Reconceptualizing the Assistant Principal Role to Leverage its Transformative Potential

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Abstract

Assistant principals (APs) can act as powerful agents for ensuring equitable educational access. Given their close proximity to students' academic and behavioral experiences, they have their fingers on the cultural "pulses" of their schools and are often positioned to influence decisions that significantly impact student trajectories. However, many APs are still underutilized and underdeveloped by principals who hold outdated conceptions of the position, using it mainly as a catch-all for supervisory duties and discipline. When relegated to low-level management roles, and in the absence of appropriate mentoring and training, APs often prematurely quit their positions, disrupting school improvement initiatives, morale, and leader succession. This study explores how a group of early-career APs experienced a unique, year-long Inclusive Excellence fellowship that offered targeted professional development and group support; it also gathered perspectives on how specific supervisory practices impacted their capacity to act transformatively and their willingness to persist in their roles.

Keywords: Transformative principal, assistant principal, school culture

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Introduction

Transformative principals prioritize social justice at the core of their work, assembling equity-focused leadership teams that work collaboratively to ensure rigorous and nurturing learning environments for every student (Nganga et al., 2025; Radd et al., 2021). They realize that this work is complex and requires the diverse perspectives and skills of various individuals leading the work at different layers of the school structure (Goldring et al., 2021; Wallace Foundation, 2021a). One strategy they use to maximize their capacity is to grow and leverage the transformative potential of their assistant principals (APs). By supporting and engaging their APs as social justice leaders on the front lines of instruction and school culture, these principals activate a critical catalyst for change (Goldring et al., 2021).

The Underutilization of Assistant Principals

Despite a steady increase in these positions, especially in urban and low-income schools, the assistant principals' potential to advance equity for underserved student populations often goes untapped (Armstrong, 2010; Goldring et al., 2021; Wallace Foundation, 2021b). Instead, many APs continue to be assigned a preponderance of disciplinary and supervisory duties by their principals that afford them little agency or opportunity to exercise or develop their leadership capacity. Furthermore, APs are often overlooked in regard to their needs for targeted professional development and coaching that can support their effectiveness in eliminating opportunity gaps (Armstrong, 2010, 2015; Bierly & Shy, 2013; Goldring et al., 2021; Houchens et al., 2018; Ishimaru, 2013).

The Lack of Clarity Around Expectations for APs

Unlike the principal role, expectations of APs can differ widely from school to school, even within districts. A combination of factors accounts for such variation: Disagreements exist in the field as to whether the position should be treated as a principal training ground, a unique leadership role, or both; in fact, current leadership standards and evaluation tools do not differentiate between principal and AP leadership roles despite their distinct differences (Bartanen et al., 2020; Bouffard, 2023; Goldring et al., 2021; Wallace Foundation, 2021a, 2021b). Additionally, though most principals will spend time serving as APs prior to advancing as building leaders, leader preparation programs often do not explore the role's possibilities, including how its unique mid-level positioning in the school structure places it in direct proximity to many of the frontline decisions that impact educational access for students (Armstrong, 2010; Goldring et al., 2021).

The Impact of Poor AP Utilization on School Improvement Efforts

One serious consequence of not providing APs with the challenges, supports, and validation needed to develop their transformative leadership capacity and commitment is their relatively high turnover rate: approximately one-quarter of APs resign from their roles within just a few years, while more than half choose to leave their buildings; approximately 10% of these APs quit building leadership altogether (Bartanen et al., 2020). Frequent AP turnover can be highly disruptive to school improvement initiatives, reducing faculty morale and buy-in for critical changes in practice when constant interruptions and the fracturing of relationships create confusion and anxiety for staff, students, and families (Bierly & Shy, 2013; Wallace Foundation, 2021a). Furthermore, just as the presence of APs has been found to prevent burnout in principals

and faculty, their abrupt departure often causes stress for the remaining administrative team members who must assume greater responsibility while replacements are hired and trained (Goldring et al., 2021). Time and money spent on continually recruiting APs also wastes human and financial resources that could be better spent on school improvement efforts (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Finally, when the role is viewed as tedious, low-impact, and low-prestige, faculty may be deterred from becoming APs. Given the increasing vacancies of principals and other administrator positions due to retirement and burnout, it is critical that the AP role be sustainably designed in order to ensure that buildings have available to them a highly trained and committed pool of mid-level leaders ready to assume these vacancies (Goldring et al., 2021).

Giving Consideration to Generational Differences in How APs Might Perceive Their Roles

Changing expectations of Millennial and Generation X APs around their work experiences and conditions may also influence their satisfaction with and persistence in their roles. For example, as employees, they may be less willing than their Boomer predecessors to tolerate autocratic behaviors and traditions of practice that prevent them from solving problems logically and responsively, or to remain in jobs that are overloaded with tedious, managerial tasks that fail to lead to more immediate growth opportunities (Purdue Global, n.d.). They tend to be more comfortable working in more informal, collaborative environments and place a high value on protecting their time outside of work hours (Purdue Global, n.d.). These generational differences may impact how these APs view role expectations, communications, and the kinds of support they expect from the principals and districts.

The Purpose of This Article

Despite the growing numbers of AP positions and our increasing acknowledgment of their potential contributions to school improvement, relatively little research exists around the best ways to utilize, prepare, and retain them (Bartanen et al., 2020; Goldring et al., 2021). This study offers firsthand perspectives from four early-career APs, employed for fewer than two years at several K-12 public schools in the Northeastern U.S., who participated in a year-long AP Inclusive Excellence Fellowship. Facilitated by the researcher, a former AP/house principal, the fellowship was designed to support participants' self-efficacy as transformative mid-level leaders and to explore their needs and experiences as relatively new practitioners. The testimonies gathered from these APs illustrate how they can and often do promote equitable practices in their day-to-day encounters with faculty, students, and families despite the challenges and compromises that can arise when "leading from the middle". Perhaps most significantly, participants reveal critical perspectives around how specific principal attitudes and practices impacted their self-efficacy and job satisfaction. The author presents this information in the context of the most recent literature around common experiences, needs, and retention issues of APs.

