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Beginning principals: balancing at the top of the greasy pole

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Abstract

Purpose – This article aims to set the scene for this Special Issue on beginning principals and to inform one's understanding of how new principals manage their work lives to make a difference in their schools.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on recent literature on beginning principals, the paper draws together and analyses issues encompassing principals' formal preparation, recruitment, licensure and socialisation.

Findings – This article outlines the broader context that frames the lives of beginning principals across societies. It does this through focusing on three fairly general topics: the current expectations of principals and potential principals, which also touches on a shortage of principal candidates in some societies; the life of beginning principals, including strategies suggested by research for "surviving" those hectic first years; and issues related to principals' preparation and learning. These topics encapsulate the focuses of the articles that follow.

Originality/value – The paper contributes to the understanding that the quest for beginning principalship cannot be restricted by national or societal borders; it is one that calls for greater international cooperation and insight.

Keywords Principals, Expectation

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

> In 1868, after 31 years in public office, Benjamin Disraeli began his first term as Prime Minister of Great Britain. Upon his appointment, he proclaimed, *I have climbed to the top of the greasy pole*.

The imagery used by Disraeli would not be unfamiliar to beginning principals the world over as they clamber, often uneasily, into their first principal post. As hard as it is to get there, however, even in these times when many potential leaders seem less willing to take on the job, the slipping, sliding and uncertainty associated with scaling the pole certainly does not end when the name is nailed to the new office door. The rigors involved in the climb not only continue but actually accentuate during the first few years of the principalship. The energy previously needed to climb must be transformed quickly to balancing atop an equally tenuous surface – a spot requiring new knowledge, skills and understandings. In too many cases, the experience of the climb has done little to prepare beginning principals for the balancing act they are asked to perform.

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Given what is known about the impact of principal leadership in schools and its place in improving the learning and life of students, it is important that we understand where beginning principals are coming from (in terms of motivation and preparation), what they are expected to do and what they actually do (how effective they are), the problems they face, how to support them (professionally and psychologically) and how to turn them towards ongoing learning and improvement. Exploring such questions must be the joint responsibility of policy-makers, pre-and in-service providers and, perhaps most importantly, the profession itself. They should be addressed both within and across organisational, societal, cultural, ethnic, gender and structural milieus.

Consequently, investigating issues related to the beginning principalship first and foremost requires an understanding of the multiple and many-sided contexts within which they work. These range, for example, in Western countries, from a crowded and increasingly standardised reform environment and the expectations this places on schools, the increasingly multicultural nature of societies, shifting conceptions of what leadership entails, how principals are attracted, selected, prepared and socialised and, indeed, what it means to take up a principalship. The context in non-Western developed and developing societies also incorporate similar elements but these are played out in quite different cultural contexts and structures and, often, without the luxury of even adequate resources and within an environment typified by severe poverty and inequity.

It is impractical to cover each of these complex areas in any detail, but a number stand out as particularly pertinent at this point in time. These are introduced below and teased out in various ways by the articles that comprise this Special Issue. Three interrelated areas help set the context of beginning principals internationally. These include the expectations facing new principals and the shortage of potential principals, the "life" of beginning principals and preparation for the principalship. Although these relate to beginning principals, they are inextricably linked to broader expectations for schools and principals already ensconced in post.

Expectations and shortage of potential principals

The dominant modern myth portrays the school principal as an underpaid workhorse tangling with the conflicting demands of instructional leadership, bureaucracy, official mandates and adverse interest groups (Fenwick and Pierce, 2001; Howley *et al.*, 2005). The rhetoric facing beginning principals in the twenty-first century is replete with images of rapid technological advancement and other demands, often related to globalisation. As Crow (2006) argues, the transition from an industrial to post-industrial society has not only exacerbated the already complex work environment confronting school principals but has also raised expectations of what they should achieve. Hess (2003) paints an even more frenetic picture when he notes that leaders are expected to "leverage accountability and revolutionary technology, devise performance-based evaluation systems, reengineer outdated management structures, recruit and cultivate non-traditional staff, drive decisions with data, build professional cultures, and ensure that every child is served" (p. 1). Furthermore, principals are expected to "restructure schools and implement new educational paradigms that focus on pedagogical findings, foster the ideals of a just and humane educational system and prepare the populace to make moral and ethical decisions in an ever-changing society" (Cline and Necochea, 2000, p. 157).

