

New Principals' Perspectives of Their Multifaceted Roles

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This study utilizes Symbolic Interactionism to explore perspectives of neophyte principals. Findings explain how these perspectives are modified through complex interactions throughout the school year, and they also suggest preparation programs can help new principals most effectively by teaching “soft” skills such as active listening and trust-building in addition to traditional “hard” skills of finance, law, and program evaluation.

New principals are asked to take on unprecedented challenges as leaders of K-12 public schools. Though they receive preparatory training at institutes of higher education or may have prior administrative experience, they often lack the skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary to meet demanding challenges created by their multifaceted leadership roles. Much has been written about how to help new principals succeed in their appointments (see Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Levine, 2005; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003), yet only a fraction of this information is based upon direct reports from the source itself—the new principal (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007; Petzko, 2008). We argue this knowledge gap is problematic because it is not possible to create more effective methods of training and supporting new principals without understanding their perspectives (i.e., thoughts, feelings, and beliefs) about issues they confront as they perform their day-to-day administrative duties.

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In response, we designed an exploratory study to address this gap. The goals of our investigation were threefold: (1) to surface initial perspectives on site leadership held by new principals, (2) to investigate what these individuals thought was most challenging and/or rewarding during their first year as site leaders, and (3) to examine how their initial perspectives changed over time as they confronted the daily challenges of their jobs. We developed the following research questions to guide our investigation:

1. What were new principals' initial perspectives of their role as site administrators?
2. What did they consider to be the most challenging aspects of their role?
3. How and to what extent were their perspectives of their role modified over time as they interacted with the challenges of their work?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Symbolic Interactionism, with its focus on explaining human behavior in terms of meanings individuals attach to experiences, provides a cogent theoretical framework for investigating the perspectives of new principals. Noted University of Chicago sociologist Herbert Blumer (1969) outlined key elements of the theory, the first of which has particular relevance for this study. Blumer noted that people “act toward things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them.” Simply put, new principals perceive events in school environments primarily as meaning-laden symbols, and their reactions to the meanings they attach to these symbols, rather than the events themselves, help explain why principals behave the way they do. For example, a directive from the central office requiring a change in school site administrative practice could be perceived very differently by two principals. One might perceive the change as making him or her temporarily incompetent by requiring a skill that s/he does not yet possess. Another may view the change as conflict, pitting his/her ideas about site leadership against those of central office administrators. In both instances, *the symbolic nature of the change* as perceived by the principals rather than the change itself can elicit substantively different responses to the same phenomenon.

Blumer also noted that meanings attached to items or events are “... modified through, an interpretative process used by the person dealing with the things he encounters.” This tenet of *Symbolic Interactionism* explains why new principals' initial perspectives about school-related phenomena change as thoughts, feelings, and beliefs are challenged by the real-world environment of day-to-day schooling. For example, aspiring school administrators often express somewhat idealistic perspectives of the principal's role. Many see the principal's office as a symbol of power and control, and some begin their careers acting on these symbolic meanings. Most, however, quickly find their perspectives challenged and then modified as they discover that power does not reside in their title, and unexpected events and human interactions control the majority of their working days (Horng, Klasik, & Loeb, 2010).

The decision to use *Symbolic Interactionism* as the framework for this study required us to abandon *a priori* assumptions about how new principals perceive their work. The purpose of using the framework was to allow these individuals to speak for and about themselves rather than having us speak for and about them. Most important, we employed the framework to guide our data collection methods with the explicit purpose of understanding how experiences at their school sites, vis-à-vis complex interactions with staff and other constituents, created and then modified their perspectives on school leadership (Gentilucci &

Muto, 2007). We matched the theoretical framework with a complimentary research methodology based on the seminal works of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Spradley (1979). A discussion of this methodology follows.

METHODOLOGY

Three researchers, working at different California State Universities, designed this qualitative study using an “open” inductive approach to collect and analyze data about how work-related perspectives of new principals emerge and change over time as they interact with people and events in the milieu of daily administrative life. We began by examining extant literature about new principals, but we discovered the majority of data upon which this work is based were gathered using forced-choice surveys, pre-designed attitude scales, or highly-scripted interview protocols (see, for example, American Institutes for Research Principal Study, 2005).

