

Transitioning from Teacher Leader to Administrator in Rural Schools in Southwestern Ontario

Julie Hohner

Western University, CANADA

Augusto Riveros

Western University, CANADA

This study investigates the experiences of a group of classroom teachers who transitioned into administrative roles as vice-principals in a rural schoolboard in southwestern Ontario. We included both elementary and secondary former teacher leaders who moved into the school administration and explored the aspects of their leadership experience that influenced their decision to make the transition into an administrative role, the challenges they faced, and how their formal and informal leadership experiences prepared them for their responsibilities within their new role. Eight former teacher leaders who moved to the vice-principal role within the last two years were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. The data were analysed using a two level coding strategy that allowed for the identification of key themes and patterns. This study found that (1) increased responsibilities and professional growth were motivators for teacher leaders to enter into administration; (2) while that there was a rapid adaptation entering the new job, the teacher-leader experience did not prepare them for the feelings of isolation from their former peers in their new role; and (3) establishing professional and collegial relationships with staff and community members is central to the successful transition from teacher leader to administrator in a rural context. This research aims to inform further research in the area of transitioning from teacher leader to administrator as well as future recruitment and support initiatives for aspiring leaders in rural schools.

Keywords: Leadership; teacher leader; vice-principal; rural education; secondary school leadership; elementary school leadership; schooling; transition; school leader recruitment

Introduction

This paper examines the experiences of a group of rural teacher leaders who transitioned into the role of vice-principal in rural elementary and secondary schools in southwestern Ontario. The rural schoolboard involved in this study is small and its schools are fairly similar in terms of size and demographics. We explored how and why these teacher leaders made the decision to take on an administrative role. As Yost, Vogel, and Rosenberg (2009) noted, school leaders play a key role in influencing key aspects of the school's life, such as teaching and professional learning. As such, it is essential to pay particular attention to the transitions of these practitioners into school administration, particularly when the recruitment and retention of rural school leaders in rural schools has become one of the greatest challenges for school systems (Wallin & Newton, 2013).

We argue that the voices and experiences of former teacher leaders, who have transitioned to an administrative position, must be studied in order to understand the factors that influence their decision to leave the classroom and to transition to a formal leadership role. It is important for rural educators, administrators, and schoolboards to understand the uniqueness of the experience of new rural leaders. By listening to their voices, it will be possible to develop the support mechanisms and resources needed in their journey. This research seeks to contribute to academic conversations on teacher leadership (Harris, 2005; York-Barr & Duke, 2004) by investigating how the experiences of teacher leaders could offer useful insights to developing recruitment and succession strategies in rural school administration.

By paying attention to the experiences of teacher leaders and how they develop their leadership capacity, this study suggests that the shortage in personnel for school administration in rural schools could be addressed by offering the necessary supports that would motivate these emerging leaders to take formal leadership positions in their schools. Teacher leaders are in an unparalleled position to enhance and strengthen the leadership capacity of schools and schoolboards; they are “teachers, who are leaders within and beyond the classroom, who identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influence others towards improved educational practice” (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001, p. 17). As we will note in the analysis of our interview data, the experience gained through participation in professional learning, community engagement, and occasional administrative duties offers valuable opportunities for the development of the skills and knowledge needed to lead schools as principals or vice-principals.

According to Wallin (2005), “despite variability among communities, research does address characteristics that are common in rural areas such as higher unemployment, higher poverty, isolation, lack of job opportunities, lower education levels and depopulation” (p. 135). In order to examine the transition from teacher leader to school administrator in rural schools in southwestern Ontario, we addressed the following research question: How do newly appointed rural school leaders experience the transition from informal teacher leaders to the vice-principal role? In order to investigate this issue, we explored the *formal support mechanisms* available to them, such as education programs at the schoolboard, university, or professional associations; the *informal support mechanisms*, such as professional and community networking, and the *challenges* that these practitioners experienced during this critical part of their careers.

There are a number of external factors that impact the transition into the new vice-principal role. In Ontario, Bill 160, the *Education Quality Improvement Act* (1997) removed principals and vice-principals from bargaining units and disallowed membership in teachers’ unions. Bill 160 also removed the rights of principals and vice-principals to unionize and be involved in any bargaining unit. When a teacher decides to move into administration, that teacher must give up his or her membership with the teacher’s union. In addition, the school has to have a need for new leadership candidates, with positions that need to be filled. In the small schoolboard where this study is situated, there are a limited number of elementary schools and secondary schools that require new administrators. The transition begins when a teacher is selected by the schoolboard’s interview panel to be placed in the vice-principal’s pool and then is completed when the position becomes permanent. In this rural schoolboard, new vice-principals are in an acting position for one year. During this year a new vice-principal is still a union member and, as such, can still make the decision to return to the classroom. The transition to the vice-principal’s role is complete when the decision is made to leave the union and thus become a permanent administrator.

