Investigating Communal Spaces: A Closer Look at the Novice Principal Role

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Abstract

The present study examined the use of reflective learning environments for graduate students studying the transition from education and training to the real-world practice of principalship. The purpose of this qualitative case study was twofold. First, the researchers sought to understand the day to day responsibilities of a novice school principal. The second objective was related to graduate students' training. Graduate students used their researcher roles to question and reflect on the expected behaviors, practices, and expectations of the principalship. This addressed educational training recommendations related both to communal spaces (Margolin, 2011) and Fullan's (2002) concept of learning in context.

Keywords: communal spaces, reflective learning environments, principalship

According to Duncan, Range and Scherz (2011), current university principal preparation programs need to emphasize opportunities for principal candidates to develop strong interpersonal skills, and field-initiated learning activities that reflect the career stages of the principalship. Many scholars in the field have argued for the importance of complementing course content with field-based learning experience (e.g.,Fullan, 2002; Spillane & Lee, 2014; O'Doherty & Ovando, 2013; Barnett, 2003).

Communal space has been defined as the (in) between space that can provide additional support and scaffolding for educational administration graduate students as they transition from graduate school to the field-of-practice but before their practicum experience begins. This in-between is one where novice school principals can share real-world knowledge with educational administration graduate students so that they can question and reflect on the expected behaviors, practices, and expectations of the principalship (Margolin, 2011).

Fullan's (2002) theory of leadership and sustainability specifically proposes the concept of learning in context. Fullan (2002) defines the concept of *learning in context* as follows:

> Learning in the setting where you work, or learning in context, is the learning with the greatest pay-off because it is more specific (literally applied to the situation) and because it is social (thereby developing shared and collective knowledge and commitments). Learning in context is developing leadership and improving the system as you go. This kind of learning is designed to simultaneously improve the organization and the (social/moral) context. Learning in context is related to sustainability because it improves the system in a way that establishes conditions conducive to continuous development. These conditions include: opportunities to learn from others on-the-job, the daily fostering of current and future leaders, the selective retention of good ideas and best practices, the explicit monitoring of performance, and the like (p. 417).

Gray and Lewis (2012) provide another argument in support of learning in context, as they conclude that "the most effective way to train instructional leaders is through extended assignments in schools where they will share the intensity of the principal's day and the

complexities and rewards of leadership that attend to working with students, teachers, and the

school's community" (p. 72). In that case, the authors believe that principal training is akin to

university-based teacher education, as preservice teachers are left to their own devices to connect

the gap between course work and fieldwork, and so are novice school principals (Britzman,

2003, Darling-Hammond, 2006; Drago-Severson, 2012). Principal preparation programs must

provide field-based learning opportunities for principal candidates through reflexive learning

environments. Reflexive learning environments are spaces whereby the educator, in this case the

graduate students who are principal candidates, examine their practices "within the context of

personal histories in order to make connections between personal lives and professional careers,

and to understand personal (including early) influences on professional practice (Cole &

Knowles, 2000, p. 2). By having graduate students who are aspiring principals conduct research

in authentic school settings, this innovative principal preparation experience provides a real-life,

day-to-day snapshot of the daily challenges school principals face (Archer, 2005).

What is more, this study recognizes that the primary role of the principal is to be able to

work effectively with many individuals (parents, students, teachers, staff, and other stake

holders). "Reflexive learning environments require that we provide thoughtful spaces for

preservice educators to critically examine fluctuations in identity that are experienced

over time, visualizing the emotions of frustration, uncertainty, and vulnerability that are often

present during times of personal change and growth" (Hyatt, 2015, pg. 87). By having graduate

students conduct research in authentic school settings, this innovative experience provides a real-

life, day-to-day snapshot of the daily challenges school principals face (Archer, 2005). As such,

this method of training graduate students also adds to the understanding of the roles and

responsibilities of principals, particularly as they transition throughout different levels of the principalship.

The transition from the assistant principal role to the principalship requires a giant leap of faith. Career promotion comes with its share of responsibilities. Presently, the focus of the American education system is the principal's instructional leadership capacity (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Spillane & Lee, 2014). "As revealed in this and other studies, school administration is a people business, which inevitably leads to conflicts when performance expectations, philosophies, and learning styles differ" (Barnettk, Shoho & Oleszewski, 2012, pg. 117). Assistant principals who actively pursue and envision themselves in the principal's role understand that they will now be stepping into a demanding career, work overload and stress, limited contact with students, with public transparency and full disclosure of mistakes, lack of time for family, and uncertainty of their ability to successfully perform in this role (James & Whiting, 1999).

