

The First Year: Assistant Principals in Title I Schools

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Abstract

In this collective case study, we explore the experiences of first year assistant principals at secondary schools near turnaround status in Colorado. In order to better understand their experiences, we employed resiliency theory. We found that assistant principals' daily experiences were characterized by overwhelming responsibilities and a consistent focus on discipline that detracted from the assistant principals' desire to focus on improving curriculum and instruction. Further, in applying the resiliency framework, two new sources of resilience emerged: motivation and diversity of perspective.

Keywords: Assistant Principal; Resilience; Case Study; Turn-around Schools

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The First Year: Female Assistant Principals in Title I Schools

‘I didn’t get lunch again this week.’

‘I love my job.’

-First year assistant principal

The role of the assistant principal (AP) is varied and complex in the best of situations. Indeed, the above comments, spoken within minutes of each other, exemplify the complicated experiences of the assistant principal – APs may be carrying so many responsibilities that they scarcely have time to eat, yet they still truly enjoy their jobs.

In many secondary schools, the principal is supported by one or more APs in formulating and executing the central vision of school leadership. The AP serves a dual function of helping to shape the leadership vision and carrying out the policies on the campus level (Hausman, Nebeker, McCreary, & Donaldson, 2002). Among APs, key responsibilities are broadly divergent core functions such as teacher supervision, facilities management, and student discipline. Additionally, as schools face increased accountability measures, more school leaders are dealing with the challenge of improving school performance or facing turnaround status, which could include replacement of administration and staff, increased learning time for students and staff, changes to the instructional model, new governance, and/or changes to professional development strategies (Borman et al., 2000). Still, while the role of the school principal is a subject of frequent study and considerable popular press attention, the supporting role of the AP – and new APs in schools nearing turnaround status in particular – remains relatively understudied.

There has been limited research attention paid to APs, and even less research that has examined the daily experiences of the AP in more challenging school settings; the research that does exist has demonstrated that the AP’s role is both instrumental to the success of a school and difficult to manage to any degree of success (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2012; Hausman, Nebeker, McCreary, & Donaldson, 2002). Other research has shown that nontraditional leadership factors – including the emotional intelligence and resilience of a leader can impact leader success (Maulding et al., 2012). In light of this, we aim to add to the literature in two ways, first by examining the daily work life of APs in schools near turnaround status – arguably some of the most challenging school settings, and second, by examining the sources of resilience upon which new APs in these schools might draw to manage the demands of their roles. Additionally, the research specifically addressing the experiences of female APs is limited. As such, we also aim to add female voices to the literature on the assistant principalship. This qualitative case study is thus designed to explore the following research questions:

1). What are the central experiences of female first-year, secondary school administrators in schools near turn-around status in Colorado?

2). What are the primary sources of resilience during the first year?

Related Literature

The role of the principal has often been a focus for scholarship (Blumberg & Greenfield, 1980; Green, 2010; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). The AP – and in particular, the female AP – , however, has less frequently been the unique subject of study. Indeed, scholars and practitioners alike traditionally viewed the AP as a stepping stone to a principal position. Fulton (1987), for example, espoused this view, stating ‘Everyone who holds the role of assistant principal should strive toward the principalship’ (p. 52). This traditional view has had the effect of lessening the specific focus on the assistant principalship, as it has been assumed that this role was essentially training for the principalship itself. Still, some scholars have increasingly started to view the AP as a unique role and subject of study and have sought to define the role of the AP as unique from that of the principal (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2012; Good, 2008; Gerke, 2004; Hausman,

Nebeker, McCreary, & Donaldson, 2002). In this study, we see the AP as being a role with many diverse responsibilities that are often distinct from those of the principal. In the following sections, we outline existing research on the role of the AP and on related leadership issues, focusing on research on leadership in turnaround schools or schools near turnaround status. We then discuss resiliency theory, examining how it has been used in studies of leadership, and discussing how it will be used in this study to help us better understand the experience of the AP. Overall, research has demonstrated that APs fulfill a variety of roles and responsibilities with mixed levels of professional support.

The Role of the AP

Early research on APs found that their roles and responsibilities fell into several broad categories, including administration, teacher, student, and community responsibilities (Black, 1980; Fulton, 1987). Other recent examples of scholarship on the assistant principal focused attention on job roles, work-time allocation, and the path to the principalship (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2012; Hausman, Nebeker, McCreary, & Donaldson, 2002; Kwan, 2009). Increasingly, scholars and school leaders have begun to view the AP as a potentially underutilized and poorly researched actor in school success (Black, 1980; Marshall, 1985, 1992).

