



Administrator career paths and decision processes

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present qualitative evidence on the processes and forces that shape school administrator career paths.

Design/methodology/approach – An embedded case study approach is used to understand more than 100 administrator career transitions within the Delaware education system. Semi-structured interview data were collected from 48 principals and assistant principals. Coding and analysis occurred through an iterative process, revealing patterns in processes and forces influencing the careers of school administrators.

Findings – While some career decisions are self-initiated, most are influenced in part or entirely by other actors in the system, described as recruiting/tapping, requesting, reassigning, passing over, and removing. In self-initiated decisions to move or stay, a number of “pushes” and “pulls” are identified. Findings also suggest the decision to stay-equilibrium is driven by relationships with students and by district support.

Research limitations/implications – Data are limited to Delaware and represent the voices of principals and assistant principals only. Patterns evident in the data suggest a need to further investigate administrator career behavior qualitatively, as well as directions for future research.

Practical implications – There is a need to better understand and improve local human resource processes in terms of recruitment and assignment of administrators. Additional research is needed to better identify processes and forces related to career decisions in order to improve leadership recruitment and retention.

Originality/value – This research represents the first large-scale qualitative study of administrator career behavior and is an important companion to recent quantitative analyses in this area.

Keywords United States of America, Leadership, Educational administration, Principals, Career planning

Paper type Research paper

To achieve great schools, we need great leaders, and calls for improvement have raised the stakes – and responsibilities – for those who work to lead our schools toward success. While teachers are the single most important school factor influencing student achievement, one overlooked is the role of the principal (Leithwood *et al.*, 2008). As our understanding of the significance of administrative leadership grows, we are more aware that recruiting, developing, supporting, and retaining quality leaders are vital to both local and national reform movements. Consequently, there is a need for research that enables us to understand the transitions school leaders make within and out of school administration. The purpose of this paper is to present qualitative evidence



from a study of administrators in Delaware about the way career decisions are made and the forces that influence those decisions. Our study finds that while some decisions are self-initiated, most decisions are influenced in part or entirely by other actors in the system. In those decisions to move or stay that are self-initiated, we find a number of “pushes” and “pulls” that can inform efforts to recruit and retain school leaders.

Background

US-based studies of the effects of principals and other school leaders on student achievement reveal that these effects are second only to teacher effects, explaining about one-quarter of all school effects (Leithwood *et al.*, 2004). More specifically, research shows that principals, in particular, exert indirect influence over a number of critical aspects of schooling and that specific practices have effects on student outcomes (Hallinger and Heck, 1998; Mulford, 2003a, b; Waters *et al.*, 2003; Robinson *et al.*, 2008; Bush, 2009; Seashore-Louis *et al.*, 2010).

Given the substantial evidence establishing the impact of school leadership on student outcomes, the issue becomes how to both recruit and retain administrators. In the USA, studies have found there are far more certified individuals than available leadership positions (Mitgang, 2003; Jacobson, 2005), yet significant research points to challenges in stability and retention. Several note the number of leaders leaving the field (Fuller and Young, 2009; Baker *et al.*, 2010), retiring (Wendel, 1994; Papa *et al.*, 2002), or no longer planning to stay through retirement (Darling-Hammond and Orphanos, 2007). Other research focusses on shortages of applicants, notably qualified ones. Cushing and Kerrins (2004) find that while there is no shortage of credentialed educators in California, there are often not enough applicants for administrator positions. This echoes Barker's (1996) finding for Washington State, which warned of small candidate pools, continuing construction of new schools, increasing retirements, and decreased enrollment in administration programs. Studies have also indicated perceived shortages of qualified and effective school administrators on the part of districts and human resource directors (Price, 1994; Raffel and Eaton, 2009).

Concerns about recruitment and retention are not limited to the USA and are raised in a number of publications (see Mulford, 2003a; MacBeath, 2009). Most evidence comes from England or the UK, where several studies have forecasted a crisis in the supply of school leaders due to a number of issues similar to those found in the USA, including early retirement and exit, the aging of the profession, and lack of desire of qualified candidates to move into leadership positions (Howson, 2003, 2004; Hartle and Thomas, 2003; Creasey *et al.*, 2004). Other research reveals similar concerns in Australia (Barty *et al.*, 2005; MacPherson, 2009), Canada (Williams, 2001; Normore, 2004), and New Zealand (Brooking *et al.*, 2003).

In light of the effects of leadership on teaching and learning, retaining effective leaders in our schools matters for student success. Studies have documented the degree of turnover in a number of contexts, including Virginia (Lewis, 1992), Pennsylvania (Strauss, 2003), North Carolina, and Illinois (Gates *et al.*, 2006). A recent figure from a nationally representative study indicates that schools experience a new principal every three to four years, with schools averaging 2.8 principals in ten years (Seashore-Louis *et al.*, 2010). A limited but growing body of research suggests that change in leadership has several negative outcomes, including declines in student achievement, interruption of program or reform implementation, low teacher morale, and the development of cultures that resist change (MacMillan, 2000; Fink and Brayman, 2006; Hargreaves and Fink, 2006; Seashore-Louis *et al.*, 2010). While these studies do not suggest that all

turnover is bad for schools, they do suggest that rapid or frequent change in school leadership can be highly disruptive and hinder improvement efforts. Fuller and Young (2009) assert that stability is critical because school reform takes time; that principal turnover negatively affects teacher retention, teacher quality, and student achievement; and that stability is needed to develop more positive working conditions. Further, instability and turnover is not evenly distributed across schools – rather schools with lower student performance or higher poverty tend to be those in which turnover is greatest (Mitgang, 2003; Clotfelter *et al.*, 2007; Fuller and Young, 2009).

In order to achieve the stability that research indicates is important, a much deeper understanding of the underlying reasons for administrators' career decisions is needed. That is, as Stevenson (2006) argues, for system reform to be met, the principalship must be an appealing and sustainable career. Therefore, research is needed that not only examines the labor market trends in school administration, but also examines the processes and forces behind these trends in order to understand movement into, within, and out of school administration.

Research on administrator careers

The body of research on the careers of administrators is relatively small, though it extends back to a line of qualitative research which emerged in the 1980s and connected to the broader literature on career theory. Blumberg and Greenfield's (1986) research examines the work and lives of principals, building on Schein's (1978) concept of career. Findings yielded a conceptualization of the stages of an administrator's career and how career paths are shaped by work, self-development, and non-work dimensions of administrators' lives (Greenfield, 1984, 1985). More recent research has applied career theory to the identification of career stages (e.g. Weindling, 1999; Oplatka, 2004; Earley and Weindling, 2007). Such research is concerned with the roles, attitudes, and behaviors associated with different time points in an administrator's career. For example, Oplatka (2004) applied career stages (induction, establishment, maintenance vs renewal, and disenchantment) to the leadership perspectives of principals, noting, for example, that a focus on instructional leadership was appropriate for the middle stages but not the induction or disenchantment stages. Greenfield (1984) emphasized the temporal dimensions of careers as well as the role of the organization in socializing the administrator and criticized the literature for ignoring the post-entry stages of careers in school administration, particularly the middle and later career stages.

This critique has been adopted by others who advocate for greater examination of the careers of principals. Basing his work on Greenfield's extensive qualitative studies of the work life of principals and more general career theories (e.g. Schein, 1978), Crow (1992) concluded that "except for attention to the preparation and entry of principals, little consideration has been given to the principal's career" (p. 80). Crow outlined a research agenda focussed on the principal's career including "examining and identifying the sequence, direction, and timing of principals' movement among schools with different characteristics and examining individual's perceptions of career rewards in these schools" (pp. 84-5).

