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Unexpected Learning by Neophyte Principals: Factors Related to Success of First Year Principals in Schools

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This paper reports the findings related to the International Beginning Principals study, which examined factors perceived by first year principals to both complicate, and account for, first year principalship successes in rural jurisdictions. Specifically, for this paper we deal with factors seen as significant in establishing oneself as a first time principal in a rural Canadian school. The general findings from this study centred on training and experience related to administration of schools. Many first time principals in rural schools had limited specific preparation for the principalship, or other related administrative roles such as the vice principalship. Such findings have taken on more importance in the last several years as school districts find it increasingly difficult to recruit principals for smaller rural schools.

Introduction

Renihan (1999) reported, 'School systems everywhere are finding out that it is difficult to find candidates willing to assume leadership positions, particularly at the school level. People are not coming forward to apply for school level administrative positions' (p. i). We know that the principalship is a complex role that involves a multitude of interdependent factors and influences. Experienced principals have developed their skills through experience and training. Of course new principals need to

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be aware of the factors that will most help them to establish patterns, attitudes and behaviours of success as administrators. In this study, all the participants were new principals in rural schools, most of whom did not have the advantage of previous administrative experience. Also many of these new principals assumed their positions of first principalship with little, or no formal training in administration, as unlike many jurisdictions, preservice training for the role of the principalship was not the norm.

Following a brief discussion on the purpose of the study and the methodology we provide the three main sections of this paper. For the purposes of this article we have selected several of the many themes of interest from the findings of the study to present to readers. The first of these selected themes relates to the unanticipated experiences of first time principals with respect to: the amount of work/time required, staff related issues, administrative tasks, leadership and role expectations, parent interactions and board office items, the impact on the principal's personal life, and personal skills required to do the work of principal. Secondly, we discuss the respondents' sense of unpreparedness as we describe what our participants said were the most important things new principals could expect to deal with (and should learn about beforehand) during their first year in the role. Here we note their focus on particular administrative duties, especially the function of personnel supervision. Thirdly, we highlight some of the participants' views on what constitute factors and influences that had a significant impact on their success as first time principals.

The Purpose of the Study

The themes discussed in this paper were drawn from data collected as part of a larger study on the neophyte principal. The data for this article were gathered from a single province in Canada, as part of the International Beginning Principals Study (IBPS). The larger and ongoing project involves researchers and schools from seven countries in Asia, North American, and Europe. In several components of the IBPS, researchers have used similar or equivalent methodologies and instruments to gather and compare findings. There are also aspects of the larger study where researchers have undertaken to experiment with the methodologies to either bring further description or explanation to the life-worlds of neophyte principals.

The purpose of this particular study was to gain insights and under-

standings into the perception of the neophyte rural principals' experiences as first time principals using an iterative, electronic and dialogical inquiry methodology over a six-week period. The following research questions guided this study: What factors do principals see as the most important in establishing themselves successfully in their first principalship? Secondly, what examples from their experience might these principals share to provide new administrators with insight into the means by which first principalships are most likely to be successful?

Methodology

For the purposes of the study a rural school was defined as one with 250 or fewer students and situated in a community of fewer than 10,000 people. Our participants were not known to each other. Superintendents of Education in rural districts were contacted and permission was obtained to contact the principals and ensure their participation. Respondents were first year and, in some instances, second year principals. In all cases we asked that these principals delimit their responses to their first year experiences as a neophyte principal.

An initial list of neophyte principals was developed through soliciting contact information from various jurisdictions (school districts, professional associations, and the provincial government). In all a total of 108 principals were asked to participate. Initial letters of invitation and explanation were faxed to qualifying principals, with 53 agreeing to participate. Data were gathered through four sessions of electronic inquiry, emails and faxes, to these 53 principals. We experienced a ten percent attrition from the beginning of the study to the end of the fourth iteration (five principals dropped out after two iterations and one re-entered for the third session). Three of the participants preferred to receive our inquiries and respond through facsimile rather than e-mail. We accommodated this preference. The first electronic inquiry asked the participants to respond to several initial questions concerning their first year of principalship. The three subsequent sessions of inquiry were built from the responses of the participants to the questions or syntheses of responses from the previous inquiry. The responses were gathered, summarized and analyzed for themes by a 'first reader.' Concurrent with this, a second reader reviewed the participant responses to questions to determine themes. A reconciliation of two 'readings' resulted in a synthetic summary, which was provided to the participants in iteration, two, three and four, along with the next set of questions. The subsequent questions

were ones that were derived from and related to the syntheses. We called these inquiries 'electronic Delphi' sessions, as the participants built on the responses and themes as these were developed through the reciprocal nature of the sessions. The participants were not directly exposed or identified to each other, except through the synthesized and mediated information derived from the researchers-participants exchange.

