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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study that described how assistant principals operate within the context in which they serve, and how they and their professional situations interact. Its focus was less on their duties and more on the how: how they think about what they do and their position, how they perceive their place within the organization, and how they think about the nature of the position. Further, the study looked at the ways organizational norms are communicated and how persons in the position of assistant principal respond to these communications. The study was designed to be exploratory and descriptive, to generate hypotheses, not test them, and to be suggestive rather than generalizable. Eight assistant principals in two high schools were selected as the site and population for the study. All had been educators for more than 2 decades, and all save one had been teachers earlier in their careers. In-depth interviews were held with each of the eight assistant principals; additionally, half were observed in their school and half were observed going about their work. The findings are highly suggestive about how assistant principals are socialized, and how they learn the roles and norms of the position, irrespective of the particular school organization, structure, or climate. While they may or may not be prepared for the job, they come with a socialized disposition to the position. They are anything but strangers to the organization and its norms, and the organization uses the position as a low-risk means to test the adequacy of the fit between the person and the organization. Apparently, the test of success is the ability of the individual to play the role well. (Contains 30 references.) (DFR)

CONTEXTUALIZING THE POSITION OF ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL

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CONTEXTUALIZING THE POSITION OF ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL

The position of assistant principal, while more than a century old, has received comparatively little attention in the professional literature. It is not without reason that Hartzell (1993) has characterized the assistant principal as the “neglected actor in practitioner literature”(title). It is as if the position were of little consequence. We know that the duties of the position are largely assigned by the building principal (Brottman, 1981; Jacobson et al., 1973), have increased in the last 50 years (Brottman, 1981), and are some combination of what is *assigned, expected, and assumed* (NAASP, 1991). Marshall (1993) has suggested that far from being a stepping stone to the principalship, it is seen by some as a career position. Beyond this, we know little about the world or work of the assistant principal. Marshall (1992) has cogently argued for going beyond the simple enumeration of duties to understand the role of the assistant principal, to understand not merely what assistant principals do, but how they “see” and operate in the position, how they think about what they see and do, and how they affect and are affected by the position. This resonates with Greenfield’s (1995) call for studies of leadership which focus on “the personal qualities of school administrators...(their) intentions, values, motives, expertise, needs , and capabilities as people (76),” and how these interact with the environments in which they are played out.

Purpose and Design

The purpose of the study was to describe the world and work of assistant principals *in context*, to see how assistant principals operate within the context in which they serve, and to see how the persons and the situations interact. Since the duties assistant principals perform are largely known, the focus was less on these duties (the what of their position) and more on the how: how they think about what they do and the position, how they perceive their place within the organization, and how they think about the nature of the position. Further, the study looked at how organizational norms are communicated and how persons in the position respond to these communications. These are questions that have been little explored, thus the study was designed to be exploratory and descriptive, to generate hypotheses, not test them, and to engage in a study that might be suggestive rather than generalizable..

Population

Assistant principals in two high schools were purposefully selected as the site and population for the study. High schools were chosen because of their long historical association with assistant principals and because they were more likely than other levels of schooling to have more than one assistant principal. The particular high schools chosen, hereinafter referred to as School A and School B, are two of twelve high schools in a large-city school county district

(over 50,000 students). The two schools present dramatically different profiles, but they each have at least 4 assistant principals.

School A serves a largely affluent, middle to upper class community in the section of the city experiencing continuing growth. It has a student population of 2200, with 130 teachers and 5 guidance counselors. The student population, which is zoned into the school, is 95% Caucasian, 3% Asian, and 2% African-American. The principal (male) and assistant principals involved in the study (two males, two females) are all Caucasian. As described by one of the assistant principals, "This school is a bit different. We have good kids and high expectations."

School B, at the other end of the city, serves a largely low-income, inner-city African-American community. The school is officially designated a Title I school and 75% of the students apply for free lunch. Three years ago, in an attempt to change the racial hegemony, a magnet school within a school was created, and the school underwent a multi-million dollar renovation to provide state of the art performing arts facilities and technology as the attracting features. Thus the student population is made up of both residential students (those zoned in from the community), and magnet students (out-of-zone Caucasians and in and out-of-zone African-American students, in equal numbers). Residential students outnumber magnet students 4 to 1 (689 vs. 170). School B has a student population of 873 students, 86% African-American and 14% Caucasian. The principal is African-American (male), as are two of the assistant principals (one male, one female). The other two assistant principals, a male and a female, are Caucasian. As described by one of the assistant principals, "our students need so much...(and) we don't have parents coming to us demanding (that we meet those needs)."

