All Over Again: A Report on the Reflections of Retired Principals,
Their Preparation and Development as Principals

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Abstract

In this paper, three principals in Manitoba reflect on their past practice and preparation as effective leaders in three areas: certification, professional development, and mentorship. How prepared were these principals for their positions? If these principals had an opportunity to experience their careers as administrators all over again, would they do things the same way? This phenomenological research examined the discourse of three retired middle school principals using qualitative inquiry and analysis methods. From the data analysis, the following themes emerged as important in the development of administrators: mentoring, teamwork, experiential learning, conversations with peers, union knowledge and professional development.
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Introduction

With the demands today in education for accountability and measurable results in student achievement, driven in part by the No Child Left Behind legislation in the United States, as well as the changing demographics of the Canadian population with attendant growth in diversity and student learning needs, the breadth and knowledge of skills needed in the principalship has grown considerably. That growth comes with an attendant need to focus on the provision of quality preparation and professional development opportunities for principals, including mentoring. LeTendre and Roberts (2005) report that “prior to 1900, formal preparation programs for school administrators had not yet developed” (p. 4) and that “1900 to 1945 encompassed a period of vast growth in administrative programs” (p. 4). It was during this time that many states required that principals be certified (LeTendre & Roberts, p. 4) as certification was considered evidence of professional growth and training for the position. In 2005, LeTendre and Roberts reported that:

almost all states require candidates for principal certification either to (1) be eligible for a teaching certificate, (2) currently hold a valid teaching certificate, or (3) have held one in the past. Also, over 90% of the states plus the District of Columbia require that a principal candidate complete a state-approved preparation program to receive a certificate as a school leader. (p. 9)

In the United States, before one can apply for a principal or assistant principal position, one must have completed a Master’s program in educational administration (Wong, 2004, p. 141). With the requirement in most states that principals must be certified, research in educational
administration has focused on the university and college programs that prepare administrators for certification (Adams & Copland, 2005; Behar-Horenstein, 1995; Peterson, 2002; Wong, 2004). The research has resulted in graduate schools of education across the country reviewing and revamping their programs (Orr, 2006; Peterson 2002). Outcomes of this review have been the establishment of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, used by 40 states as a platform for their preparation programs and licensure, and the integration of the ISLLC standards into the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) accreditation requirements (Orr, 2006; Peterson, 2002).

Other parts of the world are reviewing the professional development of administrators as well. In England and Wales, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) was launched in 2000 as a national program to further enhance the development of educational leadership (Brundrett, 2006). This program is not a university program; however, two of its objectives are: “to find, analyse and celebrate good practice in school leadership in order to build a usable knowledge base for school leaders to share; and to demonstrate the impact of the NCSL on school leadership” (Brundrett, 2006, p. 473). This program has not been in place for ten years so it is too early to determine its effectiveness; however, similar national programs have been developed in New Zealand and Hong Kong (Brundrett, Fitzgerald & Sommefeldt, 2006; Wong, 2004).

In Manitoba, a school principal (administrator, educational leader) must be a certified teacher but does not need to be certified as a principal (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth [MECY], 2008, p. 3). The government does provide guidelines for the certification of administrators and issues two certificates, Level 1: School Administrator’s Certificate and Level 2: School Principal’s Certificate once the guidelines have been met (MECY, 2008). The four
areas of focus for this certification are: “leadership, instruction, management and personnel” (MECY, 2008, p. 4). Principals can obtain these certificates by participating in professional development opportunities offered through university courses, conferences and workshops sponsored by a number of different organizations.

Ongoing professional development is viewed as essential for the continued development of effective school leaders (Brundrett, 2006; Brundrett, Fitzgerald & Sommefeldt, 2006; EdSource, 2008; Grogan, 2002; Wong, 2004). The focus over the last few years has been to integrate practical experiences along with the theory and research when professional development activities are presented. Grogan and Andrews (2002) reported that education needs school-site leaders “who have the ability to build shared vision and never to lose sight of that vision while working with others to make difficult day-to-day decisions necessary to create good schools for all of America’s children” (p. 251). School divisions are taking a leadership role in the ongoing professional development of principals particularly in the areas of instruction, assessment and organizational management to ensure that their educational leaders are capable of working in diverse settings (EdSource, 2008; Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Orr, 2006; Peterson, 2002).