Too often, from day one, new principals are expected to hold absolute knowledge and expertise (Thomas and Horsey, 1991, cited in Hewitson, 1995), even though most have yet to actually work in the job. At the very least, they are expected to have a clear understanding of their role, including how to exercise power appropriately (increasingly in terms of distributing leadership), how to maintain and/or establish professional relationships and to design processes and structures to facilitate goal achievement (Hewitson, 1995). Stakeholders up, down and around formal and informal hierarchies assume the principal is responsible for *all* school rules and practices and for solving problems as soon as they arise (Tooms, 2003). We could go on, but the literature describing current expectations of principals around the world is common enough – it is one mostly accurately portrayed as fragmented, dilemma-ridden, and demanding (e.g. Leithwood *et al.*, 1999; Schlechty, 2001; Uben *et al.*, 2001). Vandenberghe (2003) captures the essence of the plentiful literature thus:

> Being a principal nowadays means being continually confronted with disconnected demands, with expectations of a very different nature linked to different aspects of the daily operation of a school and with conflicting demands of several external constituencies (p. 4).

Faced with the weight of such daunting imagery it is perhaps not surprising that many potential principals, especially in Western societies, are thinking carefully about whether they want to take on such a daunting role (Gronn, 2003; Pounder and Young, 1996). While discussing the quantitative shortage of educators wishing to move into the principalship it should be noted this is not a universal phenomenon. For example, in Hong Kong and Singapore, because of their unique governance and selection structures there appears to be no shortage of available candidates. This, however, says little about the quality, gender or ethnic background of candidates, all problems that, to varying degrees, may indeed be widespread internationally (Walker *et al.*, 2003).

Filling vacant principal positions has become problematic as the pool of educators qualified and/or willing to assume positions shrinks in Western countries (Young *et al.*, 2002). In 2001 the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) in the USA reported a serious shortage of applications for vacant principal positions, claiming there was "only a trickle of qualified applicants, if any, willing to fill the positions" (cited in Dorman and D'Arbon, 2003, p. 27). A similar situation is apparent in the UK, where a report by the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Employment (1998) found that "on average, primary schools in London received only five applicants for each post and only five percent of London primary schools received more than 10 applicants" (Item No. 155). It seems this problem has not diminished in recent years.

Reasons given for the shrinking pool, although interrelated and somewhat confounding (Grogan and Andrews, 2002; Usdan, 2002), appear intimately connected to the "harsh realities of being school principals" (Browne-Ferrigno and Muth, 2001, p. 1). At least three reasons provide some insight into the shortage of principal candidates. These are obviously pertinent to understanding the role and place of the beginning principal. First, most principals spring from the ranks of teachers, but, at least in a number of Western countries, the number of people attracted to the teaching profession is declining (e.g. Preston, 2004). It is axiomatic that if there is a shortage of teachers, this will soon flow into a "pipeline effect" (Dorman and D'Arbon, 2003, p. 28), both quantitatively and qualitatively, to the principalship. Second, another side of the

same coin is that teachers who do come into or are already in the profession are all too aware of the challenges confronting principals, and therefore are increasingly reluctant to embrace it. They therefore decide to stay in the classroom and so "still have a life" (Rutherford, 2005, p. 290). Research cited by Howley *et al.* (2005) into the distinctiveness of being a principal from the perspective of teachers in the US helps fill out this picture. They cite a 1994 study in Louisiana as identifying this distinctiveness. In rank order, these included:

- the profession is growing significantly more complex and constraining;
- it is a source of considerable stress;
- principals lack the means and support for doing a good job;
- the salary is too low;
- daily and yearly hours are too long; and
- family life suffers from the demands of the position (Howley *et al.*, 2005; see also Cooley and Shen, 2000; Gewertz, 2000).

