

BEGINNING PRINCIPALS: REFLECTIONS ON CHALLENGES AND SUPPORTS**SANDRA SZALIPSKI¹**

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Abstract: *School districts in British Columbia, Canada, are receiving fewer experienced applicants to undertake educational leadership as a school principal. Assessing the experiences, challenges, and supports of beginning principals contributes to understanding and in assisting the early needs of this pivotal education leadership role. The purpose of this investigation was to examine the preparation, challenges, and supports for novice principals. Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews of three beginning principals from three different districts in the Province of British Columbia, Canada, generated the data for this narrative analysis. Meaningful vice-principal placements, in-service, and mentoring were dominant factors for preparation and successful initiation as a principal. Challenges with relationship issues and craft knowledge were evident.*

Keywords: *education leadership, relationships, principal, mentoring, beginning, vice-principal*

Introduction

Creating a positive and productive school environment for effective learning to take place requires a capable principal (Fullan, 2014; Lenarduzzi, 2014; Sergiovanni, 2009). Of concern is the reduced number of applicants for such an important educational position (Cooper et al., 2006; Cray & Weiler, 2011). For the benefit of sustaining principal interest, effective education, and succession management it is important to examine how novice principals develop professionally and cope personally in their first years in the position.

The purpose of this investigation was to examine the lived experiences in the first two years of principalship to gain understanding of the preparation, development, and supports that contribute to the successful transition into the role. To assist in this purpose the following sub-questions were explored:

1. What preparation was, or would have been useful?

2. What experiences and issues were most challenging to deal with?

3. What supports were most beneficial to novice principals?

The socialization of a new principal is a complex process that can be described as the “internalization of norms, beliefs and values of a school” (Weindling & Dimmock, 2006, p. 332). Normore (2004) claims that a significant challenge for beginning principals is to form a new professional identity as they move away from being a teacher, stating that “the transition from being a teacher to becoming an administrator is an intricate process of reflection and learning that requires socialization into a new community and role identity” (p. 109). The beginning years for an administrator require significant adapting on many levels (Briggs, Bush, & Middlewood, 2006).

The needed socialization occurs both professionally and organizationally. There is some anticipatory socialization of the principal’s role while witnessing the management and leadership of a school as a teacher (Crow, 2006), but most occurs when living the experience. Organizational socialization encapsulates the learning of the new school’s culture and systems (Crow) and learning to comprehend their social position within the school (Aikens, 2002). The early stages of principal socialization requires significant adapting (Briggs et al., 2006) and time is required for the building of relationships prior to altering the school structures (Aiken).

Weindling and Dimmock (2006) describe that principals internalize the norms and values of a school during this socialization to “create the interactions that legitimate and validate a new school leader within a school, preparing the way for him or her to exert influence” (p. 334). Seven stages of principal socialization were identified. Succinctly, these are:

1. Stage Zero – a preparatory stage where a teacher develops a concept of what it is to be a principal.
2. Entry and Encounter - first few months developing an understanding of the intricacies of the role.
3. Taking Hold – an early ‘honeymoon’ period and attempting to make some norm and organization changes, usually ending abruptly with a negative staff reaction.
4. Reshaping – usually in the second year where principal and staff have a clearer picture of strengths and weaknesses leading to more realistic and mutual expectations.
5. Refinement Stage – curricular changes occur and the school moves more smoothly towards a vision.

6. Consolidation Stage – about five years after arrival and the benefits of changes are being realized.
7. Stage Six – about seven years after arrival and principals have introduced most changes and feel some sense of disenchantment.

O'Mahoney's (2003) phases of Immersion and Establishment encompass much of the above mentioned stages. They describe the socialization of a principal occurring over four phases, these being:

1. Idealization Phase – examining the role with mixed emotions of joy and self-doubt.
2. Immersion Phase – a sense of astonishment and enduring the demands.
3. Establishment Phase- a calm understanding of role and establishing structures and changes.
4. Consolidation Phase- a sense of being accepted as capable and wise.

Novice principals encounter obstacles and challenges (Briggs et al., 2006; Daresh & Male, 2004; Shoho & Barnett, 2010). Most of these challenges are found to occur in the domains of (a) increased workload, (b) understanding finances, (c) instructional leadership and team building, (d) leadership with parents and the broader community, and (e) personnel matters. There exist feelings of unpreparedness and a lack of control on their time and demands. Early in the position, principals recognize the need for resilience as relationships change, and as their craft knowledge and resolution skills are acquired.

Assists for coping and adapting have been identified by beginning principals. Both experience and academic studies are useful. Professional development and training sessions in the areas of financing, communication and conflict resolution provided by districts or personal initiative were beneficial. Involvement in post-secondary leadership programs was also effective (Normore, 2004; Petzko, 2008; Weindling & Dimmock, 2006).