Our emphasis in this article is limited to the qualitative responses of principals. All of the themes presented, herein, are drawn from comments from the participating principals. However, the relative strength or force of articulation varied, qualitatively and quantitatively, from principal to principal and from theme to theme. These variations are not represented, as it is only our intention to bring the content of these themes forward in a largely descriptive, yet somewhat interpretive manner.

Unanticipated Experiences

In the commentary responses of several principals, it was recollected that the actual work and world of the principalship was quite different from what they had observed of others prior to becoming principals. In their own words, more than half of our participants indicated that they had not understood, as fully as they anticipated, what the role of the principal entailed. The reality was that those new to the role were often surprised by the complexity of the role and related demands. Their first year experiences were well beyond their initial perceptions and expectations of the principalship.

UNANTICIPATED AMOUNT OF WORK AND TIME REQUIRED

In general, principals spoke about the unexpected amount of time required to do their work. One principal commented, 'Time, time, time! You do not realize the time it will take.' Respondents identified the time required and frequency of meetings as an unanticipated expectation. One respondent stated, 'Meetings, meetings, and more meetings . . . I didn't understand how much time meetings were going to take up.' Another respondent was not aware of the 'amount of work that goes into planning a staff meeting.' Still another respondent spoke of the unanticipated amount of organizational skill required to be a principal. 'I was unaware of the organization skills that would be needed to run a school.' We found that principals had not anticipated that a certain amount of autonomy with respect to demands for their time was lost, upon assum-

ing the principalship. This profound to subtle variation from their previous educational experiences startled some and was softly resented by others.

UNANTICIPATED STAFF RELATED ISSUES

Respondents said that mediating for and between staff was an unanticipated part of the job. One respondent commented that, 'the amount of mediation between staff members' was not expected. Other respondents stated that they did not expect that teachers would so easily attempt to give their discipline problems to them. One principal commented that the 'expectation of staff that you [as principal] can more effectively deal with problems of discipline than they themselves can,' was a surprise. Another principal was surprised to find 'that I was responsible for situations that I did not create. This happened particularly in areas of discipline.' The participants identified other unexpected staff related items that covered a wide range of areas from a perceived a lack of professionalism and being misunderstood by teachers. Of course, dealing with teachers' personal issues and facing resistance from some staff members cannot always be predicted, but the frequency and intensity of such 'dealings' was unanticipated by our study participants.

Some principals did not anticipate the scope and complexity of teacher expectations. One principal suggested that teachers expect 'you will back them no matter what.' Another administrator was surprised how much 'direction and organization the teachers looked for.' In the area of teacher supervision, one principal was not aware of the 'procedures to be followed and put into place when teacher competency was questioned.' Instructional leadership was an area that principals felt they were expected to have expertise in. One principal said there were 'expectations around instructional leadership (e. g., you are expected to be knowledgeable about all curricula from K-12 (every subject)).'

UNANTICIPATED ADMINISTRATIVE TASKS

Plant maintenance and facility issues, were identified as unanticipated duties by some respondents. One administrator did not know it would be necessary to have knowledge in 'construction and the general workings of maintenance.' Related to this task area another administrator had not anticipated the 'degree of time necessary for building and maintenance issues.' Yet another principal did not realize 'the time and effort devoted to maintenance items.' This participant had 'furnaces . . . replaced

... renovations ... [and] roofing projects' in the first year in his/her new role. A principal explained, 'the biggest change was being in charge of the school budget [although] I had good advice from our school district secretary.' Yet, another principal was not prepared for the program planning process. 'Developing a program plan for the following year was also something I did not expect, especially in December when I had barely identified what was going on.'