All of the assistant principals have been educators for more than two decades (range: 24-31 years; average 28 years), and all save one had been teachers earlier in their careers (6 of the 8 in high school; 1 in middle school; 1 in elementary school). The majority of the subjects had moved directly from teacher to assistant principal (2 in each school; 3 males, 1 female). Three moved from teacher to guidance counselor to assistant principal (2 in one school, 1 in the other; all 3 female). And one went from librarian to assistant principal (male). The schools differed in the number of years their assistant principals (and principals) had held the position. At School A, the assistant principals had served an average of 11+ years (range: 4-20 years), and at School B, an average of 4 years (range: 1-11 years). However, 3 of the 4 had served fewer than 3 years; 1 had served 11 years. The assistant principals in School A had not only served longer as assistant principals (on average) in the school than those in School B, but had also all worked as teachers in School A, most for their entire teaching career. In the case of School B, while one of the assistant principals, had been at the school for his entire educational career, and one had taught at the school for 16 years at an earlier point in her career, the other two had never taught there or even taught at the high school level. This difference was mirrored in the principals. The principal of School A had been principal there for 10+ years; the principal of School B for 2 years. An interesting, and possibly irrelevant, side note is that 4 of the 8 assistant principals, two at each school (3 male, 1 female), and both of the principals, had been coaches at an earlier time, although the experience of the female as a tennis and softball coach was barely remembered and never mentioned.

Methods

In-depth interviews were held with each of the eight assistant principals, and they were observed in their school (School A) and going about their work (School B). In the interviews, they were asked questions about their background and career path, including how they came to the position, what they did in their work and how they thought about their various duties, how they came to the duties they had, how they operated with other administrators in the building, and how they conceptualized the position in terms of control, satisfaction, and ability to realize any personal vision they held for schools. As a check on that series of questions, they were asked how they perceived other assistant principals in the system to be operating. In observing them, the intent was to get a sense of the context and culture in which they worked, to see how they operated with the other administrators, and to see what they did during their day. It also allowed for asking them questions about what they thought about what they had done and contextualizing what they said about their work.

The principal of each school was also interviewed about the assistant principals, how they had come to their school and what the principal expected of them. The principals were asked how they worked with their assistant principals and the extent to which they perceived they fit in and shared their values and missions for their schools.

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a constant comparative method . As described by Merriam, (1998):

The researcher begins with a particular incident from an interview, field notes, or document and compares it with another incident in the same set of data or in another set. These comparisons lead to tentative categories that are then compared to each other and to other instances. Comparisons are constantly made within and between levels of conceptualization until a theory (sic) can be formulated.(159).

Using guidelines articulated by Miles and Huberman, (1994, Chapter 10, B and C), the categories were “tested” to confirm the findings and to ensure that the conclusions being drawn were verifiable. Further, the themes were reviewed and verified by one of the assistant principals involved in the study.

In limiting the study to eight assistant principals in two schools in one school district, the intent was to gain some measure of depth and insight into the normative dimensions of the context in which assistant principals work, and no claims of generalizability are made. By design, the findings speak with confidence only to the two schools studied. Further, it is important to consider that in choosing schools in a large-city school district (student population of 50,000 or more), with multiple high schools (13), and multiple assistant principals, the phenomenon studied differs in significant ways from the typical. The majority of school districts in the nation (71%) serve the smallest percentage of students (18.5%). Only 1.6% of school districts serve 25,000 students or more. Further, the largest percentage of secondary schools (19.3%) have

student enrollments of fewer than 200. The average student enrollment of American secondary schools is 699 (range: under 200-1,000 or more), less than the enrollment of either of the high schools studied. (Statistical data: USDE, NCES, 1999)

Conceptual Framework

Role theory provided the conceptual framework informing the study. It influenced the collection of data and provided a lens through which to analyze the data. Conceptually, role theory (role socialization) posits that the position one holds in an organizational social system carries with it powerful norms and behavioral expectations (Wiggins, 1975) which “creates certain possibilities and sets certain limits (Little, 1981, 7).” The observable behavior of individuals holding a position is a function of organizationally defined roles and expectations (nomothetic dimensions of the social system) *in interaction with* the personality and needs’ dispositions of individuals (idiographic dimensions of the social system) (Getzels & Guba, 1957; Getzels, Lipham & Campbell, 1968).” It is hypothesized that given the bureaucratic nature of schools, we should expect to see “a reduction in behavioral variation among organizational members occupying the same role...(with) perspectives, outlook, and behavior shaped more and more by institutional position and less and less by personality in the course of service (Bridges, 1965, 20).”

Role theory has long been applied to schools and schooling (Bridges, 1965; Getzels, 1967; Getzels, Lipham & Campbell, 1968; Wiggins, 1975; Hayden, 1990), and the concept of role socialization, the idea that one learns how to act and behave (norms, rules of the game) from the context (role, place, persons holding the position) enjoys fairly wide acceptance in the profession (cf. Greenfield 1985; Miklos, 1988; Murphy, 1992; Hart, 1993.) Drawing on the literature, Hart (1993) argued that organizational socialization was more “immediate, salient, and persuasive” than professional socialization (11). What is not clear, however, is how organizational socialization works in various school positions. How do assistant principals, for example, learn the roles and norms considered appropriate to the position? How does the organization mold them? How does the individual affect the position? How do the person and role interact in the position of assistant principal? To what extent can the individual play out her/his values and educational beliefs?