Rural schoolboards and urban schoolboards are two different types of entities with access to different resources. These discrepancies sometimes pose a challenge for rural school leaders, both formal and informal. This paper suggests that rural school leaders are in a precarious position that requires them to collaborate well with staff and members of the community. Ashton and Duncan (2012) noted that for new and emerging leaders “the combination of being both inexperienced and in a rural setting can be overwhelming” (p. 20). Clarke and Wildy (2008) advocate for leadership preparation that would “involve theory and practical leadership skill development, as well as rich local contextual knowledge” (p. 729). Similarly, Ashton and Duncan (2012) indicated that

many administrators said that their upward career mobility had been fostered more quickly than it would have been if they had been in a large district because they were able to showcase their leadership talent and build professional connections in a more intimate environment. However, the lack of diversity and/or number of administrative positions in rural areas could become a hindrance unless one was willing to move out of the area. (p. 144)

The rural context brings with it a variety of unique issues with which experienced and aspiring school leaders must contend with. They face unique demographic, economic, and social concerns. They also have less access to resources and professional development opportunities. The schools are an integral part of the community, as are the school leaders. Schoolboards and administrators must have familiarity with the current issues facing the rural community in order to recruit and retain future leaders.

Supporting Teacher Leadership as a Strategy to Recruit and Retain Rural Administrators

School administrator shortage is an issue across the globe. “While interest grows in the effect of leadership on school and student performance, there is also growing perception that educational leadership is in relatively short supply in the US, Canada, and many other parts of the world” (Jacobson, 2005, p. 457). There is limited research focusing on the recruitment and retention on rural school leaders. Normore (2004a) examined the Canadian context and the concerns surrounding recruitment and retention of school leaders by school districts: “Due to the lack of interest in the administrative role, and inadequate leadership preparation of individuals within the school ranks, school districts report challenges in recruitment and selection processes for school leaders” (p. 1). Fairman and Mackenzie (2012), investigating the contexts where teacher leadership emerges, noted that teacher leaders often move from their own practice to engage in collaborative work with peers. This move enables further involvement in schoolwide initiatives that influence the culture of the schools and generate mentorship opportunities. These authors noted that the continuous support from the administration to the teacher-led initiatives translates in a more robust professional learning community and improved student learning. Muijs and Harris (2007) reported similar findings. They noted that taking proactive steps to create a culture of trust and collaboration between teachers is essential to engage teacher leaders in school improvement initiatives.

There is an increase in stress and responsibility that has led to fewer teachers considering a move into a leadership role as the job is becoming more complex and demanding. It is these increased expectations that have helped to cause a shortage in applicant pools (Normore, 2004b). Because of the apparent lack of interest in taking on leadership positions, schoolboards need to improve recruitment and retention strategies (Newton, Riveros, & da Costa, 2013). Schoolboards must address the administrative shortages by investing time and money into developing recruitment and retention policies in order to attract qualified candidates into the leadership role (Normore, 2004a). Geographic location is also a challenge when recruiting and retaining administrators; Wood, Finch, and Mirecki (2013) noted that “geographic isolation remained the most highly rated challenge in rural districts not near urban areas” (p. 8). Furthermore, school districts need to understand and meet the unique needs of the rural administrator in order to recruit and retain quality candidates: “Rural leadership is more demanding because many districts have no middle management and depend on their administrators to carry out additional responsibilities” (Wood et al., 2013, p. 2). This sentiment is also expressed by Beesley and Clark (2015) who state, “Rural principals often feel isolated in their efforts to create positive change because they are tasked with greater levels of responsibility than non-rural principals, despite lower salaries” (p. 243). Howley and Pendarvis (2002) acknowledge the workload of rural school leaders as they tend to work long hours with low pay and are expected to attend school functions and community events (p. 3). The idea of community connection is reiterated in Beesley and Clark (2015). Their research suggests that rural leaders value a close-knit community and understand the unique challenges that a small school district faces. Finally, the research of Wood et al. (2013) outlines retention strategies, with the top two identified as creating a positive school culture and investing in professional learning opportunities. Their research findings varied when it came to small towns and how leaders could be retained when compared to urban locations.