Mentorships enhance the learning of administrators as the mentors support, challenge, raise new issues, and provide vision for the mentees while providing leadership role models to aspire to (Crippen & Wallin, 2008; Kline, 1987; LeTendre & Roberts, 2005; Mitang, 2007; Normore, 2006). It has been the experience of the researcher after having spent forty years as an educator in Manitoba, and having been a mentor to a number of individuals both formally and informally that mentorships do enhance the effectiveness of administrators. Mentors may be assigned formally by the organization or they may be informal; however, Crippen and Wallin
(2008) report that mentors may include:

any and all “teachers” in our lives from whom we learn the truths that most impact our lives and shape whom it is we become. They are the people who help to set us on the paths of our lives underpinned by particular values that shape our future behaviors. (p. 2)

Thus parents and partners as well as educators and administrative leaders may be mentors as informal mentors are defined by the individual not by the organization. Level 1 and Level 2 certificates do not require that a principal be formally mentored; in fact, most of this mentoring occurs informally in Manitoba (Crippen & Wallin, 2008).

The purpose of this study was to interview three retired school principals to determine (a) whether they were certified and to what level; (b) whether they had any professional development in the areas of leadership, instruction, management and personnel, as these are the focus of leadership preparation by the province; (c) whether they were mentored before and during the course of their careers as principals; and (d) whether if principals had an opportunity to do their careers all over again, they would prepare differently for the position, either in their choices of professional development and/or mentorship opportunities. The conceptual framework for this study was past practice, also known as praxis, used by the participants to reflect on their individual leadership experiences. The research followed both phenomenological and qualitative inquiry.

Methodology

The research questions of this study were subjective and the answers depended on the individual leadership experiences of those within the study; therefore, the methodology of choice was qualitative in nature. Bogden and Knopp Biklen, (2007) defined qualitative research as: “an approach to social science research that emphasizes collecting descriptive data in natural
settings, uses inductive thinking, and emphasizes understanding the subjects point of view” (p. 275). In order to address the research questions, three retired public school principals were interviewed to obtain data related to their experiences and reflections as administrators. An attempt was made to corroborate the responses of those interviewed by asking questions on three fronts: (a) pre-appointment experiences, (b) administrative experiences, and (c) retirement reflections. All interviewees were asked to reflect on why they became administrators. Then, all interviewees were asked to reflect on their preparation for administration prior to being appointed to their first administrative position (as a vice principal or principal) as well as whether they were mentored to become educational leaders. They were asked to reflect on their professional development as administrators throughout their administrative careers and whether they were mentored as administrators. Lastly, they were asked to reflect on their careers as administrators and comment on whether they would prepare for the position the same way if they were to begin their careers all over again.

The study subjects included three retired public school principals, two females and one male, from an urban school division in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The study subjects were selected by association through purposeful sampling as past colleagues who are now retired. Though a past power-over relationship may have existed at one point because the researcher is a former superintendent in the province, all participants, as well as the researcher, are now retired. Therefore the professional power-over relationship has been severed. The researcher was conscious of researcher bias throughout the study as the researcher had prior knowledge of the participants; however, the participants indicated to the researcher that they would not have been as open in their responses to the questions posed if they had not had a mutual trust relationship with the researcher. The participants had all been middle school principals. Informed consent
was obtained in writing from the participants before the interviews occurred. No essential information was withheld from participants, nor was any misleading information about the research or its purposes provided. The research did not involve deception, nor did it include the necessity of waived informed consent.