Third, dysfunctional systems of recruitment, preparation, and induction have been held responsible for the failure to attract qualified applicants. In the US, and using a somewhat accusatory tone, Hess (2003) stresses the need for human resource systems to think carefully about how they recruit the leaders schools need, prepare them for their positions, reward them in line with responsibilities, and how they sometimes lock-out candidates with vital knowledge and experience. He also notes that many administrative licensure requirements make it costly and frustrating to seek educational leadership positions and this, consequently, dissuades potentially effective administrators from applying.

A related line of study has explored the incentives potential candidates associate with becoming a principal. In the USA, Pounder and Merrill (2001) identified four key predictors of principalship desirability. These were:

(1) expectations of being considered a viable applicant;

(2) a desire to achieve and influence education;

(3) additional time demands; and

(4) salary and benefits.

A similar study by beginning principals in Belgium found that the opportunity to develop a career, having a chance to implement a personal vision and to create opportunities for school improvement were the main reasons for becoming a principal (Vandenberghe, 2003). Vandenberghe's study of beginning principals provides some key insights into their work and, as such, informs areas such as support, learning, security and well-being.

The life of beginning principals

The difficulties associated with beginning principalship have been recognised for many years. For example, in the early 1990s, Daresh and Playko (1994) synthesised the main problems facing new principals. These included:

- *problems with role clarification*, or understanding who they were and what it meant to be a principal, and how to make sensible use of their newfound authority;
- *limited technical expertise*, or how to do the things they were supposed to do; and
- *difficulties with socialisation to the profession and the system*, or how to do things in a particular setting.

These insights provide a good starting point for understanding some of interrelated issues facing beginning principals internationally.

First, beginning principals often face the subtle yet distinct message that they should not "make waves" (Rooney, 2000, p. 77). New principals have asserted that once they are appointed that little further interest is taken in them unless trouble occurs; thus, many feel abandoned by their employers (Draper and McMichael, 2000). Earley and Weindling (2004) in the UK and Legotlo and Westhuizen's (1996) research in developing countries concur about the disappointment beginning principals feel because of the scant feedback, guidance or positive direction they get from those supposedly in support or management positions. Second, many beginning principals are faced with the "ghost/s of principals past" and their enduring influence on the school. Although normally invisible, the image of the last principal haunts many new leaders (Rooney, 2000). Research has found that schoolteachers often endow the previous principal with saintly virtues once they leave the school even though they noted their frailties while in post. Weindling and Dimmock (2006) introduce evidence about new principals working in the shadows of their predecessors. Their discussion supports Draper and McMichael's (2000) finding that seven out of ten new principals reported on issues brought about by the previous principal's style of management. These were variously described as "remote control", and "tempestuous irascibility", or "passivity" (p. 467).

Third, and often closely linked to the enduring influence of the previous principals, is how beginning principals "fit" the culture already embedded in the school (and may well endure after they leave) (Deal and Peterson, 1990). The culture which guides the practices and expectations of staff leads to the all too common response to "why" questions with: "Because we've always done it that way" (Rooney, 2000, p. 77). Without cultural awareness, sooner or later, the principal will transgress a cultural code, and a rift may form between the principal and staff (Langston *et al.*, 1998). Most new principals experience a form of culture shock during their transition to principalship (Daresh and Male, 2000). Fourth, a sense of isolation is one of the features of new principalship (Draper and McMichael, 2000; Rooney, 2000). The place of the principal within the school can be a very lonely one indeed, even in these days of distributed leadership and communities of learning. Given the competitive environment between schools, they can also feel isolated from their principal colleagues. Beginning principals may be increasingly reluctant to share ideas on common problems with their colleagues because of competition for students, resources, grades or high profile success (Draper and McMichael, 2000).

Fifth, the beginning principal soon learns that the buck stops with them. Even today, teachers, parents and children often perceive the principal's office as the touchstone of authority (and even wisdom) in the school – this appears common, if differently formed, across societies (Rooney, 2000; Leung and Chan, 2001). New

principals are often surprised to find that they spend so much time on administrative matters and that educative aims seem difficult to pursue. Thus, monitoring classrooms and supporting teaching and learning are necessarily relegated to secondary roles and the beginning principals feel "bowled over" by the rush of work and the concern over balancing this with growing demands of accountability (Draper and McMichael, 2000, p. 467). Sixth, it seems that their work never quite gets done. New principals usually feel overwhelmed by the paperwork they have to do (Rooney, 2000). Furthermore, the life of a principal is usually characterised by a high degree of fragmentation and unpredictability, and many different unplanned and unexpected events are part of their daily life (Vandenberghe, 2003).