UNANTICIPATED PARENT AND SCHOOL BOARD OFFICE ITEMS

Respondents stated that dealing with difficult parents was unanticipated. It was not that these first time principals were oblivious to parental issues but rather they had not anticipated the tensions, angst and energy that each of these situations creates for the role of the principal, and all concerned. One respondent expressed surprise about the 'amount of "parenting the parents" I have to do.' A further comment was that parents 'expect[ed] immediate answers.' Another principal identified the problem of getting parents to talk to teachers. The principal 'never realized how upset parents could get over minor matters and how reluctant they were to see the teacher first.'

Other respondents identified items relating to Boards of Education and central office. A principal commented, 'I did not think I'd find solace in senior administrators ... [but] I did.' Other principals commented that they had not anticipated dealing with board members that had 'their own agendas.' Another principal was unaware of the significance of board policy and the expectation to follow it. Still another principal had questions about the limited background and experience of central office staff and board members. The principal's perception of competence required of such staff had altered upon assuming the role of principal and observing these individuals more closely.

UNANTICIPATED PERSONAL SKILLS REQUIRED

Our study administrators identified different skills that they had not anticipated they would need. Of particular note were those skills related to respecting confidentiality, time scheduling, and mediation skills. These skill-sets were identified as ones not anticipated to the degree they were required. One principal stated that you had to 'think like an administrator, not a teacher.' This comment is consistent with Sigford's (1998) view that, 'new principals need to see themselves as administrators and not teachers anymore' (p. 14). Another principal spoke about needing highly

developed skills of diplomacy. ‘Whether it is a “job expectation” or not, one of the hardest things is being diplomatic . . . and keeping my mouth shut and some of my gut reactions to myself.’

It is interesting that all our administrators would have observed principals in action from their more experienced perspective as teachers; yet, many were still surprised by the amount of work and time required as part of the position. Looking across the categories and combining responses for the amount of work/time required and the learning of administrative tasks, these two categories represented 40% of the responses. For nearly half of the first time principals, there were feelings that they were less than adequately prepared, in part, because they had not had an adequate grasp of what the principalship would actually require of them.

Sense of Unpreparedness for First Time Principals

The unanticipated experiences drew us to the question of the new principals’ sense of unpreparedness. We were interested to know what new principals felt least prepared for in their new role. An iteration of the electronic Delphi sought to generate a list of tasks/areas for prospective principals who might follow those in our study. We hoped that these insights might guide future beginning principals in their preparation for school administration. The main categories from the responses were related to: Teachers and supervision, dealing with parents, and time/work.

Slightly more than half of respondents identified teacher related tasks and supervision as something they were least prepared for. While supervision will be discussed in greater detail later, here we will say that principals related to us their difficulties when dealing with teacher competency issues. One principal recounted, ‘dealing with weak teachers,’ while another talked of, ‘disciplining/investigating a teacher when a complaint has been made.’

About one quarter of the responses were related to parent issues. Responses recounted mostly negative experiences with parents, which included ‘parent gripes,’ ‘difficult parents,’ ‘being bullied by some parents,’ and ‘irate parents.’ Many of these new principals felt they were not prepared for negative aspects of dealing with parents. One principal summed up the lack of preparation for dealing with, ‘the fury of parents when they are upset with a teacher,’ and concluded that, ‘nobody told me you needed a very thick skin and the negotiation skills of the United Nations.’ Terry (1999) advised principals to clearly ‘articulate their belief systems, to better prepare themselves to resolve parent conflicts’ (p. 29).

Twenty-five percent of the respondents cited work and time demands as areas in which they lacked adequate preparation. One principal recounted being unprepared for the ‘amount of work and the amount of time the work would take.’ A further comment was that ‘with very little administration time I worked to 11:00 or 11:30 every night, including Saturday . . . I also worked Sunday afternoon and some Sunday evenings.’ A principal of a K-12 school discussed the time demands and the effect in the classroom, as follows: ‘The incredible demands on time . . . all of the time. I felt I was always a very organized and effective teacher. My teaching time was often interrupted by admin demands thus affecting my ability to maintain an atmosphere conducive to effective learning right in my own classroom.’

It is interesting to note that the three main themes that principals identified as areas they felt least prepared for are areas in which, as teachers, they would have had some exposure. Parent-related situations certainly would have occurred for these new principals during their times as teachers. Dealing with fellow staff members and the pressures of teachings are common to all typical teaching situations. Yet as beginning principals, these former teachers felt unprepared in these areas. These data suggest that many teachers really did not understand the duties, pressures, and challenges of their schools’ principals and, perhaps we might even suggest that some have had unrealistic perceptions concerning the nature of the principalship.