In person semi-structured interviews were approximately one hour in length and took place at a time and place mutually agreed upon and convenient for the participant and the researcher. Participants responded to an identical set of questions (Appendix A) which were given to them in advance of the interview. Interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and the data analyzed and interpreted by the researcher according to qualitative research guidelines (Bogden & Knopp Biklen, 2007). Transcripts were given to the participants for member checks, at which point participants could add, delete, or change the information on the transcripts until they were comfortable with the content. Reductive analysis of the interviews was used to identify, code and categorize the data for the purposes of generalization into meaningful units that were used to identify themes and patterns related to the research questions. The research began in September 2008 and was completed in November 2008.

Findings

Based on the interview data, the following information concerning the participants is relevant to the interpretation of the data: two of the participants were female and one participant was male; all of the principals interviewed had been administrators between 12 to 16 years and had been retired for four years, two years or four months; all participants had prior leadership experience either as a department head or a team leader (similar duties as a department head but at a middle school level); all participants were vice principals prior to being appointed principals; all retired as middle school principals from the same urban school division; and all
participants had extensive experience working with professional organizations including subject area organizations and/or the Manitoba Teachers’ Society (MTS).

Certification

Two of the participants were certified at both Level 1 and Level 2. One participant had Level 1 certification and had completed most of the Level 2 requirements. Participants agreed that the flexibility in attending workshops, conferences or university courses in order to become certified rather than being able to achieve certification by obtaining a Master’s degree in educational administration was beneficial. One participant liked this flexibility for Level 1 certification but when it came to Level 2 felt more rigor was needed than was being provided in workshops so turned to the Master’s program courses in order to complete Level 2.

When asked whether it should be a requirement that administrators be certified with Level 1 and Level 2 certificates, all participants agreed; however, they noted that this should become mandatory only after the current certification program had been reviewed and revised to be more practical and relevant to the challenges facing administrators today. They believed that the program, as it is defined now, does not meet the needs of effective leaders in education today. Participants were not in agreement as to whether the certification of principals should take place before they were appointed to administrative positions or whether certification could be obtained during the first five years after being appointed. All participants indicated that there was benefit to learning something and then going back to one’s school to apply it rather than taking, for example, the theory of educational administration in a Master’s course while being a teacher and not being able to apply what one had learned right away.

Professional Development

Two of the participants had Master’s degrees although only one of them was in
educational administration. All participants had participated in professional development in the areas of leadership, personnel, management and instruction which are the areas required for Manitoba certification. The participants indicated that there were many different opportunities for professional development in educational leadership both before they became administrators and while they were principals. Participants attended a number of professional development sessions on leadership, instruction, management and personnel through university course work, in-services, workshops, conferences, division sponsored sessions, conversations with colleagues, reciprocal teaching, or through taking courses outside of education. All participants found that school division sponsored professional development was relevant to what they were doing regardless of whether it occurred prior to or after their appointment as a principal. Also, it provided just-in-time learning on topics such as budgets and staffing. One participant indicated that presenting a workshop to teachers was very good professional development for a principal: not only did one have to be knowledgeable about the subject matter but one had to model for teachers the importance of both remaining current in the field and the continuous development of educational practice throughout one’s career. Another participant found that taking a personnel course from an organization outside of education provided an opportunity to discuss personnel issues and to problem solve with leaders from different walks of life. This helped to open one’s mind to possible alternative solutions and thinking outside of the box which may not have happened if all of the participants in the course were educational leaders.

Participants also were involved in professional development on a number of other topics including: behaviour management of students, assessment and evaluation, middle years philosophy, educational law, special needs students, and specific curriculum subject areas. In the division in which the participants worked, professional development was a priority; principals
were encouraged to develop their skills by attending conferences beyond the ones sponsored by the division and to be involved in self-directed professional development. All of the participants had been involved with professional organizations both before and during their administrative careers. These organizations also provided them with professional development that they were able to apply as educational leaders. All participants indicated that they always learned something from every professional development activity they attended even though they admitted that some sessions were more beneficial than others.