Study Methodology

The Inclusive Excellence fellowship, which met bimonthly over the 2024-2025 school year, was part of an IRB-approved qualitative study on APs' experiences and needs as transformative leaders. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling: emails were sent to local superintendents and principals inviting them to recommend APs for participation. While seven APs initially expressed interest, the time commitment and driving distance to the meeting site ultimately resulted in participation by four individuals; over time, the group elected

to meet online for their convenience. Fellows included a first-year elementary AP working in an urban district, a second-year middle school AP employed in a suburban district, a second-year AP working in a K-8 suburban school, and a second-year AP serving in an urban high school. An equal number of males and females were represented; two participants identified as educators of color and one fellow identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community.

The five 1½- hour fellowship sessions featured a variety of content, discussions, and activities around the AP role, exploring such topics as enacting transformative practices within their spheres of control and influence, intervening to support behaviorally challenged and chronically absent students, and having difficult conversations. Guest speakers were invited to support reframing and understanding of root causes of attendance and behavioral challenges and share evidence-based practices for re-engaging struggling students and families. Participants dialogued around their successes, challenges, and the support they received, and how these experiences impacted their self-efficacy in their roles. Pre- and post-program interviews were conducted; member checks ensured accuracy of quotes. To further protect the anonymity of the fellows and their districts, the author has used gender-neutral language in all participant references and quotes. All fellows consented to the use of their data in publications and presentations; there were no competing interests to declare.

Theoretical Influences

The fellowship model was chosen with the intention of reducing isolation of new APs and to offer targeted professional development in a continuous and collaborative setting to further participants' preparation and self-efficacy as transformative change agents. Several theories informed the research design and fellowship curriculum.

Transformative Leadership Theories

The content of the meetings was designed to support participants' capacity to act transformatively in their roles as APs. Transformative leadership is grounded in a commitment to social justice and democracy, viewing education as having both an individual and a societal impact (Shields & Hesbol, 2020; Theoharis, 2007). It acknowledges the historical inequities in practice which have benefited Anglo, middle- to upper-class populations and which have resulted in the persistent opportunity gaps and disparate educational outcomes we see today (Ladson-Billings, 2021). In pursuing inclusive learning environments, transformative leaders not only address pedagogy, but also the deficit mindsets and sorting practices that often underlie the low rigor, segregated learning experiences provided to many minoritized populations. They strive to ensure validating, inclusive school cultures and pedagogies that engage every learner in rigorous learning opportunities (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Vygotsky, 1978). Additionally, transformative leaders take a collaborative approach to problem-solving, engaging historically marginalized voices in creating policies, systems, and curricula that address the needs of the students and families they serve. They strive to develop ethical citizens by engaging students socio-politically in exploring issues of social justice that lie in their spheres of influence (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

Adult Learning Theories

The fellowship approach reflects several principles of Adult Learning Theory, including the idea that adults learn best when content is immediately applicable to relevant problems, and when learners are provided opportunities to "sense-make" with others about new concepts and

experiences (Mezirow, 1981; Freire, 1970). Consequently, every meeting included the processing of real-life scenarios and personal challenges; in one session, a guest administrator facilitated several behavioral case studies while another session featured a guest professional who discussed a state attendance program.

This theory also maintains that, as mature mindsets can be challenging to alter, they often require "disruptive" experiences in order to successfully challenge entrenched beliefs. To encourage the fellows to consider the potential influence of implicit bias on judgments around learning potential and behavior, as well as the effects of cultural mismatches on educator-student relationships, they engaged in self-reflection around how their own lived experiences impact their priorities and relationships with some students and families.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012) suggests that people feel motivated to persist with tasks when three fundamental psychological needs are met: a sense of competence, relatedness, and autonomy. *Competence* refers to one's sense of mastery of a task and one's ability to increase one's effectiveness over time (Ryan & Deci, 2013). APs who are given assignments that are challenging, validating of their positions, and which afford them opportunities to engage in a variety of school improvement roles may be more likely to persist at their jobs. Additionally, when empowered and trusted by their principals as thought partners and decision-makers, they gain a critical sense of competency and confidence. *Relatedne*ss refers to the experience of social connectedness, including the perception that one is cared for and esteemed by others. As APs are typically supervised by principals, the mentoring and coaching they receive plays a large role in the level of professional and personal connection they feel. They often benefit from being provided opportunities to engage with the school community in ways that allow them to create key relationships and develop their leadership credibility, such as when assigned to serve on parent committees, advise student organizations, and represent the school at community events. *Autonomy* deals with the degree of perceived agency over one's life. APs want their roles to consider their career goals and strengths, and to allow them to exercise some judgment. The fellows explored their sense of autonomy in their current positions, examining their spheres of influence, control, and care, and shared strategies they used for leveraging their interests in their roles.

Exploring the Literature

APs on the Front Line of Improving Educational Access

Traditionally, the AP role has often been limited to addressing behavior, attendance, and providing building supervision; in fact, the entertainment industry has sometimes comically stereotyped APs as frustrated, inept individuals who often act as student adversaries rather than advocates. As such, the AP role can sometimes be perceived negatively by students, families, and staff. However, the position is increasingly being recognized by transformative-minded principals for its potential to advocate for underserved students by removing academic and relational challenges that act as barriers. APs are increasingly being assigned to lead intervention teams, facilitate PPTs, coach instruction, and arrange professional development, responsibilities that require effective communication and trust-building with members of the school community. From these unique vantage points, they can not only observe first-hand how students experience

the academic and cultural practices of their schools - including the degree to which they feel a sense of challenge, purpose, and belonging in their learning environments - but can use their positional authority to support the use of evidence-based, inclusive approaches (Houchens et al., 2018).