We defined these as “closed” data collection approaches because they restrict opportunity for respondents to articulate in substantial detail unique thoughts and feelings about their work. While acknowledging effectiveness for some research purposes, we decided a “closed” approach was insufficient for eliciting principals’ perspectives about their multifaceted leadership roles, the central focus of this study. Consequently, we selected an alternative “open” approach to data collection we labeled *respondent-driven interviewing*. Following the lead of Spradley (1979) and other ethnographers, we created an open-ended interview protocol that permitted respondents to “drive” or set the direction of dialogue. We began each interview by asking only a series of “grand-tour” questions, and then we encouraged respondents to use those questions to talk about their unique perspectives on site leadership and administration.

Sampling

Intentional sampling was used to select only those individuals (in this instance, new principals) who could address the study’s research questions. Principals were chosen based on our professional acquaintances with them, their proximity to us, and/or recommendation from their superintendents. They were screened into the study based on the amount of time (<3 years) they had been employed in the role of site principal. Each principal was then contacted by one of us and asked if s/he would be willing to participate in the interview process. The characteristics of participants who met all criteria are presented in Table 1.

Data Collection Procedures

Because of time and distance constraints, five interviews were conducted in person, four by written electronic communication, and two via a combination of electronic communication and a telephone interview. The respondent-driven interview protocol included four “grand tour” questions and one intentionally-focused question. The initial four questions were designed to help participants explicate their thoughts and feelings about their experiences as new principals while the fifth was intended to elicit information about how administrative preparation programs could be redesigned to prepare principals more effectively for the challenges of their work.

Table 1
Characteristics of Participating Principals (N = 11)

Characteristic	N	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	6	55
Male	5	45
<i>Administrative Level</i>		
Elementary	6	55
Middle School	3	27
High School	2	18
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
White	10	91
African-American	0	0
Hispanic/Latino	1	9
Asian	0	0

The interviews began with an introduction to the goals and objectives of the study and a brief review of informed consent. Participants were then told that a team of university researchers was conducting a study to examine leadership perspectives of first-year principals. More specifically, we informed them that we were interested in understanding how their leadership perspectives developed and how they may have changed over time vis-à-vis the challenges and successes they faced during their initial year as site administrators.

Following the interviews, principals' responses were transcribed and analyzed using open and axial coding methods. Open coding was used to "fracture" data into thematic segments, and axial coding was used to reassemble data in unique ways (i.e., transforming like-data segments into broader conceptual themes) (see Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding was conducted individually to help us "make sense" of the narrative data we collected. We then collaboratively used axial coding to identify themes in the data and to build an emergent theory of how new principal perspectives develop and change over time in response to their interaction with school environments. During the process of collaborative analysis, interview data were compared with findings from previous studies about principal perspectives to identify any disconfirming evidence that might challenge our results (see Rhett, 2004). We also compared data among ourselves to confirm the reliability of our findings (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore new principals' perspectives of their multifaceted leadership roles, and we use the three research questions posed at the beginning of the study to provide a framework for presenting our findings.

1. What were new principals' initial perspectives of their role as site administrators?

The early leadership perspectives of study participants with no prior administrative experience were considerably idealistic in nature. Others who had formerly worked in administrative jobs (e.g., lead teacher, coach, vice-principal, dean, etc.) expressed more realistic ideas, but they, too, shared the belief that “things will be different when I am in charge.”

Those without prior experience described how “grand hopes” shaped their perspectives of site leadership. Under their guidance, faculty morale would soar, student achievement gains would be impressive, and overall school operation would be smooth and nearly trouble-free. A principal described such a perspective as she discussed thoughts she had about site administration prior to starting the job:

But you know that there's good and there's great. You really need [to be]¹ a great administrator. A great administrator, at least in my opinion, is being in the classroom and supporting the teachers, and giving them feedback on the delivery of instruction, and giving them the training that they need to be successful...But I found that difficult to do when you are bogged down with the paperwork and the managerial types of things.
-- Elementary Principal

Another new principal was taken aback when she discovered how an axiomatic reality of leadership collided with her idealism:

I thought I would have a lot of people to talk to. [But I discovered] it's a lonely job at the top. That was a surprise.
-- Elementary Principal