A seventh set of issues facing beginning principals relates to the organisational socialisation process and so opportunities to learn the norms, values and beliefs of the school. Crow (2006) and Weindling and Dimmock (2006) note the dynamic and multifaceted nature of principal socialisation. Drawing upon data from a longitudinal study of British principals, the latter authors identify seven stages of socialisation. In line with discussion in these articles, the socialisation process for school administrators too often seems to "perpetuate the *status quo* by rewarding conformity, stability and complacency" rather than transformational behaviours (Cline and Necochea, 2000, p. 152). This appears true despite calls by current school reform initiatives for dynamic leaders who can drastically restructure existing systems. Being able to balance such conflicting demands makes it difficult for even the most seasoned school leaders to be innovative, much less for their raw colleagues.

Finally, it should be noted that the difficulties facing new principals in developing countries may be very different from those in developed countries. For example, problems facing beginning principals in Kenya include students who cannot pay school fees and or even buy books, shortages of basic equipment and facilities, installing telephones, parental illiteracy, students travelling long distances, lack of playgrounds, use of English as a medium of instruction, problems in acquiring clean water and the inaccessibility of parents (Kitavi and Van der Westhuizen, 1997). Bush and Oduro (2006) illustrate that these are not problems restricted to Kenya, but are indeed common across most African countries. In China and some other East Asian societies, principals spend much time balancing political demands from outside the school with raising enough money to operate effectively.

By necessity, the issues touched upon cannot claim comprehensiveness in terms of scope or depth, but they do provide a taste of the life of beginning principals according to research conducted in various settings, and they serve to introduce the papers in this Special Issue. A similar literature exists which offers a set of research-based strategies to new principals to help them during their first years in school. Four of these are introduced below, and others emerge from the articles that follow.

Surviving the first years

First is the importance of new principals clarifying and articulating their values – what is important to them in their role as principal (Walker and Quong, 2005). Tooms (2003) adopts the term of developing a moral compass. In other words, the suggestion is that a beginning principal must be clear about the values that they are willing to "go to the mat for" (p. 533). Such a compass can help the beginning principal to pick the "right" battles. Rooney (2000) notes that pressures to simultaneously accommodate

teachers, the superintendent and parents can obscure the view of such a compass and that the principal must have an inbuilt set of moral values and pragmatic intuition to decide if they are willing to invest energy in dealing with any ripples that their decision may generate.

A second oft-repeated strategy from research findings is that beginning principals work with (good) veteran school leaders inside the school. New principals need to learn quickly to draw on the individual and collective wisdom of experienced, organisationally competent, and instructionally effective colleagues (Sorenson, 2005). The thinking is that it is better to keep powerful people on the new principal's team rather than have them plot the principal's downfall (Rooney, 2000). Furthermore, it seems that having a senior management team or a deputy who can be trusted with frank conversations is important to reduce the degree of loneliness of new principals (Draper and McMichael, 2000).

Third, beginning principals are encouraged to work closely with students, teachers, and parents. Although it is a personal or career-related decision to become a principal, the actualisation of the job depends on recognition by others within the school community. Beginning principals must therefore create and make opportunities for dialogical relations and different types of cooperation and interactions (Vandenberghe, 2003). Time spent in "listening to staff concerns, hopes and ideas and in grasping the micropolitics of the school" is time well spent and helps increase accessibility and acceptability, win support and explore staff strengths and potential contributions (Draper and McMichael, 2000, p. 468). Many practising principals agree that their positive experiences relate to being appreciated by people inside and outside of the school (Vandenberghe, 2003).

