and the organizational structures of the system to a large extent contributed to that influence. Moreover, principals controlled the opportunities that assistant principals have for other forms of leadership.

### **How Assigned Tasks and Responsibilities are Seen as Preparation for the Principalship**

The demands on school leaders have changed and the deep-rooted, traditional role of one principal leading an entire school community has become ineffective and outdated. The responsibilities of school leadership are simply too varied and too numerous to continue the hierarchical leadership model inherent in most schools. The five assistant principals who were interviewed for this study noted that they entered into educational administration because they wanted to be school leaders. Several respondents shared that they wanted to have a broader impact on the system and on more students. Other respondents noted that they loved being part of the decision-making process at the district level.

For this study, much of what was revealed as assigned tasks and responsibilities can be seen as preparation for the principalship. All the respondents believed their principals involved them in tasks that they knew would be valuable not only in the overall day-to-day operations of their schools but to the overall development of their assistant principals as school leaders. In this study, the one thing that truly made the assistant principal's role be acknowledged as preparation for a principalship was the idea that the principals acted as mentors to the assistant principals and treated the assistant principalship as a true apprenticeship. It was evident that the principals understood that one of their primary responsibilities was to prepare the assistant principals to assume a future principal role. Several respondents acknowledged that they appreciated the feedback that they received on a regular basis from their principals. "He [principal] coached me, and it was satisfying to know that I have grown professionally yet still have a way to go. It's satisfying to get the positive feedback. You build a relationship with each other over time."

The assistant principals interviewed for this study also made it very clear that their principals viewed the role of the assistant principal as providing service to the school rather than exclusive service to the principal. In other words, the principals did not want their assistant principals to be limited to tasks inside their offices. They wanted their assistants to be visible leaders within the school working with teachers and staff members to improve instruction in an effort to raise student achievement. One respondent noted, "We are about instruction and what's good for kids. Kids are the priority." The building principal was typically the one who is solely responsible for the decisions that were made, but it was evident that leadership and responsibility were shared. The respondents

from this study noted that the principals involved them in classroom observations right from the start. One respondent summed it up by saying, “I think that everything I do needs to be done to help the building run smoothly and the principal is doing some of those things beside me. We are engaged in shared leadership. All of those things are preparing me to be a principal.” However, there was also evidence that debate and diversity were embraced. “We are a team. He has faith in me. We try to be honest with one another. We disagree but consider it healthy,” noted one respondent.

Creating and nurturing an environment where students can achieve appeared to be a primary focus of being a school principal. The data indicated that all the assistant principals interviewed for this study were responsible for teacher and staff supervision. Instruction can improve when teachers receive feedback regarding their instructional practices, and that was an area where the respondents have indicated that they had opportunities to learn from their principals. One respondent noted, “When I did classroom observations, it was more about planting those seeds and having conversations and following up to see how specific instructional strategies were working with students. When I share articles, I will follow up with conversations with the teachers.”

Another respondent left me with his thoughts regarding how his tasks and responsibilities were preparing him for a principalship. He said, “You get to the point where you can start to visualize a building functioning and working with your own touches on it. When you start to visualize things that motivate you and it becomes a vision...and when you start to feel and visualize yourself doing those things that you know the principal has to do, you know it’s time to move on and hopefully you’ll be

prepared to do so because it's as much your responsibility to prepare yourself as your principal's responsibility."

### **Experiences that Assistant Principals Perceive are Missing from their Current Role**

Overall, the assistant principals interviewed for this study were pleased with the assigned tasks and responsibilities related to their current role. They believed they can be effective principals because of the experiences they have had while under the mentoring of their principals. One respondent commented, "Honestly, I feel like I would not change a lot because of the fact it was the best on-the-job training I can imagine in this district. The principal allowed me to take the lead role in many areas." She went on to admit, though, that there were some missing pieces. Overall, three areas were identified as missing experiences that could better prepare assistant principals for principalships. Those missing experiences were identified as finance/budget, school law, and special education.

According to every respondent, the finance and budgeting aspect of the principal's role had not always been shared with them. They overwhelmingly spoke about the lack of understanding of the budget process in particular. When I asked what factors motivate and inspire assistant principals to pursue employment as principals, one respondent noted, "Being a leader. I think I do many of the same things that the principal does. We both do discipline. We both do the curricular piece. It's a shared leadership." She emphasized that she could perform well in a principal role if she chose to pursue that

path, but she would need to reach out to others for that finance piece because that is an area that the principal tends to covet.