Although the AP is often the first school leadership position (NASSP, 1991), the level of structured induction and socialization into the new leadership role can vary widely (Cranston, Tromans, & Reugebrink, 2004; Marshall, 1992). Greenfield (1985) synthesized early studies of the assistant principalship with the intention of building a conceptual framework for further study. The resulting framework concentrated primarily on socialization and organizational theory drawing from noted scholars such as Schein (1978) and Wolcott (1973). The socialization framework concentrated on how APs 'learned the ropes' (Van Maanan & Schein, 1979, p. 211) and the career stages of socialization. Greenfield concluded that the socialization of the assistant principal was, "characterized as, (1) individual, (2) informal, (3) random, (4) variable, (5) serial, and (6) involving a divestiture processes" (p. 21). The divestiture process concentrated on the metamorphosis where the AP shifted identity away from the teacher role to that of administrator. Later work built a typology of the AP including the phase of socialization into the position (Marshall, Mitchell, & Gross, 1990). Together, they helped to shed light on both the nature of the work of APs and how they are socialized into the position. This important combination of work-life and socialization help to guide the present study.

Various factors could influence whether and how a new AP finds success in her role (Hartzell, 1991; 1994; 1995). For example, APs are faced with responsibilities such as disciplining students, providing instructional leadership, and managing public relations (Hartzell, 1994; 1995). At the same time, APs have to deal with the pressures of increased accountability for student outcomes and large budgetary shortfalls in education, particularly in Colorado – the setting for this study. New APs are immediately thrust into this maelstrom of responsibilities and pressures, that are often highly divergent from their previous roles in the school community. Unlike the new teacher, for example, the new AP's missteps and professional growth take place largely on center stage in front of the entire school community, which could have implications for their experiences and their success (Davis, 1988). Additionally, many APs are transitioning directly from a teaching role, which can cause issues for them as they move into a role which requires them to supervise, and potentially admonish teachers who were recently their colleagues (Fields & Egley, 2005)

The Responsibilities of the AP

APs roles and responsibilities have shifted throughout the years. While the assistant principal used to be just that – an assistant to the principal, who served almost as an apprentice – the assistant principalship has become a role with distinct responsibilities and APs themselves often have differentiated skills and training. Panyako and Rorie (1987), for example, found that many new assistant principals came to the position with advanced training and coursework and that they possessed a depth of experience in curriculum. In conjunction with these new skills came an increased responsibility for instructional leadership, finance, assessment, and law. However, the

addition of new, more sophisticated responsibilities did not seem to correspond with a requisite decline in traditional duties, requiring APs to manage the delicate and complex balance of clerical and supervisory roles juxtaposed with leadership and instructional guidance (Koru, 1993).

APs shoulder a wide variety of responsibilities that are both supportive of and distinct from the responsibilities of the principal. Indeed, scholars have noted that the AP “must be thought of as a principal, and only secondarily as a deputy to the principal” (Panyako & Rorie, 1987, p. 7) because they do often have distinctive roles and responsibilities. For example, APs are often tasked with clerical and supervisory tasks (Koru, 1993), including lunch supervision and monitoring and managing attendance. APs may also take part in observing and evaluating teachers when needed (Celikten, 2001). APs may also participate in instructional leadership, though scholars have noted that APs do not engage in instructional leadership as much as the APs themselves would like (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2012). Instead, APs are usually the go-to disciplinarian in the school, which often supersedes other duties.

Managing students and disciplinary issues are often a huge part of an assistant principal’s job (Glanz, 1994; Hartzell, 1995; Koru, 1993). Assistant principals are often the administrator who manages student discipline issues (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2012). The demands of student discipline can be extreme – in one study of the assistant principalship, for example, a participant referred to the job as “a sophisticated policeman” (Koru, 1993, p. 68). This focus on discipline can have negative implications for APs’ success and satisfaction (Glanz, 1994). Indeed, new assistant principals may thus be asked to perform complex, multifaceted tasks such as budgeting or instructional programming that is randomly interrupted by lunch duty or student conflict.

Though research has demonstrated some commonalities in APs’ roles, the responsibilities of the AP are often context-dependent. Researchers have shown that an assistant principal’s job duties are often determined by the specific needs of their school (Celikten, 2001; Harvey, 1994; Petrides & Jimes, 2014; Watson, 2005). This means that the school setting has very real implications for APs’ daily experiences – APs must often do whatever is needed for the school to run efficiently and for the principal to do his or her job. For example, an AP may spend more time on instructional leadership or classroom observations in a school that is low-performing. This study takes the importance of contextual factors into account by focusing on the experiences of APs who are working in particularly challenging environments – schools near turnaround status – and by attending to the sources of resilience that APs in these kinds of context may draw on to help them manage the demands of their role.

School Accountability Pressures

Under provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), states are required to monitor school and district performance, assigning designations to schools failing to meet AYP (Fritzberg, 2004; Haertel & Herman, 2005). According to NCLB, proficient schools were meeting proficiency standards and AYP for all student subgroups. Schools failing to achieve those targets for two consecutive years were identified as in need of improvement. Consequently, the designation in need of improvement came with increasing sanctions ostensibly designed to assist schools in meeting AYP goals (Jaiani & Whitford, 2011).