The present authors argue that field studies of principals in these various stages of career development can serve two purposes. The first is to better understand the roles and responsibilities of principals, particularly at various career stages and from various perspectives, and to better prepare graduate students to perform these roles and responsibilities.

Theoretical Framework

The most prominent debate concerning aspiring principals' preparation programs is that preservice principals are not equipped with the skills to apply theoretical learning to real-life situations (Oplatka, 2009; Spillane & Lee, 2014). According to Green (2010), the instructional leadership role has many facets which include: (a) creating a comprehensive, rigorous and

coherent curriculum, (b) providing personalized and motivating learning environments for students, (c) developing the instructional and leadership capacity of staff, (d) maximizing time spent on quality instruction, (e) supervising instruction, (f) monitoring and evaluating the impact of the instructional program, and (g) developing assessment and accountability systems to monitor student progress. Relatedly, this research study proposes to enhance current Educational Administration graduate students' curricular knowledge by adding a field-based experience to reduce the "reality shocks" (Spillane & Lee, 2014) of the principalship (Orr, 2006).

This research project addresses the gap that exists between theory and practice based on the Wallace Foundation Report (2016). According to the report, current conditions of university principal preparation programs, "lack adequate clinical experience –potentially the most powerful learning opportunity for aspiring principals-is the biggest agreed-upon shortfall" (pg. 9). Second, we propose that by providing current Educational Administration graduate students an opportunity to interview novice school principals in real-life settings, the aspiring principals will help bridge the gap between theory and practice (Kearney & Valadez, 2015; Gurley, Anast-May & Lee, 2015; Hallinger & Murphy, 2012).

Statement of the Problem and Research Question

According to Spillane and Lee (2013), "most research on novice school principals in the United States predates the institutionalization of standards and test-based high-stakes accountability- policy changes that target low-performing urban school systems in particular" (pg. 433). Updated research is therefore needed to reflect this new environment, particularly from the perspective of novice principals, who are learning both the foundations of principalship and how to navigate the high-stakes testing system.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was twofold. First, the researchers sought to understand the day to day responsibilities of a novice school principal. The second objective was related to graduate students' training. Graduate students used their researcher roles to question and reflect on the expected behaviors, practices, and expectations of the principalship. This addressed educational training recommendations related both to communal spaces (Margolin, 2011) and Fullan's (2002) concept of learning in context.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative approach design and methodology, employing case study within a South Texas borderlands community. According to Yin (2006), case study design is appropriate when the research addresses descriptive and explanatory questions, and the researcher wants an in-depth understanding about people and events. The present study utilized this design because the goal was to collect pertinent program information relevant to novice school principals. Specifically, the researchers sought an in-depth understanding of how the novice principals in the study made sense of their leadership roles and responsibilities.

The study was conducted by two educational administration graduate student researchers and their professor. Before the graduate students went out to the field to collect data through individual face-to-face novice principal interviews, they received Institutional Review Board (IRB) training presented by their professor. Following the collection of all the signed IRB forms and consents, the graduate students started their research work.

A qualitative data-gathering technique was used to collect data via face-to-face interviews at the novice principals' schools or offices, using ten researcher-developed open-ended questions as the research instrument (Table 1). Collaboratively, the graduate student researchers and the professor developed the 10 item open-ended, semi-structured questionnaire

with the intent of "capturing a realistic preview of the novice principals' educational preparation, pre-principalship experiences, mentorship, leadership style, and responsibilities" (Viloria, Volpe, Guajardo & Arce, 2017, In press). In order to prepare the *Principal Open-Ended Questionnaire,* researchers agreed to utilize the *2015 Professional Standards for Educational Leaders*: Standard 1. Mission, Vision, and Core Values; Standard 2. Ethics and Professional Norms; Standard 3. Equity and Cultural Responsiveness; Standard 4. Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; Standard 5. Community of Care and Support for Students; Standard 6. Professional Capacity of School Personnel; Standard 7. Professional Community for Teachers and Staff; Standard 8. Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community; Standard 9. Operations and Management; Standard 10. School Improvement (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015).

The individual face-to-face interviews were initiated and completed within one fall semester in 2016 by the South Texas borderlands community Educational Administration graduate student researchers. The data collected is presented in the form of narratives offered by the participants as they answered each of the 10 semi-structured, open-ended questions. "The researchers' intent was to capture the individual novice principals' perceptions of their instructional leadership practices" (Viloria, et al., In press) and what Mishler (1986) describes as the "respondents' worlds of meaning" (pg.7).