Additionally, school law was an area that many of the respondents believed was missing from their experiences. More than one respondent noted that they would want to take another school law course or a refresher in school law before becoming a principal.

Many of the respondents noted that their understanding of school law specific to special education was particularly weak. This may be because most school districts have a special education director position that oversees the legal aspect with regard to special education. There are so many changes in special education, so there is definitely a need for an assistant principal who is traditionally a disciplinarian and typically works with attendance to work very closely with the director of special education and case managers. One respondent noted that he thinks special education could have been more emphasized in administrative coursework as well as his work experiences because those are areas where one doesn't want to do things wrong. The respondents did not clarify differences between what they meant by "training" or "taking a course" versus "experiences" and follow-up clarification was not asked for by the researcher.

The assistant principals who participated in this study were grateful for the opportunities that were afforded them as a result of their principals mentoring them and providing opportunities for them to develop as building leaders. Additional experiences with respect to budget and finance, school law, and special education would have been welcomed.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine and gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions regarding the assistant principal role of those currently serving in this capacity. This study sought to expand upon and strengthen previous research regarding the role of the assistant principal in school leadership and was specifically designed as a case study to better understand the kinds of opportunities and constraints inherent in current configurations of the position and whether and how those opportunities and constraints might enhance an instructional leadership role. This research was important because the role of the assistant principal has been largely overlooked in providing leadership for the school (Kaplan & Owings, 1999). Furthermore, the position of assistant principal is not considered to be a terminal position and has historically been perceived as a stepping-stone, an intermediary position in the hierarchical ladder of the district or school, to a principalship. In many cases, that step happens sooner rather than later.

This chapter presents a summary of the findings that provide insights into what the current role of the position looks like, how the role requirements and responsibilities are determined, in what ways the assigned tasks can be seen as preparation for a principalship, and what experiences the assistant principals who were interviewed for this study believe are missing from their current role that could assist them in assuming a principalship. This study aimed to not only benefit those individuals serving in the role of assistant principal but to also provoke thought within those who are influential with regard to the experiences that are offered to those in assistant roles. Recommendations for

policy and practice are discussed as a means to aid practitioners in utilizing this research to better prepare those entering the assistant principal role and support them while they are in the role. Recommendations for further research are included so others can expand upon the findings of this research.

### **Summary of the Findings**

The extant literature emphasized that, for the most part, assistant principals do their work in their offices, are rarely seen by teachers or students, and seldom get the recognition and appreciation commensurate with the work they do for schools. Although the role of the assistant principal still remains mired in managerial and clerical duties, such as attendance and discipline, the role of today's assistant principal appears to have expanded to one that includes staff supervision, instructional leadership, and curriculum development. For example, the assistant principal's work with regard to discipline has become more data-driven as they look for patterns of behavior and provide feedback to staff members on ways and means to assist students achieve success. Thus, the assistant principal's role can be seen as shifting from the traditional disciplinarian role to a more structured approach that provides greater opportunity for them to not only practice and be seen in leadership roles, but to make a difference for students, teachers and families as a result of the work they do. The quality of school leadership is increasingly gaining recognition as a significant factor in the improvement of student achievement, and there was evidence from this study that the role of the assistant principal position can contribute to this success.

The data collected for this study also supports the idea that the role of the assistant principal is changing with regard to supervision and improvement in instruction. Evidence from this study suggests that teacher supervision and evaluation can be viewed as a shared responsibility between the building principals and the assistant principals. Additionally, it was not uncommon, according to the data, for current assistant principals to make presentations at board meetings and in other public settings, lead department meetings, facilitate data team meetings and faculty meetings, and be expected to handle the role of the principal any time the principal is not available. Those opportunities depict assistant principals as competent and contributing members of the administrative team rather than as mere subordinates to their principals.

The study clearly revealed that the principal has an essential and vital role in providing the assistant principal with job experiences that will frame his or her professional growth where each can learn from the other and contribute to school leadership. Results from this study suggest that while the principal is still a strong influence over the role requirements and responsibilities of assistant principals, this influence is more positive rather than negative. Data from this study indicated that the assistant principals' involvement in such leadership opportunities would not have been possible without the encouragement and support of the building principal. While the respondents identified finance, school law and special education as key areas that are still largely missing from their work assignments, the data from this study showed that principals are currently providing instructional leadership opportunities that allow for their assistant principals to grow their leadership skills and be seen as leaders.