APs can contribute to eliminating opportunity gaps in both direct and indirect ways. Indirectly, they may influence decision-making by their administrative teams by sharing their observations of how aspects of culture and climate, pedagogy, and even policies may be negatively impacting the academic and social advancement of traditionally underserved student populations (Donlan, 2022). For example, as they work with chronically absent students and their families, they may uncover routine transportation or attendance practices that disproportionately disadvantage first-generation students or single-parent families (Author, 2022). While observing instruction, they may notice a need for faculty training in differentiation or relational strategies that can more effectively engage struggling students and help to dismantle disproportionately negative academic or disciplinary outcomes for certain populations.

APs can also directly impact school culture and climate through their acceptance or rejection of deficit narratives and biased decision-making practices by teams that negatively influence decisions that impact the academic and social trajectories of low-income students, emerging multilingual learners (MLs), students of color, and students with exceptionalities - groups that have been traditionally marginalized by schools (Fergus, 2016; Author, 2020). By modeling high expectations, confronting biased or unproductive attitudes, and holding teams accountable for using protocols and appropriate evidence in making critical decisions, APs can encourage practices that are known to promote equitable access.

Another area that APs often influence is the management and re-engagement of avoidant or behaviorally-challenged students. By sharing research and helping adults to constructively reframe their interpretations of student behaviors, and by serving as advocates of restorative and trauma-informed practices, they can potentially support social-emotional growth and development of students and reduce the use of harmful exclusionary consequences (Radd et al., 2021). Even when APs lack full authority to make final decisions around suspensions or expulsions, the contributions of their perspectives and advocacy can often significantly impact student outcomes (Donlan, 2022; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012).

Finally, the frequent communication APs have with families around student attendance, behavior, and other issues offers regular opportunities to create trusting relationships that can ultimately help their schools to better serve them. Through the myriad decisions and dispositions they display daily, APs can increase the chances that their students will have more equitable access to nurturing, rigorous learning environments. Content and activities are best aligned with adult learning theory and include interactive opportunities (Coates et al., 2016)

The Use of Fellowships for Professional Development

The fellowship model has been used to support growth and career advancement in a variety of settings, including the medical professions, science research, and K-12 teacher leadership and development (Coates et al., 2016; NIET, 2025). Fellowships typically involve the creation of voluntary cohorts or communities who meet regularly to engage in shared interests such as receiving professional development and mentoring, conducting research, networking around common issues and needs, and completing projects. Fellows may receive stipends to compensate them for work produced or to offset participation costs (Coates et al., 2016). The fellowship model has been proven to reduce professional isolation, offer greater connectivity,

and provide the opportunity to pursue personal goals, which can potentially result in increased self-confidence, better understanding of systems, increased resiliency, greater assertiveness, improved technical and communication skills, new career advancement opportunities, expanded professional contacts, and increased credibility in one's field (Debevoise, 2020; McKimm et al., 2019; Opportunity Desk, 2024; Robinson, 2024). Barriers to the fellowship model include time constraints of participants, especially when the time is not protected by the employer or academic program, and finding funding for paid fellowships (Coates et al., 2016; Opportunity Desk, 2024).

Findings

All of the study participants identified the desire to support student success as their primary motivation for entering school administration. However, varying levels of leadership opportunity, agency, and support resulted in different levels of self-efficacy and satisfaction with their roles. The fellows discussed a variety of ways that they practiced transformatively despite constraints sometimes placed on their agency:

- They confronted deficit narratives that threatened to prevent individuals and teams from accurately identifying root causes of disparate achievement and improving practice. Every fellow in the study described ways in which, either through coaching instruction, leading improvement teams, or managing interpersonal communications, they modeled empathy, cultural responsiveness, and/or growth mindsets. For example, one AP explained how they modeled and continually redirected a teacher team over a period of a year to stay solution-focused as they deliberated about ways to support a struggling student:

… I am not going to assume that he's been through trauma, but his behavior resembles it…I'm hearing his teachers often say, "Yeah, he just doesn't belong here. This isn't the right setting for him." And I think to myself, "Whether you're right or not - and I don't think you are" (and I don't say it that way to them), I tell them, "The student's not going anywhere. The student is ours to help and support."

- They supported the fair and appropriate use of academic and behavioral data in making instructional decisions. While APs still spend more time managing discipline than do principals, research indicates that their involvement in instructional leadership is increasing (Goldring et al., 2021). One way that two of the fellows leveraged their administrative access was by supporting faculty in obtaining and organizing critical academic and behavioral data. Although many teachers understand the need to collect and monitor data to inform their instructional decisions, they often face challenges accessing it in a timely, practical manner (Radd et al., 2021). In an effort to reduce inappropriate referrals for special education evaluation, one fellow worked to improve the use of data and tiered interventions by their school's intervention team. The AP introduced a decision-making protocol as well as a data collection tool that assembles academic, attendance, and discipline data into an easy-to-read document that allowed team members to explore big-picture patterns and possible correlations. By the time the fellowship ended, the AP reported feeling optimistic that the team was beginning to see a positive impact, "We do not go from Tier I to II unless we have six weeks of data collection that's very targeted, whether it's behavioral, reading or academic…a lot of these steps were skipped and not utilized. So, I think we're now helping."