Table 1: Principal Open-Ended Questionnaire

Number	Question
1	How long have you been a school assistant principal and/or principal at this school?
2	Was your master's degree in educational administration or other field of study awarded by the local university (TAMIU) or by a different institution? Please elaborate on your major field of study before obtaining your master's degree.
3	How many years did you teach and at what levels before you became an assistant principal and/or principal? Please explain and elaborate on the grades and subjects that you taught.
4	Please tell us the importance of the following educational goals: (a) promoting foundational skills; (b) promoting college-readiness skills for all students; (c) promoting social justice issues like equality, culturally relevant lessons, and advocacy for the underrepresented/underserved/underprepared students; and (d) promoting teachers' professional development in the areas of mathematics and science.
5	How do you know you are enhancing and changing teachers' classroom practices? What guides your decisions?
6	How often do you continue to do things in a certain manner just because they have always been done that way?
7	How do you accommodate new practices based on your ever-changing accountability situation to ensure that the needs of the underrepresented/ underserved/underprepared students are met?
8	What are the most pressing issues at your school right now?
9	Please describe your leadership style.
10	Please tell us, who do you consider to be your mentor and why?

(Viloria, Volpe, Guajardo & Kyle, 2017, In press)

Participants

A convenience sampling method was used to recruit two novice middle school principals from a South Texas borderlands community (Marshall, 1996). Basically, the graduate students looked for participants who were novice school principals at a local middle school. The researchers used convenience sampling because of their time constraints and limited financial resources. The participants had full disclosure about this research study and voluntarily gave their consent to participate. Accordingly, their schools were assigned pseudonyms in order to protect their identity. For the purpose of this study the schools were assigned the following pseudonyms: (1) Bluebonnet Middle School; and (2) Olive Middle School. Bluebonnet Middle School had about 1, 356 students at the time, composed of 99.6% Hispanic students. Nearly, 83.7% received free or reduced-price lunch. Students at Bluebonnet Middle School were taught by teachers with diverse years of teaching experience; 26% of the teachers at the time had 0-5 years of experience, 40.6% had 6-20 years of teaching experience and 14% of the teachers at this school had more than twenty year of teaching experience. Students at Olive Middle at the time totaled 1,056. Of those 1,056 students, 100% were Hispanic and nearly 95% received free or reduced-price lunch. Students at Olive Middle School were taught by teachers with a varied range of teaching experience. Among the teachers at Olive middle school at the time of the study, 17.8% had 0-5 years of experience, 42% had 6-20 years of experience and nearly 3% had twenty of more years of experience.

Data Analysis

Once the individual face-to-face interviews were completed, the responses were analyzed by the professor and the graduate student using the constant comparative method of data coding through a four step analysis process. (Glaser, 1965; Fram, 2013). Each graduate student researcher first analyzed his or her own interview transcript and created initial codes for the

participants' responses. Second, each graduate student researcher exchanged transcripts and

created an independent list of codes for the participant's responses. Third, the professor analyzed

each interview transcript independently. Finally, the three researchers met, reviewed all the

codes to determine inter-coding consistency. It is important to note that contradictions were

resolved through consensus evaluation. The codes were arranged into three themes: data-driven

decisions for student accountability, continuous improvement cycle and caring pedagogy. The

emerging themes are presented below with illustrative quotes to provide data descriptors, per

methodology described by Ary, Jacobs, and Sorensen (2010).

Novice Principals' Emerging Themes

Themes	Description
Data-Driven Decisions for Student Accountability	Novice principals used student accountability data to create academically successful campus-internal intervention systems
Continuous Improvement Cycle	Novice principals analyze the inputs (teacher quality) and teaching with outputs (student achievement)
Caring Pedagogy	Novice principals establish strong meaningful relationships with stakeholders

Data Driven Decisions for Student Accountability

Universally, the principals' primary goal is students' academic success. Effective school

researchers concur that a principal's role is second only to the teacher's primary role (Edmonds,

1979, Hallinger & Heck, 1996). Accordingly, the novice principal at Olive Middle School related

her experiences with school accountability. *"In this campus, student accountability is always*

changing; and unfortunately, many of students do not have parental support due to different

circumstances". Furthermore, she added that *"to ensure that the needs of the underrepresented, underserved, and underprepared students are met, different interventions are placed in practice like: Math, Reading, Science, and Social Studies pull-outs are amongst these interventions as are daily after school tutorials"*. Relatedly, Olive Middle School's principal highlighted the integration of professional development opportunities are offered to teachers to increase student accountability.