Similarly, Stevenson (2006), drawing on a series of articles on the beginning principal, argued that the concept of career trajectory, which should include both objective (e.g. social, economic, and political) and subjective (e.g. individually influenced) aspects, is needed to understand the factors impacting issues of recruitment and retention of school leaders. He further suggests that the distinction in these aspects highlights an important tension between the influence of structural factors on career trajectories and

the potential for individual agency in the shaping of career paths. Studies should focus attention on the challenges principals face as they move through their career and the forces which impact their decision to continue, move, or exit their positions.

Some of Stevenson's suggestions have recently been examined through large-scale, quantitative analyses that use sophisticated statistical methods to determine what predicts administrators' likelihood of staying in a school, district, or even the profession (e.g. Papa *et al.*, 2002; Gates *et al.*, 2006; Papa, 2007; Fuller and Young, 2007, 2009; Baker *et al.*, 2010; Loeb *et al.*, 2010; Solano *et al.*, 2010). These studies examine various transitions into, within, and out of administration occurring across diverse contexts. However, large-scale quantitative studies are limited to the typical variables found in a local, state, or national database (e.g. administrator demographics and school characteristics) and focus on one or two common transitions, such as movement between schools or out of the system. They often assume that career paths are rational and involve choice on the part of administrators – for example, to move to a higher performing school or to a better-paying district (e.g. Loeb *et al.*, 2010). While valuable, these studies are unable to fully address the underlying questions of why – that is, what objective and subjective conditions and experiences influence administrator movement into, within, and out of administration, as suggested by Stevenson (2006).

Studies to date that have examined factors related to administrator career behavior are limited and tend to focus on entry into the profession rather than moves within. Such studies have not explicitly sought to identify issues that shape career choices or used very limited samples from which to draw their conclusions. However, given the dearth of literature on these issues, they are worth reviewing to identify a broad set of possible influences. To organize these factors, we apply the theoretical work in social cognitive approaches to career decision making (Bandura, 1986; Mitchell and Krumboltz, 1990; Lent *et al.*, 1994) which identify personal (i.e. administrator) characteristics, environmental conditions (i.e. school or system social, economic, and political conditions), and individuals' overt behavior (i.e. what an administrator does) as influencing career choice. An overview of key findings from previous research can be categorized as elements of each of those dimensions, as presented in Table I.

Current conditions in the USA and elsewhere indicate significant challenges in recruiting and retaining school leaders, yet to date there is little research that systematically investigates the career behavior of administrators. Studies have typically focussed on the attractiveness of the principalship, conceptualizing the problem as one of supply and demand, administrator career stages, conceptualizing the problem as one of roles, attitudes, or behaviors, or limited types of career moves, conceptualizing the problem as a need to better identify career preferences to inform recruitment and retention policy. As argued above, there is little work that explores career trajectories and the factors or processes that result in movement across schools or out of the system.

The present study

The analysis presented here is one part of a state-wide qualitative study of school administrator career paths in Delaware, with the explicit purpose of informing local and state policy efforts to improve schools through recruitment and retention of effective school leaders. The purpose of the overarching project determined our research methods, which were selected to identify factors that influence administrators' career decisions including entry, movement within, and exit from the profession. Our analysis of data for the larger project yielded several policy-relevant

Administrator personal characteristics	<p>Demographic characteristics such as race and gender (Machell <i>et al.</i>, 1994; Wendel, 1994; Tallerico, 2000; Coleman, 2002; Fidler and Atton, 2004; Jacobson, 2005; Brown, 2005; Gates <i>et al.</i>, 2006; Bush <i>et al.</i>, 2006a, b, 2007; Bush and Moloi, 2006; Oduro, 2008; Jansen, 2009)</p> <p>Professional goals/motivation or expectations (Lewis, 1992; Pounder and Merrill, 2001)</p> <p>Personal/home life (Marshall, 1986; Lewis, 1992; Price, 1994; Mulford, 2003a; Fidler and Atton, 2004)</p>
Administrator behavior	<p>Intrinsic value of work (Price, 1994; Mulford, 2003a)</p> <p>Changing/growing responsibilities, including tension between management and leadership (Price, 1994; Barker, 1996; Whitaker, 2003; Weindling and Dimmock, 2006)</p> <p>Preparation (e.g. formal preparation or internship) (Machell <i>et al.</i>, 1994; Daresh and Male, 2000; Hertling, 2001; Reeves <i>et al.</i>, 2001; Earley <i>et al.</i>, 2002; Heck, 2003; Jacobson, 2005; Weindling and Dimmock, 2006; Holligan <i>et al.</i>, 2006; Brundrett <i>et al.</i>, 2006; Bush <i>et al.</i>, 2006a, b)</p> <p>Teaching or AP experiences (Machell <i>et al.</i>, 1994; Whitaker, 2003; Weindling and Dimmock, 2006)</p> <p>Relationships: with teachers and peers (Lewis, 1992; Price, 1994; Barker, 1996; Weindling and Dimmock, 2006); with other levels of the system (Weindling and Dimmock, 2006) and with parents and community (Price, 1994; Whitaker, 2003; Gurr <i>et al.</i>, 2005; Begley, 2006)</p>
Environmental characteristics	<p>Increased accountability (Whitaker, 2003; Jacobson, 2005; Crow, 2006; Darling-Hammond and Orphanos, 2007; Bush, 2009; Fuller and Young, 2009; Seashore-Louis <i>et al.</i>, 2010)</p> <p>Changing job roles and responsibilities (Barker, 1996; Pounder and Merrill, 2001; Mulford, 2003a; Jacobson, 2005)</p> <p>Push for local management of schools (Brundrett <i>et al.</i>, 2006; Watson, 2003)</p> <p>Constantly changing and shifting political pressures (Mulford, 2003a, b)</p> <p>Salary (Lewis, 1992; Price, 1994; Wendel, 1994; Jacobson, 2005; Papa, 2007; Baker <i>et al.</i>, 2010; Pounder and Merrill, 2001)</p> <p>School context:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> performance (Fuller and Young, 2009; Loeb <i>et al.</i>, 2010); composition (Papa, 2007; Baker <i>et al.</i>, 2010; Loeb <i>et al.</i>, 2010); level (Strauss, 2003; Baker <i>et al.</i>, 2010; Fuller and Young, 2009); urbanicity (Barty <i>et al.</i>, 2002; Papa <i>et al.</i>, 2002; Fuller and Young, 2009); school/district size (Barty <i>et al.</i>, 2005; Papa <i>et al.</i>, 2002; Seashore-Louis <i>et al.</i>, 2010); and other conditions and processes (Loeb <i>et al.</i>, 2005; Opfer, 2008) <p>Hiring practices at district/school levels (Machell <i>et al.</i>, 1994; Blackmore <i>et al.</i>, 2006; Gronn and Lucey, 2006; Myung <i>et al.</i>, 2010)</p>

Table I.
Overview of research on factors influencing administrator careers

findings, one of which is the focus of this discussion. Specifically, we found that career decisions were made through a variety of processes as described by administrators in Delaware. While some decisions were self-initiated and entailed choice on the part of administrators, we observed numerous other processes in which little choice and a great deal of external influence were at work in shaping the career paths of administrators. These include recruiting/tapping, requesting, reassigning, passing over, and removing. The purpose of this paper is to explain these processes and their implications for improving recruitment and retention efforts. We further include exploratory findings related to the administrator, behavioral, and environmental factors related to these processes.

Delaware's public education system in 2003 (the year from which our sample was collected) included 19 school districts, 194 public schools (49.5 percent elementary, 18.6 percent middle, 16 percent high, 3.6 percent early education, 7.1 percent special schools, and 5.7 percent charter) and approximately 118,000 students. The student population is diverse, with nearly half of the population (42.7 percent) being of African American, Hispanic, Asian, or American Indian descent, an increasing ELL population, and a special education rate of 12.9 percent. Districts are distributed across urban, suburban, and rural settings, with about two-thirds of students attending schools in urban/suburban districts. In 2003, there were 372 administrators serving in public schools, with 48.4 percent serving as principal and 51.6 percent serving as an assistant principal (AP). Administrative units are distributed by school enrollment in Delaware, so that not all schools have an AP (mostly elementary), and some schools have as many as seven (generally high schools).