The Transition from Teacher Leader to Vice-Principal

In most cases, new administrators are classroom teachers prior to entering the principal or vice-principal role. Riveros, Newton, and da Costa (2013) argued that many classroom teachers in informal leadership positions are hesitant to move into a leadership role, as they fear losing their connection to the classroom and teaching and learning. Their study found that a lot of the teachers who eventually take on leadership roles do not start out with a desire to move into formal leadership or administrative positions. In most cases, teachers gain experience in leadership positions within their own schools, which builds their capacity and promotes their leadership capabilities (Riveros et al., 2013). Armstrong (2009) noted that “the transition from teacher to vice-principal is an important professional and organizational passage that carries significant dreams and transformational possibilities for new administrators and their communities” (p. 686).

According to Armstrong (2010; 2014; 2015), the socialization process begins when teachers consider becoming administrators and begin to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that reflect the administrators’ work. Armstrong (2010) argued that during the transition from teaching to vice-principalship, leaders experienced a broad range of emotions, various supports, some obstacles, and encountered school district rituals; however, the new vice-principals developed strategies to see them through the transition process. This transition seems to imply a transformation in the candidate’s mindset. During the first year on the job, vice-principals must change their thinking from classroom teacher to a focus on the entire school district (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2012).

There are numerous reasons why a classroom teacher might decide to make the transition into administration. Armstrong (2010) suggests that teachers may be ready to seek a new challenge beyond the classroom and that they would like to learn more about education and be involved in school policy (p. 567). Many aspiring leaders also want to make a difference for more students in a school as a formal leader rather than as a classroom teacher or informal leader (Armstrong, 2010). While the transition from teacher leader to administrator appears simple enough, Armstrong (2009) noted it is not a straightforward change in roles and responsibilities: “Crossing the boundary between teaching and administration precipitates a challenging cognitive, emotional, and social journey across uncharted personal, professional, and organizational territory” (p. 4). Her research suggested that the new job is filled with shocks, surprises, dilemmas, and challenges.

As teachers leave the classroom and transition into a new role, they face a new sense of reality and have to build a new identity, often in a new school away from former teaching colleagues. Early on in the administrative role, new vice-principals are likely to experience a cultural shift that is “characterized by a sense of dislocation and feelings of ambiguity” (Armstrong, 2015, p. 113). In her interviews with vice-principals, Armstrong (2015) found that “all of the vice-principals reported that they felt they did not belong in this new role or environment during the early months of their transition” (p. 113). The vice-principals shared a sense of displacement as they relinquished their classroom teaching role and left behind relationships with students and colleagues for their new administrative role (Armstrong, 2015). The next section discusses the methodological approach, data collection, and analysis strategies. We pay particular attention to participant recruitment, including the profiles of the vice-principals interviewed for this study.

Methods

This research adopted a qualitative orientation. Patton (2015) explains that qualitative inquiry “typically focuses in depth on relatively small samples, even single cases, selected for a quite specific purpose” (p. 264). Specifically, the case study approach selected for this research reflects a specific situation and the life experiences of the participants. Finally, this study focuses on elementary and secondary school leaders who have moved from their teacher leadership role for more than two years. We believe this timeframe allowed our participants to recall more vividly their transition from teacher leader to a formal leadership role.

The reason to include participants with two or fewer years of experience was because this schoolboard allows a new vice-principal to be in an “acting role” for the first year, thus remaining in the teachers’ union. In the “acting role,” the vice-principal is not considered a regular vice-principal until he or she leaves the union at the end of the first year. The data was collected via qualitative semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The questions were open ended to encouraged interviewees to explain their perspectives. Open-ended questions allowed participants to respond in their own words. We explored only the themes that presented data saturation with the eight participants. Data saturation is the point where the themes in the analysis of the data start to repeat (Saumure & Given, 2008).

In this rural school district there were only 11 eligible participants that matched the 2-year-in-the-role criteria. All were invited and eight responded and agreed to participate in the study. We used pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of our sources. Each interview was thoroughly analyzed to “integrate and synthesize interview responses from throughout the interviews into a coherent story” (Patton, 2015, p. 443). We used a two-step coding strategy that allowed us to organize the data based on general categories identified through the literature review, and then, a second coding process ensued, where we identified emerging categories that allowed us to explore the issue in new and meaningful ways.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis revealed a number of themes amongst the participants. This section presents the findings as they are contrasted with previous findings in the literature.

