

PRINCIPALS MATTER: PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPALS ON SCHOOL
LEADERSHIP

by

Melissa Poloncic

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The University of Nebraska at Lincoln
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Specialization: Educational Administration

Under the Supervision of Professor Jody Isernhagen

Lincoln, Nebraska

March 2016

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Melissa Polonic, Ed.D.

University of Nebraska, 2016

Advisor: Jody Isernhagen

Leadership has long been studied in education. The correlation between effective schools and quality leadership has been linked in research. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of secondary school principals in leadership. Using a phenomenological approach, school principals were asked in an interview to describe the essence of effective leadership through their experiences as a secondary school principal based on their self-perceptions and needs in continuous learning as a leader. Authentic insight from the perspectives of secondary principals defined experiences that influenced them most, the essential elements of effective leaders, and the perceived needs of secondary school principals in continuously developing as a leader.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this dissertation would not have been possible without the support of many important people in my life personally and professionally. I first want to thank my family. To my husband, Derek, who is my forever cheerleader, advocate, and friend. Whether it was a word of encouragement, a chant of “you can do it”, or a compliment of my work~ your presence in my life encouraged me to complete this lifetime goal. To my kids, thank you for being interested even when you wanted to make fun of the word, “phenomenology”. A special shout out to Cole for helping me through statistics. I hope I have inspired an example to let you know that if you have a goal in life, it can be done with hard work and commitment. To my parents who are educators for life, thank you for giving me my first education and supporting me through forty years of classes and school. I will forever be grateful to you for inspiring in me, a passion for a career in education. A huge thank you to my amazing mother-in-law, Kris, who spent countless hours literally supporting my dissertation and Aunt Marilyn who continually gave me words of encouragement, notes, and genuinely was interested in my work. There are too many family members to list each one individually, but I thank you all for your piece in my motivation and encouragement.

Professionally, I have been blessed with tremendous mentors and supports in my career for many years that have lead me to the point I am as a professional. I specifically want to thank my current Board of Education members for their continuous support and push to complete my doctorate. Without your flexibility and focus on the importance of me doing this work, I would not have been able to complete this dissertation. To my

chair, Jody Isernhagen, thank you for your guidance and help. I respect and admire you a great deal and am happy to complete this research under your watch. To my committee, who believed in my topic and research, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to study one of my favorite topics in education. Lastly, thank you to my participants. Without professionals like you who were willing to give me some time to ask you about your deepest insights and experiences, this research would not have happened.

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Chapter 1

Overview

Introduction

The terrain of the school principalship has many dimensions. Navigating a school culture, enhancing instruction, operations, resources, community contexts all while developing a shared vision and acting with integrity and influence are just some of the responsibilities of today's school principal. The multifaceted nature of a career as a school principal is one of importance due to the fact that Gordon (2013) found "leadership is second only to classroom instruction among school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school" (p. 3). In addition, principals who focus significant energy to becoming instructional leaders in tangent with organizational management and developing relational aspects of their job creates a combination for success in school effectiveness (Grissom & Loeb, 2011). School principals are leaders. There are many questions surrounding leadership such as: Are people born leaders? Is leadership innate or a learned skill? What effect does leadership have? These are all found in research. Leaders attract followers, they influence. They possess a vision and purpose and are able to get people to commit to that same vision. People expect a leader to be ethical and stand for something with conviction. Challenging opportunities for people to change and grow are sought by leaders (Greer, 2011). A leader's actions may either alienate or commit others. An "essential ingredient to a Great Leader is boundless optimism about the potential of ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things in the world" (Ba Banutu-Gomez, 2004, p. 144).

Statement of Research Problem

Many sources may be found concerning the general topic of leadership skills, characteristics, and traits. Few studies to date explore the concept of more comprehensive school leadership from the perspectives of principals, in particular secondary school principals. Based on this lack of secondary principal perspectives, there is a pronounced need for research to expansively define effective leadership of a secondary school principal based on their self-perception and need as a continuous learner. This study intends to explore that essence.

Purpose Statement and Research Question

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the leadership experiences of Nebraska secondary school principals.

Specific research questions that this study will address are:

Central question. What are the experiences of Nebraska secondary school principals in school leadership?

Sub Questions.

- How do secondary school principals define effective leadership?
- What are the perceived needs of secondary school principals in their continuous learning as a leader?

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms and concepts are defined:

Leaders—Leaders are the architects of individual and organizational improvement (Reeves, 2006, p. 27).

Effective—Effective as defined as the adjective "effective" by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, as one that produces a desired effect. (Merriam-Webster, 2015)

Principal—A Secondary School or Building Principal is defined as the lead administrator in a 7th -12th grade setting.

School Principal Leadership—School principal leadership was defined by the Nebraska Department of Education in the Principal Standards (Nebraska State Board of Education, 2011):

- Standard 1: Vision for Learning - The Principal establishes and communicates a vision for teaching and learning that results in improved student performance.
- Standard 2: Continuous School Improvement - The Principal leads a continuous school improvement process that results in improved student performance and school effectiveness.
- Standard 3: Instructional Leadership - The Principal provides leadership to ensure the implementation of a rigorous curriculum, the use of effective teaching practices, and accountability for results.
- Standard 4: Culture for Learning - The Principal creates a school culture that enhances the academic, social, physical, and emotional development of all students.
- Standard 5: Systems Management - The Principal manages the organization, operations, and resources of the school to provide a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment for all students and staff.
- Standard 6: Staff Leadership - The Principal uses effective practices to select, develop, support, and lead high quality teachers and other staff.
- Standard 7: Developing Relationships - The Principal promotes and supports productive relationships with students, staff, families, and the community.
- Standard 8: Professional Ethics and Advocacy - The Principal advocates for policies of equity and excellence in support of the vision of the school, and acts with fairness, integrity, and a high level of professional ethics. (Nebraska State Board of Education, 2011, p. 1)

Assumptions

An underlying assumption of this study is that there were minimal educational and licensure requirements all school principals attained to be individuals who lead their schools. The thought is that the principals, scholars, and theorists have knowledge as to what these minimal requirements entail. Further, it was assumed that the participants in this study were willing to participate.

Delimitations and Limitations

By design this study focuses on secondary principals to hone in on a demographic that isn't often specifically researched. Being an elementary principal for several years, my bias of the topic may be easier set aside with participants who are secondary principals rather than elementary. It is likely that I may have an acquaintance relationship established with some participants and not others and I will do my best to not allow that to interfere with my research. All principals selected are from the State of Nebraska and may have similar education and licensure experiences in their preparation to becoming a principal. Eastern Nebraska will provide a mixture of rural and metro area perspectives but may not be generalizable to leaders of other regions or organizations.

Method

A qualitative research method, specifically a phenomenology, was chosen for this study as an understanding of the essence of lived experiences from the perspectives of principals and more elusive characteristics of the leadership of these principals and their own personal learning development was desired. Qualitative research allowed for a deeper review of topics that were more adaptable in nature such as these.

Importance of Research

Numerous studies have shown that the best leaders engage in continuous learning (Greer, 2011). School principals spend an endless amount of time in meetings about the management aspect of their positions, policies and procedures, as well as how to develop new skills in employees to advance teaching and learning. While all of these topics are extremely important to the principal, rarely are he/she given the chance to reflect on the attributes of effective leadership, his/her own strengths as a leader, areas for further development that exist in themselves, and an opportunity for continuous learning in those areas. School leaders are self-regulated learners and in order to develop and grow, they need to understand the full definition of their context as a leader and its effectiveness to continuously improve.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review literature related to the leadership of the school principal. Upon reviewing the research for this study, some categories emerged and the chapter is organized into content including: the evolution of the school principal, leadership theory relevant to the school principalship, school leadership complexity, the importance of the principal and their effectiveness, school principal defined by standards, and lastly school principals and their continuous growth as a leader.

The school principal and their leadership development is a complex topic that is deserving of scholarly research and attention beyond that which has been studied more generally in the field of leadership. The review of the research indicated that much has been studied in the aspects of theory and its relationship with the school principal, the characteristics and traits of effective principal leadership and their importance, as well as the density of the principal position, yet research has just begun to advance in the last decade of how to develop as a leader and rarely is any of the research aforementioned coming from the perspective of practicing principals themselves.

Evolution of the School Principal

Over multiple decades, school principals have reshaped their roles through research and theory introduced in the field. From the 1950's, studies focused mainly on personality or character traits. Once that was not sufficient, specific leadership behaviors began to be studied, emphasizing leadership styles and their influence on various

situations. In the 1970's to mid 1980's, more research moved to connections between leaders and followers. At the end of the 1980's, approaches started concentrating on the integration of variables that explained the effectiveness of leaders on their organization or structure (Abu-Hussain, 2014). By the 1990's, there was an extensive range of models and hypotheses and the school principalship was impacted "in response to such broad reform initiatives as school-based management, teaching for meaningful understanding, choice, and site-based decision making" (Murphy, 1994, p. 2). Many of the reform movements in educational leadership positioned "a dramatic change in the role of the principal" and gained strength "by claiming a distinct break with the status quo" (Murphy, 1994, p. 2). "Leaders are embedded within organizational systems that are continually evolving, creating a more complex picture for understanding how individuals think, feel, and behave in response to changing events" (Dinh et al., 2014, p. 45) and it is natural that this drives the desire to solve the complexities and learn more to keep pace with the scale of change even when it is overwhelming (Murphy, 1994). Reform in the school principalship, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s reported that school principals were "generally overwhelmed by the expectations that reform brought" (Murphy, 1994, p. 28). Moving into the new millennium, Dinh et al. (2014) reviewed leadership theory and research and found that the leadership field has developed in recent decades with novel perspectives that have enriched our knowledge of leadership. The newest and future research is developing integrated perspectives of how leadership theories interrelate to influence the emergence of leadership phenomena (Dinh et al., 2014). The

more information we learn in the broad topic of leadership, the more reform will come about for the school principal and their practice.

Leadership Theory and the School Principal

Theoretical trends and a long history of research can be found in the literature on leadership. According to Dinh et al. (2014), a total of 66 different leadership theory domains have been identified in this millennium. Leadership is being considered more as a collaborative team process or bottom-up follower-based process as well as a more typical hierarchical, top-down influence. Scholars are being invited to “consider how processes change and evolve as they are influenced by context, as well as by leadership occurring from multiple sources within organizations, leadership theory can move closer to the outcomes we seek to explain” (Dinh et al., 2014, p. 55). It is important to note, “no unified theory of leadership currently exists” (Dinh et al., 2014, p. 55). The field of leadership theory has welcomed “diversity in conceptualization and approaches to leadership, helping to create a vibrant, developing, and relevant scientific domain” (Dinh et al., 2014, p. 56).