- They supported the use of culturally relevant, responsive instruction: A first-year AP described how their own lived experiences as a former English Language Learner and a child of refugee parents help them to empathize with emerging MLs and to support their teachers in understanding and responding to their needs, “I did well in school, but there are times I feel like I struggled, especially with reading comprehension…so I think those pieces help me to put myself in the shoes of a student, a teacher, and a parent...” Given the large number of MLs enrolled in their school and the lack of a dedicated specialist, the fellow (a former instructional math coach) chose to offer instructional support to teachers. For example, after discovering that faculty had not received the names of the MLs in their classes, the AP obtained this information for them, then followed up with instructional strategies. They recalled a specific instance in which a teacher attempted to assess a student’s vocabulary using a worksheet that contained an ambiguous prompt; the AP helped the teacher to explore and reframe the student’s interpretations,

…the student put “hat”. And I said, “Well, technically, they're right,” and the teacher was like, “No, it's supposed to be a cap.” I said, “Well, if you want it to be ‘cap,’ then give them a word bank and just say, 'here are all the words that you're going to be using to fill out this worksheet. Another fellow of Hispanic identity also worked to build greater accountability for culturally responsive practices,I think my biggest contribution, especially to underrepresented students, is holding teachers accountable during our evaluations… You don’t realize that one teacher has so much power and influence over the lives of so many students. And if we're not addressing things that are inappropriate, or things that are not happening, then we're not serving the students academically...

A second-year AP explained how, after spending almost two years transitioning into their role, they now give greater attention to promoting inclusive instruction,
I'm following the process to be able to say, “Hey, have you considered how your students of color feel? How are they represented in their learning? Are they seeing themselves in their learning...are they being held to the same level of rigor and standards as your other students?”

- They worked intentionally to develop supportive relationships with historically underserved populations of students and families, validating their cultural strengths and advocating for their needs. Success in relationship-building can balance out the more stressful aspects of the AP role (Armstrong, 2015); by engaging in brave conversations around bias and inclusion, APs can be more effective in developing trusting relationships, especially with historically underserved faculty, students, and families (Armstrong, 2010; Craft et al., 2016; Donlan, 2022; Verduzco-Baker, 2018). Three of the study participants described how recalling their own marginalizing experiences as students has helped them to connect with groups of students and families who are struggling to be seen and understood. One Anglo AP explains how their experiences as a member of the LGBTQ+ community help them to empathize with challenges of belonging and inclusion, “… I kind of understand what it is to be somebody who wants to be understood. I still have a lot of privilege, but there have been some disadvantages I had to overcome…” This individual described how their heightened sensitivity has sometimes served as an asset in managing racial conflicts that have arisen in their school:

I had a conversation with a parent who is African American last year who was talking about her concerns about the different treatment of students of color in our building. And she said, “…you

just get it. Like, you do understand it, and we appreciate that… I don't know if it's because of your own circumstances… you have a receptiveness"…I think that it's my empathy and my life experiences…You know, we all walk in with different baggage, and therefore we all have different needs.

This AP also discussed another incident in which they bridged communication with a parent of color who claimed her daughter had been treated differently from other students, …They [the principal and parent] got to a point where they really weren't able to see eye-to-eye on anything. So, I said, "Look, I'll reach out." I don't think I made her feel like all the problems were solved, but I helped her feel heard... And I told her I would do what's in my power to help address that…not in a way like, "Oh, my principal is not doing it that way" but just, "listen, I hear your concerns, and I understand, and I want to see what we can do to improve the situation".

Two fellows reported using their multilingual assets to support non-English-speaking parents in deciphering school policies, procedures, norms, and traditions. One of them explained how they often bridge communication with their largely Spanish-speaking high school families by personally interpreting at meetings rather than hiring translators, "When I'm in these meetings, the families feel a relief when they see me. And they're like, 'You speak Spanish'! So, not needing a translator to be present is very helpful." Another fellow, who was a former student in the district they now work in, recalled how their own parents' language barriers led them to avoid school events out of self-consciousness and lack of understanding, "…my parents didn't go to any of those things unless we told them we had to go...They would take us, but they would just be, like, 'okay, we'll sit in the car. You go do what you need to do'". After experiencing a small turnout of Spanish-speaking parents for an important school choice informational event, the AP approached the organizer of the event and asked if the invitation to families had been translated into Spanish. The individual responded that they hadn't and that the AP was the first person to bring the idea up. The AP responded, "…for next year, we can get somebody to translate it because a lot of families don't know about it.

- They support faculty in enhancing their communication and relationship-building skills by modeling and facilitating constructive practices with students and families. One fellow, a former school counselor, has been effective in facilitating understanding between faculty and underrepresented families and helping them to reach solutions,
- …there are always situations where parents will be like, "my child is not getting what they need." And I see the teachers feeling like, "We're doing everything possible we can for your child." And I have the opportunity to come in and just kind of facilitate and mediate there, and say, "Hey, look, you know I'm hearing this from you, the parent. And I'm hearing this from you, the teacher or the service provider…it sounds like on both sides everyone wants this child to succeed, so how do we make that come together?"
- They shared strategies for supporting the social-emotional growth of students and modeled trauma-informed practices. APs who are trained in trauma-informed relational practices can support others in seeing beyond student behaviors to understand their root causes and develop responsive solutions (Donlan, 2022). Their level of understanding and ability to address miscommunication, cultural conflicts, and relational practices that lie at the roots of disproportionate discipline of students of color, lower-income students, and students with exceptionalities, as well as their ability to choose restorative

approaches versus exclusionary discipline, can help to close opportunity gaps (Darling-Hammond, 2023). One fellow who serves as an AP of a largely low-income, racially diverse school leverages the discretion given to them by their principal around discipline to use restorative approaches that focus on social-emotional teaching and relationship-building. This individual recalled an instance in which a minor physical altercation in their school occurred after one student accidentally brushed up against another student on the playground, "…both girls were sent to my office. I had them write out why they were sent to my office, which I learned is a great strategy…" After finding them both receptive to reflecting on their choices, the AP decreased their suspension time to prevent further missed instruction. The AP also privately followed up with the student who reacted so intensely to having her hair touched,

- …she just stood there for like two or three minutes and then just started crying. Clearly there was something else. And so I was, like, "I'll let you know something. From my experience, you react that way when somebody's done something to you physically"... So, then she just let it all out…her mom's ex-boyfriend would beat her…yanking her hair, and then hit her.