Fourth, research holds strongly that beginning principals continue to learn through multiple pathways, such as reading, attending professional meetings, and conversing with professional friends (Rooney, 2000). The key message here is the same as for experienced principals: the beginning principal should aim to be a lead learner in the school – principals who become what Sparks calls "sustained, visible learners" with the ability to unlock and maintain learning throughout the school community (cited in Sorenson, 2005, p. 63). Indeed Sackney and Walker (2006) hold that being a head learner is an inbuilt requirement for beginning principals working in a knowledge society. They also argue that building learning communities requires principals to engage in personal capacity building as well as those targeting the improved teaching and learning in their schools.

While discussing such strategies it must be noted that they can fall easily into the realm of high-sounding rhetoric if not considered in context, especially across societal boundaries. As Bush (1998) reminds us, new principals still have to deal with the multiplicity and context-specificity of demands made upon individual schools. Likewise, Tooms (2003) suggests that there is no "playbook for rookies" and that each critical incident beginning principals face is different because each person, each school and each district has its own personality and approach to a challenge. The empirical study by Cheung and Walker (2006) in this issue is a case in point. The study illustrates how ten beginning principals in Hong Kong made adaptations to accommodate the inner and outer demands they faced during the first two years of their principalship. As a result, these principals played different leadership roles.

Hence, even though structured preparation and openness are essential elements of any successful "honeymoon period", they are highly context dependent and the

majority of a beginning principal's learning is "by doing" – or reflecting independently and collegially on both success and failures (Draper and McMichael, 2000; Tooms, 2003). For example, Quong (2006) reflects on his own experiences as a beginning principal and determined that, the biggest dilemma facing him "was when to act and when not to". He learnt to deal with the issue by asking himself three hard questions:

(1) "When should I intervene?"
(2) "Am I ready to confront?" and
(3) "What can I learn from the experience?"

This leads us to what endures as one of the most contentious issues around the role of the beginning principal – that of how to prepare educators to become principals and continue this learning and support during their early years in post, or what can be called "crossing the bridge".

Preparation for the principalship

Given that this Special Issue focuses on the beginning principalship it must unavoidably address principalship preparation and induction. Leadership preparation is obviously a huge area within itself and we touch upon it here only as it relates to beginning principals. New principals often express considerable frustration over the fact that they do not understand the nature of their leadership responsibilities before they get to "the hot seat" (Duke, 1988, cited in Daresh and Playko, 1994, p. 36); this is not a new phenomenon. New principal induction, however, too often consists of "the practice of sink-or-swim socialisation" (Hart, 1993, p. 18), such as being handed a building map and a key to the office door. Thus, the world of novice principals is filled with considerable anxiety, frustration and professional isolation (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Daresh, 1986; Weindling and Earley, 1987; Young *et al.*, 2002).

In many Western countries, graduate schools of education have enjoyed a monopoly in the preparation and certification of educational leaders for more than a half-century (McCarthy, 1999). However, changing demands from the field are challenging universities to reassess their contribution to administrative preparation and to examine the models of administrative preparation to which they subscribe (Murphy and Vriesenga, 2004; Hallinger and Snidvongs, 2005). Today, there are debates over universities' monopoly in principal preparation, the need for principal licensure and the value added by preparation programs (Browne-Ferrigno and Shoho, 2002; Grogan and Andrews, 2002; Haller *et al.*, 1997).

The recruitment and selection processes for entry into educational leadership programs have been under particular pressure for change. The nominal entrance criterion since the middle of the twentieth century was a "B.A. and the cash to pay the tuition" (Tyack and Cummings, 1977, p. 60). This low entry requirement has led to the argument that "university preparation of educational administrators has fallen into a downward spiral dominated by low-prestige institutions, diploma mills, outmoded instruction and low expectations" (Guthrie and Sanders, 2001, p. 46). Many professors and practitioners agree that too many ineffective programs require drastic reform and restructuring (Murphy, 1992; Milstein, 1993; Young *et al.*, 2002). The achievement of positive and substantial improvement, as pointed out by Young *et al.* (2002), depends on "commitment among key stakeholders to collaborate" (p. 142). In fact, Crow (2006) argues that traditional university preparation programs are far from adequate and

require greater conceptual understanding of socialisation and the complexity inherent in a post-industrial society.