Both novice school principals agreed that the most pressing issues at their campuses were: *student accountability, teacher style of instruction, and mobility of students*. The Olive Middle School principal stated that *"holding students accountable and engaged in their school work is a behavior desired by the teachers"*. Although, *"teachers try to inculcate student responsibility, it is a habit that many students are reluctant to possess"*. Furthermore, because the "*teachers' teaching styles are different sometimes teachers are not willing to change, especially when it comes to the use of technology. Teachers don't want to "let go" of their strategies and prefer not to try new ones"*.

The Olive Middle School principal reported that she thrives in promoting active student engagement in the classroom and professional training to teachers in need of technology support. Accordingly, she reported that she is very data driven and uses district and campus data to make the necessary changes in the classrooms. She is fully aware that the district's content based assessments benchmarks (CBAs), and most importantly high-stakes exams results, like the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness STAAR (TEA 2012-2013) results will guide the campus instructional leadership decisions. Teacher retention is another factor she considers when making decisions. She is convinced that keeping teachers happy in all perspectives will result in student success.

Similarly, the principal at Blue Bonnet Middle School shared her thoughts and her passion for teaching, leading, and engaging students in their education. When she was asked to define her most important educational goals, she identified the following: Promoting College – readiness skills for all students; "*because we model and stress that a college degree is an attainable goal for all students regardless of your background (i.e. special education, immigrants, or anywhere they are coming from). Any student can make it; we show the value and show students that is the ultimate goal for all of them*". Furthermore, she added that promoting social – justice issues like equality, culturally – relevant lessons, and advocacy for the underrepresented, underserved, and underprepared students is similarly important; "*because when students find or discover a calling they will work with you. They become more involved and observed in academics because they take a personal interest*". Her answers exemplify that she cares and has high hopes for the students regardless of their background.

Continuous Improvement Cycle

Resonant with the literature, the principal's role is second only to teaching in terms of impacting student academic success (Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). "Britzman (2003) suggests that for educators to allow students to construct knowledge socially— a process wherein all contribute to knowledge—it is necessary to become comfortable with *not knowing*, embracing vulnerability and uncertainty in the journey" (as cited in Hyatt, pg. 92, 2015). The Olive Middle School principal shared the following thoughts about the students' continuous academic improvement, "*at this campus, students come and go mainly from and to our border country, thus students' mobility is another campus issue. Their constant mobility making matters worse, at times these students lack the necessary knowledge to succeed in the classrooms. Obviously, their English language is primordial, but sometimes their lack of content*

knowledge is evident due to their instability". In reference to educational goals, her goals differ by school level. While she considers promoting college readiness skills for all students in the at high school level, she considers promoting foundational skills such as reading, math, writing, and English speaking as the most important goals in the middle school level. She added, "*it is all about the whole child in the community; there are students with lots of issues, consequently they struggle with learning"*. In order for the students to succeed they need to have a strong foundation and their foundation is math and writing, but most importantly reading since it takes reading comprehension to do well in any other subject"*.

The Blue Bonnet Middle School Principal measures the classroom instruction by measuring the *"quality of the teachers' daily instruction from the beginning of the school year and in everything based on data such as student's attendance, academics, teacher turn over, climate, measurable and non-measurable observation"*. It was clear that her decisions are based on different types of data that she could use to justify any changes she would make in the campus. When asked how often she continued to do things in a certain manner just because they have always been done that way she stated she doesn't do things a certain manner. She added "*I always change them based on what fits the needs, goals, teachers, students, etc. You need to admit when a change is needed and do it. Doing the same thing all the time is not my leadership style"*. Her response brought to mind the continuous improvement plan, which she seemed very confident about using.

Caring Pedagogy

"New principals often struggle with feelings of professional isolation and loneliness as they transition into a role that carries ultimate responsibility and decision-making powers" (Spillane & Lee, 2013, pg. 433). For instance, both novice principals mentioned the importance

of being observant of the culture, teachers, maintenance and facilities personnel, parent and students. Hence, leadership in practice in effective school campuses is shared and distributed among the teachers (Spillane, 2001). Pecan Middle School principal added that she trusted her teachers and everyone working in the school for the wellbeing of the students. She understood the importance of having a good campus climate. Furthermore, she added the following thoughts as educators, "*you teach all students and expect them to learn. I trust my teachers and empower them to make decisions in their teaching styles, in their teaching methods to help all learners. I do this because accountability keeps changing but teaching should stay true. I don't want to bring politics in here, just teaching. In other words, I want them to keep teaching and be passionate about it because they care about students and not their scores*". The Blue Bonnet Middle School principal described her leadership style in the following statement, "*I lead by example. I walk the talk. I expect excellence from everyone, commitment, loyalty, excitement. Then I have to be loyal to their needs and show excitement. Everything I expect from them I need to show it to them. How I write a memo, talk to students, talk to cafeteria staff, everybody in general and show I treat them with dignity and respect*".