Methodology

This investigation took place in fall, 2013, in the areas of Victoria and Metro-Vancouver, in the province of British Columbia. Through a monthly, provincial electronic newsletter to administrators, participants were sought for the investigation. Three novice principals volunteered.

A bottom-up, narrative analysis approach was used. Semi-structured interviews were used to develop the principal narratives. The interview protocol used foundational open-ended questions with the flexibility to pursue the topic. The principle investigator tracked the topics during the interview allowing for going back to address missed topic areas. The digital recorded interviews were then transcribed by a professional stenographer, totalling 239 pages of evidence.

Following transcription the narratives were presented to the participants for transcript verification. One participant requested removal of a few statements to be replaced with paraphrases of the intended meaning. Data analysis was traditional to the approach. Through repetitive coding and analysis, a coding scheme emerged that produced categorization of responses into themes.

Findings

Narrative analysis revealed four themes, these being (a) preparation, (b) transitional experiences, (c) challenges, and (d) supports. Preparation for the principal's role was most effective when there was opportunity for multiple years as a vice-principal. District experiences and graduate work were also noteworthy. The most dominating transitional experiences were the increases in workload and relationship issues. The common challenges were access to support, financial knowledge, and social difficulties with teachers, students, and parents. Mentors proved to be the strongest support with school district staff and family also being significant.

Preparation for Principalship

Two of the participants had experienced being a vice-principal for four or more years. This opportunity was said to be the most beneficial experience in preparing them. As vice-principals they formed relationships and demonstrated themselves competent at administrative responsibilities. P3¹ explained that he "had solid relationships with my staff and that was big . . . it sort of paved the way for people to say 'Oh no, we really like (him). (He's) good'". When only having one year in a vice-principal role, when asked if that was enough to be prepared, P2 responded "No. I didn't. I knew I had a good, really broad experiences. But, you know, I think that I was a just nervous and lacked the confidence".

It was brought forth that the quality of the vice-principal experience was dependent on the perceived quality of the principal. Two of the three participants felt they had good role models to learn by, principals that trusted them and provided them with many varied tasks and responsibilities, preparing them well for the next step as principal. P3 explained that "there was nothing that I didn't do and he wasn't open to me doing it. . . . I wrote the plan and dealt with all

¹ P3 – P refers to principal and 3 indicates the third principal interviewed.

the data. . . . I did the budget from the minute I started”. The hiring of staff was an area that was wanting in vice-principalship placements.

District opportunities for committees and training sessions were said to be welcomed and worthwhile. Examination of district policy and procedures, legal topics and applied action research were areas found to be advantageous. University courses examining leadership theory, personnel situations, practical projects, and supervision of learning were emphasized as valuable. An example of his affirmation from P2 was that “there’s definitely been times where I’ve reflected back on those . . . on those courses and practical things that we did. I think that was a huge piece on my success now”.

Transitional Experiences

Increased workload overshadows the early experience of a novice principal. The amount of time to fulfil the role created apprehension, often working weekends and in the evenings. P2 said “I’m one of those who brings stuff home . . . often have stuff on the weekend that I do” and P3 stated that “so, oh yeah, I mean I’m constantly on”. Feeling the time and demands pressure, P1 mentioned when “I had to teach. I was doing a Christmas concert. Plus, I was trying to be a principal at the same time, and basically I just didn’t be a principal”.

The novice principals were surprised at the amount of effort required to meet the demands of parents, to complete administrative tasks, and to support school staff personally – as evidenced in Challenges. Concerning one difficult parental concern, P1 revealed that:

I tried to go to (a senior manager) because it’s legalities, and it’s contracts and all that stuff that I didn’t really have lots of experience with. I found it really stressful. It was about two and a half months with a constant, constant, constant parents, phone calls, letters, letters coming from the parents, to the superintendent, to me, etcetera”.

There was disappointment that these new demands took away from the gratifying time they had previously spent with students, being “surprized how much the principal is about paperwork and details and the running of the school versus kids” (P2).

While recognizing the importance of establishing healthy relationships with the school community, the novice principals were surprised at the amount of effort that was required for relationship building. Two of the three principals stated how they were deeply moved by this realization. P1 stated that “I need to be here to support teachers, right?” and for P2 “the other part of it that’s kind of surprised me is the amount of staff propping sometimes you have to do”. P1 felt that becoming a vice-principal was difficult as some had the perception that she had “joined the dark side”, but when in the principal’s role staff began asking for and respecting her opinion.

In those transitional months, initial regret or uncertainty in making the move to principal due to the difficulty was exposed with P2 saying, “within the first six weeks . . . not wanting to be a principal anymore that was an interesting experience for me. I thought it would be easier.” Similarly, P1 mentioned that:

I ended up driving to another school at about quarter to four one day, (was emotional), have that principal, you know, hang out with me for 45 minutes, and that was my . . . that was within that two and a half months. So, it was . . . it wasn't fun.”