The study of leadership theory directly relates to the position of school principal as

the specific interactions and behaviors displayed by school leaders while directing an individual or group of individuals to complete tasks for the common good and/or for the purpose of achieving school goals and/or outcomes is classified as their style of leadership. (Cooper, 2012, pp. 5-6).

The populations of our schools and their challenges continue to diversify and so must our leadership styles and behaviors. Some of the theoretical frameworks of leadership fit

with the context of education or effective school principals more than others and those most prevalent theories will be reviewed in this section.

Transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is one of the most common theories in the literature of educational leadership and found to have studies represented in the field of school principals.

Transformational leadership is expressed in the behaviors of the followers that bring leaders to a higher level of awareness of the importance of their mission and increase their level of motivation, maturity and aspirations, as well as their reference to the need for achievement, self-realization, social welfare, the success of the organization and concern for its social environment. (Abu-Hussain, 2014, p. 1270)

According to research, “transformational leadership engages in the creating of a shared interest that unites leaders and followers” (Abu-Hussain, 2014, p. 1270). There are four factors or components of transformational leadership: idealized influence or charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (McCleskey, 2014). Idealized influence or charisma includes two components. First, “followers attribute the leader with certain qualities that followers wish to emulate” (McCleskey, 2014, p. 120). Second, “leaders impress followers through their behaviors” (McCleskey, 2014, p. 120). Key characteristics of inspirational motivation are enthusiasm and optimism (McCleskey, 2014). Transformational leaders are able to approach common problems in new and innovative ways where their followers are stimulated and inspired to take risks and be creative, thus the component of intellectual stimulation (Cooper, 2012). Individual consideration is a leader taking an authentic interest in the followers’ personal or professional goals (Cooper, 2012).

Overall, transformational leaders have a vision for the future of the school organization, effectively communicate that vision to followers, are able to convey the importance of the vision and inspire followers to deeply commit and work interdependently towards its attainment (Cooper, 2012). Research has found that “teachers strongly preferred behaviours that aligned with the aspects of transformational leadership” (Hauserman & Stick, 2013, p. 185). The importance of this finding is that principals’ actions influence teachers’ attitudes (Hauserman & Stick, 2013). “High-functioning schools were found to have transformational principals who shaped the school vision and learning processes within the organization, thus creating a positive learning culture” (Hauserman & Stick, 2013, p. 189). Highly transformational principals developed the leadership capacity of all staff, encouraged reflection and assisted with problems, emphasized teamwork and collegiality, and pushed to think outside the box (Hauserman & Stick, 2013).

Servant leadership. The servant leadership theory is rooted in ethical and caring behavior where employees’ well being is given high priority (van Dierendonck, 2011). This comes with research moving from a strong focus on transformational leadership to a stronger emphasis on ethical, people-centered management (van Dierendonck, 2011). Greenleaf (2007) stated,

Servant leaders differ from other persons of goodwill because they act on what they believe. Consequently, they ‘know experimentally’ and there is a sustaining spirit when they venture and risk. To the worldly, servant leaders may seem naïve; and they may not adapt readily to prevailing institutional structures. (p. 27)

In a qualitative study of leaders with attributes of servant leadership, the researchers identified a number of themes in the analysis of the interviews, these categories being:

“interpersonal, character, problem-solving, work habits, inspired leadership and self-assurance” (Hamilton & Knoche, 2007, p. 154). A key component of these leaders is their problem-solving approach. They encouraged diverse opinions, debate, and open communication. Servant leaders had strong interpersonal capability representing strong emotional intelligence. Compassion and respect were significant in their interactions. Their motivation is not status, but instead a sense of contribution focused on continuous improvement. These participants were tenacious in chasing ambitious goals. These leaders exhibit authenticity, likeability, a strong sense of humility, and a down to earth style. The leaders’ strong commitment to loyalty among employees created emotional bonds. Their method of gathering ideas consisted of inquiry and solicitation rather than command and using stories to convey ideas. All of the participants owned the ability to understand themselves, people and situations, even the complex.

Invitational leadership. A newer theory created with a positive and encouraging structure to guide leaders through complexity is invitational leadership. William Purkey and Betty Siegel designed this theory in 2002 (Burns & Martin, 2010). The invitational leadership theory is based upon four components: optimism, respect, trust, and intentionality. Hope is an important element to success in educational organizations and was added to the components in a more recent study (Purkey & Novak, 2015). Respect is a basic human need that affirms people as valuable. Trust is crucial in the success of an organization. Invitational leaders are intentional with purpose in their work with everyone. Processes to involve people in activities that require cooperation and positive results builds effective teams (Burns & Martin, 2010). The five P’s to invite other

professionals in the invitational leadership theory are “five powerful factors- people, places, policies, programs, and processes” (Burns & Martin, 2010, p. 35).

In the findings of the study by Burns and Martin (2010), it was established that the “perceptions of these leaders were consistently more positive and affirming than the perceptions of the leaders in schools that were determined to be less effective” (p. 47). The researchers found the result that regardless of the background of teachers and principals from effective or less effective schools, all believed firmly that “people are the most influential element in an organization” (Burns & Martin, 2010, p. 47).

Followership theory. Leadership theory is well studied while the less studied theory is in regards to followership. Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, and Carsten (2014) explored followership theory. For, “leadership can only occur if there is followership- without followers and following behaviors there is no leadership” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 83). Followership is a crucial component to the leadership process. As we study leadership for deeper understanding, it is incomplete without also studying followership. Followership theory is the “study of the nature and impact of followers and following in the leadership process” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 84). A vast majority of research in theory is leader-centric, yet there are a few studies that are follower-centric. There also has been recognition in the research of relationships among leaders and followers as having mutual influence. “It is now widely accepted that leadership cannot be fully understood without considering the role of followers in the leadership process” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 89). The importance of this theory in education propels the importance of

studying the teacher principal relationship and its impact in understanding leadership of the school principal.

Leadership~Innate or a Learned Skill

A long debated topic in leadership is whether leadership is a skill or innate behavior. Leadership studies originated from the basic idea that “leadership is a characteristic ability of extraordinary individuals” (McCleskey, 2014, p. 117). Most now agree that it is “both a skill and behavior that exhibits that skill, this dual definition has generated additional disagreement over whether leadership can be taught” (Doh, 2003, p. 54). While agreeing that leadership can be learned, this does not necessarily mean that it can be taught in a formal sense. Strategic thinking requires mental capacity to think more conceptually and dispositional characteristics for instance are components of the behavior that exhibits the skill. Whereas, tactics and processes for gaining commitment to a vision is a skill that can be taught (Greer, 2011). A leader is more than a person who can articulate a dream and inspire others; the leader’s influence is demonstrating the behavior they are trying to institutionalize. They elicit trust in followers by their openness to receive input from their followers (Ba Banutu-Gomez, 2004). Managing this process requires a balance of innate ability and learned skill.

Elusiveness and Complexity

When we think of effective leaders, do we give more concern to their experience and skills that they bring to the situation or more abstract impressions like character and trust (Green, Chirichello, Mallory, Melton, & Lindahl, 2011). Though much research shies away from the affective domain of leadership, most research agrees that these

elusive characteristics are of great importance in the complexity of leadership. Words throughout the research listed as traits of effective leaders are ethics, morals, trust, conviction, purpose, attitudes, listening, self-regulation, personality, caring, innovative, creative, and strategic (Doh, 2003; Green et al., 2011; Greer, 2011). These are not necessarily skills that are able to be measured but are more likely to just exist in a healthy environment created by a leader. One of the reasons that leaders find themselves among chaos in their complex environment is due to a linear thinking mindset that does not work in situations characterized as ambiguous and complex (Sun-Keung Pang & Pisapia, 2012). One study by Huber (2013) revealed 30 dimensions in the study of the profiles of school leaders that contribute to school effectiveness. These 30 dimensions included general skills as well as engagement, self-efficacy, ambiguity tolerance, empathy, and enthusiasm to name a few. A self-reflection of leaders according to these dimensions promotes contemplation and with this “promotes the motivation to gather more information about their behavior in day-to-day practice” (Huber, 2013, p. 536).

The complexity of leadership is apparent in the literature. “Humans, and the organizations in which they operate—families, corporations, schools, governments—are complex, simultaneously offering opportunities for heroism and cowardice, the peak performer and sluggard, loyal soldier and traitor, deacon and demon” (Reeves, 2006, p. 10). School principal leadership “is a more contentious, complex, situated and dynamic phenomenon than previously thought” (Dinham, 2011, p. 4). “The new work of school leaders is a mixture of technical and adaptive work” (Fullan, 2005, p. 53). Technical problems are not always easy, but we know how to approach them. Adaptive challenges

are ones in which we do not always have answers because of their dimension and complexity (Fullan, 2005). Not only are school principals the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), they are also motivators and instructional leaders (Sidhu & Fook, 2009).

Today's schools are complex and compelling where

the evolving nature of school environments has placed high demands on educational leaders. Where knowledge of school management, finance, legal issues, and state mandates was once the primary focus for the preparation of school leaders, education reform has created an urgent need for a strong emphasis on development of instructional leadership skills to promote effective teaching and high-level learning. Moreover, educational leaders must recognize and assume a shared responsibility not only for students' intellectual and educational development, but also for their personal, social, emotional, and physical development. (Sidhu & Fook, 2009, pp. 106-107)

One of the most elusive characteristics resulting as important in the literature on leadership was trust. The "most reliable guide at the principal's disposal may be the 'moral compass' upon which the individual has learned to rely" (Larsen & Derrington, 2012, p. 2). The importance of ethics in school administration is vital. "Ethics is not a luxury; it is central to our survival" (Larsen & Derrington, 2012, p. 4). Trust relates to ethics. A follower's trust in their leader is an important issue. "How a leader acts and communicates with followers during very challenging periods of time can create the foundation for future trust in the leader" (Norman, Avolio, & Luthans, 2010, p. 350). How does a leader gain trust from their followers? A study by Norman et al. (2010) found that "leader transparency was strongly related with participant trust in the leader" (p. 362). Most importantly, actions speak louder than words. "In establishing a set of values and beliefs, an effective school leader not only has to demonstrate, establish and

espouse the values themselves, but also to communicate these to staff and students as well” (Papaku Malasa, 2007, p. 23).

The Importance of School Leadership

How important is a school principal in the success of students? “Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (Seashore Louis, Wahlstrom, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2004, p. 65). School principals influence student outcomes indirectly by facilitating instructional leadership, organizational management, as well as internal and external relations. “Two variables that profoundly influence student achievement are the quality of instruction provided by teachers and the quality of leadership provided by school principals” (Suber, 2011). Principals who combine significant energy to becoming instructional leaders while increasing their capacity for organizational management and focusing on the relational aspects of their job seem to have a combination for success in school effectiveness (Grissom & Loeb, 2011).