Interestingly, the data from this particular study is inconsistent with the previous research as presented in the literature review. Not only was the data inconsistent with the extant literature, it was also inconsistent with the researcher's experiences when she was an assistant principal. The data collected within the confines of this study was disconfirming evidence as it disproves the researcher's initial conceptions regarding the role of the assistant principal.

### **Conclusions**

With respect to the findings of this study, several conclusions will be discussed in the following section. Those conclusions include the effect that role clarity has on the perceptions of the role of assistant principals, the perceptions between the ideal and actual roles of the position, and the extent to which the principal's influence in assigning duties and responsibilities for the assistant principal position affects the perceptions of the assistant role in school leadership.

One of the key themes that emerged from the extant literature was the concept of role clarity. Role clarity for any individual leads to a more successful implementation of his or her job expectations. As widely noted in the literature, the role of the assistant principal has always been a poorly defined position (Shoho et al., 2012). We often place people in the position of assistant principal because of a certain skill set, but as a result of the position being poorly defined, the skill set may not align well to the expectations of the position. A clearer understanding of the purpose of an assistant principal may help

relieve feelings of frustration by enabling those in the position to effectively and efficiently complete their duties and prioritize their time.

The research also suggests that perceptions between the ideal and actual roles of the assistant position exist. The assistant principals in this study appeared to have understood the expectations of the role prior to accepting the position, as most respondents noted that they were aware that they would be involved in customary administrative tasks, such as discipline, attendance, and events scheduling, as well as teacher supervision and evaluation.

The role, however, remains ambiguous and volatile today, primarily due to the extent to which assistant principals' duties are largely assigned by the principal (Shoho et al., 2012). School principals have considerable autonomy when assigning tasks and duties to their assistant principals, and that autonomy can define the working relationship between the two professionals. Prior research posits that because assistant principals' duties are often assigned by the school principal, the assistant principals have little opportunity to develop as instructional leaders (Marshall, 1992). More dated research (Austin & Brown, 1970) noted that most principals practiced a do-as-you-are-told style of relationship with their assistant principals, and assistant principals understood that they had to mirror the working style and educational philosophy of their principal in order to be successful in their role in the organization. Such a relationship effectively kept the assistant principal in a subordinate position to the principal. This hierarchical style of leadership hurt the professional development of the assistant principal as well as the tamping down any leadership potential that a strong, unified team of administrators could bring to a school when they work toward common goals. A study conducted four decades

later by Marina and Chance in 2010 (Melton et. al, 2012) found that 83.4% of American assistant principals indicated that the principal still had complete authority to determine and assign duties of the assistant principal.

The findings of this study suggest that the principal maintains a significant amount of influence over the role of the assistant principal and continues to have considerable autonomy in assigning tasks to those in that role. That has not changed, nor have the organizational structures, such as the assistant principal's job description and the placement of the position on the organizational chart. Those organizational structures support a strong influence on the role of the assistant principal.

What has changed are the kinds of tasks and duties in which the assistant principals are engaged. Assistant principals in a 1990 study showed interest in taking on stronger instructional leadership roles (Pellicer et. al, 1990), yet Kwan and Walker (2012) found that assistant principals still had little involvement in teaching and learning, curriculum development and teacher growth, tasks commonly associated with instructional management. Few of the assigned tasks of the past involved problem solving or collaborative effort with other school administrators and remained managerial and clerical in nature, such as record keeping with regard to discipline, attendance and schedules. Consequently, their duties and responsibilities did not provide opportunities to develop their own leadership skills.

The assistant principals in this study also were interested in being instructional leaders, and actively worked with their principals to make that happen. Overall, they were pleased with the kinds of tasks that they performed on a regular basis that stretched far beyond being disciplinarians and attendance officers. Although the assistant principals in

this study have not dropped discipline, attendance, and the bus and lunch duties from their responsibilities, the role of instructional leaders has been added to their plate and overall was a welcomed addition. As a result, the current role of the assistant principal looks different than the traditional manager of the school building from years past. It has evolved and has moved toward one more focused on instructional leadership.