The diversity of the state makes it a microcosm of the larger US system, while its size makes it feasible to conduct statewide qualitative and quantitative analysis. However, Delaware is also an interesting case as between 2000 and the present, it has engaged in significant reform in the area of school leadership, initially funded by the Wallace Foundation and continued through the federally funded Race to the Top competition. These reforms include the adoption of licensure and evaluation standards, reform of leadership preparation, and increased professional development and networking opportunities for current administrators.

Conceptual framework

We draw on both career choice theory and previous research on administrator careers in developing a conceptual framework for our analysis. First, we consider the state public education system of Delaware to be the career system in which administrators operate. We are concerned with movement into, within, and out of administrator roles within the state, as well as within Delaware's school districts and individual schools.

Second, we define the school administration profession as APs and principals. We recognize there are other forms of school leadership (e.g. teacher leaders, department chairs, etc.) and of educational administration (e.g. central office roles) and that the voices represented here include only those who have chosen to and been successful in moving into school administrative positions. We specifically examine the time in which individuals are serving only as school-level administrators, both to focus the scope of our work and because the literature focusses primarily on these individuals.

Third, we conceptualize our work as examining administrators' career paths or trajectories, as advocated by Stevenson (2006), rather than as temporal stages. Career paths are more complex than exit and entry, consisting of a series of transitions. Career theory posits several typologies of transitions (e.g. Louis, 1980) which include entry, changes in role, changes in organization, changing professions, or leaving the labor pool, as well as combinations of these transitions (e.g. changing role and organization). These theories have not been empirically explored in education leadership, yet conceptually the categories apply and guide our analysis of the data as explained in our methodology. Here, entry into the profession begins with assuming the role of AP or principal, movement within indicates either movement in role (AP to principal or vice versa) or location (retaining a school administrator role but moving between schools or districts), and exit refers to the decision to leave the role of AP or principal, whether continuing as an educator (e.g. teacher, central office) or otherwise (e.g. retiring, new career).

Finally, we rely on previous studies on administrator careers to identify hypothetical factors that may influence career trajectories. To organize these factors, we apply the theoretical work in social cognitive approaches to career decision making (Bandura, 1986; Mitchell and Krumboltz, 1990; Lent *et al.*, 1994). This body of work theorizes that career choice and development is a product of the interaction between personal characteristics, environmental conditions, and individuals' overt behavior. We use these three categories of factors to explore the context of career transitions.

Figure 1 illustrates the various elements of our conceptual framework. This framework informs our research design and data analysis, discussed in the following pages.

Research methods

We utilize an embedded, multiple case study approach to understand administrator transitions in Delaware. We use both quantitative and qualitative methods to identify distinct career transitions experienced by a cohort of administrators. Our analysis focusses on these transitions, rather than on individual administrators, to draw conclusions about aspects of the administrative profession and educational system in Delaware. The first stage of the research was quantitative, utilizing administrative data described below to identify the characteristics and career trajectories of school administrators in Delaware. The findings of this stage were used to confirm the range and nature of school administrator transitions that inform the qualitative sampling strategy, coding framework, and analytical approach. The second stage of the research project focussed on qualitative (interview) data from a sample of those included in the first stage of the analysis.

Annual administrative data were collected for all Delaware administrators between SY 2003-2004 and SY 2008-2009 from the Delaware Department of Education. Data included basic demographics and human resource data (experience, position, school). Additional data, such as district, county, and school level/type, were added from public records to provide greater detail about the working conditions and locations of school administrators. Data were used to identify the cohort of administrators (principals and APs) in SY 2003-2004 for follow up quantitative analysis and used to draw a sample for

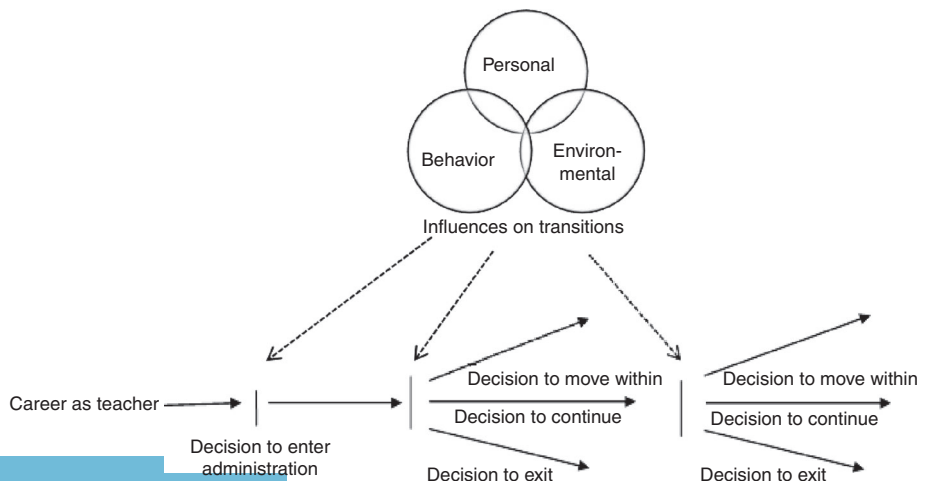


Figure 1.
Conceptual framework
for careers and influences
on transitions

qualitative data collection. Because of the small number of administrators for some outcomes, we generated six broad but distinct categories as a basis for our qualitative sample: stayed in same school, moved to new school, moved to new district, moved to central office, returned to teaching, not in system. For those who were not in the education system in 2008-2009, we contacted colleagues in the Delaware system and utilized internet search engines to determine a more specific status.

Qualitative data in the form of interviews were collected for a sample of this cohort between November 2009 and March 2010. Cohort members were randomly sampled using a stratified process to ensure proportional representation for each five-year outcome as well as representation from each school level (elementary, middle, and high school) and each of Delaware's three counties within each outcome. We contacted 103 cohort members for interviews[1] and were successful in conducting a total of 48 interviews, including ten who remained in the same school, seven who moved to a new school within the same district, six who moved to a new district, seven who moved to the central office, four who returned to teaching, and 15 who left the system. Of those that left the system, we interviewed four who were ineligible to retire, five who we confirmed had retired but moved into another position in education, four who had fully retired, and two who were eligible to retire but for whom we did not have additional information about their career. Appendix compares the characteristics of the full cohort, contacted sample, and final set of interviewees[2].

Interviews were conducted by members of the research team and trained interviewers. The interviews were primarily conducted in person, except for very few cases in which the administrator had moved out of state or was otherwise unavailable to meet in person. The interview protocol was retrospective, focussing on pre-service experiences that led to positions in school administration, their position and experiences in SY 2003-2004, their position and experiences in SY 2008-2009, factors related to the decision to change positions, and general beliefs about the work of school leaders. However, respondents more often described the entire evolution of their career, retelling the stories of multiple transitions. We reviewed the data and determined that 48 decisions to enter, 12 moves across district, 15 changes of positions within schools, 25 changes across schools, and ten decisions to exit administration included sufficient detail for meaningful analysis of how those decisions or transitions occurred.

There are a number of limitations to using retrospective interviews as a primary source of data, including informant inaccuracy, memory decay, and distortion (Bernard *et al.*, 1984). However, we believe these data are valid for the purposes of this study for several reasons: first, most decisions covered by our protocol were relatively recent history in terms of administrators' careers; second, interview questions did not seek a level of detail that we believe would be problematic in reconstructing the career decisions (e.g. specific dates) but rather sought broader information about the circumstances of the transitions; and third, we are particularly interested in administrators' perceptions of career decisions as a valuable source of information in understanding and improving administrator recruitment and retention.