A prevalent theme in the research was the impact that principal leadership directly has upon teachers in a school. A principals’ support of and collaboration with teachers is linked to student success (Gordon, 2006). Leadership may affect the job satisfaction and work commitment of a teacher (Hudson, Graham, & Willis, 2014). Cultivating employee engagement through fundamental conditions was the focus of Gordon’s (2006), *Building Engaged Schools*. The fundamental conditions for a principal to assist in maintaining a healthy workplace included: basic needs such as expectations and materials to do their job, management support allowing people to do what they do best, recognizing, caring

and encouraging; establishing teamwork where opinions count, the job is important, and fellow employees are committed to doing quality work alongside friends; encouraging growth through routine progress checks and opportunities to learn and grow (Gordon, 2006). “A great principal, just like any other manager, is critical to retention because, as noted earlier, most people don’t leave organizations, they leave supervisors” (Gordon, 2006, p. 240).

Effective School Principals

Embedded in the studies of school principals, researchers have sought the traits, characteristics, and skills that summarize an effective principal. “Recognizing that principals affect school outcomes is very different from specifying *how* principals affect these outcomes” (Grissom & Loeb, 2011, p. 1094). Grissom and Loeb (2011) show that organizational management tasks such as budgeting and maintaining facilities are just as important as effective instructional leadership. Principals need to devote a significant amount of energy into both by “combining an understanding of the instructional needs of the school with an ability to target resources where they are needed, hire the best available teachers, and keep the school running smoothly” (Grissom & Loeb, 2011, p. 1119).

Costellow (2011) researched the perspective that “the ideal school leader that individuals paint in their mind is formed from each person’s individual beliefs, experiences, and needs” (Costellow, 2011, p. 1). Such as a superintendent may want someone instructionally minded, parents may prefer quality instruction and safety, students might prefer someone who addresses their social emotional development, and

teachers may be looking to the principal to make them feel more satisfied in their job (Costellow, 2011). Ultimately, Costellow's (2011) dissertation discovered that the five top traits teachers and principals found as most important were "communication, visibility, culture, focus, and discipline" (p. 110).

In his research of the high school principal as an instructional leader, Clabo (2010) summarized that teachers "respected the importance of their principals' role in hiring effective teachers and matching these teachers with the most appropriate classes and students" and "recognized the difficulty and necessity in removing ineffective teachers from the schools before they gained tenure" (p. 226). Teachers also emphasized the principals' role in providing "resources and professional development to teachers in order to enhance classroom instruction and student achievement" (Clabo, 2010, p. 227). From his research, Clabo (2010) listed the following advice for secondary principals: "focus on teachers, be visible, minimize disruptions, share/delegate leadership, and motivate students" (p. 253).

A study that sought to explore the relationship between school leadership and a schools' performance by Sammons, Gu, Day, and Ko (2010) identified actions of the school's leader that were most important in promoting school improvement. A sample of schools selected for their academics and sustained improvement found five major categories of leadership practices from their primary heads, those being in order of most cited: "improving teaching practices, academic press/emphasis, redesigning the organization, setting directions, and developing people" (p. 93). This study on academically effective and improved schools in England "provides new evidence that

demonstrates the links between various leadership dimensions and school organization and processes” (Sammons et al., 2010, p. 97).

Authors conducted reviews of research that summarized key findings or a synopsis of the knowledge found in the literature regarding effective school leadership. One such review conducted by Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins (2006) composed a summation of seven strong claims about successful school leadership. The first of those claims being “school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning” (Leithwood et al., 2006, p. 3). Claim two is “almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices” those being “building vision and setting directions, understanding and developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the teaching and learning programs” (Leithwood et al., 2006, pp. 6-7). The third claim is “the ways in which leaders apply these leadership practices—not the practices themselves—demonstrate responsiveness to, rather than dictation by, the contexts in which they work” (Leithwood et al., 2006, p. 8). An example of this is when building vision and setting direction, it is important for the leader to have involvement of staff to craft and revise a school’s direction so the ownership is shared (Leithwood et al., 2006). Claim four, “school leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment and working conditions” (Leithwood et al., 2006, p. 10). This claim relates how the three influences listed alter teacher practices and then ultimately impact pupil learning and achievement. The review found that it is “clearly important to develop teachers’ capacities” (Leithwood et al., 2006, p. 11). The fifth claim “school leadership

has a greater influence on schools and pupils when it is widely distributed” suggested that leadership is provided not only by principals but also by “teachers, staff teams, parents, central office staff, students and assistant principals” (Leithwood et al., 2006, p. 12). Claim six, “some patterns of distribution are more effective than others” in other words “there is no loss of power and influence on the part of principals when the power and influence of many others in the school increase” (Leithwood et al., 2006, p. 13). And lastly, the seventh claim being “a small handful of personal traits explains a high proportion of the variation in leadership effectiveness” (Leithwood et al., 2006, p. 14). Those traits identified were: being open minded; ready to learn from others, flexible, persistent, resilient, and optimistic (Leithwood et al., 2006).

The Wallace Foundation has issued “more than 70 research reports and other publications covering school leadership” (Wallace Foundation, 2012, p. 2). They summarized their findings in these reports to describe what effective principals do. In short, they believe principals “perform five key functions well: shaping a vision of academic success for all students, creating a climate hospitable to education, cultivating leadership in others, improving instruction, managing people, data and processes to foster school improvement” (Wallace Foundation, 2012, p. 2).

Standards are a way we define or describe in education and

professional standards for school principals can play key roles in aiding reflection and self development, formulating suitable professional learning experiences, attracting and selecting suitable candidates for positions of responsibility and assessing the effectiveness of school leaders. Standards also articulate the values, knowledge and practices of school leaders to the wider community. (Dinham, 2011, p. 4)

Professional Standards

The most well-known set of professional standards in education leadership are the Interstate Leadership and Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Policy Standards (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). A consortium of educational organizations collaborated on writing the standards to define highly effective practices for the nation's school leaders. These standards have been used by many states as a guide to developing their own state standards. Revisions to these standards are currently in progress in 2014 and 2015, yet the official version of the standards is still the adopted 2008 version (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). The educational leadership policy standards ISLLC 2008 are:

- Standard 1: Vision and Mission. An educational leader promotes the success of every student by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders.
- Standard 2: Instruction, Learning, Culture, Professional Learning. An education leader promotes the success of every student by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.
- Standard 3: Operations and Management. An education leader promotes the success of every student by ensuring management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.
- Standard 4: Engaging with Faculty and Community. An education leader promotes the success of every student by collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.
- Standard 5: Ethical Principles and Professional Norms. An education leader promotes the success of every student by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.
- Standard 6: Responding to the Education Context. An education leader promotes the success of every student by understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social economic, legal,

and cultural context. (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2008, p. 14)

The Nebraska Department of Education approved Principal Standards for the state of Nebraska on May 5, 2011. The committees developing these standards were “informed by the profession’s national standards” (Nebraska State Board of Education, 2011). The standards were developed by the state to be used as a resource for effective practice (Nebraska State Board of Education, 2011). The Nebraska Principal Standards are:

- Standard 1: Vision for Learning—The Principal establishes and communicates a vision for teaching and learning that results in improved student performance.
- Standard 2: Continuous School Improvement—The Principal leads a continuous school improvement process that results in improved student performance and school effectiveness.
- Standard 3: Instructional Leadership—The Principal provides leadership to ensure the implementation of a rigorous curriculum, the use of effective teaching practices, and accountability for results.
- Standard 4: Culture for Learning—The Principal creates a school culture that enhances the academic, social, physical, and emotional development of all students.
- Standard 5: Systems Management—The Principal manages the organization, operations, and resources of the school to provide a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment for all students and staff.
- Standard 6: Staff Leadership—The Principal uses effective practices to select, develop, support, and lead high quality teachers and other staff.
- Standard 7: Developing Relationships—The Principal promotes and supports productive relationships with students, staff, families, and the community.
- Standard 8: Professional Ethics and Advocacy—The Principal advocates for policies of equity and excellence in support of the vision of the school, and acts with fairness, integrity, and a high level of professional ethics. (Nebraska State Board of Education, 2011)

Continuous Learning~ Personal Pursuit

The “job of leading and managing the school is often portrayed as a solo endeavor” (Spillane & Hunt, 2010, p. 296). As a school principal, time is spent in a variety of ways; one study by Spillane and Hunt (2010) found that “principals spend over half of their time on administration-related activities” (Spillane & Hunt, 2010, p. 303). Much of the time that is spent on curriculum and instruction activities is spent leading, co-leading, or just participating (Spillane & Hunt, 2010). Very little time is left for the principal’s own continuous learning on leadership. The importance of the school principal’s own learning is clear, as “the single key for unlocking the resources and capacities that we will need is an enlarged conception of the moral imperative of school leadership” (Fullan, 2003, p. 80). So much of leadership hinges on perspectives as it requires satisfying many others with diverse expectations, and it also requires performance—thinking and doing (Doh, 2003).

Leaders who are purposeful, harness an energy that allows them to link new information that is gained from experience into new challenges they may face.

It is highly unlikely that anyone would be able to develop fully as a leader merely through participation in a series of programs, workshops, or seminars. The actual development takes place in the so-called white space between such leader development events. (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Strum, & McKee, 2014, p. 80)

In educational leadership, professional learning communities and networks are becoming increasingly popular as they provide situated learning opportunities and a mutual exchange of ideas and experiences to widen the understanding of a leader (Huber, 2013).

One of the most common teaching methods in school leadership is mentoring or on the job training where the teacher is able to model through professional interactions with the

learner (Green et al., 2011). “Ongoing practice through day-to-day leadership activities is where the crux of development really resides” (Day et al., 2014, p. 80). Living these day-to-day experiences with a coach promotes leaders being able to combine feedback and coaching sessions specifically tailored to developing leadership skills (Goff, Guthrie, Goldring, & Bickman, 2014). Goff et al. (2014) found “evidence that principals who voluntarily engage in more coaching sessions are more likely to change their behaviors” (p. 32).