The AP connected the student to the school's counseling services and talked with her about better communication strategies. "That was a few weeks ago, but now, every time she comes in the hallway, she sees me and feels comfortable and safe. Today, she asked if she could have lunch with me." The same AP also reported supporting faculty in reframing their interpretations of certain behaviors, encouraging them to look beyond them to ask, "…this is what we saw, but behind that, there is this piece, and we just need to be compassionate and also understanding… how can we support her?"

Barriers to the Practice and Motivation of APs

Despite the transformative potential of the role, the agency that APs are actually afforded is largely determined by the attitudes and leadership practices of their principals, including their willingness to position their APs as critical team players in leading school improvement efforts (Bartanen et al., 2021). Research identifies several common barriers to the transformative capacity of APs which are often rooted in principal practices, including an unwillingness to distribute leadership roles and a lack of understanding of the pedagogical and cultural conditions needed to create equitable educational access (Bierly & Shy, 2013; Buff, 2017; Wallace Foundation, 2021b). Below are the perspectives and experiences of the fellows around these barriers as well as connections to the related research:

Lack of Agency and Dead-End Assignments

Outdated notions of the AP role, coupled with a more autocratic style by principals, can prevent the assignment of meaningful responsibilities to APs that build their skills and credibility with the school community (Goldring as reported by Gill, 2018; Matthews & Crow, 2003; Wallace Foundation, 2021b). In fact, a significant number of APs fail to be promoted to the principalship due to insufficient leadership experience (Buff, 2017; Pollock et al., 2017; Somoza-Norton & Neumann, 2021). As mentioned previously, APs often quit jobs that are filled with a preponderance of managerial duties that prevent them from applying their training to advancing school improvement efforts and which do not help them to improve their leadership skills (Anderson & Turnbull, 2019; Armstrong, 2010, 2015; Barnett et al., 2012; Craft et al., 2016). One AP shared,

…sometimes being an assistant principal can feel very powerless because I can only do so much. I get along wonderfully with my principal…but there's a level of, like, almost linear vision in certain areas…I feel like right now I'm in the phase where I have all this knowledge and have some practical application. But I really need to know, and really need to grow, my ability to kind of make it happen… I struggle with, "All right, now what?"

APs can also be hampered by district decisions that fail to support building-based goals and unique site challenges, including the needs of various minoritized populations (Buff, 2017; Carpenter et al., 2017). One fellow explained how vacillation by their district around school start times diverted a significant amount of their time from supporting faculty in the stressful weeks before the opening of the school year, "…I literally spent my first three weeks before school creating a schedule for all the teachers and entering it into (Name of Database)…that took a lot of time." After completing a schedule to accommodate staffing reductions, and with only two weeks before school was scheduled to open, the AP was notified that the district's proposed plan had been revoked: "My principal decided we would go back to our times from last year. However, I couldn't just go back to last year's schedule because I wasn't going to be given my full staff… I still had to work on the schedule regardless…" Then, the day before the final schedule was due, the AP received a third directive that the building would be getting all of their former staff back, necessitating yet another schedule revision. Another fellow experienced a barrier to instructional coaching when their central office switched to a new reading program mid-year but failed to communicate the decision or provide administrative access to the curriculum.

Some APs experience anxiety when faced with ethical dilemmas caused by mandates to enforce rigid or outdated policies that are known to exacerbate disparities, especially when managing attendance or discipline issues (Anderson & Turnbull, 2019; Armstrong, 2010, 2015; Buff, 2017; Carpenter et al., 2017; Shields & Hesbol, 2020). One fellow shared that their district's emphasis on uniformity over equity has sometimes prevented them from being appropriately responsive to individual circumstances,There's a lot of pushback, especially with a district as big as [Name of District]; we always need to ensure that all of the schools are on the same page and doing the same thing because if one family comes from one school and decides to move over here, but we're doing things differently, then there's a lot of conflict.

This AP added that it can be painful to experience criticism from faculty and families for enforcing certain district mandates: "…Sometimes when it comes to these policies, we don't have much power over any of that. A lot of teachers feel that we are the ones making these decisions, and the parents feel that it's us, but it's not the administrators at all..."

Unsustainable Working Conditions

In many districts, vague contractual terminology and the lack of administrator unions offer no standards or protections around APs' work conditions; many new hires feel overwhelmed when immediately assigned a full array of responsibilities without a reasonable adjustment period and appropriate supports (Armstrong, 2010, 2014, 2015; Barnett et al., 2012). A common reason that APs resign is poor work-life balance, including inattention by their supervisors to even their most basic needs such as time to eat lunch and to utilize sick days (Armstrong, 2015; Carpenter et al., 2017; Pollock et al., 2017). Though shortsighted, some districts defend these oppressive practices as "rites of passage" along the path to promotion (Armstrong, 2010; Houchens, 2012). In fact, prolonged exposure by APs to stressful working

conditions can negatively impact their morale and their health, potentially reducing their productivity and longevity in their roles (Armstrong, 2010, 2014, 2015).