Interviews were transcribed and entered into a qualitative software program (NVivo8). The researchers utilized initially coded data into three sets of nodes reflecting larger issues related to the research question and informed by previous research: observed career transitions and categories of factors hypothesized to influence decisions as described in our conceptual framework. Additional, emergent layers of coding within each of the three broad categories were generated collaboratively by the research team as previous levels of coding were reviewed and interpreted.

Examples of these additional layers of codes are presented in Figure 2. The larger study from which this analysis is drawn explores multiple dimensions and interactions between these codes using a matrix process. While we recognize the value of the interactions between all of the issues presented in Figure 2 and include them in our implications for future research, our limited purpose in this discussion is to identify and explain the types of decision processes experienced by our sample of Delaware school administrators, and as such, we focus our discussion on results related to relationships between transitions and processes and between influences and processes.

Findings

Analysis of the interview data revealed a variety of processes by which decisions were made. While some decisions were self-initiated, we identify numerous other processes, described as recruiting/tapping, requesting, reassigning, passing over, and removing, in which administrators experienced little or no choice in their career paths. Within decisions where administrators exercised choice – that is, self-initiated decisions to continue, move, or exit – we examine the factors that shaped those decisions. These influences were observed to be forces that either pushed or pulled administrators into particular transitions. Finally, we discuss preliminary findings about what we describe as equilibrium forces – those that keep administrators in their roles. We describe these processes and factors in the following section, followed by a discussion of their implications for research and practice.

Processes in administrator career transitions

Self-initiation. We began this study with the assumption that most decisions made by administrators were self-initiated: deciding to apply for a position, deciding to move to a “better” school or district, and so on. Indeed we found that administrators were primary actors in a number of decisions, particularly in entering the profession. In our sample, 28 (58 percent) administrators stated that their entry into administration was at least partly self-initiated but only 16 (33 percent) indicated it was the only factor (e.g. they were not “tapped”; see below on tapping for further discussion). Respondents who self-initiated a move into administration generally felt the move as a step up the career ladder in education. Some saw it as a natural progression, others as a long-standing career goal. As one principal commented:

It was a career role for me to keep moving up the ladder of responsibility and job, what’s the word I want to use, “responsibilities” I guess is the best word. I just wanted to continue to move up that ladder in the educational field.

In addition to entry into the profession, we focussed on transitions within and out of school leadership. In terms of moves between schools and districts and moves into the central office, we observed 16 decisions. These decisions were initiated as a result of a variety of personal and professional circumstances, which we discuss at greater length later in terms of push and pull factors. Decisions to leave the state educational system, most often to retire to pursue other opportunities within the field of education, were usually self-initiated as well.

Recruiting and tapping. One of the most common circumstances surrounding administrators’ decisions to enter and move within school administration was being recruited by a fellow educator. Recruitment was typically a recommendation by someone, usually a superior, to consider a specific position. Within the process of recruitment, we separate out the idea of tapping (Myung *et al.*, 2010) as the process by

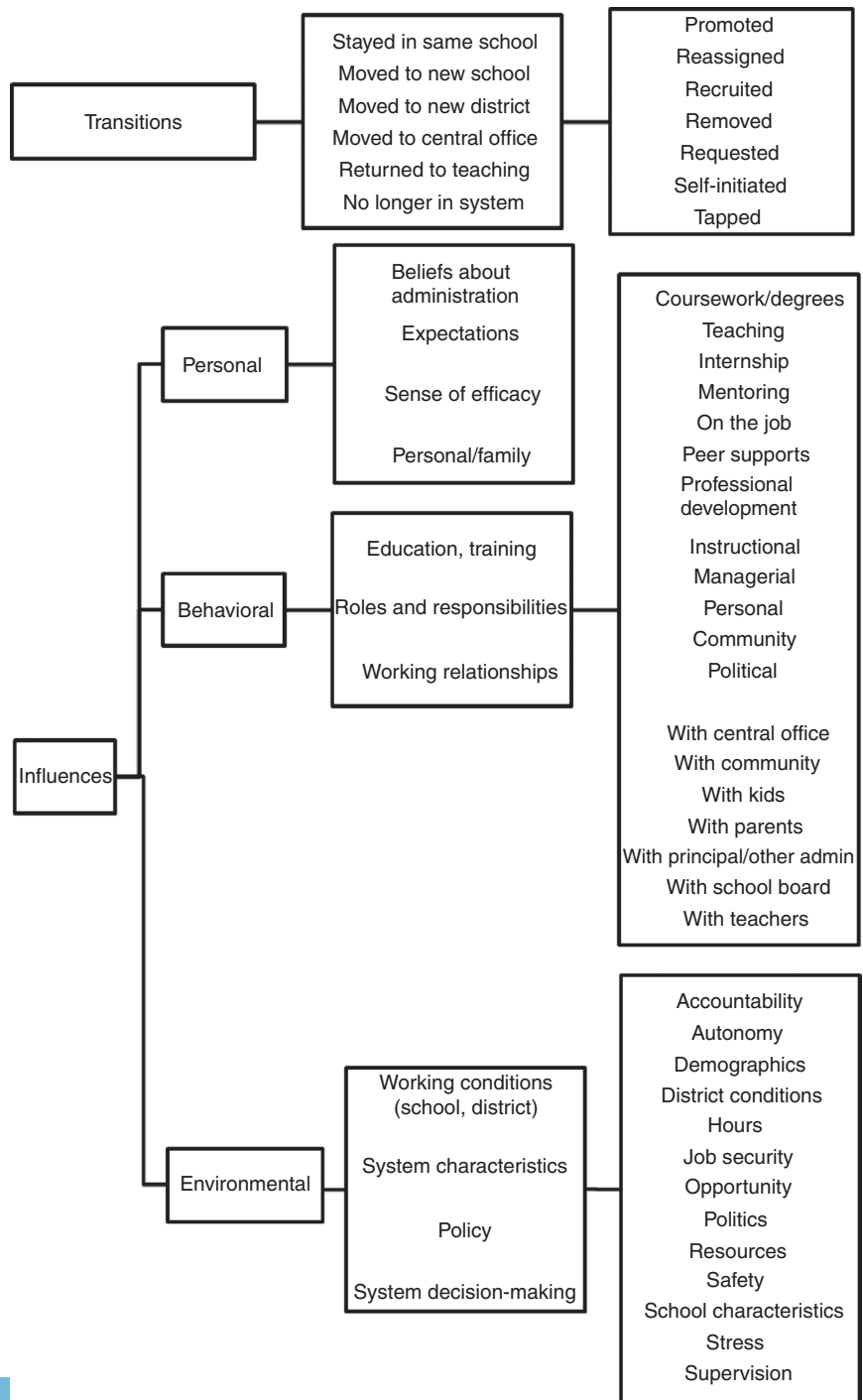


Figure 2.
Coding framework

which teachers are encouraged to enter school administration. The vast majority of respondents became school administrators because someone recommended they do so with only 16 indicating they were not tapped. The recommenders ranged from superintendents to fellow teachers, a husband, and even a custodian. They urged the respondents to prepare formally for the role and/or apply for a school administrator position, as typified by one statement:

And I was approached by – and truthfully, I had not really seen myself in that role, but in the years prior I had been approached by different staff. “Would you ever consider being the principal, would you ever consider going into administration?” As I was a school counselor, I took leadership roles in the building. And they saw what I could do, and they liked it. And so, that kind of put that little seed in my head.