Findings

Functional

While some of the assistant principals studied will likely end their careers in the position, all of them either wanted to become principals or had wanted to at an earlier point in time, and this included assistant principals who had been in the position for 10 years or more. They may become career assistant principals, as described by Marshall (1992), but they do not or did not seek to be such. There were some differences in responses between the schools. In School A,

two of the assistant principals had wanted to be principals at an earlier time, but no longer did; one because of a health need to avoid stress, and the other because he was “making almost as much as the principal without all the aggravation.” Two others in the school wanted to become principals, but only in “this school” or one “just like this school.” In contrast, all of the assistant principals in School B wanted to be principals and put no parameters on where. “If you don’t have aspirations you die,” offered one. “How could you not want to be a principal,” offered another, “you see so much that could be done, but you can’t do it (as an assistant principal).”

In contrast to Marshall’s finding that “new assistant principals are shocked at how unprepared they are for the array of tasks they confront (1992, 41),” all but one found the job to be “as expected.” They generally felt that they had known what it would be like before they had gotten into it and thus found “few surprises,” although one in each school opined that parents were more difficult and demanding than they had expected. The assistant principal who had come from elementary school teaching and guidance expressed “shock” at the size of the students, at having to deal with severe discipline problems, and at how “there were more students who required more.”

In consonance with what has generally been reported in the literature, each assistant principal had a variety of duties, and discipline was one of these with one exception. In School A, discipline was distributed among the assistant principals by grade level, each assistant principal getting one grade and following it through to graduation. In School B, discipline was distributed among the assistant principals by teacher. Discipline related duties included dealing with students sent to them by teachers or others, meeting with parents, holding disciplinary hearings, and monitoring disciplinary decisions. While discipline duties were a part of their work, and there were days when they pushed other tasks aside, the assistant principals reported that this was generally not the usual case. It was a part of each day, but just that. The fact that each school had multiple principals may well have played a part in reducing what is widely reported in the literature as a pervasive and encompassing duty of assistant principals.

Like discipline, teacher evaluation, in accordance with State mandates, was a duty distributed among the assistant principals in both schools, as was hall duty. The assistant principals were also responsible for a number of other managerial duties that were divided up amongst them assistant principals. Such duties included parking, athletics, lockers, dances, plays and other school events, open houses, new teacher support, intern supervision, graduation, liaison to other organizations or agencies, cafeteria duty, hall monitoring, state reporting records, and special projects (e.g., accreditation, school improvement plans). Going to meetings of various kinds outside the building was also a part of their duties, although this varied with the assistant principal.

In both schools, formal duties (roles and responsibilities) were assigned by the principal, and he did so at the beginning of the year. The duties were clearly managerial in nature, focusing on “organizational maintenance” (Marshall, 1992, 38), and unlike what has previously been reported, tended to involve unambiguous duties and non-overlapping lines of authority, i.e., there

were clear boundaries to the task that allowed for independent operation.. A number of duties was assigned to each assistant principal, but they were divided up a little differently in each school. In School A, the tasks to be managed had been largely identified at an earlier time, and were assigned/reassigned almost automatically each year, as might be expected given the fact that the administrative staff had worked together for a long time. Changes in these assigned duties tended to occur only when someone new was added to the administrative staff or if someone specifically asked for a change. One assistant principal gleefully reported finally being able to give up a duty never liked to a “new” assistant principal added to the staff. Cafeteria duty and hall monitoring were the only overlapping duties identified, however, cafeteria duty was the only duty in which all of the assistant principals participated in the same place at the same time. In School B, where the administrative staff did not have a long-standing relationship, the duties were assigned by the principal at the beginning of each year, and the assignments had been different each year. The assignments did not overlap, but there was a perception among some of the assistant principals that they were not equitably distributed. Unlike School A, in which most of the tasks that are likely to emerge have been anticipated and assigned (or the categories of tasks to be assigned to particular assistant principals have been determined), tasks emerged in School B which had not been anticipated. As tasks emerged, the principal assigned them ad hoc to one of the assistant principals. There was no clear pattern to this assignment, but proximity, as in, who did he see first after learning about the task, was speculated to be one of the factors.