Even those principals with prior administrative experience spoke about optimistic initial perspectives:

I came up through the ranks, so having done that [I thought] before I got to this level [I had] a little bag of tricks, and that what I brought to this job [would] minimize some of the stress. But it hasn't minimized the stress from the things that I . . . discovered throughout the year. [Now I know] the things I didn't have to worry about [when I wasn't the principal]. I didn't have to worry about discipline and Education Code and coordinating state testing and all of those things . . . so I didn't have to sweat that stuff. Now I do.
-- Middle School Principal

New principals, even those whose experiences prepared them well for the challenges of site administration, were generally very optimistic about succeeding in their roles. This perspective held across grade levels, gender, and years of prior administrative experience. More importantly, this hopeful perspective remained stable even in the face of contradictory evidence (i.e., when those who preceded them in their respective roles failed to achieve similar aspirations).

¹ Text in brackets added for clarity.

2. What did new principals consider to be the most challenging aspects of their role?

Study participants talked openly about difficult issues they confronted in their new roles as site administrators. Data in Table 2 indicated the most frequently mentioned challenges (100% of participants) were stress and time management, and creating and sustaining positive and productive working relationships. Additionally, almost all (91%) of new principals described a desire for more mentorship and support as they coped with the exigencies of their work.

When aggregated in various ways, these challenges constitute four key perspectives new principals developed about their roles during the course of their first year. We entitle these perspectives stress, time management, relationships, and support. Each is described here in the words of the principals themselves.

Table 2

Most Frequent Role-related Challenges Reported by New Principals (N = 11)

Theme	N	%
Coping with Stress	11	100
Managing Time	11	100
Creating Positive Working Relationships	11	100
Desiring Additional Mentorship and Support	10	91

Stress

Participants said they expected the role of a new principal to be difficult, but they were surprised, often unpleasantly so, by the frequency and intensity of work-related stress they experienced. Stress was particularly challenging for those who had risen up the ranks within the same district.

I guess in terms of . . . the emotion and the toll that goes along with dealing with upset people, I would say it increased, I mean just by the very nature of the position. And . . . I don't know if you could prepare for that. You kind of work your way up, you deal with it at each level. In all the jobs that I've had . . . I've always dealt with parent complaints, but not at the level and the intensity increased at the principal's office. . . . [Most of them have] the belief that basically you can fix things, you know what I mean; you're the principal, why can't you just fix this? -- High School Principal

We also had several events at school that defined the year and caused me great grief, personally. We have a handful of "gang-interested" middle school students who show affinity for the gang lifestyle, and [they] like to push the envelope with behavior and dress code. After one after-school conflict between groups, the [police] came to school and did a mass arrest of six of my students—walking them through the halls in handcuffs after arresting them outside of their classrooms. The community was in an uproar, Latino parents especially. I received mountains of phone calls and emails. . . . Latino families came to meet with me and were livid and accusatory, and white

parents called me to ask if their children were safe from “those people.” It was terrible. -- Middle School Principal

Time Management

Many of the study participants described how the role of new principal “consumed” them. They were generally unaware of how much more demanding the job of a site administrator was than other administrative or teaching positions they held, and several discussed how their initial expectations of managing and controlling their time clashed with the reality of day-to-day administrative duties.

There are so many [district] meetings. We have meetings about meetings . . . we’ve had meetings about planning for a meeting . . . For me, I don’t need to have a meeting where 95 percent of what’s being talked about could just be put into an email. . . . It’s very frustrating because one thing I have really regretted about this year [is that] I have gotten into the classrooms very little because I just simply do not have the time. Even if I would try to schedule time on my calendar, well, when discipline walks in the door, when you have a kid who’s not behaving or whatever, those plans to go in and to sit or to read poetry with a group of seventh graders or some of the other things that I planned for myself, well, they just go out the window. --Middle School Principal

I take a lot of time meeting with people—staff, teachers, parents. That takes a lot of my time and energy. . . . There’s just not a lot of time for deep thinking and planning. [This first year] is more about putting out fires and preventing fires instead of, you know, really planning for the future. --Elementary Principal