The “in need of improvement” designation created added pressures for each year in that designation. Starting with the third year of schools failing to meet AYP goals, schools were required to offer tutoring services provided by the school system. Starting in the fourth year, schools failing to meet AYP goals were required to make schoolwide changes in , curriculum and personnel changes. For schools missing AYP targets for five consecutive years, the law mandated restructuring—the takeover or reclassification into charter school status—and the wholesale change of school leadership (Fritzberg, 2004).

Colorado implemented the NCLB requirements by creating a school performance framework based off NCLB’s AYP goals (Colorado Department of Education, 2009). The major metrics included academic achievement, academic growth, test participation, and the performance of identified groups. Within the performance framework are four rankings of schools based on the states’ goals. The top designation was Performance a category analogous with NCLB’s proficient schools. Schools in this group meet all the requisite criteria. The rankings for the next categories

were based on years of failing to meet expectations. In order they are: Improvement, Priority Improvement, and Turnaround. The categories of Priority Improvement and Turnaround reflect longer periods of failing AYP goals and result in increasingly losses of school-level autonomy and increasing levels of state supervision and, potentially, school closure (Colorado Department of Education, 2009).

The pressures of turnaround status for school leaders are well documented. Principals must quickly make improvements to test scores (Duke, 2004) while addressing systematic, long term organizational changes (Hallinger & Heck, 2011), including unions and potentially ineffective teachers (Weiner, 2014). All this takes place in a compressed timeline which is seldom supported by organizational leadership research and empirical results (Aladjem et al., 2010; Argyris & Schon, 1996; Malen & Rice, 2009). Finally, NCLB's emphasis on the role of the principal places the administrative team's success at center stage for replacement in turnaround efforts (US DEO, 2014). Given these pressures, principals and APs in priority improvement schools face substantial pressure to avoid slipping into turnaround status.

Theoretical Framework

As noted in the previous section, the role of secondary assistant principal is demanding in hours, number of duties, and complexity of challenges. Much like new teachers, the new AP frequently has the least desirable duty assignments and the fewest systematic supports. Further, though many APs come from teaching, having been a successful teacher does not guarantee immediate success as a school leader. Indeed, the position is often one of exceptionally high stress. As a result, many new school leaders must hone or develop the skill of identifying mistakes and transforming them into learning opportunities. Further, the lessons of the first-year administrator are learned on center stage in front of an audience of stakeholders: parents, teachers, other administrators, and community members. Finally, new APs that work in particularly challenging or stressful environments, such as schools nearing turnaround status, have to find a way to learn the job and manage the stressors of their daily work, while also navigating the threat of turnaround. Thus, the concept of resilience is critical in understanding the experiences of APs, particularly as they navigate their first year in a school near turnaround.

Although the term resiliency has no universally accepted definition among researchers, there is a shared foundation in the ability to "bounce back" (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000, p. 555) or to surmount adversity. Resilience has been examined as both a psychological construct and a socially-constructed construct (Gu & Day, 2007). In psychological terms, researchers have argued that positive emotions build personal resources, which are later drawn on as sources of resilience (Fredrickson, 2004). Socially-speaking, resilience is also influenced by the social relationships in an individual's work context and the by the work environment itself. The capacity to be resilient in challenging situations then is mediated not only by a person's internal beliefs and psychological resources, but also by the setting in which the challenging situation is taking place (the context) and by the other individuals in that context (Day et al, 2006). Thus, both internal and external forms of resilience are critical to how a person manages challenging situations.

Early resiliency research explored the reasons for positive coping strategies exhibited by some schizophrenics (Garmezy, 1970). As research expanded into multiple fields, the discussion diverged in two directions: the sources of resiliency and whether resiliency was innate to the individual or generated externally and thus dynamic and context-driven (Higgins, 1994; Richters & Martinez, 1993; Werner & Smith 1982, 1992; Wolin and Wolin, 1993). Further debate centered on to what degree resilience was context- and time-centered (Mrazek & Mrazek, 1987).

The framework quickly expanded to education. Researchers and practitioners alike saw value in measuring sources of resilience and in increasing resilience in educational practitioners. Areas of success in challenging circumstances, such as urban schools, became a focus for researchers interested in students (Wang, Haertel, & Wahlberg, 1994) and for those interested in the experiences and success of teachers (Patterson, Collins, & Abbott, 2004). Gu and Day (2007), for example, argued that teacher effectiveness is mediated by the teachers' sense of self-efficacy, their professional identities, and the interaction between these internal constructs and the external work environment. Later, the focus shifted toward increasing resilience in the hope of increasing both

teacher retention (Le Cornu, 2008) and student outcomes (Patterson et al., 2004). The focus on teacher burnout, for example, began to shift toward an examination of teacher resiliency and how that influenced retention. In terms of students, researchers began to look at how to build resilience in students to improve outcomes (Morrison & Allen, 2007).