Other forms of recruitment resulted in numerous moves within the profession, whether an individual was recruited by a superintendent of another district, encouraged to apply for another position in the district, or recruited to fulfill a particular position being vacated. In some cases, recruitment was less formal, evidenced by statements such as, “At that point in time, they wanted to make a change. So I was encouraged to apply and it worked out fine” or “Actually two positions opened up in our district and our assistant superintendent at the time encouraged me to apply for the elementary position.” In other instances, the recruitment was more direct: “So, when it was time for her to make the move, then she came to me and said, ‘I want you to fill in the spot,’” or:

We were at education event, and we were seated beside each other at dinner and, you know, it is one of these “what do you do? Where do you live?” and he said, “I have got a job that I think you would love, even though it was a position cut and a pay cut, he said it is in a K-1school [...] I am looking to bring in an assistant to the next principal. Would you consider it?” and I said “of course, I will consider it” and I got interviewed with him and got the job.

Overall, 16 decisions to move within the profession (between schools or districts) were discussed in terms of recruitment.

Requesting. A third though less commonly cited process was requesting, in which a superintendent asked an administrator to change positions (role or school). Mentioned by only six administrators, this process was most often associated with moving between schools, sometimes as interim and sometimes as a way of filling hard-to-staff or undesirable roles. As one principal put it, “The superintendent came in one day and said, ‘Can you be a good soldier?’” While the way in which the administrators discussed these moves suggests the option to turn down a superintendent’s request, a few administrators questioned whether there is really a choice, given limited autonomy and annual contracts under which administrators are often employed. One explains:

You know administrators don’t have the luxury because once you say “no” to them then the chances of other options – opportunities that come up – you may not be considered. I don’t think that is a written statement or law but it’s just a feeling everyone tells you. You go where – and really when you sign your contract it says you are working at the discretion of the superintendent – wherever he needs you. You are not hired for a specific job or a specific site or whatever; it’s at his discretion you serve.

With this in mind, we are cautious about the agency of administrators in decisions categorized as requests, and it may be that this process is closer to what we refer to as reassignment.

Reassigning

This is a type of “musical chairs” observed in several decisions where school administrators were moved without their input. Moves were initiated by central offices, most often superintendents, and happened exclusively in moves between schools (though those moves may have entailed a change in position from principal to AP or from AP to principal as well). As one administrator recalled, “They walked in one afternoon and said, ‘You are going to move to [a new high school]. You start tomorrow.’” Reassignment was discussed by only eight of our sample, but those administrators indicated that this process was in place multiple times, if not throughout, their career. Two administrators describe such moves:

Oh, I never had any choices. I mean, I do not think I have ever applied for an assistant principal position. I have always just been told this is where I will be going, and I was told that I will be coming here. I am pretty sure that I am the only person at [this school] who really did not choose to be here [...]. So I think most of the teachers chose, I am sure of it, they chose to be here, and the assistant principal that was here prior to me, you know, chose to be here, wanted to be here [...] so I was just told that I would come here, and you know, it worked out fine for me, but it was not something that I planned on.

Well, I was at [name of] high school and then I was moved-and I’ll tell you that all the positions that I’ve had in [this district], I have not applied for. They have not been posted. I’ve just been moved from one position to another.

Most instances of reassignment were described in these terms – the absence of a choice and no clear explanation for the move. However, a few cases were more explicit as to why the move was occurring, even if a choice was not given. For example, one administrator described the closing of his school and his assignment to a new position as the result.

Removing

To our surprise, six administrators were willing to talk about cases where they were removed from a particular position. In these instances, administrators were removed from their administrative responsibility – most often through non-renewal of contract or other pressures which forces an individual out of administration. According to administrators, this was usually a result of a conflict situation described as a “personality conflict” or “politics.”

I did have some conflicts because what I wanted to do to run my building in a certain way and other people didn’t agree with that but then there is an issue. You know, you have 10 years as an administrator so you serve at the pleasure of the school board who goes on the superintendent’s recommendation and it’s unfortunate sometimes that one person has a lot of control, and I’ve seen that in a number of districts.

There was a decision to – I don’t even know how to say this. Just for reasons that I still don’t know, there was a decision made to replace me and to move a new administrative team into the high school.

Most political or conflict-based removals resulted in the decision to leave the profession, though some ended up returning to teaching or are employed in other districts. However, other reasons for removal were noted as well, for example, when a school needed a change in direction. As one former principal stated, “They wanted to go in a different direction with their whole administrative [staff], which was probably not a bad idea.”

Passing over

This final process was difficult to ascertain, but as administrators told the story of their career, a number of individuals did indicate points in time when they remained in a role or school but not by choice. Passing over occurs when an individual remains in a particular position longer than they chose to because they were not hired for a particular job they sought through self-initiation. Comments such as the following were not uncommon, though determining the frequency and extent of passing over is not possible from our interview data:

Actually, I had – I threw my hat in the ring, but I had interviewed for the year before there were six elementary principal openings and I was passed over for those ‘cause I guess, I wasn’t deemed to be the right fit.

I had applied for the position. Actually prior to that, there was a principalship open at the middle school. I, at that time, also had applied for that because I was reaching a point where I thought, “Well I know that I want to pursue a principalship.” Even though it had been four years total of being an assistant principal, I thought, “It’s time for me to at least start interviewing and experiencing the process of going for a principalship with the idea that eventually I would get one.” So I had just interviewed for the middle school. I did not get that job, but out of that came a lot of discussions about my possibly doing the principalship at the high school because the thought was that the current principal was leaving. So when that did open, I did apply. I did get that job. So it just came from that transition of an outgoing principal and my being there at the time.

In these instances, administrators were ultimately successful in moving into positions or schools they desired. In other cases, administrators were not successful, as one AP indicated in discussing how she ended up as a career AP. In this sense, passing over can have not only short-term implications for administrator careers but also long-term implications.

Processes observed for each type of transition are presented in Table II; however, it is difficult to make claims about the relationship between process and transition given the small number of respondents in several of the transition categories and our ability

Career path decision	Key process
Became a school administrator	Tapping Self-initiating
Changed schools	Self-initiating Tapping Requesting
Changed school levels	Reassigning Self-initiating Requesting
Changed school districts	Reassigning Self-initiating Tapping
Changed position within school	Self-initiating Reassigning
Decision to leave school administration	Self-initiating Removing
Decision to stay	Self-initiating Passing over

Table II.
Principal career path
decisions summary

to include only decisions respondents openly discussed rather than all administrator decisions. Nonetheless, these processes demonstrate that career transitions are not as simple as making a choice to take a new job, and that school administrators are not the only participants in their career decisions. In terms of the processes we observed, recruiting/tapping, requesting, reassigning, removing, and passing over all entail the significant if not complete influence of others – often superiors – in shaping administrators' careers, accounting for the majority of transitions documented in our interviews. In contrast, there were 32 instances of purely self-initiated transitions, half of which related to entry into the profession. That means that only 16 decisions to move within and out of school administration were made entirely by the administrators themselves.

Pushes and pulls in self-initiated career decisions

Our research sought not only to identify the processes by which decisions were made, but the forces that shape those processes. Because our data come exclusively from the administrators and not others involved in the decision process, we cannot explore the full range of forces at play in decisions in which other actors exerted influence. Therefore, we focus our findings on self-initiated decisions to move into, within, and out of administration as well as the decision to stay in a particular position. Within each transition, we preliminarily explored the various factors or “forces” that appear to influence decisions. These forces are initially described along the dimensions developed by socio-cognitive theories of career choice and include characteristics of the administrator, administrator behavior, or environmental conditions. As suggested by career choice theory, transitions are a result of the interactions among these dimensions. As such, we found that these forces can serve as pushes – forces internal to the situation that encourage the administrator to move out – or pulls – forces outside of the position, perhaps in their personal life or in the larger system, which draw administrators away from their position. The interaction resulting in administrators' career transitions then are often unique – that is, that they experienced a different process or force (push or pull) driven by a set of experiences or conditions that is heavily contextualized to their personal and professional circumstances. While more in-depth analysis of particular cases would prove valuable in understanding these interactions and relationships, an exploratory analysis of our interviews serves as a starting point for identifying key factors that serve as either push or pull forces in the administrators' career paths.