Improvement as a leader is a passionate pursuit that has to be held by the leader themselves. “Leadership is not a position; it is a process” (Greer, 2011, p. 30). “It’s difficult for leaders to be effective if they do not take the time to examine their sense of purpose and the ways it has been defined, influenced, informed and refined by their experiences” (Greer, 2011, p. 20). A leader working on their own dispositions is a learning process, heavily based on the learner’s reflection and self-assessment (Green et al., 2011). An example of this is assessing leadership capacity using a 360* process. This process is

based on four assumptions: (1) feedback is important for personal and professional growth; (2) most organizations are feedback-poor environments; (3) when we look in the mirror, we see who we think we should be more than who we really are; and (4) empirical research and anecdotal evidence has shown that 360* feedback leads to improved performance in the areas that are being evaluated. (Green et al., 2011, p. 6)

The development of leadership capacity begins with self-knowledge. “For an individual leader it is a process for gaining the skills and abilities needed to manage self and others” (Cardno & Youngs, 2013, p. 3). Leaders need self-knowledge of their personal and professional values, attitudes, beliefs, and their worldviews in order to grow and learn

(Green et al., 2011). Authenticity of self is important in leadership, “if scholars had produced a cookie-cutter leadership style, individuals would be forever trying to imitate it. They would make themselves into personae, not people, and others would see through them immediately” (George, Sims, McLean, & Mayer, 2007, p. 129). Knowing your authentic self is described in George et al. (2007):

when the 75 members of Stanford Graduate School of Business’s Advisory Council were asked to recommend the most important capability for leaders to develop, their answer was nearly unanimous: self-awareness. Yet many leaders, especially those early in their careers, are trying so hard to establish themselves in the world that they leave little time for self-exploration. (p. 133)

This self-awareness has also been described as withitness. For example, in a study by Hogan (2013), a principal with withitness is described as having “the uncanny ability to read the situation that was presented in front of them, do some research, talk with key stakeholders, and make a decision that was best for all involved in their school community” (p. 96). No matter what terms you use, developing oneself is a researched idea that has potential for impact. “This self-view subsequently shapes an understanding of one’s own strengths and weaknesses, ultimately influencing decision-making and subsequent behavior” (Day et al., 2014).

Summary

The literature review revealed there is an abundance of research on leadership and even specifically the leadership of a school principal. Through examining the concepts of the evolution of the school principal, leadership theory relevant to the school principalship, school leadership complexity, the importance of the principal and their effectiveness, school principal defined by standards, school principals and their

continuous growth as a leader, I was able to find an extensive amount of research on effective practices and their definitions but very little from the perspective of school principals themselves and how to develop the more elusive characteristics of leadership. The importance of this literature as it relates to my research is that through the use of a phenomenological study, I seek the essence of the principals' lived experiences that are connected to the research, to allow time for the principal to self reflect, and contribute to the body of research that I have just reviewed with their own lived experiences.

Chapter 3

Research Methods

Research Design

A phenomenological approach specifically has been selected for this research study due to the desire for exploration around the topic of school principals, their experiences and how continuous development takes place as a leader. A phenomenology study includes “a group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 78). The four characteristics of a phenomenology are: “it is descriptive, it uses the reduction, it searches for essences, and it is focused on the intentionality” (Castro, 2003, p. 49). The lived experiences of these individuals will propel the body of research available in assisting leadership development for school principals to increase effectiveness. Due to the aspiration to capture the essence of school principal leadership experiences from the perspective of school principals including more elusive concepts, a qualitative research approach has been selected. A phenomenological approach allows for focusing on “grasping the whole meaning of the experience, instead of dividing it into parts without understanding the basic meaning structure, which gives sense to the whole experience” (Castro, 2003, p. 47). Attempting to break a given experience into parts before having understood the perspective of the person who lives the experience would be making artificial explanations about an experience from our own perspective instead of the sense of the whole of the experience for the person who lives it (Castro, 2003).

A phenomenological approach requires the researcher to bracket themselves from the study by revealing personal experiences with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). As the researcher, I must disclose that I was an elementary school principal for 11 years and have some personal opinions and biases about the subject of this research. The gap in research that I find defining the experiences of principals as school leaders, their dispositions, relationships, and self-awareness to name a few drives me to seek an understanding of this phenomenon more fully as there are multiple dimensions and ambiguity to the complex work of school principals. Due to my past position as an elementary principal, I may have bias regarding my own life experiences and what I expect those I interview to state as their experiences as well. For this reason, a phenomenology approach is a good selection as bracketing is part of the approach. “It is common practice in phenomenological research for the researcher to write about their own experiences of the phenomenon or to be interviewed by a colleague in order to ‘bracket’ their experiences prior to interviewing others” (Merriam, 2009, p. 93).

Following Giorgi’s Existential Phenomenological Research Method, will include four general steps: (a) formulation of a question to focus the investigation, (b) data-generating where participants give their description of his/her experience, (c) data analysis where the researcher reads the data generated and reveals the meaning of the experience, and (d) presentation of the findings (Castro, 2003).

Data will be collected through individual semi-structured interviews with 8-10, secondary school principals from the Nebraska Council of School Administrators (NCSA) Regions 1 and 2 (see Appendix A). Participants will be recruited by sending an

email invitation to all NCSA Region 1 and 2 secondary school principals in eastern Nebraska. Interviews will be recorded and analyzed according to Giorgi's Existential Phenomenological Research Method. This particular method has been selected not to "separate a given experience from the concrete meaning structure of the person" in order to maintain the "meaning that the person is trying to affirm in her/his daily life" (Castro, 2003, p. 48).

Sample Selection

The sample selection will be based upon Creswell's criterion sampling by "finding individuals who have experienced the phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013). The criteria selected for the sample being NCSA Regions 1 and 2 secondary school principals in eastern Nebraska. An email invitation will be sent to qualifying principals in hopes to select approximately 8-10 participants that would provide a variety of levels (junior high and high school) and demographics of participants (see Appendix B). Participants will be selected after appropriate Institutional Review Board permission has been sought with the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. Upon permission being granted, participants will be contacted with an email explaining more in detail the study, confidentiality and informed consent, and interview details (see Appendix C).

Data Collection

Semi-structured one-on-one interviews will be conducted with the 8-10 school principals in a location of their choice, most preferably in a setting that is quiet and comfortable to them. I will meet with them face-to-face to conduct the interviews. The process referenced by Creswell (2013) will be utilized as steps for the interviews. The

interviews will be recorded by audiotaping with a primary and back up device as well as by note taking. An interview protocol (see Appendix C) will be utilized to provide a framework for the interviews and a format that provides some consistency for both parties. The interview questions will be refined through pilot testing as suggested by Creswell (2013). Interview questions will be drafted and then sample interviews will be conducted with three familiar principals that will not be a part of the final research. After the interviews are conducted, the participants will be asked to provide feedback for revision. Prior to the interview, consent will be obtained, the purpose of the study and amount of time needed will be explained, and plans for using the results will be articulated. During the interview, focus will be given to asking the questions prepared, consideration of the time, and the majority of the time spent listening to the interviewee and their responses.

Data Analysis

The initial analysis of the data will focus on interpretation following the concrete and naïve description given by the interviewee instead of a theoretical standpoint from me as the researcher. The transcriptions of the interviews will be organized in computer files as well as in a hard copy notebook. The transcriptions will be read multiple times for immersion of the whole. As these readings occur, the researcher will be searching for essences in which I may find invariant and unchangeable characteristics of the phenomenon (Castro, 2003). After analyzing the intentionality of the whole, I will follow Giorgi's method in dividing the whole into Meaning Units (Castro, 2003). My task being to "discriminate the different units or blocks that express a self contained meaning"

(Castro, 2003, p. 51). This allows me to divide the description into smaller and more manageable units or blocks in which I can do a more detailed analysis (Castro, 2003).

Each of these units will then be systematically interrogated for what it reveals about the topic under study in a concrete situation for a specific person (the interviewee) (Castro, 2003). As the researcher, I will then use “imaginative variation” (Castro, 2003, p. 53) where as the researcher will begin to follow the experience of the interviewee and reflect about different possibilities of the meaning of his/her experiences. This process enables me as the researcher to produce meaning where there is consistent non-subjective agreement. The next step is to synthesize and integrate the insights about the meaning units in order to make a final consistent description of the experiences of these school principals (Castro, 2003). There are two levels to this step, “situated structure,” which is “focused on the concreteness of the situation in which the phenomenon takes place” (Castro, 2003, p. 54) and the “general structure” which shows “the most general and essential meaning of the phenomenon under study” (Castro, 2003, p. 54). This will allow me to make general statements about the essential and invariant aspects of the principal’s experiences that are trans situational (Castro, 2003). This step has to answer “two questions in a very descriptive way: What is the essential structure of the phenomenon or experience? And how does that phenomenon or experience take place?” (Castro, 2003, p. 54)

As a last step in the analysis, once the general description of the phenomenon has been formed, a study of all the protocols will be integrated in order to describe what the

descriptions have in common. This allows for a “coherent and final identification of the essences of the phenomenon” (Castro, 2003, p. 55).

Validation Strategies

Triangulation, peer review, and member checking will be utilized by the researcher to validate the study (Creswell, 2013). Multiple sources of research will be used to triangulate and corroborate evidence in my study. I also plan to have a qualitative expert review and evaluate my research processes. I will distribute rough drafts to the participants allowing them to review and provide feedback regarding my descriptions.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the personal nature of the questions and self-reflection component of the interviews in data collection, I will keep confidentiality and my word of commitment of that confidentiality to the interviewee. Self-analysis may reveal some vulnerability in the participants. In order for them to feel comfortable in disclosing their thoughts and reflections honestly based upon their self-reflection, it will be extremely important for me to establish a trustworthy rapport with each participant (Merriam, 2009).

Summary

In summary, this chapter provided detail of the methodology to be used in the study. A qualitative methodology was chosen based upon the desire to examine the lived experiences of secondary principals in eastern Nebraska. Data were collected through a purposeful sample and analyzed using Giorgi’s method of dividing the whole into meaning units (Castro, 2003). Triangulation and peer review account for credibility and dependability.

Chapter 4

Lived Experiences of Secondary School Principals

Introduction

This phenomenological study portrays the lived experiences of secondary school principals. A phenomenology allows individuals to share their life experiences and approach “the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions” (Merriam, 2009, p. 199). A variety of experiences are shared to help the reader understand the participants’ quotations and allow for the voice of the participants to provide their perspectives.

This chapter presents the findings attained from nine in-depth semi-structured interviews of secondary school principals. The chapter is organized by the research questions (a) what are the experiences of Nebraska secondary school principals in school leadership; (b) how do secondary school principals define effective leadership; and (c) what are the perceived needs of secondary school principals in their continuous learning as a leader?

Participants

The research study included 9 secondary school principal participants. All participants were male and their amount of years experience as secondary school principals ranged from 1 to 23 years. Among the 9 participants, there were participants from rural, suburban, and city school districts. The student population of their schools ranged from 72-1381 students. There were 4 principals from a 9th-12th grade setting, 4 principals from 7th-12th grade setting, and 1 from a 7th-8th grade setting. Schools were

all in NCSA (Nebraska Council of School Administrators) Regions 1 and 2 and were located in the Omaha, Nebraska, city limits and as far away as 156 miles from Omaha. All of the principals served their local public school district.