We asked first time principals what they felt were the most important tasks that they needed to get ‘a handle on,’ in order to be successful. Respondents submitted a variety of items that they felt were important for first time principals. For the purpose of this line of questions we will focus on specific tasks and not general ideas. The two most often mentioned categories were administration-related and staff-related tasks. Fewer of our participants mentioned categories student-related, board related, community-related, and program-related than one might have expected.

ADMINISTRATIVE TASKS

The question becomes, to what extent are first time principals prepared for these various critical tasks? Previous analysis in this study has shown that many first time principals did not have adequate administrative experience or training. First time principals do not have the experience or training in these critical tasks will be challenged to effectively perform

their duties. Should first time principals who do not have the experience and training be given additional administration time to develop the skills to perform these critical tasks effectively?

Dealing with students, Community issues, and School Board tasks were also important issues for which first time principals needed to develop skills in order to better address them. Student discipline was the main theme of the student related responses. One principal tied together student and staff related items by saying that 'developing a school discipline policy that is workable and that the staff has agreed to enforce' was an important task for first year principals. Other responses for important student-related tasks included: working with the student representative council (SRC), student team building, recognition of students, working with graduation committees, and being involved with special needs students and their programs.

Other tasks identified were related to Boards of Education. Preparing for and attending board meetings were seen as important. One principal found this newly acquired knowledge shortened the time needed for the preparation of reports to the Board as he/she developed a 'template [to] enter any new information for each meeting.' One principal stated that it was important to 'work closely with parent councils and involve them in the school vision . . . or perhaps involve them in formulating the school vision!' Another administrator commented on the role of the local board of trustees and the skill needed to deal,

. . . with the local politics and how it impacts on decision making at both the Board of Education and Parent Council level. I am not used to dealing with decision-making in a non-rational environment and for the sake of small local groups as opposed to the common good. Having the tact to deal with that day after day takes practice and a real talent.

The area of student discipline was mentioned a number of times. In fact, nearly half the responses in the student-related category concerned the successful establishment of effective student discipline. However, the most obvious and recurrent theme in our inquiries was that of staff supervision. Participants identified staff supervision as a critical task. Yet many new principals reported that staff supervision was perceived as one of their weakest areas. In the final section of this article we share some of our findings with respect to this supervisory role and related functions.

STAFF SUPERVISION IN THE FIRST PRINCIPALSHIP

Twenty-one percent of the staff related tasks involved staff supervision. The number of responses indicates that staff supervision was seen an important task for new principals. One principal said, 'teacher staff supervision is still [the] number one' task for the new principal.

Knowing that developing skills in staff supervision has been reported to be a critical skill, as identified by 450 principals in California (Schmieder and Cairns 1996, xvi). We asked our first time principals to describe their initial experiences with personnel supervision. We were also curious about the types of training or experience that they brought into this aspect of their work. The respondents submitted a variety of items that were grouped into the following five categories: initial experiences, expectations given, how did you feel, training received, and advice for new principal.

Initial Experiences of Staff Supervision

Several of our particular participants said they did not have much to do with staff supervision in their first year of principalship. Participants typically indicated that their superintendent of education was responsible for staff supervision. One new principal said, 'It had never been done in the district.' A principal indicated the superintendent initially handled staff supervision but, 'as the years have gone on, more has fallen onto the principal.' The remaining participants had various levels of involvement in staff supervision. One principal said the expectation was for principals to supervise one-third of the staff each year. Another principal stated that the district, 'asked principals to do nearly all the supervision.' A further comment was that supervising new staff was not a problem but that it was, 'hard to be as open as needed for improvement when part of the process was a final report.' For the first-time principals in this study population, the fact that they were in-scope and also considered teachers, with membership in the teachers' union, complicated this role and related expectations.

Expectations for Staff Supervision

Slightly over half of the respondents stated that the expectations for staff supervision were outlined in Board-level policy. Fewer respondents made comments about having been simply 'given' expectations. Some respondents commented that they specifically received supervision expectations from their respective superintendents of education.