The critical role of the principal was apparent as the participants reflected on whether they felt they had “control” over (and in) their jobs and whether they felt other assistant principals in the school system had. To a person, they stated that it depended on the principal. In School A, the four agreed they had a great deal of control (total control, almost total control, 95%, quite a bit). However, as noted by two of them, their independence was tempered. “I know what the limits are.” “He perceives us as a team, but we know who’s in charge.” In School B, while there was more variation in response (total, 75% (2), no answer), here too the responses, even in the instance where the question was ducked, were keyed to the principal. One assistant principal suggested, “75% within the responsibilities and expectations he gave us.” Another appended to this percentage, “whether I perceive the things (responsibilities) are of value or would choose to do them is another question.” The assistant principal who ducked the question replied, after a pregnant pause, “You need the principal to back you up.”

Both the principals and assistant principals spoke of the administrative “team,” and the majority of assistant principals spoke of their group as “a team.” “We work well together,” noted an assistant principal in School A. “We’re a good, close-knit team,” noted an assistant principal in School B. Interestingly enough, the definition of team in both schools included the notion of delineated, non-overlapping duties that allowed the administrators to cover what needed to be done in the school without “impinging on one another’s areas,” (School A). “We stay in our own lanes” (School B). In School A the principal suggested that the “team approach” worked really well and allowed for using (the assistant principals’) strengths. With only minor exceptions, the assistant principals in the school affirmed that they were doing things they liked to do. (The

relationship between liking and competencies or strengths is unclear.) In School B, while agreeing they operated in different lanes, two of the four assistants had reservations about how effectively the team was—or could work—given the way the principal assigned duties, the fact that they did not necessarily like what they were assigned to do, and did not think the assignment of duties used the strengths of the assistant principals. One assistant principal had a problem even thinking of parallel operations as fulfilling the concept of team.

Thematic

Three themes emerged from the data: principal as boss, the structural/managerial nature of duties, and the zone of independent authority.

Principal as boss. It is impossible to read through the data without being powerfully struck by the extent to which the principal is seen by the assistant principals as "boss" in the traditional hierarchical, bureaucratic organizational sense. Seemingly by virtue of his position (he in both cases), he is seen as the supreme authority in the context and accorded all of the rights and privileges devolving on such authority, even if perceived less than worthy of such accord. At one level, since he controls the assignment of duties, he frames and determines what will be attended to, has priority and even importance, what doing school is about; he sets the parameters for the roles the assistants will play and for how much control they will have in playing out those roles; he "controls" what they are exposed to and gain experience in doing; and in every way sets "the demands of practice" (Hart, 1993, 8). This would clearly be one of the vehicles or conduits for socialization to the position and to administration, itself, and a means by which norms are transmitted and/or reenforced.

At another level, one is struck by the willingness of the assistant principals to *accept* the notion of principal as boss, accept it unquestioningly and placidly, as a given, and more, to speak of it as right, appropriate. It is almost feudal, metaphorically, with the assistant principals as knights or samurai in service to the liege lord. It is one thing for the principals to say, "The principal is like the head coach. The assistant principal's job is to realize the principal's plan," and "My vote counts for 6 (although he did explain that he sought feedback about decisions to be made and did not always go the way he would have liked)." However, it is another when the assistant principals say that their job is to "serve" the principal, do what it is he says to do, even if it conflicts with what they believe to be best to do. It appears to be a norm they bring to the position, not just one learned in position. One assistant principal shared that in getting the position she had been told by central office, "Your job is to do as instructed by the principal, and support whatever program or action he endorses." Another reported overhearing a conversation between assistant principals of other schools. One said to the other, "Our job is not to question, but to serve."

The norm of "serving" the boss, and the principal as boss, clearly represents a professional norm for the position, at least in the school system studied, and assistant principals adopt and act on it

perhaps “because those chosen for the positions are disposed to do so, or because the role itself imposes on the individual, or both” (Mertz & McNeely, 1993, 11), and/or because adherence to the norm is seen as a prerequisite for advancement to a principalship or central office position (Marshall & Mitchell, 1989, Murphy, 1992). Twenty-five years ago, Wiggins (1975) attempted to explain how it worked, and it may well explain how it continues to work. Wiggins argued that “the socializing forces of the school teach compliance...It is the means whereby teachers become “good teachers,”...teachers whose beliefs, norms and behavior are brought into line with those of the organization.” He went on to argue that principals were selected based on evidence that they have been “good teachers,” in other words, consonant with the definition, and concluded, that “Compliance appears to be a pervasive and highly valued phenomenon in the administrative role. (355-356).

The norm of service to the principal did not mean that the assistant principals did not, or did not feel free to, speak up; they did, within the self-imposed limits “learned” from working with the principal (“I know what the limits are.”). On the contrary, they did, and felt it was serving the principal to point out things he might not have considered, to prepare and present arguments for a program, position or idea they thought would be of benefit to the school, or to disagree with a position he had taken. That was indeed serving him and the school. How and where were the critical factors, not whether. The rules (norms) governing such “service” appeared to include: raising concerns in private (one-on-one if it was perceived as potentially very “touchy”) or within the administrative group (principal and assistant principals). Disagreements and/or differences were not to be raised in public, which included every other arena, and not to be shared with others, i.e., other than those within the inner administrative circle—not with teachers, parents, community members, and certainly not with central office. Indeed, a concomitant norm for behavior was to present a united front, “speak from the same page,” no matter what they might think personally. This constituted demonstrating loyalty.