After interviewing these principals, the themes of their experiences answered the principle questions that focused the research: (a) What experiences were impressionable to them in their career, (b) What challenges do they face, (c) How ethics plays a role in their position, (d) How their leadership influences their school, and (e) If the standards of their profession impact them as a leader. Secondly, they defined leadership: an effective leader, leadership as an art or a craft, what contributes to an effective school environment and how does the leader impact that environment. Lastly they shared, what their perceived needs were to continuously grow as a leader: what areas they wanted to focus their growth around and what was the most meaningful way for them to learn.

Experiences of Secondary School Principals

The lead research question of this study was, What are the experiences of Nebraska secondary school principals in school leadership? The interview questions used (Appendix D) were developed to prompt discussion regarding the lived experiences of secondary school principals and to inform the research of their personal perspectives as current practitioners. Participants were asked which of their experiences had most influenced or impacted their growth and development as a leader. Four themes came from their descriptions: (a) They learned from challenges and failures, (b) Doing the job itself and collaborating with others causes them to learn, (c) Implementing a major

professional development effort or implementing change has impacted them, along with (d) prominent mentors they have found in their careers.

Learning from challenges. One principal describes learning from challenges as:

I think sometimes the failures, they hit you the hardest but you learn the most out of it. And resilience that you show to overcome those are the things, that allow you to, and not only take pride in what you do, but also realize and make adjustments so that doesn't happen again.

A second principal added:

I think you learn most when you are, what I always use the phrase 'in the mud with the pigs'. And as you get older, I tell teachers all the time; I tell coaches 'never jump in the mud with a pig because this is what is going to happen. The pig likes it, you're going to get dirty and you will not win'. So as you get older, I think you learn from experiences and you sometimes just get that sense of what could happen.

Another principal described a student tragedy as a defining moment for him by stating, "I saw how much people depend on, in moments of crisis, a strong leader and I felt like I was that day and have been through the whole situation."

Doing the job itself. A second theme of influence mentioned by the principals was just simply "the job itself," as quoted by one principal. Another principal stated, "I can identify students and issues I have dealt with. Students that have challenged me, stretched me, and help me grow. I can identify teachers that I've worked along side of, but also those that have worked under me that challenge me and help me grow." One principal in particular felt he learned a great deal from others in casual settings,

sometimes I learn more sitting around a table, playing some cards, because everybody has a story and most successful administrators are great story tellers, because a great story always has a purpose at the end with a lesson. Over the 30 years I've been doing this, I have been lucky enough to be smart enough to love to listen to those stories, because behind every story a disaster is a solution that either worked or didn't work.

Implementation and change. A few of the principals interviewed cited a major professional development implementation which created change within their school as an impactful experience. One said, “that was really impactful on me as a principal because I got to see it from that side, you can do some really out of the box things and make instruction work.” Another principal working on changing culture in their building stated

That has definitely impacted me because I’ve had to tell people, listen, this is the way we’re going to go about this and if you don’t feel like this is the same spot as five years ago than there are other schools and some have left and that’s okay. It has forced me to prove that the steps that were taken are good steps for kids.

Impact of mentors. Many principals mentioned working with others and the influence it has had on their growth and development. One principal stated, “I don’t know if there is a better way to learn than to be around good people and to have experience.” “Working with good people has really affected me.” “Having to do and watch other people take care of difficult situations, I think it’s been effective as far as my growth.”

When probed about challenges from the perspectives of secondary school principals, five main topics came to the forefront. Creating educational opportunities for ALL students, balance, doing the hard things, working with adults, and finances.

Creating educational opportunities for all. At the top of the list of challenges for secondary principals, one principal described, “creating a great educational experience for every student in the building.” This same principal spoke about students in their birth to 21 program and stated,

What are we doing to ensure that when they walk out of this building when they are 21 years old, that they can go out into the community and have a productive life? That's an enormous challenge and again it goes back to the old craft, do you have it in you to do it?

In an interview of another principal as he spoke of the accountability of achievement set forth by the State of Nebraska he said,

as much as we think we can change kids' lives, and I think we do for the most part, for the vast majority of kids, there's a certain element, that no matter what you do, you can't overcome their background and their family and the support of environment they grew up in.

Balance. Balance was a topic of great discussion during the interviews.

Managing the balance of day-to-day operations of a school and trying to be an instructional leader. Balancing a personal and professional life. One principal discussed how he balances time and said,

everybody wants leadership to be the biggest thing you do, but the reality is you spend a lot of time making sure the copy machine works and the network is not down and the buses are going to run and you know, snow days. And the more you go to management, the less you lead.

Balancing time also deals with the challenge of family time vs. time on the job. A principal interviewed who regularly strives for better balance tracks his time to literally keep himself in check. He stated,

so for example, just this week, today is Thursday, and so I've already put in about 50 hours. We're halfway through, so I've got ballgames to cover Friday night and then all day Saturday, you know so this week is probably going to be 80-90.

Balancing was a heavy theme for almost all principals that were interviewed.

Doing the hard stuff. As these individuals spoke about their challenges, some of them spoke candidly about doing the hard stuff. One principal stated,

sometimes you have to do things that don't feel good and that is always a challenge for me because I like people to be happy and I like to give good news rather than bad news. I think sometimes when you deal with difficult people, either parents, teachers, whatever it might be, I think that is a challenge for me because I don't crave that type of interaction but I do it because I have to.

Another principal frankly states, "One of the biggest challenges is courage."

Courage to be confrontational when needed and maintain relationship. It's not so courageous to be tough if you don't have relationship. It's courageous to be tough when you are trying to maintain a relationship. So I think courage to me is huge and very honestly, its one of those things I struggled with for a long time as a leader.

Working with adults. One of the principals spoke openly about his surprise of "needy adults."

I have people in here every day and I was not prepared for that. I mean like daily, during their planning period or before school, they just have this constant need. It's not always just pats on the back, it's not that they aren't confident or qualified or good at what they do it's just, it was just really a unique thing I was not and I am still not sure I am 100% prepared for.

As another principal reflects on resistance to change in adults he said, "A lot of people do get set in their ways so it is really important to hammer away on why what we are doing is important or why change is important." Another sentiment of the principals is the challenge of getting all adults to move in a common direction or vision.

Limited resources. Finances were a fairly important challenge for some principals. "Finances are always a challenge. It affects what we do and how we do it. We find creative ways to get things done." Another principal stated, "We just need to be creative to get to where we want to go. It's hard to say never to something but we just have to work a little bit harder to get to that point." These perspectives were shared from a principal of a very large school and one of the smallest schools interviewed.

When questioned about ethics and their role in the life of a secondary principal, three main themes came through: a commitment to the student, the role of ethics in dealing with conflict and decisions, and using consistency and follow-through to earn trust.

Commitment to student. “You have to make decisions based on what’s best for kids. Sometimes that’s the individual kid, sometime that’s the group,” stated one principal. Another spoke of “having that commitment to the student is the biggest thing about the whole idea of ethics and doing it for them and not doing it for you.” Yet another similarly stated, “I guess honesty and integrity are kind of a given for any educator but then when you take it a step further as a principal, it’s making sure the kids are getting the education and the programming they need.” And yet another principal speaking passionately about ethical responsibility to the student says,

That’s the gift to affect a life of a child and the parents are trusting you with that kid. And that is the most precious thing in the world, right? And so I know you may see things . . . but you know what? With that comes a high responsibility. And that’s what drives you every day.”

Dealing with conflict and decisions. Ethics impacted principals greatly when they were dealing with conflict or making hard decisions, many of them shared similar statements. “The ethical part is always going to be fair when sometimes people don’t want you to be fair, sometimes what’s fair may not always be how it has always been” replies one of the principals. “You’ve got to make good ethical decisions because you’re working with adults and students all at the same time” says another.

Consistency and follow-through earn trust. All principals spoke of being a role model and setting the tone for how people treated each other. One principal in particular spoke about the consistency of doing what you say you're going to do. He elaborates,

just the way you treat staff members and students and they need to know that you are not going to say one thing to them and something else to others. Actions speak louder than words, they have to match, you had better be consistent as much as you can anyway."

During the interviews when principals were asked about how the Nebraska Department of Education Principal Frameworks for Evaluation standards impacted their practice, a sentiment among all of them was that they were aware of the standards and understood their importance. They felt the standards defined their practice and might be used for measuring their performance or as ideas for developing goals. One principal explained, "I would say if you're doing this job well, you really don't have to worry about it. It should just come to you naturally." Another states, "The reality is I pay very little attention to them. I am aware of them just enough to know that the majority of them are common sense." Quite bluntly, when questioned whether the standards impacted them, a principal says, "They don't. I can't recite them but I bet the things I have spoken about are probably intertwined within that."

In summary of the experiences of Nebraska secondary school principals interviewed, principals spoke about themes of: (a) learning from their challenges, (b) the experience of the job itself makes them grow and develop, (c) implementing change or professional development stretches them, and (d) mentors have been important along the way. The challenges they face consist of: (a) creating excellent education for all students, (b) balancing the many responsibilities personally and professionally, (c) doing the hard

things and the courage it takes, (d) working with adults, and (e) limited finances. What effects them ethically in the position is: (a) their commitment to students and their education, (b) dealing with conflict and decisions, and (c) being consistent and fair to earn the trust of others. The written standards for the profession have little to no impact on their experiences, yet they were aware of the standards.

Effective Leadership Defined by Secondary School Principals

A sub question of the research was: how do secondary school principals define effective leadership? Interview questions prompting discussion to define effective leadership from the perspective of a Nebraska secondary school principal produced multiple themes from the participants. When asked to reflect on an effective leader and their personal traits, skills, and characteristics, principals consistently spoke of the importance of relationships, knowledge and experience, particular personal attributes, the ability to have vision and develop system and plans from that vision, and excellent communication skills.

Relationships. Successful relationships were the most common theme among the participants tied to effective leadership. One principal simply stated, “A relationship builder is key” when speaking about an effective leader. “He took the time to build relationships with everybody that came through the door, with parents and community members” remembers a principal about a mentor of his. Another principal spoke about an effective leader he remembered and said,

I remember how they made me feel. To me that is very important as to how administrators make their colleagues feel. If they're valued, if their opinion matters, and if they listen and value opinions from the people they work with.

Additionally another principal added,

They tend to have the ability to understand that, if you are going to surround yourself with good people, you've got to be able to build relationship; it has to be a relationship of depth that causes people to come around and get your vision."

Knowledge and Experience. Principals spoke of the importance of knowledge in the success of effective leaders. One principal described this as, "I think just intelligence, the ability to know a lot about our field, to be well read and understand a lot of the different aspects of the field because it is wide reaching." Another similar statement by another principal is, "They're intelligent people. They understand their profession; they understand the ideas of what good schools are and what they are made up of."

Personal attributes. During the interviews, principals named various attributes of personalities that they felt contributed to effective leadership. These personal qualities being: hard worker, humble, command, influence, dependable, approachable, adaptable, resilient, and genuine.