There is no such thing as an “average” day. Anything can happen. You plan, and then you have to know that yesterday’s to-do list often. . . . becomes the next day’s list, or today’s to-do list becomes tomorrow’s to-do list, which becomes the next day’s to-do list. . . . You hope you can just take a couple of things off [the list] every day so that they’re not on tomorrow’s list. That’s kind of the way this whole year has been. -- High School Principal

The adjustment from assistant principal to principal was huge. My night duty as an assistant principal was . . .back-to-school night, awards night, open house, and spring awards . . . maybe a band concert at Christmas. But when you become the principal, you are the face of the school, and now [I am out] four or five nights each week. It was kind of overwhelming at first. -- Middle School Principal

Relationships

Creating and sustaining positive working relationships with staff, students, and parents were a priority for study participants. All said relationship-building was essential for improving school culture, and the first-year process went well for some but was arduous for others.

And so I just have spent a lot of time really trying to get to know my staff and trying to really show them how much I appreciate what they do every day....And so I remember . . . all the years that I've spent in the classroom, I will never forget those years. They

are the foundation of who I am as a leader. And so I've really invested a lot of time in my staff...I've built a trust with the staff, and I would say to any new principal don't forget that. Lay that groundwork. Don't be in such a hurry to put your imprint on a school that you don't forget to honor the people who have been there way before you got there and will be there way after you leave. You know what I mean?

-- Middle School Principal

I believe that if you model, you're trustworthy, you're this...you put that out to people...they will receive that and then follow you. But that is not always the case because that negative influence [among staff] will try to pick everything apart and turn it. And I underestimated the power of that. I kept thinking that if you do the right thing for kinds and you treat people fairly, then all things will be right in the world...and I still believe it...but I've learned a great deal that...there are people out there who do not always do what's in the best interest of the kids....So it [building relationships] is tricky.

-- Elementary Principal

Support

One study participant eloquently synopsized this perspective when she stated, "It's lonely at the top." Without exception, new principals said they desired and needed the guidance and support of senior administrators and peers as they faced the challenges of their work. Unfortunately for most, there was no formal systematic mechanism for providing this support within their respective districts. In response, principals were forced to create their own (mostly informal) support networks for mentorship and advice.

I used to be part of the conversations in the lunchroom and everything and now I'm not. And that part of it's lonely. But then I do still actually go down and like heat my food in there [the faculty room] and sit down and talk about the weekend and babies and all of that. I'm finding that becoming a parent was the best thing that ever happened for my job because all the moms . . . here want to talk to me about pregnancy and having a baby. But as far as you know, frustrations and things about my work, you can't really go there with teachers. . . . so I end up talking to my husband a lot about what's going on.

-- Elementary Principal

Well, I've been fortunate because between coaching and teaching and administrative [work], I've been able to come into contact with a number of mentors. I had a head football coach that I worked for mentor me quite a bit in dealing with conflict and organizing myself. And then I worked for a . . . really good principal. And I still use the advice . . . she gave me about discipline. Networking and peer support [are] very valuable . . . but that was only like two or three times throughout the whole year . . . So I've got [my own] network. My brother . . . has been a vice principal for a number of years at a comprehensive high school. I've got an athletic director from when I was in Washington. He was a principal; now he's a superintendent. Because I've been at multiple districts, I have a network of people that I can get in touch with and say, "Hey, what are you doing with the master schedule? How are you handling hiring? What are the struggles that you're going through?" I mean we're all dealing with similar problems.

-- High School Principal

One of the things that would help . . . would be . . . an administrative type of training [and support] in the district. Even a booklet . . . to say, “Hey, you know in this situation, here’s a scenario.” Really, I mean because when you’re a principal, you’ve had years of experience in the classroom, but outside of that realm, we need more training. That would help me be a stronger leader. -- Elementary Principal

3. How and to what extent were their perspectives of their role modified over time as they interacted with the challenges of their work?