*Mentoring*

All of the participants had both formal and informal mentors and were encouraged by their mentors to become administrators. The participants reported that they were mentored by their respective spousal partners, their peers, experienced administrators and superintendents. Their mentors changed over time as people moved away or retired but they all agreed that mentors were of value to them. Interestingly, all participants reported that during their careers they had worked with principals they did not want to emulate. Thus they were able to identify effective from ineffective educational leaders. They reported that this helped them in their own leadership development. All participants reported that being on a team of middle school principals was extremely valuable. The conversations they had, the ability to bounce ideas off of one another and the trust they developed as a group assisted all of them to become effective leaders. One participant described it this way: “we were all very trusting of one another. We all supported one another. I personally liked the team approach”. Another participant described that the real energy came from the team: “we could throw out ideas, we could talk about them, and about how other people approached problems and what they did. It was a very open kind of forum and we trusted each other”. Another participant reported “they supported each other
unconditionally”. However, when some of the actors on the team changed so did the dynamics of the team and this did have an effect on the closeness and relationships on the team. Trust was not the same and did not develop to the previous level. This can happen on any team depending on who is on the team and who they are connected to in the organization. For teams to be successful trust in one another is critical. If one member of the team suffers fallout from central office based on information shared at a team meeting because that information traveled up the pipeline, the “safe haven” of the team is destroyed. Mentoring breaks down when trust is broken or doesn’t develop. This is not surprising given the various personalities on the team but the loss of the positive effects of mentoring and professional development to the members of the team was a big loss to the division and to the further development of effective leaders.

Principals working in an urban school division are able to visit one another’s schools more easily than administrators working in rural areas where the closest school to one’s own may be many kilometers away. The unreliability of the internet in rural areas also poses problems. Telephones could be used but depending on how long one talks cost be cost prohibitive. One participant indicated that principals in rural areas should get involved in professional organizations at the provincial level in order to have conversations and discussions with colleagues and to develop networks in order to have people to bounce ideas off of and to avoid the feeling of loneliness. All participants stressed the importance of teamwork.

All participants indicated that they mentored other people, including the vice principal as well as other administrators in the division both formally and informally. One participant saw mentoring of the vice principal as being her responsibility: ”I believe my job was to take those young vice principals in and train them the best I could in every way that I could in all things that I could and then send them on their way”. The participants reported that they gained as well from
the mentoring experiences by using their knowledge, actively listening and by stretching themselves to problem solve with a colleague. One participant took mentoring of staff members to a higher level by developing a leadership team of eight staff members and meeting weekly with them and mentoring them over the course of two years. These people developed trust in one another, felt free to discuss things openly and to take the decisions they made back to the staff. The staff recognized these individuals as leaders and approved their decisions with confidence.

Reflection on Preparation

Participants reflected on how prepared they believed they were for the principalship. All three described their lack of preparation at the beginning of their administrative careers particularly in the areas of timetabling, preparation of budgets, and personnel issues; however, the participants believed that the experiences they had as either department heads or team leaders assisted them in their preparation for administration. One participant indicated that working with a national educational organization was a benefit as well. All developed skills as effective educational leaders through experiential learning and networking in addition to professional development and mentoring. Using role playing in their team meetings, debating, discussing, listening to and learning from other’s experiences, learning from one’s mistakes; observing others; and being able to see the “big picture” were examples given of experiential learning. They used reciprocal teaching to learn how to timetable effectively. Through focused conversations with colleagues in like situations they problem solved and debated possible solutions. Two participants indicated that discussing situations with administrators from outside of the division or with leaders from outside of education helped them to develop a broader understanding of the situations and also helped them to develop a wider perspective as leaders rather than focusing only on their schools and the division. All indicated that knowledge of the
unions in the division was necessary for effective leaders. One participant was involved in the local association of the MTS and became very familiar with the collective agreement for teachers and administrators as well as the contract for non-teaching employees. This participant indicated “if you don’t really know what the contract says, how can you possibly know how to do the job? You don’t even know what you can ask people to do and what you can’t ask people to do”. Another participant indicated “you’d better know what those collective agreements would do or you’d be in deep trouble”. The knowledge with respect to particular clauses in the collective agreements helped these administrators to deal effectively with personnel issues and kept them out of any legal difficulties.