Challenges

Consistent in the narratives, were five areas proving to be a challenge for new principals. Teacher professionalism and personnel issues were foremost of these. Teacher apathy and unwillingness of some teachers to lead instructional change or be involved in professional development were difficult areas to navigate for novice principals. Concerning professional development, P1 remarked that some “people do their self-directed and they go into their classroom and they mark or they, you know, stay at home and they do whatever, and that's not professional development”. P2 stated that “a couple of teachers, that never participated in anything as a group, so, they would never attend any kind of staff functions, they'd never do a Pro-D event that we were all doing together”.

Building teamwork on a staff and managing the attitudes and positions of both young and senior staff member were problematic. While having successful staff interactions staff predominated, the challenges are exemplified by the following comments:

I don't know where their extreme distrust for admin came from, but my goal with them was for them to get to know me as a person and I spent a lot of time talking to them about things that interested them or about things we had in common. I asked them about their families, about their experiences in life, and it did come from a genuine place. I shared details about myself. I wanted them to see me as I am -- not as an adversary. (P3)

She was having a really hard time in September. She could not get a handle on the class. She couldn't . . . her management was so off that she just . . . she was drowning . . . I ended up building the relationship with her enough to be able to say ‘You know what? I'm really worried about you’’. (P2)

Some of my younger teachers here – I'm surprised at their lack of enthusiasm for things, because they are still young . . . some of my more seasoned teachers are some of my more active ones when I ask people to be involved in things”. (P3)

Managing the hiring process, the intricacies and time requirements, along with a lack of training in this regard emerged as a frustration.

Student behaviour was a second area of challenge. The principals were not concerned with strategies for managing the discipline of the student but with the issues of teacher ownership of student behaviour and classroom management. P3 stated that “I will at times, say to teachers, ‘You know this needs to be handled at the classroom level, and these are some things that you can do . . . or ‘What have you done at the classroom level with this child?’” and P2 dealt with one teacher that “would be locking Grade 2s out of the room for 25 minutes at a time”.

The new principals repetitively cited the amount of time needed for teacher conversations about expectations and directions for this area and “would try to model conversations with the student in the presence of the teacher so that they can see how they might handle (situations) in the future” (P3).

Parent matters were a third area of concern. Unhappy parents, gossiping in the parent community, and the spreading of misinformation about staff were matters in which new principals had to manage and develop leadership capacity. Concerning parent complaints, P3 explained that:

What I learned from (parent challenges) is to really take time to think and listen, but also to go through the steps and the different levels of district support and personnel. . . . I learned how to manage things more successfully with that Mom. She wasn’t happy with a situation last year as she felt she wasn’t informed of things after the act. I found out later that she wanted continued contact.

Managing school finances and accessing timely support were the final two areas of challenge for novice principals. All participants wanted more consistent and reliable support when they were dealing with what they felt were urgent situations. Frustration was evident concerning staffing when P1 pronounced that “nobody could really explain to me why in August we weren’t and now all of a sudden we are . . . and I still, to this day, have no idea why it didn’t work out or isn’t working out” and regarding a legal concern, “I didn’t know . . . I was winging it by the seat of my pants, and I didn’t feel I got a lot of support with that”. The urgent need for information and support usually encompassed personnel and social concerns. It was also evident when managing school budgets. Earlier specific training on school finances was desired.

Supports

Novice principals had supports. Having a specific mentor was the greatest assistance. In two cases the mentor had been a principal that the participant had worked with previously. There was a sense of trust with the mentor when the principals needed help in the areas of finances, staff

issues, and work-life balance. P2 said “I told him he had to answer it any time I phoned. So, he was great” and P1 “called them for everything . . . from ‘How do I do the fire drill?’ . . . or if something came up in the daytime that I needed to just throw by somebody.”

District staff was appreciated for their advice with the details on finances, personnel, and curriculum. Other principals in the district were also sources of information and support. P2 spoke about his initial reluctance to ask for help but now feels comfortable with it after an experienced principal told him “that is what we are here for . . . We’re all here to figure this out together. Ask! Don’t ever feel you can’t.” P1 found that “we have amazing admin out there, and so I was constantly going out to them and saying. ‘This is what’s happening. Tell me what to do next’”.

Two participants had fathers who were principals and welcomed their perspectives, as “he basically saw everything you can possibly imagine And he usually had a story, some kind of background stuff” (P2). Family support for their new professional role was strongly evident. The understanding of spouses and children for being busy with other things and the extra time demands reduced stress for novice principals.

Discussion

Becoming a principal generated feelings of gratification and unease. The lived experiences of three new principals helped to examine these reactions. Increased workload, personnel issues, and the lack for timely, attentive support created pressures. Formed relationships, preparatory training, and support from mentors and family provided the means to manage the new position.