Vision, systems, and expectations. The concept of an effective principal having a clear vision and the ability to carry it out rose as a theme of the interviews. One principal described this as an "ability to clearly outline or have a vision of what they were going to do and obviously how it was delivered." One other principal described this as paying attention to details, "Those principals that I think that pay attention to the details constantly are improving buildings for kids."

Communication. Principals repeatedly mentioned the ability to communicate for effective leadership. One principal summed this up by saying,

I just think about my job as being so much communication. Just one idea from one person to another or a global idea or whatever it is but so much of my time is information management. Things are coming at you and you have to get it out to the people so they don't say I didn't know or why did we do it that way.

Managing communication is a huge task but communication is also on an informal level.

One principal described this as "You have to be able to do this, you have to be able to speak, on a variety of levels, and so you gotta be that people person and just have the small chit chat." Communication might be vital to a principal developing his/her vision as well. Another principal discussed "their ability to communicate the vision that they have to those around them seems to me to be an important quality and characteristic of most quality principals I have been associated with." A principal summarized communication to them by saying, "you have to be willing to be a communicator on all the different modes that you can be."

Leadership is an art and a craft. The majority of the principals interviewed believed that leadership is a blend of both an art and a craft. Their overall sentiment was that not everyone can lead and there are natural born tendencies to great leaders but leadership can be improved, learned, and refined. One principal explained, "I think successful administrators have to have a certain amount of pizzazz or a personal characteristic that endures colleagues to them." "Not everybody can be an administrator." Another says, "there is an art to it too, it's that ability to see, hear, and feel." "Seeing how people react or are listening and getting that feel for and then making those adjustments on the fly, certain people have that ability." An honest response from another principal is, "Not everyone can do this job. Whether they think they can or they

can't, when it comes down to it, the job is tougher than what people think it is." A

principal speaks about the natural tendencies of great leaders and adds,

but I certainly think you can improve. I think leadership has to be learned. I think it is something you can build upon and you have to learn it at some point. You can't expect kids or people just to know how to be great leaders.

In one principal's response to leadership being both an art and craft he says,

I would probably use the term gifted. That people who are going to be exceptional leaders are gifted with leadership but then I have to say I've seen examples of people who have gifts in leadership, who don't practice the craft and don't learn the skills necessary to develop that in themselves.

When questioned about effective school environments that are impacted by leadership, principals described a very long list of topics that from their perspectives that make a school environment effective. They all saw the principal as a key to influence the setting and their responses fell into the themes of an environment including: high instructional quality focused on students, positive and caring atmosphere, respect among all, and one which is orderly and safe.

High quality instruction. A principal stated that he felt quality instruction was number one, "To me, an effective school is all about the teachers. The building, all that stuff's important. But I mean you could put the best teachers in a terrible facility and they would still be great teachers and it'd be a great school." Another principal reiterates, "You have to have great teachers. That is the biggest impact on our kids, day in day out. I want the people who are going to be here, they have to be here about kids and they have to be able to teach kids."

Positive and caring atmosphere. Several of the participants spoke of the "feel" you get in an effective school. A principal hones in on positivity, "You gotta have

positive people; you gotta show it; you gotta be positive with kids, even when they've done something wrong. At the end of the day you gotta try to find the positive out of everything you do." Along with positivity, principals talked about "energy." A principal stated it was hard to explain but "when you walk into a building, and you sense this is a pretty good place; that energy comes from kids, it comes from adults, and it comes from the whole school community." Another principal described this as "There is a sense of excitement and that excitement is surrounded by something good is happening, something good could happen. There's something else yet, there is a sense of anticipation in that excitement." Passionately another principal stated, "You have to believe, or at least exude the feeling, that what you do is the most important job in the world. It's infectious. If you love what you do and it shows that you have fun, it becomes infectious." Lastly, principals described the importance of caring in the environment. "You have to love kids," this simply put by one principal. "Number one is a student feels like there is an adult that cares about them," says another.

Mutual respect. Along with caring, a sense of respect was spoken about by the majority of principals interviewed. "There has to be a mutual respect that exists. That we all know that we can respect one another, we can respect one another's thoughts, and we can respect the ideas. And that doesn't mean we are going to follow them all, but we'll demonstrate that respect" articulates one principal. Another described this as, "If there is respect there can be education. If there is no respect, there can't be any education. Respect is the language of education."

Order and safety. A sense of order and safety is a desired characteristic of effective schools from the principal perspective. One principal summarized by saying “The expectations are clear, expectations are concrete.” Another says, “Students have to feel safe to learn.” And one more principal described this as, “There is a sense of order and safety. Students, kids, and staff members they know how things work.”

Secondary school principals had a great sense of how their effective leadership influenced an effective school environment. When questioned about how their effective leadership impacted school effectiveness, their responses centered around the concepts of high expectations for themselves and others, empowering others, role modeling, and valuing student expectations and feedback.

High expectations for self and others. One principal describes his style as “high expectations and low tolerance. But we’re going to have a lot of fun doing both of those.” Another speaks about his expectation for himself as, “I also think every day so how do I inspire and prepare our teachers to do the very best job they can do? How do I inspire and prepare the staff? How do I inspire and prepare parents?”

Empowering others. A principal described empowering others as,

A great leader isn’t somebody who does everything. I think micro managers are the worst people to work for. I think what you need to do is empower others to do their jobs and to do them more effectively. Give them the opportunities, help them along the way, but empower them.

A foundational belief for another principal is servant leadership that he described as,

Every school that I have been a part of leadership in I have recognized first of all is that there is somebody who has more expertise in whatever it is. Whether it is best practices in teaching, whether it is leadership qualities, whether it is ways to technology. Whatever it is that I am doing, there is probably someone who has more intelligence about those issues than I do.

I have to be able to identify and tap into the resources that are at hand for me.” “I have to nourish these folks. I’ve got to find a way to nourish them, to encourage them, to challenge them, to give them that kind of ownership so that they can perform at those levels. I have to be able to lead enough and have enough expertise that they understand that I’m not just saying well that’s your business. I have to be walking with them and I have to be able to understand that with them. I’ve got to be able to rely on them.

Another perspective from a principal about empowering teachers is, “Listen but get them to refocus on why they are here, what they are doing, support them and give them the tools they need and let’s get going.”

Role model. Being an example and role model is a prevalent theme for principals. “I have to be, my leadership, I have to reflect as a positive stable role model for adults and students” proclaims one principal. Another stated,

I think the principal sets the tone for leadership in the building. I think you set the tone with how you work, how you communicate with others, even your values. How you act and what you do and how you treat people, I think that is how a principal affects overall in a building.

An example of role modeling is given by another principal as “I am trying to model for teachers everything I do. When we get together, staff meeting? There’s a learning goal, there’s a scale. Why? Because that is what I expect when I walk into the classroom.”

Value student expectations and feedback. One principal in particular spoke articulately about incorporating the role of student expectations and feedback in his leadership. He stated that as a school becomes more effective, “students begin to expect more.” “It is a good sign if a student is starting to raise their own expectations of the teacher.” This principal readily uses “student feedback from student surveys to inform our year professional development plan for the next year.” He believes, “it makes people reflect a little bit more” when it comes from students.

Perceived Needs of Secondary Principals in Continuously Learning

Along with insightful perspectives of Nebraska secondary school principal experiences and their views on effective leadership a third sub question was asked, what are the perceived needs of secondary school principals in their continuous learning as a leader? Specifically, principals were questioned on the content of their own personal development plans. Each principal was able to identify multiple goals they had for personal pursuit whether these were joined with or independent from their professional evaluation as a principal. Two themes emerged from their goals, developing as an instructional leader and developing communication to influence relationships.

Developing as an instructional leader. Overwhelmingly, the focus of the principals interviewed in their professional development plan was the theme of developing as an instructional leader. For one principal this entailed, “the recognition of the things I’m not good at or the things I might not like or fully embrace as much as I should. An example, for me personally, would be technology.” For another principal, he stated,

one of the biggest components I needed, because it was my weakness, and that was developing more growth, the personal growth in what was best practice was the cutting edge ideals in education. I had to study those. I always wanted to find out more. Understanding what was at the forefront of educational change and development so I could learn something new to take back.

A specific area for one principal was, “my action plan for student data is about reducing failing students.” And yet another principal stated,

What are the things that keep me up at night? One is I want to make sure we are improving instructionally, you know helping these teachers develop. Number two is how do we meet all the needs of our kids? I think I come to my three ‘F’s’, you know focus, fidelity, and follow-through.

“I have to keep learning. I’ve got to keep developing.”

Developing communication to influence relationships. Several of the participants mentioned a desire to hone their communication to influence better relationships. A principal stated that one of his professional goals was building relationships with staff,

I really maintain that I don’t care what level of leadership you are in, whether administratively, you are only as good as the staff you have. So I needed to make sure I built those relationships and that I fostered in them the characteristics and the mentality that we are here to serve the kids however that looks. And I couldn’t do that by just telling them, I had to develop those relationships.

He goes on to explain that how he did this is by “asking the question whenever I did an evaluation and had the visit with the teacher and a follow up, what do you need? What do you need to be more successful? And realizing that truly was my responsibility.”

Another principal candidly speaks about his own self regulation in communication by sharing

I am careful with it too because I do have a lot of passion. I do have a lot of energy. And sometimes that can come off misdirected and too much like a little dog licking your face too much. And I have noticed as I have gotten into this profession more is to slow down a little bit. Read them where they are at, give them little bits and pieces but enough to get them thinking, that little hook. And then they go out and chew on that for a little while. And so I have to do that and that is my biggest challenge for me.”

Principals were also questioned through interviews what their most meaningful professional development as a leader had been. The principals listed several opportunities such as national or regional conferences or meetings, collaborating with colleagues, making school visits, engaging in simulations or scenarios with others, goal setting, pursuit of higher degrees or education, as well as presenting to others. One

principal stated, “I don’t think there is just one experience out there that is, boom, that’s it! So for me, I use a combination of a few things.” Many principals shared this same idea.

Learning from others. Most principals talked about developing by engaging with others in their profession. One principal spoke about leadership coursework, “having 35 people in there talking about their experiences and what they do. That’s probably the most effective professional development I’ve ever been in.” “The ability to communicate with my partners; to run scenarios by us; activities; getting out of my seat and doing different things; applying the information. If it is related to my job, that engages me.” One other principal spoke of an on the job mentorship he experienced and how the mentor “was able to be vulnerable enough to say what did you think? What could we have done different? What would you have done here? Those kinds of things are the best type of professional development I have ever gotten.” Principals seek each other out to learn. One principal stated, “There are other people I literally look to seek out because I want to read their stuff because it is really insightful and thoughtful.” Another speaks of doing school visits, “You have to get away. You have to see something new. And I get more out of that than going to a conference or something. I want to see practitioners.” One other principal says, “You talk to the right people, and you identify, and I think if you’re any good at what you do, especially in education, you identify certain people and what they’re doing.” “Then you seek them out and you pick their brain.”