Further, there appeared to be norms governing how hard the assistant principal could/should push a position or idea not supported by the principal, which had parallels to some of Marshall’s (1992) articulated limits on the roles of assistant principals. It appeared to be fine to be passionate about something, but not too passionate, too often. It would put too much pressure on the principal to agree to something he might not want, or to have to take some action to “squelch the person making the demands.” Similarly, it “would not do” to be so heated as to make anyone uncomfortable, i.e., to suggest that they should be as concerned or that they were somehow not doing their jobs, thereby disturbing the harmony, or at least the appearance of harmony, in the administrative staff. That had the potential for destroying the united image required by the norms of the context and for disturbing the working relationship among them. Rather, it was considered preferable (how you should do it) to be reasonable (calm, dispassionate, if possible), to present logical arguments for why something should be done, preferably linked to making the school look better, with no blame accruing for its not having been done already, and then, whether you were passionate or not about the issue, to allow it to be discussed by the principal or the group, or dropped, without making a fuss. (It was considered okay to bring the issue up again at another point, as long as you were good humored (not too pushy) about it.) “You can have a

passion for something,” argued one assistant principal, “but if you present it to him (the principal) and he doesn’t take it up, you need to give it up.”

Structuralist/Managerial Nature of Duties. The duties assigned to the assistant principals defined the roles they played and the position itself. The sum of their duties was how the assistant principals described the position and what it was about. The nature of those duties speaks eloquently about the organization, about how it is conceptualized by the principal (and perhaps the school system), and what it is assistant principals are socialized to believe about how one should organize to do school. Marshall’s contention that “assistant principal’s work is primarily focused on organizational maintenance” (1992,38) was evident in the work of the assistant principals. The tasks and roles that defined their position were managerial in nature, focusing on the structure and organization of the school, on coverage and control over day-to-day events, and on establishing and/or maintaining an efficient operation. It was designed to maintain the organization, maintain it as presently conceived.

Many of the most recognizable aspects of a structuralist framing of leadership (Bolman & Deal, 1991), were evident in the tasks assigned to assistant principals. Such an orientation seeks to create conditions that enable the organization to operate “with a high degree of certainty, predictability, and efficiency...” to reduce the vulnerability “to external influence or interference,” and to create structural mechanisms to protect these operations (Bolman & Deal, 1991, 48-49). In this, “coordination and control are essential to effectiveness (ibid, 48).”

What is relevant about the nature of the duties assigned to assistant principals for the purposes of this study is what it is that assistant principals learn about schools and how they should be run from how the school they serve in is organized and run, and how that plays out in the duties assigned to them. Learning what you live is the socialization process in action, and a powerful way to socialize position holders. At least in these two schools, assistant principals were being taught to coordinate and control, to manage the school, and in doing so, to maintain the existing structure. If this is the leadership frame assistant principals live, they may be hard pressed to think of, no less create, frames they have not lived or to know how to do so even if they harbor a wish to do so. Thus one should expect that if indeed “one can enter and move up in the hierarchy of administrative careers only by adhering to the dominant cultural values” (Marshall & Mitchell, 1989, 3), and the dominant values one experiences under persons so chosen emphasize a structuralist frame, one would expect the assistant principals so socialized to be more likely than not to continue to prize and to implement a structuralist frame as they are chosen to move up. Indeed, that is the very power of socialization writ large, to perpetuate what is.

The compartmentalization and specialization of duties was both an expression of a structuralist organizational paradigm {“Dividing work by creating a variety of specialized roles” (Bolman & Deal, 1991, 77,) is consonant with traditional, hierarchical forms of organization}, and a powerful means of role socialization. The differentiation and specialization of duties, and their

distribution among assistant principals, was a striking feature of both schools, and entailed strongly held norms. Having their own duties provided the assistant principals with a sense of control and satisfaction in their work, even for those not entirely happy with the allocation of duties. They felt they knew what they had to do, and thereby what they did not have to do. They had a means of gauging, at least for themselves, when they had met the expectations and when they had not. It also provided a measure of accountability, and a way to garner praise and avoid blame. They knew what they were responsible for. The differentiation of duties, combined with the fact that having assigned the duties the principals tended to leave the assistants alone to fulfill them as they saw fit, accounts in large measure for the control the assistants reported they felt in their work. As one assistant summed it up, "We have clearly delineated roles and tasks and then nothing restricts me from doing what I want."