Consistent with the theory of *Symbolic Interactionism*, all 11 principals reported significant changes in perspectives between the beginning and end of their first year on the job, and one of the most substantial modifications involved new principals’ understanding of organizational power. During interviews, principals discussed how at the outset of their first year, they believed the legitimate authority conferred on them by the title of “site administrator” was sufficient to solve challenges encountered in their respective schools. Implicit in this perspective was the idea that most problems could be solved by rewards or coercion, the two most basic but least sustainable forms of power.²

Without exception, principals reported this perspective was dramatically modified as they interacted with various publics (e.g., staff, parents, students, etc.) at their respective school sites. Most quickly discovered that reliance on rewards and coercion failed to motivate others and often worked in counterproductive ways within their organizations. These negative interactions caused principals to change their perspectives and rely more frequently on the power of example (referent power) and the power of superior knowledge (expert power) as the school year progressed. Both sources of power enabled principals to build positive, sustainable relationships and establish high levels of trust among members of their school communities.

Looking back after the end of her first year, one principal explained in detail how interaction with difficult staff modified her perspectives on the use of power to change the organizational culture of her school:

You know, I came into the . . . position as a new administrator, [and] I went into a school that had already had so many problems and so many transitions with administrators, and they were really difficult to work with. . . . It was more about teachers thinking they had control of the school, and a “you-can’t-make-me” kind of culture. . . . So the small things that I thought would just be easy, bringing everyone together and building a belief system, a vision, and working toward one goal . . . you couldn’t start there with that staff. [So] changing the culture there was the biggest challenge. . . . I had to bring everyone on board with the idea that they were responsible for the change we had to make, and make everyone take an active role. And that was really tough because we had the culture of “you-can’t-make-me.” So I [just] assigned jobs and said, ‘You are responsible for this aspect.’ And [the teachers’ response] was a kicking and screaming type of thing. . . . And I underestimated the power of that. So, I think that if I had gone into it another way, [with a] more critical eye, I might have handled it differently [at the beginning]. [Over time] I started

² See French & Raven, 1959.

reaching out to those negative teachers . . . and to the people they influenced . . . [and tried to] keep them from going to the dark side. And that was the answer, and that's what I had to start doing. And it helped me with my staff because I reached out to those people . . . [and] I made them part of the improvement process . . . it empowered those people [to become members of a team]. -- Middle School Principal

In light of these findings, new principals seemed to begin their work with a set of generally optimistic perspectives, related primarily to expected first-year accomplishments. While some perspectives remain constant over the course of the year (e.g., stress), most are modified in response to challenges encountered as principals interact with the phenomena in their environments (e.g., expectations about building positive relations with staff).

We now turn our attention to a brief discussion of the findings, the implications they have for administrator preparation programs, and recommendations for future study.

DISCUSSION

This exploratory study, with its emphasis on the use of respondent-driven interviewing, elicited a wealth of rich descriptive data about how perspectives are formed and modified through principals' interaction with the world of site administration. Among the most noteworthy findings was a perspective that revealed how new principals viewed their role as collaborators, communicators, counselors, and motivators not because of a job description or title but because they were intrinsically motivated to serve others and "make a difference" in the lives of students and staff. This perspective remained constant throughout their first year on the job despite the host of challenges they faced.

Striving to create positive and enduring relationships vis-à-vis personal example and effective communication is another important finding. Study participants repeatedly said principals had to possess effective communication skills that include active listening, problem solving, knowing limits, establishing boundaries, and taking responsibility for one's actions if they wished to succeed in their role.

Interestingly, few new principals mentioned lack of managerial training as a significant challenge of their work. This finding has particular significance for principal preparation programs because, almost without exception, the challenges most problematic for new principals centered on "soft skills" that include stress management, personal organization, relationship building, communication, networking, and surviving at the center of complex organizational dynamics (see Fullan, 2008). Yet, many preparation programs shy away from these "fuzzy," somewhat difficult-to-teach skills and focus instead on traditional "hard skills" such as budgeting and law because the later are easily articulated and assessed.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

We determined from data analysis and collective interaction among ourselves that a broader selection of principals, distributed more evenly across geographic settings (i.e., urban, suburban, and rural), as well as an increased number of participants would have strengthened our findings and their value for informing the profession. Future research should include stratification of participants by grade level to attain a clearer understanding of challenges related specifically to high, middle, and elementary school principals. Such research might

also explore if and how gender, race, and ethnicity affect perspectives. The most significant challenge for future researchers will be to determine how programs of administrator preparation can more effectively teach and develop critical “soft skills” in addition to traditional “hard skill” content (see Tucker & Coddling, 2002).

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