Lack of Targeted Professional Learning Opportunities

Most APs want and need targeted professional development (PD) around such responsibilities as coaching instruction, leading special education and 504 meetings, managing conflict, engaging families, and addressing mental health concerns (Armstrong, 2010; Barnett et al., 2012, Barnett et al., 2017; Craft et al., 2016; Goldring et al., 2021; Pollock et al., 2017). While several of the fellows reported receiving some continuing education from their districts, such as training in instructional rounds and facilitating standardized testing, it was often optional and had to be sought out. In some districts, APs may be discouraged from leaving their buildings to attend conferences or professional gatherings (Oliver, 2005). While the study participants were initially given permission to attend the fellowship's late afternoon meetings, most fellows missed at least one meeting due to pressure to be on-call in their buildings.

Insufficient Coaching and Mentoring

The social transition from faculty member to building administrator can be a challenge for some newly appointed APs, especially when they encounter criticism, resistance, or rejection from former faculty colleagues (Armstrong, 2010, 2015; Barnett et al., 2012; Craft et al., 2016). One fellow shared how overwhelming it was to begin an AP position in a new school, "nothing prepares you for that…people are coming to you with questions, and I'm, like, 'I don't even know where the *bathroom* is!'" Principals and administrative colleagues need to offer newer APs empathy and reassurance as well as strategies for developing the "thicker skin" required to successfully make their career transitions (Armstrong, 2010, p. 708; Armstrong, 2015). Without such support, APs can feel professionally isolated and less confident in their roles. While three of the four APs met regularly with their principals, one fellow expressed disappointment at their principal's unwillingness to schedule regular meetings with them when they first assumed their AP role, leaving them to figure many things out independently,

… I had asked if we could have weekly meetings, because that's what I saw at my old school. However, [the principal] wasn't too fond of the idea. So, for now, I just kind of approach [the principal] with things I may have noticed…

Unsupportive or Unethical Behavior by Principals and District-level Administrators

A common reason for employee turnover is a lack of trust in and respect for their supervisors (Parker & Horowitz, 2022). APs are no exception, often leaving jobs due to unsupportive, temperamental, or inflexible principals who overturned their decisions or openly criticized them to placate parents, faculty, or board members (Armstrong, 2010; Buff, 2017; Ishimaru, 2013). Such behaviors not only undermine relationships between principals and APs but may also negatively impact how the school community perceives the credibility of the AP role (Armstrong, 2010; Cohen & Schecter, 2019. Additionally, equity-minded APs can find it challenging to work for principals who confuse equity with equality, making it difficult for them to be responsive to the exceptional needs of underserved populations (Armstrong, 2010). While none of the fellows in the study reported having contentious principal relationships, each experienced different levels of alignment with their principals' values and goals.

How APs Define Principal Support

Despite the significant numbers of APs who experience dissatisfaction with their positions, many APs work for building and district leaders who intentionally create professional and relational conditions that support their self-efficacy and retention (Goldring et al., 2021). The four fellows in this study identified the following positive supervisory practices as not only critical to their growth and self-efficacy, but influential to their decisions to continue in their roles. These practices align with the literature on building the capacity of APs and ensuring successful leader succession:

Their principals modeled and engaged in practices that align with a mission of equitable access. A culture of inclusive excellence begins at the top with principals (and central office administrators) who demonstrate behaviors that support equitable practice, such as a willingness to engage in brave conversations when leading critical changes (Bierly & Shy, 2013; Mitchell, 2025; Author, 2020, 2023; Radd et al., 2021; Shields & Hesbol, 2020; Verduzco-Baker, 2018). One fellow shared that their principal's clear messaging and modeling have helped them to facilitate an inclusive approach to leading their climate committee in identifying the school's core values: "I'm getting the staff to take the lead, and I'm facilitating it in regard to defining what it means to be a (school mascot)…we will have a very clear identity, and then, from there, we will identify what we value."

Their principals gave increasing discretion to them over decision-making. APs need to feel empowered and confident about making the dozens of daily, on-the-spot decisions that impact pedagogical quality, school culture, and student/parent engagement (Buff, 2017); when principals resist the urge to micromanage, they allow their APs critical opportunities and space to take calculated risks that can develop their skills, confidence, and credibility (Anderson & Turnbull, 2019; Banerji, 2025). One fellow attributed their growing self-efficacy around leading school improvement efforts to the unwavering trust their principal has shown them, "…I almost feel like an equal with [the principal] when we work. I don't view myself - and [the principal] doesn't view *me* - as an assistant. We are truly a team." The AP recalled an instance in which they felt particularly validated by their principal's enthusiasm over a book that they shared about a new math approach, "… [The principal] read it, and was like 'Oh, we have to do this!'" Additionally, the principal supported the AP's suggestion of leading an all-faculty book read: **"**We agreed on the topic of grading and selected the book by Joe Feldman called *Grading for Equity*. So, I am running that PD and put a small committee together." The AP then led the committee in a collaborative process for planning faculty training to help them create protocols and grading criteria aligned with the school's newly established commitments: "I feel like I'm building capacity with that smaller team and building their leadership...I'm able to help the whole staff go on this learning journey this year with me."

Their principals conveyed honesty, caring, and a growth mindset. As new leader practitioners, the fellows wanted both honest feedback and the ability to make novice mistakes without fear of being judged harshly (Armstrong, 2015; Barnett et al., 2017). They emphasized the importance of knowing that their principals "had their backs" at challenging moments. One AP who experienced a particularly challenging teacher supervisory situation that led to significant union involvement described the importance of their principal's support and guidance through each step of the process. After one particularly difficult legal meeting, the fellow was

shocked and grateful when the principal unexpectedly showed up at their home to check on them: “I don’t think I could have gotten through it without [the principal]’s support.”