Weindling and Dimmock (2006) and O’Mahoney (2003) identified stages of principal socialization. The participants described their forming of relationships, working with staff and generating school direction, similar to the “entry and encounter stage” (Weindling & Dimmock, p. 336). All of the new principals showed signs of what O’Mahoney refers to as the “immersion phase” (p. 17) in which making sense of the role of principal and weathering the increased demands of the staff, parents, and children of their school.

Stress on time and new job demands are consistent with any career change. Similar to Aiken (2002), the novice principals found themselves spending large amounts of time building relationships with staff and community. They all felt they were able to establish trusting relationships that allowed them to work towards school improvements and to conduct personal counsel. All spoke of their amazement at the amount of time and energy spent supporting teachers and parents in a variety of circumstances. Self-doubt was also evident in the Entry and Encounter stage (Weindling & Dimmock, 2006) or the Idealization phase (O’Mahoney, 2003).

Novice principals valued their preparatory experiences. Leadership courses, district in-service and being a vice-principal assisted them with the career transition. The more beneficial grounding came from their role as vice-principal. Nonetheless, there was discrepancy in the opportunities and experience provided. As vice-principal it was most valuable to have a principal who demonstrated trust by exposing them to many responsibilities, especially the finances. P3 described that “he didn’t stand beside me while I called, instead he allowed me to take on an experience and grow in it, while supporting me from afar. I knew he was there, but I knew had faith in my ability to manage it”.

All participants were cognizant of the increased work and time demands. “It’s the night time stuff” said P2, “when you start banking all the night stuff that changes it from a 45 hour week to a 60 hour week. That’s when it starts, right?” They found ways to adjust to this upsurge. Leaving work early when possible, working in the evening and weekends and also consciously taking breaks from the work milieu allowed them to manage.

Dealing with the adult issues caused consternation for new principals. Struggling with recalcitrant staff, challenging parents, and demanding Parent Advisory Councils consumed their time and pressed their leadership capacity. Two of the principals talked at length regarding struggling teachers or those resistant to changes in practice. This imbalance between the task and personal capacity aligns with research showing how inexperienced principals find personnel issues a significant challenge (Briggs et al., 2008; Shoho & Barnett, 2010; Weindling & Dimmock, 2006).

Some advice given for other new principals was to clarify classroom expectations for teachers and to always act like a leader; being aware that principals of today could be the senior managers of tomorrow. P1 offered that:

Whether you want to go into admin now or in five years from now, today is the first day of your interview. You are going to start making connections today that people are going to remember for the next five years.

The narrative evidence, offered both insight by which school districts can approach the successful development and evolution of new principals. To encapsulate, the following points are presented for readying prospective candidates for the role of principal:

- offer regular district seminars on key aspects of principalship, with special attention to personnel scenarios, educational law, and human resources--hiring procedures;
- expect prospective principals to complete a quality graduate experience in educational leadership;
- place prospective principals as a vice-principal for a few years prior to being placed as a principal;

- actively monitor the vice-principal experience to ensure that responsibility and sound guidance is provided over a broad range of leadership areas, especially in areas of work-life balance, budget, and hiring; and
- have vice-principals develop a personal leadership growth plan, journal their experiences, and participate in a Professional Learning Community with other vice-principals.

For initial years as a beginning principal:

- mutually decide on an appropriate mentor for new principals; clarifying expectations
- provide the means for responsive access to consistent, meaningful, and accurate advice during urgent situations; and
- actively monitor and support the new principal to safeguard personal health and to ensure professional development.

This study has exposed some of the subtleties of transitioning into the role of principal. For further study greater specificity of questioning, broader evidence collection, increased sample size, and accessing teacher perceptions of the principal's transition, would contribute to evolving the discourse further.

Conclusions

The purpose of this investigation was to examine the lived experiences in the first two years of principalship to gain understanding of the preparation, development, and supports that contribute to the successful transition into the role. Transitioning to a career as a principal had obstacles, but all participants felt successful.

The small sample size was a challenge. The small sample size reduces the potential to generalize the findings. Nonetheless, the intention was to use principal perceptions to describe the experiences and challenges lived by new principals. Additional probing about the satisfactions of their early experiences would have offered further balance to the challenges that emerged.

The data demonstrated significant increases in workload and that leadership capacity was stressed in relation to personnel issue and some areas of craft knowledge, such as finances and hiring processes. There was frustration with incidents of teacher initiative and access to timely support. New principals feel that quality graduate courses and specific, job-related in-service were valuable. Family support, personal mentors, and comprehensive and authentic vice-principal experiences were highly beneficial. To ease the career transitions and to sustain and enhance administrative succession, school districts need to manage the vice-principal's experience and actively monitor the support and professional development of novice principals.

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