Applying what you learn. Furthermore, principals then are motivated to take what they learn from others and apply it in their own setting. A principal described this, “You know it’s digging into something and then applying it and then having to model has kind of raised our own bar.” Additionally, one other principal commented, “How do we make it not just a one hit wonder and how do we make it part of our culture, a part of our school going forward. I think a lot of times people go to training and they are super excited and then. . . .”

Summary

Nine (9) secondary school principals contributed to answering the three research questions of: (a) what are the experiences of Nebraska secondary school principals in school leadership; (b) how do secondary school principals define effective leadership; and (c) what are the perceived needs of secondary school principals in their continuous learning as a leader? Their thoughtful insights provided multiple subthemes surrounding each of these questions. The subthemes are interrelated and helped to shape my understanding of their lived experiences. These subthemes will be examined more closely in the next chapter to summarize an understanding of the essence of their experiences, definition of leadership, and perceived needs.

Chapter 5

Summary, Interpretation, Limitations, Recommendations, Discussion and Conclusions

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the leadership experiences of Nebraska secondary school principals, how they defined effective leadership, and what their perceived needs were in their continuous learning as a leader. Through the perspectives of practicing principals, an understanding of these concepts will provide insight for principals who strive to define effective leadership and how to grow as an effective leader. This chapter provides a summary of the study, interpretation of the analysis, limitations of the research, recommendations, discussion of significance, and a conclusion.

Summary

A qualitative approach to the research was taken in order to present a rich description of the secondary principal's lived experiences. Data were collected through in depth, one-on-one, audio recorded interviews of nine Nebraska secondary school principals, which took place in their offices at each of their schools. The protocol used to conduct the interviews is found in Appendix D of this study.

The data were analyzed and organized using Giorgi's existential phenomenological method comprised of the following steps: (a) read and reread the data in order to understand the meaning of the whole experience of each participant, (b) divided the data into meaning units, or blocks of data that contained similar meaning,

(c) interrogated the meaning units for what it revealed about the research questions and where there was consistent non-subjective agreement, and (d) synthesized and integrated the meaning units in order to identify themes and create a consistent description of the experiences of secondary school principals and what they had in common (Castro, 2003).

The study was based on the following comprehensive questions:

1. What are the experiences of Nebraska secondary school principals in school leadership?
2. How do secondary school principals define effective leadership?
3. What are the perceived needs of secondary school principals in their continuous learning as a leader?

Analyzing the consistent themes from the data to investigate these three inclusive questions produced an essence for understanding each of them through the perceptions of the principals.

Interpretation

A comprehensive review of the literature informed this study and was used in comparison to the findings within this interpretation. The interpretation is organized as models and comparisons representing: (a) the experiences of secondary school principals, (b) effective leadership defined by secondary school principals, and (c) their perceived needs in continuous learning.

Experiences of secondary school principals. The data analysis revealed impactful experiences of principals, their challenges, and the role of ethics in their career. These findings and themes are represented in Figure 1. The figure represents a summary

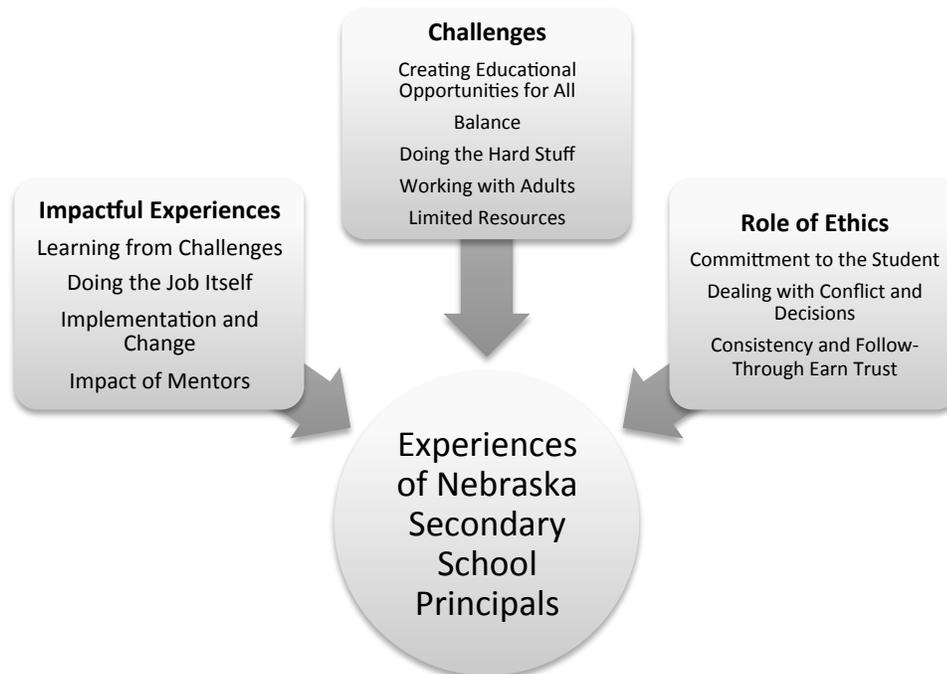


Figure 1. Experiences of Nebraska secondary school principals.

of all the themes reported in the findings from the participants on their experiences as Nebraska secondary school principals.

When the findings of the participants and the elusiveness and complexity section of literature review were compared, many of the concepts discussed in the literature review were discovered in the findings. Aforementioned, the complexity of leadership is apparent in the review of literature and was also apparent in the lived experiences of Nebraska secondary school principals. Student suicide, changing school cultures, opening a new school, having the courage to do the job, balancing a personal life with the extreme demands of 80 hour weeks, and getting everyone to the same vision were just a few of the experiences mentioned by the principals. A captivating discovery of the research was that, the complexity and elusiveness of the job actually had the most impact

on practicing principals. When the participants reflected on what had impacted them most in their experiences, time and again they mentioned the challenges and failures, doing the job itself with its complexities, and implementing a major change. The people who influenced them the most were their mentors, who often walked them through the difficulties of the job. The whole concept of having the courage to do the job, doing the job day after day, and then reflecting by sharing that with others is what seemed to propel the experiences of these principals.

Trust and an ethical commitment to the student were spoken about frequently when principals reflected upon ethics and their role in their position as a principal. In the literature review, one of the most elusive characteristics that resulted as important in leadership was trust. To create the chain of leadership and followership, trust must be present. Principals indicated in their statements that their fairness and consistency in dealing with difficult situations developed trust. Even if people did not like the decisions, if it was dealt with in a fair and consistent manner, trust was developed. Surprisingly, the whole concept of the commitment to students was not connected to ethics in the review of literature. Yet, it was the most common theme among principals when they discussed ethics. Caring deeply for the students they serve and ensuring that they get a quality education is what defined them as educators according to statements made by multiple principals.

When asked about professional standards and how that impacted their practice or experiences, principals had very little to share about how these standards held a vital role for them in their profession. The literature review shared the most well-know set of

professional standards, the Interstate Leadership and Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Policy Standards (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). Also reviewed and inquired about in the interviews was the Nebraska Department of Education Principal Standards (Nebraska State Board of Education, 2011). Both of these sets of standards were created to impact school leaders as a resource of effective practice. The feedback received during this research was that the principals were aware of their professions standards but their presence did not necessarily have any impact upon their practice.

Overall, the experiences of Nebraska secondary school principals closely represented elusive characteristics and the complexity of school leadership as relevant in the body of research on leadership. From the perspective of the school principal, the challenges and complexity of the job drives how they deal with challenges which are ultimately driven by the role of ethics in their leadership.

Effective leadership defined by secondary school principals. The themes discovered in the analysis of effective leadership from the perspective of school principals were founded by (a) what defined an effective school environment, (b) how effective leadership was defined, and (c) how an effective leader influenced an effective school environment. The related themes of the principal perspectives in each of these categories are represented in Figure 2.

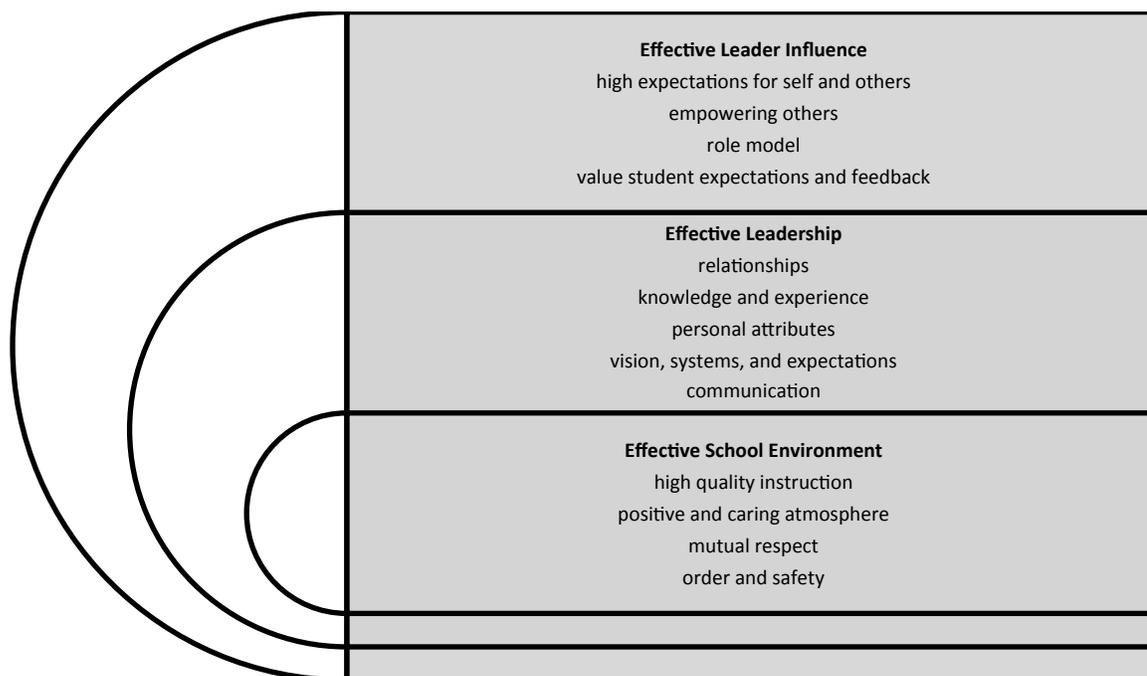


Figure 2. Effective leadership defined by Nebraska secondary school principals.