Leaders in all walks of life and all kinds of organizations, public and private, need to depend on others and need to encourage the development of others to accomplish the organization's purpose. Schools are no different. Results from this study support the idea that the principal has an essential role in providing the assistant principal with job experiences that will frame his or her professional growth. Data from this study indicated that the assistant principals' involvement in such leadership opportunities would not have been possible without the encouragement and support of the building principal. Consequently, the assistant principal has been able to connect day-to-day tasks to instructional leadership as a result of the principal's influence on the assistant principal's role.

There was little evidence in this study to support the old style of school leadership as presented in the literature review. Rather, the current study supports the idea that the assistant principals believed their principals provided opportunities for them to grow as leaders while inspiring others. The assistant principals in this study defined the working relationship between themselves and their principals as a positive relationship rather than hierarchical in nature.

The fact that finance and budgeting were mentioned as missing pieces of the assistant principals' experiences in this study adds additional support to the conclusions

of Lankford, Connell, & Wyckoff's 2003 work that ascertained assistant principals should be better prepared in financial and facilities management. Paula Kwan and Allan Walker devoted a sustained effort to studying and understanding the roles and responsibilities of assistant principals and also found scant involvement of assistant principals with budgeting and financial issues in a 2011 study (Kwan & Walker, 2012). Interestingly enough, assistant principals in this study continued to speak of those missing pieces in 2015.

All this suggests that the current role of the assistant principal is very different than the role of the assistant principal in the past. In today's climate of heightened expectations for accountability spawned by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, as well as the restructuring of schools in terms of size, organization, and increased diversity, principals are in the hot seat to improve teaching and learning and may be beginning to view the role of the assistant principal differently. Furthermore, principals are now more acutely aware of issues involving school safety, emergency planning, and crisis management than ever before—an area of concern that rivals academics in urgency. For those reasons, the role of the assistant principal appears to be changing as principals are looking to lead their schools in a framework of collaboration and shared decision-making with their assistant principals (NASSP, 2013), and the work of the assistant principals in this study supported that framework more than previous research has shown.

### **Recommendations for Practice and Policy**

The stories of the assistant principals interviewed for this study provided a rich

tapestry of their daily lives. Their stories also served to provide a voice for assistant principals. After consideration of the findings and conclusions drawn from this study, instituting a teacher leadership program for aspiring assistant principals is a recommendation for practice. Recommendations that will influence policy, such as reconceptualizing the assistant principal role to provide more focus on instructional leadership, engaging principals in mentoring assistant principals, and developing the principal and assistant principal positions into a leadership team will be discussed in this section.

A recommendation for practice is for school districts to partner with higher education institutions to develop a pathway of training for teachers who have an interest in pursuing a career in school leadership. The primary goal would be to educate participants in the workings of administration as well as training specific to the assistant principal role. Such training for aspiring school leaders will keep participants abreast of current trends in education. The program should also include some of the areas that have been identified in this study as missing pieces for effective leadership preparation, such as school finance and budgeting, school law, special education, as well as effective classroom instructional practices. The program would also provide a networking base for the participants so they will be able to learn from the practices in other districts.

Byproducts of the program would be better informed staff members who would have a higher-level of understanding of school administration and a highly-qualified pool of school leaders prepared to fill administrative vacancies within or outside their districts.

The first policy recommendation is for the role of the assistant principal to be reconceptualized to focus time and energy on instructional leadership and less on the

managerial aspects the position tends to possess. Even though evidence from this study supports the evolving role of the assistant principal, managerial duties have not fully gone away. Acknowledging that it takes a different skill set to be a building manager than an instructional leader, administrative assistants who have a pragmatic skill set and an aptitude for responsibilities such as managing facilities, logistics, and resources could perform some of the tasks that are still done by assistant principals, such as scheduling meetings and building activities. By doing so, the assistant principal can be moved into an instructional leadership role and create and support staff development initiatives and be more visible in the classrooms. Hence, the position can be maintained as a stepping-stone to the principalship, and the assistant principal would be better prepared to assume a future principal role.