Crow's voice echoes growing critique of principalship licensure structures in countries such as the USA, even as other societies (e.g. Hong Kong) have moved only recently to establish them. (Walker and Dimmock, 2006). The problem is complex, especially given the difficulty of keeping educators interested in the principalship. Although licensure is a device best suited to ensuring that the clearly incompetent do not prey upon an uninformed public, effective licensure requires clear standards of competence against which aspirants can be measured (Hess, 2003). However, as Hess points out, the problem with leadership licensure is that management and leadership are unavoidably context-bound, thereby what "good" leaders do across settings can be very different indeed. Furthermore, allowing new teachers to complete administrator certification requirements (which often requires little more than clocking requisite credit hours) early in their career results in excessive numbers of administrator-certified candidates who either remain in positions as classroom teachers or seek principalship several years after completing their licensure (Browne-Ferrigno and Shoho, 2002; Hess, 2003).

The content of principal preparation programs is also open to question. For example, in a study of beginning principals in Queensland, Australia, half of the respondents reported that tertiary qualifications, training programs and other in-service activities had prepared them for their role as a principal to "little" or "no extent" (Hewitson, 1995, p. 24). A survey among aspiring and experienced principals in the USA uncovered major discrepancies in terms of the kinds of skills assumed to be important for effective job performance. Specifically, aspiring administrators placed much higher value on the demonstration of technical skills, while practising administrators ranked these issues as least important (Daresh and Playko, 1994). Such findings clearly show a gap in understanding as to what beginning principals need and how they can best attain it. Thus, the challenge exists to bridge this gap and tailor preparation programs to the actual needs of beginning principals, within context. In the USA, for example, Browne-Ferrigno and Shoho (2002) suggest that efforts to improve the effectiveness of such programmes should start with careful consideration of desired student outcomes and use of futurists' perspectives to answer such questions as: what do graduates of today's leadership preparation programs need to know and be able to do as successful leaders of tomorrow's schools? What previous experiences, personal attitudes and dispositions, and career aspirations – that cannot be developed through professional training but can be measured – link to desired leadership ability? Responses to such questions may go a long way to improving how we prepare beginning principals and, subsequently, their meaningful transition into schools.

Discussion of how to prepare beginning principals is at an interesting and potentially very influential stage. Peak government and professional bodies such as the National College of School Leadership in the UK (Hallinger and Snidvongs, 2005; Weindling, 2004) and the University Council of Educational Administration in the USA (Murphy and Vriesenga, 2004) are committing considerable resources to research what is needed, as well as supporting new developmentally oriented programmes. Similar resources are being allocated in Singapore, Hong Kong (Walker and Dimmock, 2005) and continental Europe (Wales and Welle-Strand, 2005), to name just some. By contrast, Kitavi and Van der Westhuizen's (1997) study found that the means by which

most principals in developing countries are trained, selected, inducted and in-serviced are ill-suited to the development of effective and efficient school managers. For example, in Kenya, deputy principals as well as good assistant teachers are traditionally appointed to the principalship without any leadership training at all. In addition, no pre-service training for principals is required and in-service training that is provided rarely addresses the needs of the future beginning heads. Bush and Oduro (2006) further illustrate this point: in Africa, principals are appointed for their teaching records rather than leadership potential, and once they are appointed there is usually limited induction and support for them. The situation in other developing countries may be similar, but unfortunately very few data are available in the area.

This issue

The preceding discussion barely scratches the surface of the complex montage faced by and surrounding beginning principals internationally; it proposes merely to set the scene for the collection of articles that follows. As indicated throughout this opening piece, each of the articles in this issue provides in its own way a richness that supports further investigation into what beginning principals do, need and feel. In combination they provide a snapshot of the status of beginning principals across and within a number of international contexts. Ideally, we would have liked to include more perspectives from around the globe, but this was not possible. As such, we hope they what we have included in this thematic issue will both enrich the work of others and encourage ongoing efforts not only to further understand beginning principalship, but also to drive strategies to attract, recruit and support the learning of principals. We hope that this challenge can be addressed internationally, much more so than we have managed in this issue, for it is here that we believe much of the knowledge and understanding for improving the lot of new principals can come.

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