Their principals acted as mentors and coaches. While most APs need and want intentional coaching and mentoring to develop their leadership capacity and their resilience, especially when managing complex interactions with parents, faculty, and students, new hires in particular need safe spaces in which to talk through current issues and challenges (Armstrong, 2010; Barnett et al., 2017; Cohen & Schecter, 2019; Craft et al., 2016). One fellow confessed, “I feel like I'm at that stage of the learning cycle where I don't even know what I don't know. I'm aware of that, and I do want help.” APs also need reassurance from their principals. When one fellow was advised by a colleague to trust themself more, they were relieved when the principal agreed and said, “You’re doing *fine*. Trust that.”

Many APs benefit from scenario-based coaching on ways to manage difficult conversations (Craft et al., 2016; Hayes & Burkett, 2021). Younger APs, for example, can be challenged by veteran teachers who resist their supervision and test their authority by going over their heads with questions and concerns (Armstrong, 2010; Barnett et al., 2017). One fellow who has worked with their principal to strategize around developing buy-in from seasoned teachers for revising outdated practices has learned to reframe the process as “evolving, not changing.” It's a blessing and a curse, but we have the oldest, most veteran staff in the whole district; most of our teachers have 20+ years of experience. It's a gift when it comes to class management - they have things down. However, when we're asking them to explore grading, and we've graded the same way since I student-taught… you hear the grumblings.
Despite the need for this support, the AP feels confident in their principal’s trust in them: “I do feel that I have the power, but I’m still very new to all of this...”

Their Principals Supported Critical Reflection. Principals and other mentors who model and cultivate the habit of self-reflection with their APs can help them to clarify their ethical commitments and develop their transformative leadership platforms (Barnett et al., 2017; Kafele, 2023; Khalifa et al., 2016). For example, all school leaders need to reflect on how their lived experiences may serve as assets or deterrents to their capacity to understand and respond to the needs of others (Barnett et al., 2017; Gooden & O’Doherty, 2015; Khalifa et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2021). One fellow, for example, sometimes struggles to connect with the community’s wealthier families,We have big chunks of students that I have a hard time relating to because they are uber- wealthy… I have no idea what it's like to be in a family with seven different houses around the country… but, you know, sometimes those children from wealthy families have attendance and discipline issues. They can have neglect, too. It just looks different. Additionally, APs benefit from exploring common tensions that arise while working transformatively, such as the challenge of changing a system from within; they may also benefit from learning strategies for depersonalizing and managing resistance to change (Author, 2023).

Their Principals Provided Well-Rounded Professional Leadership Opportunities. APs often need guidance in selecting professional experiences that will not only improve their practices but support their career goals. Three of the fellows stated that their principals took intentional steps to model skills like facilitating school improvement teams, then turned these responsibilities over to them. A second-year AP expressed enthusiasm at being entrusted with the job of building the following year’s elementary school schedule, which requires making some key programmatic

decisions: "[The principal] has given me a lot of ownership over building next year's schedule, yet I feel comfortable enough to ask questions and problem-solve." Another participant was encouraged to create and lead faculty PD: "I led an entire PD series through our staff meeting around relationships and putting relationships at the focus of climate and culture…" Research indicates that APs benefit from being encouraged to gain new perspectives and resources by attending networking events and conferences and by serving on professional committees within and outside of their districts (Barnett et al., 2017; Hayes & Burkett, 2021). One AP described how participating in fellowship helped them to develop the courage to provide more honest, direct feedback to faculty, "I don't know if it was a direct strategy I heard from the group, but being empowered to take that head on…I wanted to 'up' my game…"

Their Principals Built High-Functioning Leadership Teams. High-functioning leadership teams can support the self-efficacy of APs by helping them to learn day-to-day procedures, anticipate upcoming responsibilities, and consider the cultures and traditions of their buildings in their decision-making (Armstrong, 2015; Buff, 2017; Craft et al., 2016; Goodman & Berry, 2013; Hayes & Burkett, 2021; Pollock et al., 2017). One fellow appreciated the time their principal takes to plan fun, authentic team-building activities for the leadership team. Another AP described the value of having department heads in attendance at weekly administrative meetings, "…they're great about trying to figure out solutions for our kids that are struggling or underrepresented." A third participant noted the benefits of having a second, experienced AP on the leadership team to whom they can turn for advice.

Implications/Discussion

Given the growing complexity of the needs of today's student populations, and the relatively high AP turnover rate, the need for intentionality by principals around developing skilled, committed, equity-minded midlevel leaders is more urgent than ever. Aside from providing targeted professional development to the participants, an important goal of this study was to gather critical perspectives from early-career APs that could offer principals and districts first-hand perspectives on how to leverage APs as transformative change agents while supporting their self-efficacy and retention. A third objective was to explore the capacity of a fellowship model to meet the professional development needs of this growing population of school leaders.

The Importance of Providing Agency to APs

One major finding of the study is that the self-efficacy of APs is largely impacted by the degree of responsibility, agency, and support given to them by their principals. APs are less likely to feel fulfilled or to develop self-efficacy in jobs supervised by principals who provide minimal opportunities to engage in a variety of planning and problem-solving activities around school improvement and who fail to afford any autonomy over their time or decision-making. While it may benefit a principal's schedule to hand off all of the discipline or supervisory duties to their AP, or seem organizationally efficient, such constraints can prevent the AP from engaging in leadership experiences that build skills and support their promotion to higher-level positions. While the fellows in this study spent significant amounts of time addressing behavior challenges, they were also provided time to lead improvement teams, provide instructional supervision, and engage in problem-solving with their principals and with students and families. They appreciated opportunities that leveraged their interests, background knowledge, and linguistic strengths. Fellows also valued the encouragement of their principals to take on higher-

visibility responsibilities such as leading professional development and building schedules, which allowed them to build their credibility with faculty, students, and families; such opportunities helped to balance out the more stressful aspects of their jobs, allowing others to experience their strengths and the positive impact they had on various aspects of school culture, operations, and pedagogy.