Administrator characteristics

In terms of administrator characteristics, we found that personal or family relations, a sense of efficacy or challenge, and beliefs about administration were salient when making career decisions. During the course of explaining their work and career choices, interviewees mentioned they were raising children, sending children to college, dealing with personal illness, coping with illness or death in the family, going through marriages and divorces, and/or experiencing a change in their spouse's job. Most personal issues served as push forces in the decision to leave the profession to support their own or a family member's health. However, in a few cases the emotional and subsequent physical toll of their work led to decisions to change positions but remain in education (e.g. move from principal to AP or to teaching). This affective dimension of the profession becomes important in understanding the conditions under which administrators work and highlights the human side and needs of school leaders.

A second characteristic emerged as important in decision making: a sense of efficacy or desire for a challenge. When asked why they entered school administration, nearly everyone talked about what they could accomplish in that role. As one respondent explained, she wanted to “effect more change than in the classroom.” Such beliefs were a strong pull into the profession. Additionally, several administrators actively sought a challenge when making decisions to move between schools, further evidence of this force as a pull into other opportunities. For example, one administrator stated, “[...] I wanted to go there because it was in bad shape and I knew I could fix it,” and another, contemplating retirement, held off to help open a new school: “You know it was a personal challenge really; I wanted to see if I could do it.” In this sense, efficacy and challenges were most often pulled into new positions or roles.

Additional responses suggested additional administrator characteristics as relevant, including gender. One respondent refers to the “old boys’ network” as part of the politics of the administrative profession, which, while not directly influencing a decision in our data, does imply that further inquiry into how demographic characteristics relate to the processes observed.

Administrator behavior

The clearest factor in terms of administrator behavior that emerged as influential in career decision making was working relationships. Administrators we spoke with often found their working relationships to be among the most beneficial aspects of their job, while also finding them at times to be the most challenging and ones for which they were least prepared. Many found it hard to earn trust from their former colleagues. As one administrator explained:

What I wasn’t prepared for was this whole thing that once you switch into the administrative office, people who were your best friends are now threatening you with grievances; they’re complaining to you about everything and you get a lot of “come on, you know what it was like, you know, don’t give me these two kids in the same class” kind of thing. You know, so, I was taken a little aback by that, but I think, and it’s like I had said earlier; I knew it was going to be more work; you just didn’t know.

Similarly, school administrators valued the contribution of parents to the school and their children’s learning but felt frustrated by angry or indifferent parents. They were dismayed by conflicts with teachers and parents. And conflict extended beyond the school to the central office and school board. In several transitions, strained working relationships and conflict were a push force, influencing the choice to move schools, districts, and in some cases, positions, as was the case for some principals who moved to the assistant principalship.

An important omission from this analysis is administrator performance as a type of behavior. We are unable to measure this meaningfully as part of our research design and our only data regarding performance relates more to administrators’ sense of efficacy – a personal characteristic – more than an observation of behavior. An administrator’s performance as a leader may and likely does have an impact on career transitions, whether poor performance leads to removal or reassignment or strong performance leads to requests to move to a struggling school or opportunities beyond the principalship. In any case, we acknowledge the potential power of having such a measure in explaining career behavior, and suggest that further research in this area consider this in the design.

Environmental conditions

While we noted that administrator characteristics and behavior are influential in the decision process, administrators were more likely to discuss factors in their career paths as having to do with the school, district, or state system in which they worked. Most often these were described in terms of economic incentives and available opportunity. Career advancement, whether into administration or into central office roles, was an attractor – or a pull – for some, most notably those who were self-motivated to become an administrator. Most administrators did not report economic benefits for particular moves within their district but two noted improved salaries when applying for positions outside their district. We also observed mixed feelings about compensation, noting the perception of very little salary differential in comparison to teachers in spite of a much higher degree of responsibility – a potential push into other positions in education:

[...] If you take my years of experience and my degree and compare that with a teacher's salary which is 10 months to someone that works 12 months, the pay is not that much greater for the responsibility that you have because the responsibility is greater.

However, the benefits of pension were recognized as a valuable incentive both to stay in the state system and to retire when eligible to capitalize on those benefits.

A second environmental condition that emerged as important is the availability of opportunities. Those who left the system had often moved into other roles as educators – mentors, professors, and so on – which were opportunities available to them as experienced administrators. Within the system, opportunities exist when positions become vacant or when an administrator is recruited to a school, district, or central office. For example, one principal stated, “So, I said, ‘Well you know maybe I can stay here and I can take this to the next level,’ so when I made that decision to go to the next level, then this opportunity kind of opened up.” Others noted that opportunities were not always available in their own school or district, which resulted in a need to move in order to pursue career goals. This was particularly true in smaller districts with fewer schools and therefore less administrative openings.

Notably absent from this list of forces – both push and pull – are working conditions, such as hours and responsibilities, and district support. We anticipated these to be strong factors in career decisions as respondents talked extensively about both issues. However, none explicitly focussed on them as a push or a pull force in a particular decision. Rather, they referred to them as a fact of the matter. Administrators referred to conditions in their schools, including the difficult task of fixing what previous leaders had left behind, working with disadvantaged populations and communities, and wide ranging forms of support from their central office as well as varying degrees of support. They also discussed systems-level issues related to policy, accountability, autonomy, district support, and job security. Though we believe these issues are important areas of consideration when working to improve recruitment and retention of school leaders, administrators did not cite them specifically in their decisions to move into, within, or out of school administration.

Equilibrium: the decision to stay

We observed a number of processes by which administrators' experienced career transitions, as well as identified some of the forces that influenced transitions in which they exerted choice. However, we also sought to understand the experiences and conditions that produced equilibrium, that is, the decision to stay. Respondents did

indicate at times why they stayed in their positions, but another question generated reasons as well: What do you like most about this position? Below we discuss the responses, highlighting the two overwhelmingly dominant responses: “the kids” and district support.

“The kids!” There are at least two aspects of the response “the kids” – one is based on interacting with the students (administrator behavior) and another is a feeling of efficacy, a feeling of success in (and sometimes even recognized for) helping students (a personal characteristic or value). When we look across the responses of the nine school administrators who stayed in place over the five years, their responses usually begin with “the kids.”

[...] the kids. The kids, they are funny, they are challenging, working with kids is funny and you never know that whole aspect to me, you never know what to expect from day to day from them. Always energized me in that sense. Always made me – I have never and – god I wish my kids were here, they can vouch for it, and I think this is why I impressed upon them – I never ever woke up saying I hate my job. I never had moments or periods of time saying I resent my profession. Never!!

The kids, it's all about the kids [...] It has to be first, second, and third about the kids. I like the fact that I can sit down and have a conversation with them; I like the fact that when we talk about the future, there still is a future. I like the fact that, I've already experienced kids that I've taught, go on to college and graduate and they call back and say, “Thanks! I wouldn't have made it without you.”

A second equilibrium force dealt with an environmental condition: strong district support. Principals who felt they had strong district support referenced this as a positive working condition that contributed to their decision to stay. One administrator commented, “I had tremendous support in everything, so I loved it there, I absolutely loved it there.” Among those who experienced supportive relationships from their central office, support took various forms. For some, the relationship was a form of professional and emotional support – feeling like “part of a team,” having a safety net during their development as a leader, or visits from central office administrators that allow them to understand firsthand the issues an administrator is encountering. For others, support was more specific to needs, including emergency support for safety issues, professional development opportunities, and resources, whether financial or human. Still others believed their central offices were supportive by giving them autonomy to make decisions and trusting their judgment.