Resonant with the literature of a principal's role in creating a positive campus culture and climate, the Olive Middle School principal described herself as *"a positive leader"* who takes ownership for what she has done, good or bad. She added that "*if it was bad, I learned from that experience".* She has an "open door" policy and believes that students' learning is "*all about the teacher" and those who help her make of this campus a success*. She is open minded and willing to listen and accept ideas for the benefit of the students. Relatedly, she leads by example and makes sure that if she says one thing, she will not do another, as she added, *"In my very own opinion, leading by example, is a critical element of a productive leadership. All of this is an effective way*

of leading a positive campus and climate". The Olive Middle School principal was pleased to share that she considers her previous principal to be her mentor. In this interview she expressed how she *"learned all about leading with passion and doing the right thing; being positive and providing teachers all the tools they need to ensure student success".*

Limitations of the Study

The case study had a limited amount of participants since only two middle school novice school principals participated in this study. It is not the intent of the researchers to generalize its findings or conclusions. In addition to the limited sample size the data analysis only represents the perceptions of novice school principals and not the teachers, parents, and students of the South Texas borderland region where the data were collected.

Discussion and Recommendation for Future Studies

There were two objectives to the present study. The first objective was to understand the roles and responsibilities of principals from the perspective of two South Texas borderlands community novice middle school principals. The second objective was to provide an overview of the importance of complementing the coursework of aspiring principals with field-based learning experiences (Fullan, 2002; Spillane & Lee, 2014; O'Doherty & Ovando, 2013; Barnett, 2003). Some of the most important points presented by the novice school principals regarding their participation in this study were their suggestions for future research. For example, the principal at Olive Middle School suggested that: *A good question to ask and add is "As you are in your first year as a principal, what is the one thing that was very unexpected to you? Because the most unexpected thing for me was learning that social skills and communication sets the tone for your school. The way you present yourself shows your leadership; about 95% of your communication comes from body language and these things are things education will not teach you. You need to show everything is in control by being an*

effective communicator, that is the one thing that will make you or break you. Knowing everything is not the only thing that will help you succeed. Part of communication is being a good listener; you must be a good listener in order to succeed. In addition, the principal at Blue Bonnet Middle School suggested that *in reference to educational goals, her goals differ by school level. "I consider promoting college readiness skills for all students in the high school level; for example, promoting foundational skills such as reading, math, writing, and English speaking as the most important goal in the middle school level. "It's all about the whole child in the community, there are students with lots of issues, consequently they struggle with learning". In order for the students to succeed they need to have a strong foundation and their foundation is math and writing, but most importantly reading since it takes reading comprehension to do well any other subject".*

Implications

The objectives of this research study were to better understand the roles and responsibilities of principals from the perspective of novices, as well as to present current Educational Administration graduate students with an opportunity to interview novice school principals in real-life settings. Although the researchers acknowledge that the limitations of this study are the number of participants and its short duration, this study contributes to the field of Educational Administration and principals' preparation in two ways. First, the present study authors argue that, based on the reported perceptions of the novice middle school principals in this study, as well as prior research (Hallinger & Heck, 1996), one may propose their direct and daily interactions with the teachers, students and parents could potentially indirectly effect school improvement.

Second, according to Garrett and McGeachie (1999), supportive principals provide training, develop an open and honest relationship, create opportunities for assistant principals to

attend and perform principal functions, and encourage their assistant principals to pursue principalships. Furthermore, the three themes that emerged from the data collected in this present study: data-driven decision for student accountability, continuous improvement cycle and having a caring pedagogy, contribute to field of educational administration and support the characteristics of a school leader presented by Garrett and McGeachie (1999). In essence, a principal's role continues to be focused on coordinating, administering and working with people as well as creating a positive school ethos (or culture) keeping in mind the external relations of the school, and its community. Furthermore, principals need to ensure quality through strategic overview of the campus needs and by building capacity of the school personnel via professional development (Garrett & McGeachie, 1999). The authors recommend that a similar study be conducted using larger sample sizes in addition to collecting data from parents, teachers and students.

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