The state of Pennsylvania has recognized that cultivating leadership in others is important and has, therefore, instituted a statewide, standards-based continuing professional education program for school and system leaders. The program focuses on developing the capacity of leaders to improve student achievement. Despite such a mandated, formal program for school administrators, a second recommendation for policy is the establishment of policy that demands the expectation that principals mentor their assistant principals on a daily basis at the school building level. This effort will not only prepare assistant principals as leaders but will provide additional leadership for the school. In order to do so effectively, focused quality professional development must be available to the principals. The practice of mentoring must be systematic, thorough, and authentic with well defined outcomes. Teachers are afforded a mentoring program when hired, and it would benefit all stakeholders if such a program were extended to new

assistant principals. The mentoring program would allow school districts to take advantage of “home growing” their future administrative teams by ensuring that principals are mentoring their assistants and providing meaningful and valuable experiences that will develop leadership qualities. It would also provide the district an opportunity to get to know and evaluate new assistant principals while providing regular, on-the-job support. At the same time, such a mentoring program would provide some common direction with regard to district leadership. Finally, mentoring can be a two-way street. A new assistant principal can spark his or her principal’s creativity and reenergize the principal’s career by discussing the most current instructional strategies and trends in teaching and learning.

The extant literature discussed the idea that the hierarchical structure of the assistant principal position is detrimental to the position’s effectiveness because the principal has a significant amount of influence regarding how the position is used. The assistant principal’s role continues to be largely undefined which contributes to its ambiguity. Evidence from the study indicated that the principal and assistant principal often work together. It is for these reasons that a reconfiguration of school leadership is recommended. A final recommendation for policymakers is to reconfigure the leadership team in a way that would more accurately reflect the administrative roles as a team. Instead of having one principal with one or more assistants serving below the principal, consideration could be given to having co-principals or a shared leadership model. Policymakers would create a job description for the principal and assistant principal as a team rather than separate roles. Instead of the assistant principal reporting to the principal, the principal and assistant principal would report together to the

superintendent. The two-person team would create annual goals with action plans for each person's role. Their performance review would be based on the success of their goals as a team rather than individually. This practice may require a change in personnel policy as individual performance evaluations are typically a confidential matter.

Embracing this paradigm shift would increase and strengthen the capacity of school leadership teams and provide the power and status to the position that the traditional assistant position lacks. Additionally, a shared leadership model would allow for those serving on the administrative team to share the instructional and discipline duties and work collaboratively to ensure teacher and student performance, thus making a positive impact on student achievement. Such a team effort would not only decrease the principal's responsibilities, but it would provide opportunities for the assistant principal to work in leadership roles and eventually transition into a principal position with more confidence. Those involved may feel less frustrated and more satisfied professionally and personally. This model could be established only if the two administrators agreed and felt comfortable with such a design. Performance evaluations are typically confidential, and it is not customary for one person's evaluation to influence another's.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The work of the assistant principal is vital to the success of schools and worthy of more study. This study sought to expand the limited work of other educational researchers in an effort to understand assistant principals' perceptions of the work that they do. Simply put, more qualitative research is needed to capture the stories of assistant

principals regarding their struggles and successes and to gain insight into the role of the assistant principal. Recommendations for further research in the areas of training, professional development, and mentoring are suggested.

In order to help prepare future assistant principals, additional research should be conducted on how assistant principals are being trained to enter the role. Are higher education institutions programs sufficiently preparing those to enter the assistant principal positions? Are those already in the assistant principal position provided with ongoing professional development relevant to the role? Are the trainings and professional development opportunities keeping up with current trends? Additional research can contribute answers to those questions. Another area in need of further research is one that focuses on principal preparation and whether there is any meaningful difference between principal preparation and assistant principal preparation.

As discussed in the recommendations for policy, further research on the restructuring of the role of the assistant principal is also needed. If a leadership team consisting of co-principals were implemented, the impact of such a structure would beckon additional study. Future research could contribute to the body of research demonstrating the critical importance of more than one person in a leadership role in schools. More research is necessary regarding the instructional leadership of assistant principals within the context of shared leadership. Additionally, more data to substantiate the value of the principal mentoring his or her assistant principal would also be of interest to district and state leaders.

This research study was intended to understand how the role of the assistant principal is used in today's schools. It is recommended that a larger scale study be done

to describe the impact of assistant principals' experiences and how they may affect one's aspirations to pursue a principalship. This would further help determine specific areas that might be causing assistant principals' reluctance to aspire to principalships.