All of the participants indicated that if they had to do their careers all over again they wouldn’t hesitate to become administrators. One indicated that the systems approach used in the Master’s program in educational administration was appreciated so recommended finishing the M. Ed. prior to becoming a principal. The other two participants indicated they would prepare themselves the same way stressing the importance of mentoring, conversations in the field and union involvement. All participants indicated that their main focus as administrators was the students in their care and all of their preparation was directed towards being effective educational leaders so the children in their schools would benefit.

Discussion

This section considers the findings in light of current research in the area of principal preparation.

Certification

All participants were principals of schools for a number of years prior to retirement and their years of administrative experience were within two to four years of each other. Although
the participants agreed that certification for principals should be a requirement in Manitoba they put some caveats on this. They reported that the program for certification needed to be revised and become more relevant and practical to principals in schools today. Grogan (2002) supports this idea of relevancy and reported:

the advice is to thread practical experiences throughout program components. This trend seems to suggest that we might better prepare leaders by first exposing them to practical tasks and daily routines and then providing them with relevant research and scholarship that allows them to expand and critique their assumptions. To do this would necessitate tight coordination with school districts and professional organizations. (p. 251)

The participants supported Grogan (2002) as well in that they indicated that involving the Manitoba Teachers’ Society and local school divisions in the development and implementation of university courses and professional development would enhance the development of effective school leaders.

*Professional Development*

All participants were involved in a variety of professional development opportunities throughout their careers and were encouraged to do so by their school division which had professional development of its employees as one of its priorities. EdSource (2008) reported that “effective programs use methods such as internships, mentoring and cohort peer groups to help administrators learn how and when to use this knowledge. Researchers also emphasize collaboration between providers and local districts so training is tailored to local challenges” (p. 19). Data from the participants’ interviews would support this finding as two of the participants suggested internships would be helpful to those interested in becoming educational leaders and all participants supported mentoring and cohort peer groups as well as collaboration between the
universities and the school divisions. In fact, some of this collaboration has already begun between the University of Manitoba and some school divisions where cohorts within the divisions have been formed and faculty members go to the school divisions to instruct the courses. Further development of this collaboration would include faculty and division staff co-instructing a course, faculty supervisors of internships, and action-research projects as part of the cohort experience.

*Mentoring*

Research has shown and the participants reported that mentors come in different sizes and shapes. For the three participants in this study, team mentoring while being part of the team of middle school principals was reported as a major factor in their development. The concept of team mentoring is supported by Kline (1987) who reported “we are more open with each other, we are more tolerant of our differences, more aware of our areas of commonality I feel we can now work together, help each other, and have some influence in the district” (p. 71). School divisions that can encourage the concept of team mentoring as well as individual mentoring will have more effective educational leaders and in the long run the students will be the beneficiaries of the mentoring of their principals.

Crippen and Wallin (2008) reported in their research that mentorship is valuable because “individuals learn from the styles and/or characteristics of others whom they would like to emulate” (p. 1). All participants reported positively on the value of both being mentored and being a mentor. Mitang (2007) reported that:

mentoring should be seen as only one stage—albeit an important one—in a continuum of professional development of principals that begins with pre-service training and, ideally, continues throughout leaders’ careers. And it is only one piece among many that must be
in place if states and districts are to increase the likelihood that principals can eventually become effective leaders of learning. (p. 20)

Mentoring is essential in the development and sustaining of effective leaders and the participants in this study were fortunate to work in a division that supported the mentoring of administrators provided by peers, administrators, superintendents and assistant superintendents.