Of particular interest in this study are the sources of resilience employed by female leaders. Gender plays a critical role both in how leadership is conceptualized and in whether and how leaders draw on sources of resilience. For example, Christman and McClellan (2008) explored the relationship between gender and resiliency in educational settings. Their findings concentrated on identifying both sources of resiliency and exploring them through a feminist lens including dividing resiliency sources into masculine and feminine forms. They concluded that many female leaders had adopted a more masculine leadership style. Turner (2009) explored resiliency for women leaders in the early childhood area, while Perkins (2011) examined the stressful intersection of mother, administrator, and doctoral student. Despite this existing work on resilience in female leaders, there has been no work to date applying resiliency theory to female APs, whose experiences may be shaped both by their unique position and by being female administrators in a traditionally male-dominated position.

In this study, we draw on resilience theory to understand and categorize the experiences of three female APs. In particular, we are looking to understand the sources of resilience upon which these APs draw to navigate their first year as an AP. In so doing, we draw on the work of Wolin and Wolin (1993). They described resilience as ‘the capacity to rise above adversity by developing skills’ (p. 5) and as a learned rather than innate quality. Wolin and Wolin divided resiliency into seven sources: insights, independence, relationships, initiative, creativity, humor, and morality (See Table 1).

Table 1
Source of resilience

Source	Characteristics
Insight	The habit of asking tough questions and giving honest answers.
Independence	Drawing boundaries between yourself and troubled parents; keeping emotional and physical distance while satisfying the demands of your conscience.
Relationships	Intimate and fulfilling ties to other people that balance a mature regard for your own needs with empathy and capacity to give to someone else
Initiative	Taking charge of problems; exerting control; a taste for stretching yourself in demanding skills
Creativity	Imposing order; beauty, and purpose on the chaos of your troubling experiences and painful feelings
Humor	Finding the comic in the tragic
Morality	An informed conscience that extends your wish for a good personal life to all of humankind

Wolin & Wolin, 1993, p. 6-7

Research Design

The goals of this study are to examine the lived experiences of female secondary school APs, focusing on several APs’ sources of resilience as they navigate their first year in their new jobs. Toward our study goals, we employed qualitative collective case study methodology (Stake,

1995) in order to explore themes across cases. Case study research is “not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied” (Stake, 2000, p. 443); thus, case study scholars place great importance on purposefully choosing and bounding the case by both time and place (e.g. Stake 1995; Merriam, 1988). In this collective case study, the APs’ practices and experiences in their schools represent the boundaries of the case study as a whole. Embedded units of analysis, within the larger case of the assistant principalship, are bounded to the experiences and actions of those particular APs.

In conducting a qualitative collective case study, we sought to draw connections and conclusions across cases in order to “build a general explanation that fits each of the individual cases, even though the cases will vary in their details” (Yin, 1984, p. 108). In other words, we aimed to explore the experiences of each individual participant, while also comparing experiences across participants to draw conclusions about the larger experience of being a female AP. Collective case study is thus particularly well-suited to this study, as we seek to explore the experiences of individual APs, in order to understand the assistant principalship as a specific phenomenon. Bounding our case to these three specific APs allowed us to garner an in depth understanding of their experiences in order to provide a more general understanding of the assistant principalship.

Participants

To bound the case study, the sampling for this study was restricted to three APs. We utilized purposive sampling (Creswell, 2007), choosing three specific principals who could provide insight into the experience of being a female first-year assistant principal in a challenging context – low-performing schools nearing turnaround status. Thus, all three participants were first-year APs in secondary schools near turnaround status. Each was located in a different county and school district along the front range of Colorado. The school districts were all the largest and most ethnically diverse in their respective counties. All three participants are women between the ages of 35 and 45, a typical age for a first-year administrator. They represent a variety of ethnicities: European-American, Latina, and bi-racial. Two of the participants worked in high schools and the third worked in a 6-8 design middle school.

Our purposeful sampling strategy afforded an opportunity to explore a female perspective on the first-year experience as well as examine sources of resilience. However, some unintended common traits also emerged. All three APs lived abroad for significant periods during their adult life, which impacted how they viewed and responded to their experiences as APs. Additionally, as teachers, they shared a background in second-language instruction, having either taught English language learners (ELL) or Spanish language. Basic demographic information is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. *Demographic Data*

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Prior Experience	Administrative	School Type	Setting	Education
Lupe	42	Latina	Summer school assistant principal		High	Urban	M.A.
Beth	43	European-American	District program director		Middle	Urban	Ph.D.
Anne	37	Bi-racial	ELL coach		High	Urban	2 M.A.

Data Collection

This case study relied primarily on observations over the course of a school year in conjunction with a series of semi-structured interviews. In addition to the initial interview, participants were asked three open-ended follow up questions with five days of the initial interview.

Interview questions were formulated based on the resilience model of Wolin and Wolin (1993) to highlight challenges and setbacks that the school leaders faced and then identify the underlying sources of resiliency they employed. Further, the sources of resilience serve as propositions for our analysis (Yin, 2014), which we discuss in further detail in the data analysis section.