This study was conducted in small, rural districts, and there is value in the detailed information that the five respondents provided in order for others to better understand their work. Other studies may include larger samples, randomly selected from multiple geographic locations. The field could benefit if future research explored the assistant principal's role in large urban settings as well. A new study could determine whether or not school size affects administrators' perceptions more dramatically than could be shown in a sample with as little diversity as was employed here. Therefore, it might be useful to conduct research in small and large schools. Such research could uncover the fact that the role of the assistant principal should vary according to school size.

This study focused on perceptions of the assistant principal's role in school leadership at the secondary level in central Pennsylvania public schools. The data collected could support further research on the differing perceptions of elementary, middle-level and secondary assistant principals on their roles and responsibilities. Additionally, research questions could be expanded to present an opportunity to seek out and include a larger number of female assistant principals to investigate the perceptions of female assistant principals relative to the role.

The fact remains that without effective leaders most of the goals of educational improvement will be very difficult to achieve. The educational community could benefit from additional studies that can help to expand our understanding of the perceptions of

the assistant principal's role in educational leadership and gain insight that can be used to help prepare future assistant principals before and after they enter the role and send them to the principalship better prepared.

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## Appendix A

### Sample Welcome Letter to Assistant Principal Participants

Date

Mr. Vincenzo M. Public  
Academic Junior/Senior High School  
Academic School District  
101 Academic Lane  
Academic, PA 11111

Dear Mr. Vincenzo M. Public:

Thank you for agreeing to be a participant in my doctoral dissertation case study. In order to participate, you must currently be an assistant principal with less than three years experience at the secondary level in a public high school within the Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit's region. It is my understanding from your Superintendent that you meet this criterion. Your Superintendent has given permission for you to participate in my study.

I have enclosed two copies of the Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research. Please read each form carefully. If you agree to participate in this study, you will need to sign and return one copy of the consent form. You should keep the second copy for your personal records. I have enclosed a self-addressed, stamped envelope for you to return the signed consent form to me. In order to expedite the study, I am asking that you return the signed consent form by (insert date). As soon as I have received your signed consent form, I will contact you to schedule a date, time and location for the initial interview.

Please contact me by email or phone ([sxm295@psu.edu](mailto:sxm295@psu.edu) or 570-490-1454 if you have questions or need additional information regarding the study.

Once again, I thank you for your willingness to participate in this study, and I look forward to meeting you.

Best regards,

Sandra Mattocks  
Doctoral Candidate, The Pennsylvania State University

## **Appendix B**

### **CONSENT FOR RESEARCH**

The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Perceptions of the Assistant Principal's Role in School Leadership

Principal Investigator: Sandra Mattocks

Address: 324 Water Street New Berlin, PA 17855

Telephone Number: 570-490-1454

Advisor: Dr. Nona Prestine

Advisor Telephone Number: 814-863-3762

Subject's Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**We are asking you to be in a research study. This form gives you information about the research.**

**Whether or not you take part is up to you. You can choose not to take part. You can agree to take part and later change your mind. Your decision will not be held against you.**

**Please ask questions about anything that is unclear to you and take your time to make your choice.**

### **1. Why is this research study being done?**

We are asking you to be in this research because you are currently employed as an assistant principal in a public school district within the Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit or within a 60-mile radius of the researcher's place of residence.

This research is being done to find out how assistant principals feel about the role they play in school leadership.

Approximately five people will take part in this research study at a local site.

### **2. What will happen in this research study?**

The individuals chosen to be interviewed will be assistant principals at the secondary level who are employed in a Pennsylvania school district within the Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit region or within 60-miles of the researcher's place of residence. The interviews will be structured around the role of the assistant principals using an interview guide. Interviews will be conducted face-to-face in order to hold an engaging conversation where information can be shared and perceptions exchanged.

Those interviewed will be asked open-ended questions pertaining to their role as an assistant principal, such as their experiences, actions or behaviors,

their opinions or beliefs, and their feelings. By using a semi-structured format, the researcher will begin asking the participants questions regarding topics that have been predetermined prior to the interview, but the largest portion of the interview consists of the researcher exploring relevant topics as well that might come to light during the course of the interview. A semi-structured interview protocol will serve as a guide during the interviews with subsequent questions emerging from the respondents' replies. The subjects are free to skip any questions that they prefer not to answer. Boundaries, simply identifying what will and what will not be studied, will be used as a way to prevent the researcher from going off on tangents that are not related to the research questions. Placing boundaries will allow the study to remain reasonable in scope. The researcher will focus throughout the case study on the leadership experiences in which the assistant principals are participating and what experiences they believe may be lacking.