The norms accompanying this specialization of duties, as earlier noted, stressed "staying in your own lanes," "not impinging on one another," doing your own tasks and not thinking about or interfering with the tasks of others; minding your own business, so to speak. There is no norm dictating cooperation or collaboration; quite the contrary. Through the compartmentalization of duties, with its accompanying norms, the assistant principals appear to be being socialized to operate autonomously; to complete the task, but not necessarily solve any underlying problems (since they are neither identified nor assigned); to act independently, not collectively or cooperatively; and to accept this arrangement as constituting the operational definition of teamwork. This has interesting implications for both the preparation of assistant principals to become principals and the willingness and ability of assistant principals who have been socialized in these ways to bring change to schools.

Hartzell (1995) concluded that the position of assistant principal did not prepare the assistant principals he studied to be principals, and there was no indication that their work involved specialization of duties. Specialization of duties, where practiced, makes it even less likely that assistant principals will be prepared to become principals, if preparation means exposure to and understanding of the range of roles, responsibilities and tasks involved in operating a school (as opposed to learning to maintain the structuralist organizational paradigm). Specialization just does not allow for this. It is interesting to note that the principal of one of the schools, when asked what he would do if he were an aspiring assistant principal, replied, "be the assistant to the principal and share everything the principal did," something that does not, cannot happen under the present arrangement. Further, in the norms they are "living" with non-overlapping specialization, the assistant principals are not learning to operate in ways that are considered necessary to transform and lead schools into the 21st century, schools that will be effective, not just efficient. Murphy, et. al. (forthcoming, 2000), argue:

In these new, postindustrial organizations, there are important shifts in roles, relationships, and responsibilities: traditional patterns of relationships are altered, authority flows are less hierarchical, role definitions are both more general and more flexible, leadership is connected to competence for needed tasks rather than to formal position, and independence and isolation are replaced by cooperative work. (117)

On the contrary, they are learning to maintain roles and relationships as they are, and to maintain and lead the organization as it is.

Zone of Independent Authority. Despite the power of assigned duties and expectations and their attendant norms to frame and constrain the roles, behavior and thinking of assistant principals, a zone of independent authority and for independent action can be glimpsed in their situation. What is not assigned or expected, can be assumed, provided that in doing so, you do not violate established norms. It is within this zone that assistant principals can presumably play out their own individual values, beliefs and educational/philosophical perspectives, and derive meaning and purpose from their work, what Marshall (1992) calls the great “unanswered question” in the position. A place in which “you try to make your own world; to get things to fit what you value, think is right and how it should be,” explained one assistant principal.” Whether or to what extent they do so, and for how long, depends.

Four of the assistant principals, two in each school, articulated personal visions or values in response to questions about personal goals or objectives they might have in their job—things that might be beyond or different from the duties assigned to them---and what they would do in the job if they were totally in charge. (An interesting note is that the other four assistants neither articulated goals nor identified anything they would do they were not already doing.) While these goals differed in scope and complexity, they represented personal (versus organizational) values and aspirations. All four spoke about the possibility of taking on roles or duties other than those assigned by the principal. One observed, “If there’s something you want to do, you can, but you have to be prepared to sell it or do it yourself, and some things are harder to get done than others.” Two of the assistants, both in School A, reflected that they were free to realize the objectives they articulated, that nothing prevented them from doing so. What was characteristic of their objectives was that they were modest in scope and scale, did not impinge on or even relate to the roles or duties assigned to other assistant principals, would not require or cause any changes in the “way things are done in this school,” and did not require the assistance of either the principal or other assistant principals, they could be undertaken unilaterally. In nature, they appeared to be what Marshall has spoken of as a way for the assistant to exercise authority “discreetly...without causing major changes or inviting strong opposition” (1993, 43). Both of these assistants spoke of having worked with the principal for a long time and knowing “what the limits are,” and “who’s in charge.” While these understandings appeared to frame what they thought possible, and perhaps what they thought about doing, they clearly recognized the existence of an area in which they felt they could operate independently, as long as they did not stretch the limits too far, or forget who was boss. That they had not yet implemented or realized their objectives was attributed in one case to a lack of time; in the other, to the fact that it depended on students achieving the goal.

In the other school, two assistant principals agreed that they had the freedom to take on other roles and duties, and had done so. One assistant spoke about making changes in how and at what she spent her time to allow her to spend time in classrooms. She made sure to fulfill all of her assigned responsibilities, but gave up doing things not specifically assigned. The roles and duties

they reported they had assumed tended to match those identified in the other school: where they could undertake the duties unilaterally, where no one else was assigned to the duty, and where it did not involve changing in any significant way the way things were done.