Reflection on Preparation

Reflection is part of the practice of effective leaders and is crucial to the development of effective educational leaders. Normore (2006) stated that “reflection on practice should be a prime consideration in the recruitment of school leaders” (p. 62). The participants of this study had been retired for a few months or a few years and were able to recall their administrative experiences without difficulty. If they had been retired for ten or more years, their memories may not have been as accurate. The analysis of data from the participants’ reflections indicated that in addition to the themes of mentoring, professional development and teamwork discussed previously, preparation, experiential learning, and union knowledge were the most prevalent. In the area of preparation Orr (2006) reported that:

District and university collaborations have been the basis for significant innovation in leadership preparation and have become more common in recent years. Fifteen years ago, district/university collaborations were primarily initiatives of smaller regional colleges and universities. Now, all types of colleges and universities collaborate with school districts and are developing substantive relationships that reflect local contexts and assumptions about how leadership can improve schools and communities. (p. 497)

Research on the collaboration in Manitoba would be valuable to indicate where this province stands in the review of its educational administration programs, including Masters and
certification programs. In addition, the participants reported that they learned by doing and that their experiential learning assisted in making them effective leaders. Brundrett’s (2006) research reported previously supports experiential learning leading to good practice.

Knowledge of collective agreements negotiated by unions for all employees assists administrators in being effective. If administrators have no prior knowledge of the contents of the collective agreements they are more likely to make mistakes in personnel matters. Having union knowledge would be an asset for administrators. If senior administrators in school divisions discover that there is a lack of this knowledge in school-based administrators, they would be wise to provide in-servicing on it to avoid legal challenges and to increase the leadership capacity and confidence of school-based administrators.

Conclusion

Given the limited sample size of this study, general conclusions are tentative. However, based on the research in this study, it appears that the certification of administrators requires review and revision before it becomes a requirement in Manitoba. Professional development prior to becoming an administrator and ongoing professional learning opportunities during an administrator’s tenure is essential for effective leadership. Experiential learning and having discussions with peers were referred to most often as being beneficial. Mentoring and being mentored play an important role in the development of effective educational leaders and the benefits are felt throughout the school system. School divisions should be encouraged to develop mentoring programs for their administrators that are both individually and team based. Knowledge of collective agreements was considered to be essential for administrators to carry out their personnel responsibilities. This study confirmed that administrators develop skills in a number of ways, not just in taking courses or through experience.
This study focused on three principals who had worked at the same grade levels and in the same school division. Further research and comparison of findings could be done in this area if the number of principals interviewed was increased, the sample covered all levels of schools in a number of school divisions, and the sample included principals currently practicing in the field. This study was valuable because it documented the experiences of recently retired school-based administrators who were noted as having successful careers and were prepared well to lead schools effectively. However, further research is needed in the area of preparation of educational leaders in Manitoba because effective educational leaders create the conditions for learning for the growing diversity of experience children bring to today’s schools which should be the main focus of all principals.
References


Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Pre-appointment experiences:

1. Tell me about why you became an administrator (educational leader).

2. Describe for me the pre-appointment preparation you had (university courses, professional development, level 1 or 2 certificates, etc.) for administration before you became an administrator.
   - Which of these experiences were most helpful? Why?
   - Which of these experiences were least helpful? Why?

3. Tell me how prepared you felt for your work as an administrator.
   - Were there any areas in which you felt unprepared? If so, what were they?

4. Tell me about any mentors who influenced you to become an administrator.
   - What was their relationship to you and why did they become mentors to you?
   - What skills or knowledge did you learn from them and how did that help you become a better administrator?

Administrative experiences:

1. Describe for me the professional development experiences you had (university courses, conferences, workshops, level 1 or 2 certificates, etc.) in administration while you were an administrator.
   - Which of these experiences were most helpful? Why?
   - Which of these experiences were least helpful? Why?

2. Tell me how these professional development experiences influenced you as an administrator.

3. Tell me about any mentors who influenced your development as a leader.
What was their relationship to you and why did they become mentors to you?

What skills or knowledge did you learn from them and how did that help you become a better administrator?

4. Tell me about why you did or did not become a mentor to an administrator.

- If you did mentor an administrator, why did you choose to mentor that individual(s)?
- If you chose not to mentor other administrators, what factors influenced that decision?

Retirement reflections:

1. What preparation benefited you the most as an educational leader?

2. If you were to do it all over again, would you prepare yourself differently both prior to your appointment and during the years you were an administrator? If so, how? If not, why not?

3. What do you believe is the best preparation for teachers who wish to become administrators?

   - What form should these opportunities take?
   - Who should be responsible for designing these opportunities?