Finding 1: Increased Responsibilities and Professional Growth as Motivations to Enter Administration

Few studies have examined the pathways of teacher leaders and the extent to which those leaders move into formal leadership roles, such as vice-principal. Newton et al. (2013) explain, “very little has been written on how teacher leadership benefits school systems by means of leadership development and career advancement” (pp. 107-108). Most of the teachers in this study did not anticipate leaving their teaching role to enter the vice-principal’s office. Richard clearly articulates this experience, “I didn’t get into teaching figuring I want to do this.” Newton et al. (2013) note that, “recent research suggests that the motivation of teachers to assume formal leadership roles is a more significant issue” (p. 106). All participants took on leadership roles in their schools, which ultimately led them to take on the vice-principal role. It was the leadership experiences that they undertook as teachers, which provided a greater lens for school leadership and exposed them to a job beyond the classroom. For the eight individuals in this study, the decision to transition into the vice-principal role was influenced by their leadership experiences as teachers in their schools.

Perhaps Katie illustrates this best when she stated she wanted to have an impact on students by making changes based on research and not “change for the sake of change, but to impact kids’ lives in a positive way.” Shen, Cooley, and Ruhl-Smith (1999) found that teachers tended “to enter administrative positions for reasons of self-actualization, followed by reasons related to esteem and affiliation” (p. 362). In other words, teachers in this study entered into administration for professional growth. Some of new vice-principals interviewed worked as special education resource teachers at some point in their careers. This experience was critical to them, in order to gain leadership experience. The interviewees felt this leadership role provided an opportunity to work with the school team and contribute to the whole school’s vision. Melissa explained that this role “was a real learning opportunity for me because up until that time I didn’t really know what my administrators did.”

Other participants attributed their leadership experience to acting in the role of Teacher in Charge (TIC). This opportunity to fill in for the vice-principal or principal allowed the interviewees to get a feel for what the role entailed and was pivotal in their transition to the vice-principal role. Armstrong (2009) argues that these roles “mark the move from outsider to insider and between teaching and administrative roles. These processes reinforce and protect organizational roles and structures, and they communicate information about acceptable and unacceptable administrative behaviours and role boundaries” (p, 55).

The participants also cited the training program, *Aspiring Leaders*, as preparation for the pathway into administration. Some participants, like Jill joined the training for three or four years. Other participants discussed other leadership roles they had on various committees, such as athletics, or chaireing in-school committees. Each participant had some type of formal or informal leadership role in their school or within the schoolboard and they cited these experiences as contributing to building their leadership capacity and their desire to move into the administration of the school. Those who participated in the *Aspiring Leaders* program with the schoolboard and the Principal Qualification Program (PQP) recommended this specific training for school leaders.

Finding 2: Isolation, Professional Growth and Adaptation to the Role

Overall, the participants in this study concur that there are aspects of the school leadership and administration that are specific to the rural context. They agree being a leader in a rural school can be isolating and that geography does impact their prospects. Julia mentions the isolation in terms of lacking opportunities: “people being isolated in their own homes and reliance on tech, so that they have fewer [opportunities] socially.” Richard describes the rural isolation as a barrier to developing “professional relationships with community, outside of the community, just because it’s such a large geographical area.” Melissa also discusses the isolation in terms of a lack of resources for her students and the lack of transportation, but she also notes the geographic barriers to her professional career as she will have to drive to whichever school she is placed and will not be considered as a candidate for some schools simply because she is at a geographical disadvantage from all schools within this rural schoolboard.

Although most of the interviewees described their transition as “smooth,” they went on to elaborate on some of their frustration with the process and the exhaustion they experienced. The vice-principal experience differs from that of the principal in that they are just entering the world of administration. They have to negotiate the transition between being a teacher and becoming an administrator, and they may require more time to adjust to the new role. Other participants alluded to the fact that their transition was “abrupt,” or “fast and furious,” or “pretty quick.” Shoho and Barnett (2010) acknowledged the rapidity of the transition in the case of newly appointed principals: “unlike beginning teachers, new principals are expected to be experts and to hit the ground running from Day 1” (p. 569). The interviewees acknowledge that being a school leader is also a physical and emotional job that can be lonely at times. As Armstrong (2015) suggested, “it is not uncommon for new administrators to experience multiple and ongoing challenges as they adapt to and make sense of their new administrative role” (p. 110).