Each interview will be audiotaped with the participant's permission. Participants will be able to review the notes and transcripts as a way to verify information. A second interview will be conducted as a means to clarify any statements made in the first interview and to answer any questions.

In addition to intensive interviewing and observing the participants at work, various school documents and archival records will be requested and provided by the school staff to be analyzed. Documents that will prove to be most helpful will be the district's goals, objectives, and mission and belief statements, copies of job descriptions, etc. The use of document analysis will provide important insights into both public and private perceptions, rules, guidelines, and images. Observers' comments, field notes during the interviewing process, and document analysis records will serve as a means of calling attention to speculations or issues to be explored in future data collection and analysis.

A second, semi-structured interview will be conducted with the assistant principals to clarify responses from the first interview as well as answer any questions that have emerged since the initial conversation. The use of more than one interview is important because interviews are cumulative, each interview building on and connecting to the other. Field notes will also be taken during the second interview and analyzed.

### **3. What are the risks and possible discomforts from being in this research study?**

There are no reasonably foreseeable risks, discomforts, hazards, or inconveniences to the subjects as a result of participation in this study. Subjects participating in this study will not be subjected to any physical, psychological, privacy, legal, social, or economic risks. There is a risk of loss of confidentiality if your information or your identity is obtained by someone other than the investigators, but precautions will be taken to prevent this from happening.

**4. What are the possible benefits from being in this research study?**

**4b. What are the possible benefits to others?**

The assistant principal's voice needs to be heard as educators, policymakers, and citizens seek to define the problems in education. Additional research may identify reasons why principals do not do more to develop their assistant principals' skills. A look into those experiences may provide effective training opportunities. Additionally, future study may investigate the ill effects of those who wait for their turn with little preparation once they get there. By sharing the voices of assistant principals, we may also be able to determine what aspects of leadership preparation are useful.

**5. What other options are available instead of being in this research study?**

You may decide not to participate in this research.

**6. How long will you take part in this research study?**

If you agree to take part, it will take you about two months to complete this research study. You will be asked to be present at the research site (your place of employment) on two separate occasions.

**7. How will your privacy and confidentiality be protected if you decide to take part in this research study?**

Efforts will be made to limit the use and sharing of your personal research information to people who have a need to review this information. Research data in the form of field notes will remain in the researcher's possession at all times. To enhance the integrity of findings from this study, every effort will be made to conduct the data collection and analysis with accuracy and rigor. Neither participants nor their school districts will be identified by name. Each participant will be given a pseudonym, so that someone with knowledge of the school district cannot identify the research participants based on traits such as age, gender, and number of years with the school district. A list that matches your name with your code number will be kept in a locked file or password protected file. The corresponding audio tape will also be labeled

with the respective pseudonym and code number. The researcher is the only person who will have access to the data. The researcher will maintain all data until PSU informs the researcher that the data can be destroyed.

In the event of any publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

We will do our best to keep your participation in this research study confidential to the extent permitted by law. However, it is possible that other people may find out about your participation in this research study. For example, the following people/groups may check and copy records about this research.

- The Office for Human Research Protections in the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services
- The Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies) and
- The Office for Research Protections.

Some of these records could contain information that personally identifies you. Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private. However, absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

#### **11. What are your rights if you take part in this research study?**

Taking part in this research study is voluntary.

- You do not have to be in this research.
- If you choose to be in this research, you have the right to stop at any time.
- If you decide not to be in this research or if you decide to stop at a later date, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled.

The person in charge of the research study can remove you from the research study without your approval. Possible reasons for removal include if the researcher believes the subject is not adhering to protocol requirements.

#### **12. If you have questions or concerns about this research study, whom should you call?**

Please call the head of the research study (principal investigator), *Sandra Mattocks*, at 570-490-1454 if you:

- Have questions, complaints or concerns about the research.
- Believe you may have been harmed by being in the research study.

You may also contact the Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775, or Protections@psu.edu if you:

- Have questions regarding your rights as a person in a research study.
- Have concerns or general questions about the research.
- You may also call this number if you cannot reach the research team or wish to talk to someone else about any concerns related to the research.