To better understand aspects of the sources of resiliency, multiple questions per resiliency construct were designed. The use of multiple measures per construct was built around two ideas. If the construct was a source of resilience, it would present multiple facets of the source and provide insight into how it provided support for the individual. If the construct appeared not to be a source of resilience, then multiple measures provided confirmation and provided a platform for how the individual viewed those situations. Because sources of resilience might have shared origins, questions were intentionally designed to have the potential to measure more than one construct. A matrix of the questions and constructs is shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Questions by Theoretical Construct

<i>Construct</i>	<i>Questions</i>
Motivation	1, 2, 5, 6, 11
Persistence	1c, 3, 4, 7, 9, 11
Essence of Assistant Principal	1a, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12
Setbacks	1b, 7, 10
Challenges	2c, 2, 3, 8, 10, 12
Past History	11, 12
Feminist Perspective	13

At least one hour of observation data was collected by the first author on the day of the interview. To support observations, he spent additional time both before and after the interview observing the school environment. He generated memos about the overall experience of the interview, the site, and reactions immediately following the interviews. To support the memoing process and the personal observational field notes, photographs and some artifacts were collected. In order to preserve confidentiality of the participants, schools, and students, no identifying photographs were included in this study. Interviews were transcribed, pseudonyms were attached, and the research memos were completed within two days of the initial interview.

Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of a process of deductive and inductive coding, along with consistent analytic memoing – a process of reflecting on a journaling about analysis and potential categories, patterns, and themes (Strauss, 1987). Our deductive coding process was reflective of our emphasis on resilience and our theoretical framework and fit well with our methodology. A significant advantage of case study is that it encourages researchers to extensively engage existing empirical and theoretical literature (Yin, 2014). In this study, resilience theory provides the foundation and starting point for an orienting set of propositions. Propositions reflect important theoretical and empirical issues, direct the researcher to important components of the case that should be examined within the scope of the case study, and point the researcher toward data points that contain relevant evidence (Yin, 2014). For example, drawing on resilience theory, and sources of resilience as identified by Wolin and Wolin (1993), our proposition is that we should see those forms of resilience – insights, independence, relationships, initiative, creativity, humor, and morality – emerge from the data. Thus, we developed *a priori* codes, based on this framework. Still, we wanted to remain open to other emerging forms of resilience, so we engaged in a process of inductive analysis as well. Our inductive analysis consisted of a process of open coding, followed

by constant comparative analysis – narrowing concepts to categories and themes as indicated by the data and continuously recycling to identify emergent patterns (Glaser, 1965).

Limitations and Trustworthiness

The biggest limitation for this study was time. The first year in school administration is a stressful and sometimes overwhelming transition. It would have been ideal to interview the participants more frequently during multiple times during the year. However, the duration of the study only allowed for a single set of interviews and follow up questions, thus creating a single window into the experiences of these women. Nevertheless, this single window offers some perspective on how APs experience the first year of their new jobs.

To compensate for limitations and ensure trustworthiness, we asked two veteran school administrators to read over the findings and theoretical framing to see if it spoke to their lived experiences during the first year. We also engaged in member checks by returning transcripts to the participants and asking them to review them for accuracy and intended meaning. Finally, we asked the participants to read all three de-identified transcripts to see if they could see a shared lived experience with the other participants.

Issues of positionality. This study's first author had a number of prior experiences that could potentially color data analysis and interpretation. Most importantly, he was both a secondary school teacher and administrator for a number of years. He worked and consulted in Title I schools as recently as the 2011-12 academic year and had prior contact with two of the three schools in this study. However, those prior experiences were also the very source of interest for this study and helped to drive the research and the research questions.

Findings

While this study represents a snapshot for a given moment in time for these women, the similarity of their work duties, although they were in two different school types in three different counties, was remarkable. Further, their overall experiences were supported by the literature. The work life and duties were fairly typical for the position (see Marshall, 1985; Fulton, 1987; Hausman, Neberker, McCreary, & Donaldson, 2001). The first year experience for all three women was an exciting period that was something of a balancing act between their challenges and setbacks and sources of resilience. Overall, the lived experience was dominated by the multiplicity of competing responsibilities and a sense of joyous exhaustion. Although all three had experienced challenges and setbacks, none regretted taking the position or planned on not returning the following year. In this section, we first discuss overall themes that characterized the APs' experiences. We then move on to examining the sources of resilience on which the APs drew to 'survive' their first year on the job. We conclude with a discussion of our findings and implications.

Student Discipline

Student discipline was an integral part of the APs day-to-day experiences. Indeed, student discipline provided the background rhythm of each AP's workday. Disciplinary matters interrupted other duties and took the most time during the day. It meant the difference between a 'crazy day' and a day with 'some quiet downtime.' Still, discipline represented a duality of experience for all three APs in this study. For example, Anne described the positive aspects of her disciplinary responsibilities, saying 'I love that [the disciplinary aspect of the job] and it's just seeing the breakthroughs with the kids who you've had the constant discipline problems with and watching them turn around.'