What was most interesting, however, was what happened as they sought to initiate roles and duties that did not fit those characteristics. In these things what they sought to do involved change in the way things were done, could not be managed unilaterally, potentially impinging on the duties of others, could cause discomfort given the concomitant suggestion that the way things were operating wasn't right, and required the principal to agree to undertake or at least sanction the change. In attempting to realize these objectives, they made their case or before the administrative staff and expected that he or they would see the value of their proposal. And the fact that the principal did not object to the implied criticisms, often agreed that what was proposed was a good idea, and sometimes told them verbally to go ahead, added to the confusion and subsequent disillusionment. Over time, when nothing seemed to happen or their initiating actions seemed to be inadvertently undermined by other actions taken by the principal, they found themselves raising the subject again, and again. It did not take them long to conclude that it was just not going to happen. Their growing disillusionment was apparent in the way they spoke about what was possible and what they did in the face of this. "You can't do it without the principal's support," said one resignedly. The other explained:

Here's what kills you. Everyone agrees when you talk about making change or about changing the way you deal with kids. Everyone agrees, even the principal. He says, "yes, that is a good thing to do." And then, everything stays exactly the same. After a while you get tired and the things that really go against what you believe, that really violates what you hold dear, then for one kid, here or there, you do what you think is right and hope to h— you don't get caught.

Interestingly enough, in revealing "how it is," the assistant principal revealed one of the ways in which assistants would appear to be able to play out an individual agenda, presuming s/he is willing to violate the norms and suffer the consequences if found out, i.e., adopt a subversive course: change the rules or ways of operating for some, without asking or changing the policy or practice for all; operate independently and as if you had the authority. Indeed, this may be an organizationally acceptable way to operate, and unwritten rule. Clearly, this was saved for situations in which the assistant felt deeply, and while no other assistant principal spoke about this, one was left wondering whether or not and to what extent this was a strategy recognized by other assistant principals and/or considered acceptable as a way to realize personal goals, to play out individual values and beliefs in the face of organizational resistance.

What is most revealing about the perspectives of the two assistants, is what they suggest about the norms operating and the way assistants may be socialized to those norms. Over time, in the face of a lack of support or encouragement for realizing their objectives, the assistants abandoned attempts to realize their objectives, looked for ways to do what they wanted without

getting permission or impinging, and/or imposed restrictions on themselves (self-censored). Speaking about the change in both enthusiasm and willingness to press for change observed, one assistant insightfully detailed how the normative process was working.

Every time you go against the system you lose juice. So you convince yourself that by going along or appearing to go along you'll have the juice to fight when it is really important. But over time you find you just avoid the fight, you 'don't rock the boat'."

At the risk of going beyond that for which there was clear evidence, time in position appeared to be a factor in the process of learning the norms of what was and what was not acceptable to pursue in this zone of independent authority. There was a clear difference in the characteristics and scope of the personal goals and objectives of the two sets of assistants, those who had been in place for a relatively long time and those who had held the position a relatively short time. Had the longer tenured assistants learned to tailor their objectives to what they had learned was acceptable? Were the less tenured assistant principals in the process of learning to do so? This seemed to be the case. One observed the changes in their behavior and thinking over the course of the study, literally saw the learning of the "rules of the game." It may be that these assistant principals were just not as effective as they might have been in the way they went about trying to realize their individual agendas; or the principal was less effective than he needed to be in dealing with the requests; or there was a discontinuity of fit between what the assistants sought to do and what the principal perceived should be done; or all three. However, it may be that whatever way they went about it or whatever the situation, would have required learning and complying with the rules of the game about what was allowable and appropriate in the context. Role theory predicts differences in behavior among people in an organization who are in the same role will decrease over time. Time and experience in the context appeared to bring the newer assistants more in line with the longer tenured assistants, to reduce the "behavioral variation" (Bridges, 1965, 20) among them, and bring their understanding of the zone of independent authority in the position *within* the parameters of what was acceptable and normative.

Concluding Thoughts

The intent of the study was to describe how assistant principals see and think about their work: how they learn what and how to think about the position; how the organizational norms for the position are communicated and taught; and how the individual affects the position. While limited to the schools and school system studied, the findings are highly suggestive about how assistant principals are socialized, how they learn the roles and norms of the position, irrespective of the particular school organization, structure or climate.

While assistant principals may or may not be prepared for the job, they come with a socialized disposition to the position. They are anything but strangers to the organization and its norms, are

aware of persons they have experienced in the position, and have been chosen, at least in part, because they appear to fit the organizational conception of the person “we want” in the position. Research on mentoring for administrative advancement has highlighted the role and importance of fit, physical and philosophical, on the selection process (Mertz, Welch, & Henderson, 1988). Whether the participants see the position in this way or not, the organization uses the position of assistant principal as a low-risk means to test the adequacy of the fit between the person and the organization (is like us) and to see if the person fits in (accepts; conforms to what the organization perceives to be important), as well as a training ground to continue to mold the person to fit the organization. The test of success is the ability of the individual to play the role well (Hayden, 1990).