### *INFORMED CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN RESEARCH*

#### *Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent*

Your signature below means that you have explained the research to the subject or subject representative and have answered any questions he/she has about the research.

Signature of person who explained this research	Date	Printed Name
(Only approved investigators for this research may explain the research and obtain informed consent.)		

#### **Signature of Person Giving Informed Consent**

Before making the decision about being in this research you should have:

- Discussed this research study with an investigator,
- Read the information in this form, and
- Had the opportunity to ask any questions you may have.

Your signature below means that you have received this information, have asked the questions you currently have about the research and those questions have been answered. You will receive a copy of the signed and dated form to keep for future reference.

#### *Signature of Subject*

By signing this consent form, you indicate that you voluntarily choose to be in this research and agree to allow your information to be used and shared as described above.

---

Signature of Subject

---

Date

---

Printed Name

*Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent*

Your signature below means that you have explained the optional part(s) to the research to the subject or subject representative and have answered any questions he/she has about the research.

---

Signature of person who explained this research

---

Date

---

Printed Name

**Signature of Person Giving Informed Consent**

*Signature of Subject*

By signing below, you indicate that you have read the information written above and have indicated your choices for the optional part(s) of the research study.

---

Signature of Subject

---

Date

---

Printed Name

## Appendix C

### Assistant Principal Interview Protocol

\_\_\_\_\_ Area High School/Middle School  
(Name of District)

**Assistant Principal:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date of Interview:** \_\_\_\_\_

- 1) Tell me a little bit about yourself and include your leadership and educational background.
- 2) Why did you want to become a school administrator?
- 3) Describe the preparation you had for your role as an assistant principal?
- 4) What (if any) would you change about your leadership preparation for the assistant principal role?
- 5) Describe how you felt when you were first hired as an assistant principal.
- 6) Describe how you thought you would be spending your time as an assistant principal.
- 7) Describe the “actual” duties and responsibilities of your role as assistant principal.
- 8) As assistant principal, what leadership roles do you assume?

- 9) What input do you have in the policies of your school or district?
- 10) How do your responsibilities as an assistant principal relate to the mission of improving instruction?
- 11) What is the most challenging part of your role as an effective assistant principal?
- 12) How personally and professionally satisfying is it being an assistant principal?
- 13) How would you describe your career aspirations as an assistant principal?
- 14) Describe your relationship with your administrative colleagues.
- 15) Describe your school principal's job responsibilities.
- 16) What influence does the principal have in determining the role and responsibilities of the assistant principal?
- 17) What are the factors that motivate and inspire assistant principals to pursue employment as a principal?
- 18) In what ways, or to what extent, can the assigned tasks and responsibilities that you have described be seen as preparation for the principalship?
- 19) It can be argued that the most qualified candidates to assume a principal position are the assistant principals who have (or should have been) groomed for a promotion. What do you think about that statement?
- 20) Suppose you were a member of a school board that was looking to redefine administrative roles in a district, how would you redesign the role of assistant principal?

## VITA

Sandra Mattocks

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### **EDUCATION**

#### *Degrees*

D.Ed., Educational Leadership, Pennsylvania State University, 2016

M.Ed., Educational Administration, Bucknell University, 2005

B.S., Elementary Education, Bloomsburg University, 1996

#### *Certifications*

PA Letter of Eligibility, 2014

PA Supervisor of Curriculum and Instruction, 2008

PA School Administration (K-12), 2005

PA Instructional II Elementary Education, 2004

### **EMPLOYMENT**

Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Mifflinburg Area School District, 2012-Present

Assistant Middle School Principal, Mifflinburg Area School District, 2006-2012

Middle School Teacher, Shikellamy School District, 1999-2006

### **PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATIONS**

*Effective School Discipline: A Positive, Proactive, Organizational Approach*

Master's Treatise Bucknell University July 2005

*The Effect of Pre-Professional Teaching Experiences on Teacher Education Students' Motivation*

Paper presented at the 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Northeastern Educational Research

Association Conference in Kerhonkson, New York October 20-22, 2004

*A Study of the Correlation of Numeral-Writing Difficulty and Students' Rank in Math Class*

Presented at the National Conference for Undergraduate Research at the

University of North Carolina at Asheville, North Carolina April 18-20, 1996

### **PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS**

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

Pennsylvania Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development

Pennsylvania Association of Federal Program Coordinators

Susquehanna Valley Reading Council