Still, the APs identified negative aspects to their disciplinary responsibilities as well. As they described it, the opportunity cost of every minute spent doing discipline meant robbing a marginally performing school of a valuable source of instructional leadership. For example, Lupe's frustration with this aspect of her job was palpable, 'I am not getting to do what I thought I was; I'm not being in there and helping teachers. I'm dealing with all this discipline.' Both Anne and Lupe emphasized their love of curriculum and instruction and how it was their 'thing.' Each related

stories about having a strong curriculum background and how they enjoyed working with teachers. This suggests that although the APs recognized the importance of discipline to their job roles, the nonetheless wished that they could spend more time on curriculum and working with teachers, which each saw as part of their identities as APs.

Overwhelming Responsibilities

All three APs expressed how the only thing that was constant was discipline. Beyond that as Anne stated, 'the typical day is, atypical.' The commonality of each day was the sheer number of responsibilities the APs had to manage. For example, during the initial interview with Anne, a tone continually sounded in the background. During follow up questions, Anne identified it as the email indicator on her phone. During our interview she received 21 emails. Her response was, 'it must have been a slow afternoon.' Indeed, all of the campus-based interviews were interrupted at some point. Lupe commented that the closed door certainly wasn't a deterrent.

Each AP described a work assignment that could not possibly be achieved by a single person. Each had a list of duties that ran multiple pages. Beyond discipline, they all had in common departments or grade level teams, security, English language acquisition department, in-school suspension, and front office staff. The net result was relearning prioritization. The reality of prioritizing was that some things were going to have to wait for another day. As intelligent, highly motivated, and successful women, this 'letting go' presented its own challenges. Lupe described it as, 'I had to figure how I was going to make it through the personal ghosts of wanting to be perfect.'

Gender as a Mediator of APs' Experiences

When asked about the effect of gender on school leadership all three initially denied there was an effect, followed by a more nuanced, if qualified, answer. For them, gender was not an issue and none particularly felt their gender played a role in school leadership. However, they universally agreed that gender was an issue for others in the school community. Beth did express how she saw value in having both women and men on the administrative team for balance of views and ideas. Most importantly, she felt some students were more comfortable speaking about sensitive issues with a specific gender, especially at the middle school level.

Anne explained how some parents and staff overtly tried to circumvent her in order to deal with a man. She said it was part of the prevailing culture of the building and something she and the leadership team were working to change. She expressed very little emotion about the issue, explaining, 'I lived in a third world country for a couple of years. So I'm pretty used to it and I don't really care.' For Lupe the issue was more about misperception. During her first week, the vice president of the alumni association—a woman—expressed her pleasure that Lupe was going to bring a 'skirt to the leadership team.' Conversely, as the school's chief disciplinarian she had staff members feel she was too soft on students because she was a woman. In both cases she felt the misperceptions were based on gender stereotype, but she had never been asked her opinion on the subject.

Sources of Resiliency

As discussed earlier in this paper, we utilize resiliency theory to help us identify possible sources of resilience in the data, and to provide a frame of reference for additional emerging forms of resilience. Drawing on Wolin and Wolin (1993), we were specifically looking for insights, independence, relationships, initiative, creativity, humor, and morality as sources of resilience. In addition to comparing our data to these existing forms of resilience, we looked for emerging forms of resilience not accounted for in the original framework. We found that the three APs exhibited the existing forms of resilience identified by Wolin and Wolin, while also exhibiting additional forms of resilience – motivation and diversity of perspective, which we discuss in further detail below.

Insight. Wolin and Wolin (1993) described insight as a source for resilience as 'the habit of asking tough questions and giving honest answers' (p. 6). For Lupe, this was an exceptionally important skill. During her challenging times she asked herself why she was so constantly frustrated

and realized her attitude was coloring the situation. After asking the tough question, she imposed a solution,

I made a conscious effort to make sure that I just let things go and slide off and just tell myself, you know, I'll get it done when I get it done and not take it so hard on myself and just tell myself I was going to be happy for the whole month of January.

For the others, insight wasn't nearly as powerful tool, but also involved the tough choice of letting go. Each AP talked about making a list and getting comfortable with not being able to accomplish it all.

Independence. Realizing the magnitude of the challenges facing the school as a whole can be daunting for any AP. This problem is compounded when the school's achievement is flat or declining. The ability to keep an emotional distance by defining what problems were theirs and what came with the school was a skill incorporated by all three. They recognized the challenges of generational poverty, linguistic barriers, and limited funding. While they all worked for solutions, they also recognized they could not internalize all of the problems of their schools themselves. Lupe described her school as 'broken' and Anne repeatedly identified the types of challenges the school faced by their professional terms: Title I, low SES, etc. At one point she asked, 'what other labels can we put on a school?' For Beth it was the realization that she wasn't 'able to adopt any children and bring them home.' All of these behaviors were a form of independence; they were defining a safe distance between the sometimes overwhelming challenges and their senses of self.