Greenberg and Bacon (1993) characterize organizations as having a life of their own, apart from the individuals that make up the organization; that complex of “attitudes, values, behavioral norms and expectations”(313) that make up the organizational culture and are (come to be) shared by the members of the organization. These rules for behavior and ways of thinking are largely unwritten, informal, implicit and below the radar screen. People are aware of them, but they are rarely discussed, except when transgressed, and remain below the level of day-to-day awareness. In this way they may be learned and reenforced subtly till they become part of the habituated behavior. More blatant teaching would be far more likely to rouse resistance to such molding. The persistence and pervasiveness of the organizational culture may help to explain why organizations appear so resistant to change; why they alter so slowly, if at all. In order to change what is, so much has to be brought to the level of awareness; so much has to be unlearned; so much new has to be learned; and all of it must be consonant to create a different culture. That may help to explain why critics like Sarason (1997) are convinced that schools can not change themselves and must be created anew. Equally, it helps to explain why the organizational culture “will tend to prevail over forces to change it (Wiggins, 1975, 3545),” and why the individual is more likely to be affected by the organizational culture than the culture is to be affected by the individual.

School systems are hierarchically organized. This hierarchy is structural as well as conceptual, and facilitates organizational socialization in the system. There is an established hierarchy of positions and a delineated authority structure. While it is not entirely clear to what extent assistant principals seek to become principals or to move up in the administrative hierarchy, in preparing for and choosing to move into the position of assistant principal, they signal an interest in possibly moving up and become more visible as candidates for advancement. As Schein (1971) has suggested, aspirants for advancement are highly motivated to demonstrate that they are committed to the organizational norms. It signals that they fit.

“The school as a workplace proves extraordinarily powerful...The prevailing patterns of interactions and interpretations in each building demonstrably creates certain possibilities and sets certain limitations (Little, 1981, 7).” And in this workplace, the principal appears to be a significant and powerful actor in the socialization process. The principal is, first of all, a representative of the organization and of organizational fit (a model); of what the organization

says, symbolically, they seek in a principal. Second, in the context in which assistant principals work, "principals, by virtue of their position, have rights of initiative to- or to erode - the relevant norms. By what they say and do, reward and defend, administrators convey a set of values, create (or limit) certain opportunities and control certain consequences (Little & Bird, 1984, 2)." But norms are not merely definitions of what the person in the position "should or should not do under various circumstances (Bridges, 1982)," they are ways of viewing the world, of seeing how that world is and how it works; and implicitly, how it should work. Principals direct and reenforce the norms assistant principals bring to the position in the way they make meaning in the organization (Bogue, 1994). In how they structure and organize to do school, in the roles and tasks they assign, and in the expectations they hold, they influence what is learned and what it is possible to learn, teach what it is school is about, and frame the dialogue about and in the context. In these ways, principals are powerful vehicles of organizational socialization *in situ*, irrespective of the particular organizational culture or the particulars of the culture being considered.

The notion that the norms of behavior are strong and defining in the position of assistant principal is consistent with what Hayden (1990) found in the position of principal. The apparent strength of organizational socialization to affect the individual, and the indication that time in position reenforces that socialization, raises questions about the ability and extent to which the individual can affect the position. Clearly, assistant principals bring who they are to the position, their beliefs, values and educational philosophies; their unique personalities and ways of managing in the world. They constitute individual expectations, dispositions and readinesses which come into dynamic interplay with those of the principal and peers and of the organizational culture. Theoretically, the individual has the ability to influence the social system. In the zone of independent authority identified in the position, a zone which some assistant principals recognize and use to play out their individual influence in the organization *within* fairly defined normative parameters, and use, perhaps, to contravene the norms, albeit in small ways when and if they perceive they can, a venue for such influence is apparent. It is also not difficult to conceive of a person so skillful in managing the situation as to move the principal and other staff members to operate in different ways. But the forces of socialization to maintain what is, whatever that is, are so strong, that the patience, persistence and long-range strategizing necessary to do so would be daunting to even the strongest personality. The professional literature allows occasional glimpses of crusaders crushed against the barricades, and it is clear what happens to individuals when they too blatantly violate the norms of appropriate behavior for the position. One wonders whether the individual, in the face of such daunting forces, decides to bide their time, wait until they are in a position in which they perceive they have more influence-- when they are principal or the ... Might the individual with discrepant organizational views sign a mental promissory note to conform to the organizational norms *for now*, fit in *for now*, defer immediate gratification for the promise of later influence in and on the system? This raises a whole set of other issues about what happens to deferred dispositions and how long one can defer them without changing them or being changed. It is, nonetheless, an intriguing possibility and a way to understand why less experienced position holders may feel more constrained by the norms than do more experienced ones.

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