While “the kids” and district support were clearly the most influential equilibrium forces, we did observe other patterns as well. In terms of administrator characteristics, again, we found a sense of efficacy or ability to rise to the challenge to be an incentive to stay in a position. Many principals discussed the challenges of being a principal, but also frequently commented that they enjoyed the challenges, expressed as a belief that they are in the “right line” of work. Principals who felt a sense of accomplishment and those who related to the mission of their work often referenced this when discussing the positive aspects of being a school administrator. As one principal commented, “I think I make more significant contributions to our students as an administrator than I did as a teacher.” Furthermore, principals who felt like the school had a culture that promoted student achievement and excellence were excited to be a part of the school. One administrator commented, “The culture of the school was such that look, if you're going to walk in there you had better work as hard as we work or we will run right over you, and they (the teachers) would.”

Similarly, administrator behavior was again influential in terms of working relationships. The most often cited working relationship was administrators' relationships with teachers. Administrators recognized the need for and importance of positive working relationships with the educators in their building and often highlighted the benefit of a positive and hardworking staff when discussing the working conditions at a school. One principal commented, "I had really great teachers to work with who took young teachers under their wing, who took me under their wing." Similarly, administrators strongly valued their peer relationships and networks with other principals. These supports countered the feeling that it is a "lonely job" and were a source for both coping and learning on the job.

Lastly, environmental conditions were identified as contributors to the decision to stay in a particular position: autonomy and working conditions. Principals who felt that they had a certain level of autonomy in the workplace to drive the vision, culture, or mission of the school often found this to be an attractive part of the position. Autonomy was often mentioned in the context of relationships with the central office and school board, which reflects the relationship between administrator behaviors (here, relationships) and environmental conditions.

In particular, working conditions played a role in equilibrium for APs. Several APs who were not motivated by ambition to move "higher" stayed in their positions. They indicated that they were content in their role and did not seek to become principals. They noted the conflicting demands made upon principals and indicated they liked the more limited responsibilities they had. In this sense, the working conditions of the assistant principalship were attractive whereas those of the principalship were less so. Further distinctions between the assistant principalship and principalship were evident in our larger study, directing our future analyses toward differences in career paths based on roles.

Table III presents a summary of the push and pull forces associated with self-initiated career transitions as well as the equilibrium forces observed to influence the decision to stay. Evident in the table are the presence of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that shape career decisions, and these findings may prove valuable in developing effective policies for recruitment and retention. Notably the working conditions, such as hours, accountability, and stress, that we anecdotally anticipated to be strong push forces did not appear to be significant in the transitions we observed. Additionally, we note that some forces appear as either a push or a pull but also as an equilibrium force. Again, this highlights the uniqueness of administrators' career transitions and reinforces the importance of understanding the impact of interactions and relationships among different administrator characteristics, behaviors, and environments on career trajectories.

Pushes	Pulls	Equilibrium
Politics/conflict Poor working relationships Personal or family issues	Salary Available opportunities Efficacy/challenge Retirement benefits	The kids Strong district support Efficacy/challenge Autonomy Positive working relationships Retirement benefits

Table III.
Push, pull, and
equilibrium forces
in administrator
career decisions

Implications

There is substantial evidence both within the USA and internationally that schools face a crisis in school leadership, whether from inadequate supply of qualified administrators or from high degrees of turnover that threaten the sustainability of reform efforts. Yet to date, little research systematically investigates the career paths or trajectories of school administrators as a way of understanding or addressing these problems. We attempt to address this gap in the larger case study of Delaware, focussing the present discussion on the processes underlying administrators' career transitions. Our analysis reveals that the career paths of school administrators are complex in the types of transitions experienced, the processes by which career decisions are made, and the forces that underlie those decisions. This complexity has several implications for research, policy, and practice.

First, we conceptualize our work as examining administrators' career paths or trajectories, as advocated by Stevenson (2006), rather than as temporal stages. Career paths are more complex than exit and entry, consisting of a series of transitions. Career theory posits several typologies of transitions (e.g. Louis, 1980) which include entry, changes in role, changes in organization, changing professions, and leaving the labor pool, as well as combinations of these transitions (e.g. changing role and organization). Our quantitative data evidence the complexity and range of possible transitions that administrators experience, highlighting the need to conceptualize issues of recruitment and retention as more than entry into and exit from the profession. That is, we need research that focusses not only on the attractiveness of the principalship or the pipeline into administration, nor only on issues of attrition and turnover, but rather that explores the whole career from entry through exit. Rather, as argued by Stevenson (2006) and in career choice theory, research on transitions that constitute administrator career paths and the factors and processes which influence those decisions is needed to fully understand the nature of administrator careers.

Further complexity is added through the various processes associated with each transition, and this produces a second implication. Rather than being a mere function of increasing candidate pools or pipelines, our analysis emphasizes the role of human resource processes in addressing issues of recruitment and retention as these processes shape administrators' career paths and decisions about entering, remaining in, and leaving the profession. Little research has addressed the role of human resource systems, with some international exceptions (Machell *et al.*, 1994; Blackmore *et al.*, 2006; Gronn and Lucey, 2006). We observed administrators who exerted choice – that is, self-initiated – in each type of transition but also found examples where administrators' careers were significantly, if not completely, influenced by the decisions of others in the system. How district, state, or national systems manage school administrators as human resources is not well understood, though our findings suggest that such management decisions are a significant force in shaping the careers of school leaders. Reassignment practices can result in a variety of moves to different school levels, different positions, and different schools, which may have negative, if unintended, consequences for administrator turnover and retention. While consequential for administrators' careers, this is also consequential for schools in terms of their ability to sustain reform, retain quality teachers, and improve student performance. Furthermore, the prevalence of "tapping" as a process for moving into administration also suggests a need to better understand local human resources management. Tapping may serve as a way of drawing talented educators into leadership positions who may otherwise not have considered it. On the other hand,

it may also perpetuate the status quo if those doing the tapping are selecting individuals who share the same beliefs, skills, and goals. Given the impact of human resource processes on administrators and schools, it is critical for policy makers and current practitioners to carefully consider current practice and to utilize these processes as a lever for administrator recruitment and retention as well as school improvement in general.

Third, we initially explored forces that influence the various transitions experienced by administrators in this sample, and found that many issues were experienced as a push, pull, or equilibrium force. While findings are exploratory and certainly demand more in-depth investigation, they demonstrate the importance of interactions and relationships among different administrator characteristics, behaviors, and environments. Such relationships appear to impact career trajectories and reveal that these forces work in complex rather than simple ways. As a result, efforts to improve recruitment and retention must reflect this complexity. Policies to address both push and pull forces may be valuable strategies in recruiting and retaining administrators.

For example, improving the push conditions in a particular position may lead to greater stability. Better preparation and support for managing conflict both within the school community and with the central office and school board may minimize those issues as push factors. Findings also suggest that certain pull forces may serve as levers to increase stability. For example, we found administrators were drawn to new jobs by a particular challenge presented in that opportunity, whereas those who found their jobs to be challenging wanted to stay. While the work of school leadership is in and of itself challenging, perhaps there are ways to increase opportunities within a school or district that might entice administrators to continue in their position. Similarly, retirement benefits are highly valued and contribute to the decision to continue in education, yet at the same time, early retirement opportunities may seem to pull eligible administrators out of the profession.