Initiative. Taking charge of an issue and creating a solution was the one of the greatest sources of pride for the APs. Both Anne and Beth identified problems in their school and were able to take solutions from proposal to implementation. Both of them saw misconduct in the classroom as having roots in not understanding what was being taught and wanted to address the problem at its source. For Beth, it was a tutoring center within the school day. For Anne, it was the creation of intensives at the end of each quarter. For some students, the intensives presented an opportunity for credit recovery and for others a chance at enrichment. Both programs created much needed student support and administrative team buy-in.

Relationships. Relationships were central to the success of all APs. For Beth and Lupe, it was a spouse. They both discussed how they went home to talk about their problems. Their spouse represented a safe, non-judgmental place to process the issues of the day. Sometimes those discussions were to seek solutions and others to release the tensions of the day. Not coincidentally, both of their spouses were educators and administrators. Beth emphasized how her husband was a safe person because he could maintain confidentiality and 'the only other people you can talk to are either the other administrative team members or somebody outside who is another administrator.' Lupe remarked how she and her husband—also a secondary administrator—would 'swap war stories at home.' For Anne, home was a safe place entirely away from work. She cultivated two close mentor administrators from when she was a teacher. When she needed advice or a safe place they were her confidants. She adamantly maintained she could talk to her husband about school matters but wanted school problems to stay at the office door.

Creativity. Creativity, as described by Wolin and Wolin (1993), best exhibited itself at home. Lupe described herself as 'craftsy' and described knitting her first scarf. Beth learned to crochet at work and is an avid creator of pottery. She became such a crochet aficionado that she created hats for her entire immediate family in a variety of styles. Anne described how she took to gardening and was waiting for spring so she could start planting. Creativity gave each an outlet from the stressors of work and allowed them to create beauty in a world that frequently had ugly realities for them and their students. Beth remarked that 'pottery required her to be in the moment' if she let her concentration lapse, inevitably, the pot was ruined.

Morality. A strong moral compass guided each AP through the day. When pressed, they all described having a well-developed sense of morality early in life. The reality that many of their students lived disturbed them deeply and each did what she could to help make school a safe place. Lupe's words were typical of the group

So I think, for me, one of the biggest surprises for me was the access of information that I have for the kids. The baggage they come with is just... I don't know how they get

through their day. I don't know how an adult would get through what they get through. So just the baggage they come with. It's just crazy. I think if teachers had that information, they would treat the kids differently. They'd have a little more empathy.

Beth talked about trying to help guide students to the social services they desperately needed in order to have a chance at succeeding in school. Talking about the reality of her school as compared to principal preparation she stated,

Nobody ever talked about kids who have parents who are drug addicts or in prison and how do you fill out the paperwork on them? Because in principal prep and all the rest you deal with the theoretical and the 'in a perfect world, this is what we would do' and that perfect world is not where I work.

Humor. To be able to deal with the emotional weight of experiences like these, a sense of humor borders on a job requirement. For these APs, the role of humor cannot be underestimated. Lupe described 'if you don't laugh at it sometimes, you go home and cry all the time.' Laughter was a common experience throughout the interviews and follow up questions. The APs were able to laugh at their students, teachers, coworkers, and above all, themselves. Their ability to find humor in the tragic was a well-honed skill. Independently, they all developed a similar sense of gallows humor.

Because so much of the humor was unique to the experience, a proper audience was essential. Beth's mother volunteered in a middle school for over a decade and the two had a standing Sunday morning appointment to relate humorous stories. Every interview had at least one humorous anecdote. Without fail, they all related a story that outwardly seemed inappropriate but typified their lived experience. The tamest story was recounted by Lupe who discussed working with the district HVAC specialists on the roof to identify a stench permeating one wing of the building. Several hours later, they determined the odor was from a frozen turkey left in a locker over the entire Thanksgiving break by a student who went home sick.

Additional sources of resilience. Beyond the sources of resilience already demonstrated in the literature, Beth, Anne, and Lupe demonstrated two other forms: motivation and diversity of perspective.

Motivation. All three APs drew on their own motivation as a source of resilience. Each participant was highly motivated to be an assistant principal. Although the initial conceptual framework did not have motivation as a source of resilience, we added it as a code because motivation was clearly central to the lived experience of the APs and also acted as a touchstone during hard times. When schedules got challenging and stakeholder interactions were exceedingly negative, motivation helped carry them through just as the other sources of resilience did. When the days got especially challenging in January, Lupe talked about how she chose to be where she was and she could choose to how she would manage the effects on her.

The biggest source of motivation for all three women was the students. On multiple occasions they discussed how the students were the foundation for everything they do. Beth, who left a central administrative position primarily to be back with students, described how, 'I feel like I am making a difference in kids' lives.' Lupe described the feeling of 'I'm building relationships with students, every day, good or bad because they are in my office.' Still, the desire to help students, while also the biggest motivator, was also the biggest source of frustration. Anne described how she wanted to help students by improving instruction. She said,

The amount of time I spend on discipline...if I can shift the culture and climate, so that we have less discipline issues not even for me. Not even that I want less kids to come to the office, but so I walk into a classroom more.