Irrespective of the source of the supervision expectations, and across the categories, almost half of the responses suggested these expectations were less than adequate. One principal said that, 'the only expectation from the superintendent was that I be in the classrooms.' Another principal cited that the only expectation given 'was when the reports [were] due.' Further comments included not being given any specific instructions regarding teacher supervision and that the 'expectations and purpose were poorly defined.' One administrator said, 'I was unclear as to why I was supervising.' A further comment by an administrator related to a frustration with the lack of clear direction and unclear expectations for supervision. Speaking about the supervision expectations one principal said,

There were none, as we did not have a teacher supervision and appraisal policy at that time. There was an unwritten expectation that I should immediately be able to improve the instructional capabilities of some of the so-called 'worst teachers' in the school and if they did not improve then I was to 'fire' them. This of course is ludicrous but it was an expectation of both the superintendent and the board of education.

Respondents indicated that the superintendent, or district policy, provided adequate expectations for teacher supervision. One principal commented that the superintendent 'clearly expected that the principal supervised teachers and was an integral part of the evaluation.' Further comments were that 'expectations were to be consistent with district policy' and that expectations were 'set out by central office and teachers are aware of them.' Sergiovanni (1995) agrees the, 'principal's evaluation responsibilities . . . include reviewing and regulating performance, providing feedback, and otherwise tending to standards of goal attainment' (p. 4).

How First Time Principals Felt About Staff Supervision

Seventy four percent of our respondents stated that they initially felt uncomfortable in their supervisory role. One administrator recounted feeling, 'very unprepared and lacking in skills to effect change.' Another administrator said, '[I] felt out of my depth, especially with teachers who had more teaching experience than me.' Many of those who indicated that they felt uncomfortable at first, commented that they grew more confident in this role with experience. One principal was, 'scared at first

but . . . grew confident with practice and encouragement . . . it would not have been successful without the support of my staff.

The minority of respondents stated they felt comfortable with staff supervision initially. While one administrator simply found, 'teacher/staff supervision has been both enjoyable and demanding.' Another first time principal felt better prepared as he/she was more 'comfortable in the role of teacher supervisor because I have had training.'

Background Preparedness for Staff Supervision

Almost sixty percent of the responses indicated that, as first time principals, they had received no training, or very little training in supervising teachers. One principal felt she was, 'thrown into teacher supervision with no training and [only] a bit of information that I received at the Principals' Short Course.' The training described included university graduate classes, provincial school-based training, and administrators' council training modules in supervision, curriculum-based inservices, district supervision seminars, and general comments about training. One principal recounted taking a, 'supervision graduate class that was experiential and this was life saver.'

A further theme was to keep 'eyes and ears open' all the time while working with staff. Working with staff and getting to know their teaching styles was offered as a way to gain specific insights into teachers' strengths and weaknesses. One suggestion was to pop into classes frequently to get a sense of what is happening in the classrooms. Another principal summed up the use of reflective supervision as follows:

I started with 'walk-about's' to get a sense of what was going on in classrooms. I then began full period visits in each teacher's classroom and wrote a 'report' on 'what was happening in the classroom'. The teacher and I discussed the lesson soon afterwards. From there, in a subsequent visit, I focused on creating reflection questions for the teacher and used this as a basis for encouraging professional growth. If there was a teacher who appeared to be having difficulties, I visited them again and when needed, I gave specific directions for areas to focus on.

Robbins and Alvy (1995) reported that, 'if you think something is important, like visiting classrooms, build it into your schedule' (p. 51). The data suggest that principals in districts that had board policies for staff

supervision were more likely to see themselves as being successful in performing teacher supervision. However, nearly half the respondents saw the expectations for staff supervision as inadequate. Over half of the participants had little or no training in staff supervision. Many of the suggestions for staff supervision involved being visible and being aware of situations. The study data suggest that staff supervision was one area of weakness for first time principals; unclear expectations and insufficient training were factors linked to this perceived weakness.

Responses to a specific question on supervision generated some candid and revealing responses from the participants. Three of every four respondents said they were initially uncomfortable with the supervision expectations they had been given. Participants were concerned about supervising staff that were older and had more experience. Some participants were concerned about the separation that they felt between themselves and their staff because of the evaluative role in supervision. Almost one out of four of the respondents indicated that they had adjusted to their supervision role as time went on.

Our respondents' comments on administrative preparation and surprising time demands caused us to wonder if first time principals in these rural schools had the background and administrative time to develop good staff relationships and be engaged in the supervisory process? Did principals who felt uncomfortable supervising feel that way because of a lack of role adjustment, lack of clear expectations, or a lack of preparation for staff supervision?