The Importance of Coaching and Mentoring

Another important finding is that APs need mentoring, coaching, and reassurance from their principals and other senior leaders. The three fellows who regularly spent time talking through challenges and engaging in planning with their principals viewed these opportunities as highly important to developing their confidence and sense of connection. The fellows who expressed the most positive feelings about their jobs worked for principals who treated them as partners, engaging them in planning and problem-solving. However, the one fellow whose principal took a more laissez-faire approach was able to find enough satisfaction and validation from classroom coaching, relationship-building with students, and the freedom to make some decisions independently to remain in the position. The fellows also expressed the need for encouragement and support from their principals at difficult moments, particularly when dealing with faculty supervision. Despite acknowledging some drawbacks to their roles, each fellow elected to continue in their AP position the following year. Though one participant's position was eliminated by their district, they continue to apply for AP positions as they open up and have been assigned many AP-like responsibilities by their current principal.

The Need for Districtwide Coherence and Support

While this study largely concentrated on AP roles in their buildings, two fellows discussed how a lack of coherence throughout the district sometimes interfered with their ability to practice inclusively and responsively; one fellow claimed that district constraints sometimes negatively impacted their credibility with the school community. Consequently, district leaders need to be mindful of how district policies and decisions align with building goals and needs and ensure that they reflect the evidence around supporting greater inclusion and re-engagement of students who struggle academically or behaviorally; this can be accomplished by engaging principals and APs on policy development teams to explore their perspectives on how proposed policies might play out in day-to-day practice (Anderson & Turnbull, 2019; Armstrong, 2010Barnett et al., 2017; Booker-Dwyer et al., 2023; Doleh, 2024; Khalifa et al., 2016; Mitchell 2025; Pollock et al., 2017; Oliver, 2005; Radd et al., 2021; Yan, 2020). District leaders can also support AP retention by engaging principals in critical discourse around distributive leadership, coaching, and mentoring, and by providing APs targeted professional learning opportunities that can grow their skills and self-efficacy.

Benefits and Barriers to the Fellowship Design

This study explored the value of the fellowship design from both practical and social-emotional perspectives. All of the APs reported benefits from having ongoing group opportunities to process issues and to gain practical ideas; one fellow reported feeling greater appreciation for the supports they receive from their principal after hearing less positive experiences from some fellowship members. Another AP reported gaining greater courage to take more risks when giving faculty feedback after hearing how other APs engaged in brave conversations. One participant took back to their principal a data collection tool shared by

another fellow. All of the fellows reported that the guest speakers offered information that was practical and useful to their roles. However, a considerable barrier was time, which is consistent with the research on the challenges of the model (Coates et al., 2016). While the fellowship was intentionally scheduled in the late afternoon so as not to interfere with the school day, participants indicated that it might have been easier for them to attend meetings scheduled during school hours given the challenges of after-school building coverage and competing personal commitments. Some meetings were attended by only one or two participants; the mean attendance for the five-meeting series was 3.5 sessions. However, while one participant expressed a preference for meetings attended by the larger group, others found benefits in meeting with just one or two peers as well.

Future Research

Retention of Administrators of Color

A relevant concern that this study did not address is the experiences of APs of Color, including their needs for development, support, and retention. APs of color tend to serve for disproportionately longer periods of time in their positions before being promoted, receive less mentoring, and are tapped to be principals at lower rates than Anglo APs, often due to implicit bias (Alcade, 2024; Chism & Childs, 2023; Gill, 2018; Bouffard, 2023; Goldring et al., 2021). In general, administrators of color quit their positions at higher rates, frequently citing toxic work cultures in which they experienced hostility, constant challenges to their credibility, and microaggressions (Alcade, 2024; Armstrong, 2014; Bartenan et al., 2000; Raskin et al., 2021).

Gender Discrimination

Gender differences in AP experiences were also not studied. Female APs, for example, are less likely than their male counterparts to be promoted to high school principalships, which can reduce their chances of advancing to district leadership positions (Bailes & Guthry, 2020; Gill, 2018). Similarly, male administrators of color are often assigned to discipline or DEI roles rather than to academic leadership positions, which can prevent them from developing the broader knowledge and credibility needed to progress in their careers (Peters, 2024; Scott, 2016).

Limitations of the Study

A potential limitation of the study is the possibility that participants were self-selecting; the goals of the inclusive excellence fellowship may have attracted a group of participants who were already committed to ethical, social justice-oriented leadership. As such, their appreciation for the opportunity to improve their transformative practices may not represent the views and priorities of APs as a group. Also, as all four participants were formerly acquainted with the researcher, either through past graduate courses or employment experiences, their commentary may have been influenced by these prior relationships.

Conclusion

When situated in schools that intentionally develop their transformative leadership capacity and support their self-efficacy, APs have the potential to make a significant impact on equitable educational access. However, it is critical that principals and district leaders understand that the degree to which APs can and do act transformatively - and their willingness to persist in their roles - is largely a function of how they are positioned, coached, and supported by their

supervisors and colleagues. As entry-level administrators, APs often face steep learning curves and, consequently, require support, validation, and continual skill development. In addition to receiving support at their worksites, participation in fellowships is an effective way to reduce isolation and provide critical role-specific professional development, informal mentoring, and networking that can enhance their confidence and commitment. By recognizing the capacity of APs to serve as leaders in their own right - and by being intentional about providing them appropriate training, mentoring, and validation - schools not only increase opportunity for their current students, but guarantee to future generations their right to be served by leaders who are capable of and committed to the work of advancing equitable educational access.

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