Diversity of perspective. Finally, all three APs had spent time abroad and all three described it as a source of resilience. When they discussed their time abroad and how it influenced leadership and resilience they framed it in diversity of perspective. Living elsewhere gave them tools for working in a very culturally diverse district. Beth and Lupe talked about their coworkers who 'have never been anywhere but our district, so they don't have the experiences to draw on if they didn't encounter it here' and how it created limitations for them. They felt they were more capable leaders because of the diversity of life experiences. For Anne the time in the developing

world was a clear source of resiliency. She flatly stated ‘I can make something out of nothing!’ when discussing the lessons she learned. Budget cuts and lack of resources simply didn’t faze her as a teacher or as an assistant principal.

Summary

In sum, our findings demonstrate that APs share many similar experiences, frustrations, and motivations. Still, the roles of the individual APs in our study were clear throughout. Each woman relied more heavily on different sources of resilience and constructed meaning out of a common phenomenon individually. Although the sources of resilience were supported by the observational and interview data, their utilization was highly individual. Each woman showed characteristics for all seven of Wolin and Wolin’s (1993) sources in addition to motivation and diversity of perspective. The top five sources of resilience, based on number of items per code, for each woman are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4

Top Five Sources of Resilience by Construct

	Beth	Lupe	Anne
1	Initiative	Insight	Initiative
2	Creativity	Creativity	Lived Abroad
3	Humor	Independence	Feminist
4	Relationships	Relationships	Humor
5	Independence	Humor	Relationships

Each AP was highly motivated in their passion to help students and teachers. How they best were able to do so continued to be grounded in the individual and context.

Discussion and Implications

Existing research on assistant principals is still limited – the body of work is even smaller when examining the critical, first year of the AP, and even smaller when looking through the female AP lens. We know very little about APs’ daily experiences, and the theoretical construct of resilience has been applied in a very limited fashion to principals and assistant principals. This study thus contributes to the literature on assistant principals, in both the choice of subject and theoretical lens. In this study, we found that our participants experienced many commonalities in their daily lives, including an emphasis on student discipline, overwhelming responsibilities, and the mediating influence of gender. This study thus confirms some prior research on the assistant principalship, including that the assistant principalship is multifaceted in its job requirements (Black, 1980; Fulton, 1987; Koru, 1993), is often stressful (Adkinson, 1981, Gronn & Lacey, 2004, Hartzell, 1993), and that APs’ responsibilities are often disproportionately discipline-related (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2012).

This study also supports prior research on resilience (Wolin & Wolin, 1993), in that the APs appeared to exhibit the previously identified forms of resilience. Additionally, the APs in our study appeared to have exhibited two additional sources of resilience: motivation and diversity of perspective. These additional forms of resilience are important and could be critical to future work both on school leadership and on resilience as a construct.

While the number of women in school leadership is increasing, the field is traditionally associated with men (Adkinson, 1981; Christman & McClellan, 2008; Cottrel, 1976; Gross & Task, 1976). The lack of male voice in our study points to an opportunity for further research regarding

traditional gender roles and the possibility that the construct of resilience could function differently across genders especially given the apparent lack of socialization and formal mentorship many assistant principals receive (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2012; Duke, 2004).

Implications

This study offers several implications for schools and for educators. First, schools and principal preparation programs should focus on crafting support structures such as mentorship opportunities and systematic supports for APs. Not only did these women share a similar lived experience, they also seemed to share an apparent lack of any systematic attempt at ameliorating the stresses and the overwhelming responsibilities they faced.

Second, the centrality of discipline to each APs daily activities was critical to their experiences. Its influence was palpable in every interview and in the problems the schools faced. The focus on discipline meant a lack of time for instructional supervision. All three APs in this study recognized the need for instruction to change to better meet the students' needs, yet they were constantly pulled away for matters of discipline. While a safe and orderly school is the foundation for good instruction, these schools all shared an underutilized asset in their assistant principal. For schools to better serve their stakeholders and their students, they must find alternative ways of approaching discipline and the role of the assistant principal in order to utilize APs to their full potential.

Finally, the application of the resiliency framework and our focus on resiliency in APs yielded several implications. As mentioned above, motivation and diversity of perspective emerged as sources of resilience for our three participants. In particular, diversity of perspective emerged as a key source of resilience that helped the APs deal with the unique context of their schools and the various demands of their jobs. This source of resilience is something that both schools and leader preparation programs should seek to build by providing APs with mentoring and development opportunities that expose them to diverse school contexts.

Conclusion

In this study, we sought to examine the daily experiences of several female assistant principals. We also sought to identify sources of resilience that APs drew on to 'survive' their first year on the job. We found that assistant principals' daily experiences were characterized by overwhelming responsibilities and a consistent focus on discipline that detracted from the assistant principals' desire to focus on improving curriculum and instruction. Further, in applying the resiliency framework, two new sources of resilience emerged: motivation and diversity of perspective. These new sources of resilience may be important for future studies both on APs on and on resilience as a construct.

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