The data suggest that supervision expectations were not clearly communicated to first time principals. Just over one half of the respondents indicated that their school districts had a policy for supervision. Four of every 10 respondents felt the expectations for supervision less than adequate. In those districts where there was a policy for staff supervision, a minority of the principals saw the expectations as inadequate. The data suggest that districts that have policy for staff supervision communicate their expectations adequately to new principals. The implication for the new administrator is that they should be clear on the supervision expectations that the district and superintendent have for them. Beginning administrators need to realistically assess their supervision skills and ask for help if they are not prepared for supervision duties. Those administrators who did not initially have staff supervision responsibilities found that they were now engaged in the supervisory process. The data suggest

that a lack of training and preparation for the supervisory role was common for first time rural principals. There was no indication in the data from this study that first time principals received such training through their boards of education.

Factors in a Successful First Principalship

We asked principals to think about the factors that they believed were the most significant in establishing a first principalship and to describe the five most significant factors that contributed to establishing themselves as a principal (e. g., training, experience, and personality). The responses were grouped into fourteen broad categories listed in order of frequency as: character traits, experience, leadership and interpersonal skills, personality, training, support from central office, working with staff relationships, personal motivation, support systems, situational considerations, support from colleagues, patience, and risk taking as related to standing on one's principles.

Character traits were identified as: strong work ethic, imagination, ambition, confidence, and consistency. One respondent said 'A strong work ethic leads to credibility. This is especially true in a smaller/rural school. If you are not willing to lead by example, people will not be as likely to put in the extra effort.' Teschke (1995) agrees that effective leaders are those who are visible and prepared to put in the necessary effort to lead the school (p. 10).

'Experience' was the category attracting the second most responses, including: successful teaching, being a vice-principal, and being mentored by an administrator. One respondent said that 'mentoring by an experienced principal' and having them 'available to talk over situations and routine is important. Their experience in scheduling and policy are invaluable to a beginning principal.' Another respondent had 'watched five previous principals work in the school' and had a year of vice-principal experience before taking the job. A former vice-principal thought 'the number one factor [for success] was mentorship through a vice-principalship.' These comments in support of mentoring new principals are consistent with the literature (Adams 1999; Ellis and Macrina 1994; Lovely 1999; Peel et al. 1998).

Leadership skills and interpersonal skills were identified as including: organizational skills, communication, and leadership styles. Interpersonal skills, such as listening and empathy, were also indicated. One respondent said there must be a 'willingness to listen and persuade rather

than dictate.’ Another respondent talked about the importance of organizational skills. ‘It is very important to be on top of things especially so in your first year. If staff members see that you are organized and on top of things, I feel that things will go a lot smoother for you.’

In discussing ‘personality,’ while repeat responses were not counted for frequency, it is worth noting that one respondent felt the need to list personality twice. That respondent said first time principals need a personality that, ‘is open to hearing others so that they feel heard’ and ‘is open to sharing decision making with the stakeholders of the decision.’ Somewhat reflective of this view of first year principals is the viewpoint of Sergiovanni (1995) who spoke of principals as ‘ministers to serve parents, teachers, and students’ (p. 127).

Training was seen as an important factor for success in a first principalship. Respondents expressed having university programs and other professional administration inservice in mind, under this category. There was no distinction made between preservice or inservice. One respondent stated that someone in a first principalship needs ‘an academic background broad enough to have informed opinions about educational issues.’ The same respondent cited the example of special education and the changes within that program. Bergh and Van der Linde (1996) added that principals ‘need to take the initiative to learn about curriculum theories and issues’ (p. 4). One principal stated:

My graduate classes leading to my Masters Degree in administration were invaluable in helping me adjust to the dynamic role of [the] principal. These [classes] provided me with the theoretical background to help me understand many of the things that were occurring in a much broader fashion. This depth and breath of understanding led to making higher quality decisions, especially in stressful circumstances that inevitably occur during that first year.

The comments concerning training proved to be interesting in that a minority of the respondents downplayed training as a success factor. Some principals made comments such as, ‘training has virtually nothing to do with the job’ and ‘I don’t think you need a lot of post secondary training to be successful as an administrator.’ Alvy and Robbins and Alvy (1998) have observed that the new principal, ‘often feels unprepared for the role, despite extensive training’ (p. 26).