Our findings also suggest that policies addressing recruitment and retention focus on both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. When we began this work, we anticipated hearing about long hours and stress – working conditions we had anecdotally heard were pushing administrators out of the system. However, what we found to be the most frequent and strongest influence were working relationships. Administrators above all valued their relationship with “the kids,” but also stressed the importance (and challenges of) their relationships with teachers, parents, central office administrators, and school boards. As incentives for recruitment and retention are considered, we emphasize the importance not only of the extrinsic rewards such as salary and job security but also the intrinsic ones. Efforts in the policy and practice domain to recruit, develop, support, and retain leaders should attend to preparing administrators in areas such as politics, conflict management, and school-community relationships. Additionally, sitting administrators need continuing support from their central offices in managing politics with parents and school boards in order to make decisions in the best interests of their students. Our data suggest that central office support is highly variable across districts, with some serving as an invaluable resource and others actually contributing to the problem.

The complex processes and forces observed in this study point not only to policy action but to a need for further research. As suggested in many responses, there are a number of factors or forces at work, though our analysis addresses only a few of a range of possible issues identified in previous literature. Our findings show that

socio-cognitive approaches to career theory may be a productive lens for understanding those forces. This body of work (e.g. Bandura, 1986; Lent *et al.*, 1994; Mitchell and Krumboltz, 1990) theorizes that career choice and development is a product of the interaction among personal (i.e. administrator) characteristics, environmental conditions (i.e. school or system social, economic, and political conditions), and individuals' overt behavior (i.e. what an administrator does). Our analysis reveals that these issues are salient in administrator career decisions and that they interact to produce different processes and different career transitions. Understanding the relationships among these categories of factors would greatly improve the body of knowledge related to administrative careers and certainly provide relevant information to improve policy and practice.

Lastly, our findings highlight the need for the education community to pay greater attention to the voices of administrators. What we heard from respondents differs from our anecdotal expectations, challenges assumptions about preferences and choice in recruitment and retention practices, and reveals processes and practices that are rarely acknowledged in conversations about school leadership. We recognize that the voices included here represent only one perspective in a complex educational system, and that the voices of students, teachers, central office administrators, supervisors, school boards, and other stakeholders would certainly benefit our discussion. Nonetheless, the perspective of school administrators is invaluable in understanding the processes and conditions related to recruitment and retention as it is their perception of those processes and conditions which influence their behavior. Thus, great insight is gained by giving them a voice. While a more narrative approach would certainly benefit research in terms of furthering our understanding of the lives and work of administrators (Cooper and Heck, 1995), we also argue that policy makers and practitioners could benefit from creating a safe space for administrators to share their experiences and actively participate in the creation of policy that supports and affects school leaders.

There are, of course, limitations to our findings which should be understood when considering the impact of this research. First, the context of Delaware may be unique in many ways, due to its size and the organization of the education system. While diverse in setting (urban, rural, and suburban), socio-economic and racial composition, district size, and economy, findings may not easily generalize to other contexts. Further, the time frame utilized for sample selection (2003-2008) may not generalize to current economic (and therefore, labor market) conditions. For example, the economic crisis may impact the supply side of the turnover issue. This should be considered in future research. Second, our stratified random sample enables us to be comfortable generalizing to the larger population of administrators in Delaware, but the complex and personal nature of each administrator's career paths make it necessary to pursue these issues through both in-depth case study and through larger scale inquiry where combinations of transitions and factors might be better represented. As a result, this research should be considered alongside other evidence – qualitative or quantitative – of factors in administrator career paths. Additionally, the voice we have given to administrators in sharing their experiences is decidedly one sided in that it allows us to understand only their perspective on the factors influencing their careers. Absent from this conversation are the voices of district administrators, school boards, and teachers, who may have been able to offer a more holistic picture surrounding each transition we examined. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is the omission of a critical yet immeasurable variable: quality of performance. An administrator's performance as a leader may and likely does have an impact on career transitions, whether poor

performance leads to removal or reassignment or strong performance leads to requests to move to a struggling school or opportunities beyond the principalship. In any case, we acknowledge the potential power of having such a measure in explaining career behavior, and suggest that further research in this area consider this in their design.

Conclusion

The complexities of school leadership and the careers of school administrators are clearly illustrated in the processes, pushes, pulls, and forces for equilibrium. Any policy designed to address recruitment, development, support, and retention of school administrators needs to recognize this complexity. Those looking for simple explanations of school administrator career decisions will be dissatisfied, as will those seeking simple “solutions.” This is not a straightforward calculus. Indeed, the decisions administrators make in their career paths involve many variables, and these variables affect administrators in various ways.

Our findings offer a more in-depth examination of career paths found in other research. Reviewed earlier, most of this work is quantitative in nature with no large-scale qualitative studies to examine the “whys” underlying administrator career behavior. Further, previous research has often focussed on identifying administrators’ preferences as a way of understanding recruitment and retention. As this analysis shows, we found that the process of changing positions is far more complex than simple explanations would suggest. There are many transitions in the career path of administrators, and many of the decisions about entering and leaving school administration were not made by the respondents but by others in their organizations. We observed specific factors that are not able to be quantified or measured in large-scale database: notably working conditions (politics, stress, impact on family), working relationships (with kids, teachers, peers, and the community), and system practices (district support, system decision making, job security, and autonomy). These factors are only cursorily examined here, but findings offer meaningful directions for further research.

As efforts to improve leadership-related policy and practice are underway not only in Delaware but nationally and globally, evidence presented here cautions that simple “reforms” and fixes, although seductive, are unlikely to adequately address the complex issues raised by this research. Rather, we argue that a more systemic, informed, collaborative approach is needed in which policy makers, school administrators, central office administrators, school boards, and researchers will have to work together to improve the recruitment, development, support, and retention of school leaders.

Notes

1. Note that 48 of the 103 initial sample were administrators who had left the system. We intentionally oversampled this population expecting significant difficulties in locating contact information and making contact.
2. Using a χ^2 -test for categorical data and t -test for numeric data, the only differences between the cohort and interviewed sample that were statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ were county and the subgroups of those who had left the system (acknowledged).

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	SY 2003-2004 cohort		Sample selected		Sample interviewed	
	<i>n</i>	%/mean	<i>n</i>	%/mean	<i>n</i>	%/mean
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>						
Gender						
Female	190	51.1	54	51.9	28	58.3
Male	182	48.9	50	48.1	20	41.7
Race						
African American	83	22.3	31	29.8	10	20.8
White	289	77.7	73	70.2	38	79.2
Age in 2003	372	46.2	104	45.0	48	44.9
<i>Characteristics of career in 2003</i>						
Level of 2003 school						
Elementary	179	48.1	48	46.2	25	52.1
Middle	139	37.4	37	35.6	13	27.1
High	54	14.5	19	18.3	10	20.8
County of 2003 school						
Kent	82	22.0	26	25.0	14	29.2
New Castle	215	57.8	52	50.0	18	37.5
Sussex	75	20.2	26	25.0	16	33.3
Position in 2003						
Assistant principal	192	51.6	60	57.7	23	47.9
Principal	180	48.4	44	42.3	25	52.1
<i>Career outcomes between 2003 and 2008</i>						
Central office	42	11.3	9	8.7	6	12.5
New district	24	6.5	6	5.8	6	12.5
New school	67	18.0	13	12.5	7	14.6
Return to teach	20	5.4	7	6.7	4	8.3
Same school	102	27.4	21	20.2	10	20.8
Left the system	117	31.5	48	46.2	15	31.3
Retired (confirmed)	7	1.9	6	5.8	4	8.3
Retired under 60 (working status unknown)	23	6.2	6	5.8	0	0.0
Retired 60 and over (working status unknown)	45	12.1	9	8.7	2	4.2
Retired and working (confirmed)	21	5.6	6	5.8	5	10.4
Ineligible to retire based on age/experience	21	5.6	21	20.2	4	8.3

Table AI.
Population and sample
characteristics

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