A few of the new vice-principals described feeling “lonely” and “isolated” in their new role. They elaborated by noting that they felt lonely as they left their teaching colleagues behind for a new leadership role, which changed the dynamics of their relationships. Armstrong (2015) examines

the feeling of “doing it all by yourself” and the shift in teachers’ perceptions and collegial interactions were poignant reminders to the vice-principals of their unexpected loss of a larger community of peers and their exit from the teaching culture. (p.114)

Finding 3: Establishing Professional and Collegial Relationships with Staff and Community Members is Central to the Successful Transition from Teacher Leader to Administrator in a Rural Context

The eight vice-principals interviewed in this study acknowledged the necessity of building relationships with teachers and other community members. For example, Julia specifically mentioned validating the work teachers do and the importance of being a co-learner with the staff. Jill led collaborative inquiry groups with her staff and feels like working with teachers enhanced her relationships with the teachers. For these participants, developing and cultivating relationships is part of their leadership role. Armstrong (2015) argues that the vice-principal job can be difficult, but it is “their ability to work positively with teachers and the broader community to support students afforded them a new sense of purpose” (p. 118). Jason articulates why the work with teachers is important when he explained that sometimes there are tough decisions to be made and when the vice-principal gets to know people and build a rapport with them, “they felt that you took their thoughts and feelings into consideration; that you had their best interest in mind.”

Another area the new vice-principals emphasized as significant to their new role revolves around developing community relationships. In this study, the participants view the parents as the stakeholders with whom they need to communicate the school’s vision and goals. Michael cites being able to meet parents at “open house night” as it is an opportunity to interact with the community. Melissa acknowledges that the school council and attending its meetings are crucial to her role in developing community relationships and communicating with their stakeholders. Jill also notes that writing the school newsletters and communicating with parents is essential to building those relationships as it keeps the community informed and involved.

The vice-principals in this study also recognized the importance of networking and most built their own networks of experienced principals or vice-principal colleagues. To build his network, Jason, similar to others explained that he

reached out a lot to people who were in the job, or colleagues, or people who I knew, or people I have worked with rather, in the same job, or they were principals and have been VPs recently. It was more informal that way.

Many of the interview participants in this study also articulated their desire to have greater networking opportunities and collaboration with their vice-principal colleagues.

Conclusions

This study found that increased responsibilities and professional growth were motivators for teachers to enter into administration. However, it is worth noting that the participants did not anticipate leaving their teaching role to become administrators. Those that entered the vice-principal role were teachers who took on leadership roles within their schools; their principals helped to build on their capacity and this helped them see “the bigger picture” (Jason) in their school and schoolboard, which led them down the pathway to administration. In this study, half of the participants undertook the Teacher in Charge role and five out of eight had experience as the special education resource teacher. Half of the interviewees also attended the *Aspiring Leaders* program, and cited the Principals Qualification Program as valuable training for new school administrators. This reflects Normore’s (2004a) findings that the socialization of administrators begins in training programs. Participating in leadership training and leadership in both formal and informal roles opens pathways into becoming an administrator.

Applying Muijs and Harris’ (2007) terminology, teacher leadership in the schoolboard examined in this study is “developed [and] emergent” (p. 111). That is, there is a commitment to support the practice of teacher leaders and there is an interest in developing their skills to engage in formal leadership roles. This approach has the potential to address issues of shortage in formal leadership positions as teacher leaders may feel enticed to explore the path towards vice-principalship as their entry point to school administration. While there are emergent structures in place to guide teacher leaders towards administrative roles, our research suggests that more attention should be paid to the factors that may hinder the transition to vice-principalship. The first issue noted was a sense of isolation due to the geographic location of this rural schoolboard and the distance between schools and towns. Some of the participants reported a sense of loneliness because of the distance between people and places. Some cited the distance and isolation as a barrier to professional learning and networking opportunities. They reflected on the limited job opportunities, as they would not be able to access jobs at all schools in the schoolboard, which is a hindrance to future career options.

Transportation issues were cited as a concern for aspiring school leaders, for instance, driving a long distance to work, as well as bussing issues, and weather matters. There is also a concern that the rural setting may lack resources and opportunities for students, along with a concern about a lack of diversity within the schools. In the rural setting, there is an expectation that the school leader would become part of the community and it is not uncommon to see staff, students, and parents outside of the school setting.

Rural schoolboards must recognize the aforementioned feelings of isolation and loneliness and address the issue by implementing robust mentoring and support programs for informal leaders who may be interested in future administrative positions. The development of support mechanisms, such as mentoring schemes, could help teacher leaders create personal goals and work on professional growth and stress relieving strategies. Schoolboards should continue to offer and expand relevant training programs. They should continue to cultivate its future leaders through leadership opportunities like the *Aspiring Leaders* program.

The task for rural schoolboards is to find ways of addressing concerns of teacher leaders interested in formal leadership positions. Appropriate supports and programs need to be available to assist them on the job. Finally, we believe schoolboards must acknowledge the transition that these professionals encounter and the influence the rural context has on their leadership practices, both at the teacher leader level and the formal administrator level. More work and research needs to be conducted in order to enhance the experience of classroom teachers who decide to move to administrative positions in a rural school.

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