Notwithstanding this, those administrators with training seemed sup-

portive of it, while those without seemed sceptical. We felt it would be interesting to investigate the types and qualities of training that these participants had in order to more fully explore the reasons for their not considering it of much value in their first principalship.

Supports from central office, boards of education, community/parents were identified as success factors by close to ten percent of the respondents. One respondent stated that support from the superintendent and local school board were important, but that 'expectations of each [should] be clearly spelled out in advance.' The literature supports the idea that the duties and roles of local advisory boards must be clear and well communicated (Ubben and Hughes 1997, 68; Bolman and Deal 1993, 30; Sergiovanni 1995, 68). Another principal spoke about 'knowing the community beforehand' as important. A further comment describing the support of the community was that 'in a smaller school it is important to build bridges with the community. You never know when you might need help from them.' The respondents who identified support and working with parents as a factor for success did not describe the ways that they perceived parents showing their support.

Slightly less than ten percent of the participants raised working with staff and establishing a working relationship with them, as factors in their success. One principal stated, 'I learned to use the strengths that were already present . . . making the staff feel involved is very important.' Another respondent spoke about expectations and said, 'I let my staff know what my expectations were . . . I take a very collaborative approach to leadership within my school and I had to communicate this early, so that staff members knew that their input, when requested, is important.'

Fewer respondents mentioned the remaining categories: personal motivation, support systems, and situational considerations, as factors leading to a successful first principalship. Respondents discussed career advancement and financial incentive as factors. Other respondents indicated that family support was an important factor. One principal said, 'I wasn't afraid to take a risk, which is partly to do with me and partly to do with the support of my family.' Another principal found his 'family was very supportive' when he had been considering the move to administration. Daresh and Playko (1997) emphasize the importance of maintaining personal and family support and to 'keep a personal focus on what is truly important in your life' (p. 101).

Respondents cited the support they had received from colleagues as a factor in applying for their first principalship. One principal commented,

'I was encouraged by my staff to apply for the job.' Another principal had been 'encouraged by . . . fellow staff members to apply.' Respondents agreed that an important factor for them had been that the previous principals had not done a very good job.

Patience, taking risks and standing on one's principles each had garnered responses from our participants. One principal said it was important to 'above all . . . [to] be patient.' Another principal said it was important to stay 'steadfast' to one's principles in the midst of all that is going on. In the area of risk taking, one principal felt the 'willingness to assume risk and its consequences' was an important strategy in establishing a successful first principalship.

Summary and Conclusions

First time principals were often surprised by the high expectations related to their new roles and the sense that they were expected to have answers to the many problems in the school (personal and well as professional). The transition from being a staff member-teacher to becoming a staff member-principal resulted in considerable role confusion for some principals and for their teacher colleagues. Also unexpected, on becoming a principal, was the reality of dealing with difficult parents. These factors contributed to a sense of unpreparedness in the face of unexpected demands on these neophyte principals. Many first-time principals reacted strategically (some more than others) to address their newfound difficulties. A key learning for new principals was centred on concern about balancing work and family life. Many of the issues raised by our beginning principal informants are reflected and informed by the literature.

The general findings from this study centred on training and experience related to administration of schools. Many of the first time principals in rural schools had limited specific preparation for the principalship and only a few had related administrative experience in others roles, such as the vice principalship. The majority of participants had no school-based administrative training prior to their first principalship. Most participants had little or no administrative experience other than their involvement in leadership roles as teachers and rarely as vice principals. The findings of the study indicate that the majority of new principals who had vice-principal experience, or had a mentoring relationship, felt they were better prepared for their first principalship. As to the use of successful teacher leaders, Anderson (2003) raised the question of the

school districts' misunderstanding of teacher leaders as too quickly seeing these people as a ready pool of future administrators. Quite simply some are and some are not. We feel some teacher leaders may well be recruited into the principalship without due consideration given to their need for support in face of less than adequate preparation, or experience as an administrator. Clearly, prospective principals could better understand the role of the principal. The elimination of the vice-principal role in many rural schools may have contributed to the surprises and unanticipated learning experienced by our study participants. We think that exposing prospective principals to the descriptions of our study participants and connecting them with the factors that are associated with success are ways of fostering the development of beginning principals.

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