According to the literature review, the newest generation of school principals signifies how leadership theories interrelate and the findings of this research agreed with that same sentiment. Leader influence and a definition of effective leaders may be found in various leadership theories and the literature review clearly noted that, “no unified theory of leadership currently exists” (Dinh et al., 2014, p. 55). Components of transformational leadership which are focused upon developing the leadership capacity of all staff, servant leadership which is rooted in ethical and caring behavior, invitational leadership which is based upon respect and trust, and followership theory which highlights the importance of the teacher principal relationship, were all found in the conversations with secondary school principals. There was no one theory that had more representation in the findings of an effective leader than another.

As principals defined effective leadership in the study, the main themes that emerged are represented in Figure 2 under the heading of effective leadership. The majority of the themes are very similar to what was represented in the literature review. Effective communication was one of the most common themes between both the principals and the review of the literature. Principals spoke most about relationships and their importance in effective leadership, while the literature review stated this as understanding and developing people, motivating others, or managing people. Developing a vision collaboratively and putting systems in place to set direction in the way of that vision allows for the development of clear expectations for all. This was also a commonality of the literature review and the findings of school principals. Principals spoke of personal attributes of effective leaders such as; influence, dependability, hardworking, adaptability, and approachability. The literature disclosed terms such as: flexible, resilient, optimistic (Leithwood et al., 2006).

The significant finding from the perspective of the principals that was not identified in the literature review was the concept of knowledge and experience in defining an effective leader. The principals spoke often of intelligence, understanding the profession and having experience as important in the definition of an effective leader.

Upon review of the literature, the importance of school leadership was investigated. The literature signifies that the principal does indeed directly impact the effectiveness of the school in multiple studies by Seashore Louis et. al. (2004), Suber (2011), and Grissom and Loeb (2011). More specifically, the principal impacts teachers in a school directly (Gordon, 2006). Principal perspectives of an effective leaders'

influence reiterated this importance. The noteworthy contribution that the principal perspective adds to the literature review is that there were particular behaviors that the principals identified as common to contributing to effective schools. Those behaviors are listed in Figure 2 under the title of effective leader influence. Common behaviors that emerged from the perspective of the principals were the concept of having high expectations for themselves and others, empowering others, their actions spoke louder than words and they are the role model for what they want, and value student expectations and their feedback.

The concept of whether leadership is innate or a learned skill was explored with the school principals in the interviews. Just as supported in the literature review, most believed that leadership is both a set of dispositions as well as skills that can be learned or refined. There was a sentiment among the principals interviewed that not everyone can lead. One principal even stated that leaders hold a “certain pizzazz or personal characteristic with a touch or tweak that sets people apart.” Also in agreement with the literature review were that tactics or processes could be taught (Greer, 2011) but principals shared that leaders had to be intentional to learn or hone the natural skills they had.

The perspective of the principal from this study aligned with multiple concepts from the body of literature in leadership, yet some authentic additions can be made from their insights. From the perspective of the Nebraska secondary school principal, knowledge and experience are relevant attributes for an effective leader and there are specific behaviors associated to an effective leaders’ influence on an effective school.

Perceived needs of secondary school principals in continuous learning. The review of literature identified continuous learning as a leader as a personal pursuit, the findings from the school principals supported this concept. Principals all identified personal pursuits they had identified for themselves to develop. Their needs centered around two main themes, how to develop as an instructional leader and how to communicate to influence others. Specifically they spoke of technology, best practices, and student data focused goals in relation to refining instructional leadership. Informal communication, developing non-school relationships, having conversations, developing leadership capacity, and affecting change and climate were all items connecting to the theme of communicating to influence others.

The literature review identified that self-knowledge and linking new information gained from an experience into a new challenge that may be faced is all part of purposeful learning for leaders (Day et al., 2014). The principal perspective in this research study provided some specific examples meaningful for professional development and learning. All principals interviewed mentioned in some way that they like to learn from others. In the literature review, professional learning communities or networks and on the job training were stated as becoming increasingly popular (Huber, 2013). The principal viewpoint of meaningful learning experiences focused around two main themes: learning from others, and applying what they learned. The formats that principals have engaged in according to these two themes was varied and inclusive of national or regional opportunities, local collaboration, school visits, simulations of situations or scenarios, pursuit of higher education, and presenting to others. Principals

mentioned all of these as meaningful learning experiences that contributed to their continuous learning as a leader. Figure 3 represents the perspective of the secondary school principal and their perceived needs in the continuous cycle of learning.

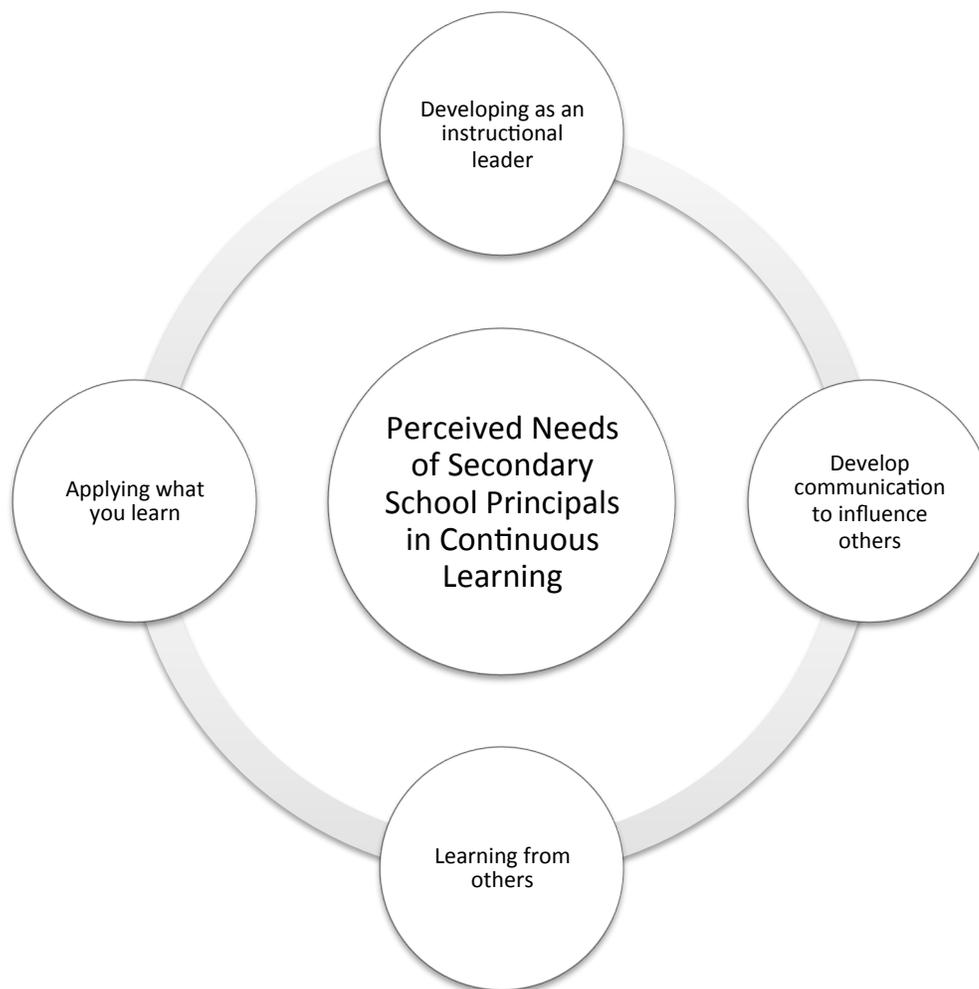


Figure 3. Perceived needs of Nebraska secondary school principals in continuous learning.

Limitations

There were limitations to this study. The participants were all from NCSA (Nebraska Council of School Administrators) Regions 1 and 2, defined in Appendix A. Although size of school varied as well as age and years of experience of the participants, they all ended up being male and from the same ethnicity. A wider range of demographics by geographic, gender, or ethnicity may have expanded the scope of the study. Another limitation of the study was through its' qualitative nature, the principal perspective was forefront and thus the data easily was validated through member checking and peer review but limited in being triangulated. Since all of the participants were from a similar region, some of them knew each other personally and/or professionally and may have had similar views and perspectives naturally. In addition, being a Nebraska administrator myself, I had personal acquaintances with two of the participants. These limitations may or may not have impacted the findings. Despite my choosing to study secondary school principals, it is possible that my own experiences as an elementary principal for 11 years may have created a bias that placed limitations on my analysis.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been developed from the data collected and analyzed as part of this research. Recommendations are being made in three categories: (a) Secondary school principals, (b) District level administrators or professionals who assist in developing school principals, and (c) Future research.

Recommendations for secondary school principals. Individuals who serve as a secondary school principal should consider:

- Reflecting on their challenges and day to day activity in the job and discuss those experiences with like colleagues or mentors as those experiences may be what impacts them the most in their career.
- Realizing that the challenges of the profession include the pressure to create educational opportunities for all, balancing professional and personal responsibilities, doing the hard stuff, working with adults, and being creative with limited resources. Therefore, sharing successful strategies in addressing these challenges with other colleagues would be helpful.
- Consistently keeping a commitment to the student when dealing with conflict and decisions and following through will earn trust with others.
- Actively working toward an effective school environment where there is high quality instruction, a positive and caring atmosphere, mutual respect, and a sense of order and safety.
- Establishing effective leadership based upon relationships, knowledge and experience, desired personal attributes, communication, and creating a common vision with systems and expectations in place to develop that common vision.
- Actively engage in the behaviors of having high expectations for themselves and others, empowering others, being a role model for desired behaviors, and valuing students' expectations and feedback.

- Seeking a professional group of colleagues to engage with on a regular basis about developing as an instructional leader and developing communication to influence others.
- Finding ways to apply what they learn from conferences, classes, professional networks, or visiting other schools into their own context.

Recommendations for district level administrators or professionals who assist in developing principals. Individuals who supervise, lead, or assist in developing secondary school principals should consider:

- Finding coaching and mentoring opportunities for principals or principal candidates that are on the job training experiences where the principal or principal candidate has a mentor or coach working along side them to dialogue about their experiences of doing the job itself.
- Addressing the challenges of the school principalship by seeking professional development opportunities for them that include strategies for creating educational opportunities for all, balancing personal and professional responsibilities, addressing the hard things, and working with adults.
- Supporting and promoting school principal decisions that are consistent and rooted in a commitment to the student.
- Including a way to praise or develop the more affective behaviors of effective leadership in principal evaluation, such as acknowledging a presence of or lack of a positive and caring atmosphere, respect, relationships, desired

personal attributes, high expectations for self and others, empowering others, and being a role model.

- Encouraging, supporting, or creating professional networks in which principals or principal candidates can learn from others.

Recommendations for future research. Additional research is recommended to further the scope of this study. Due to the limitations of this study's scope and methodology, I would recommend the following research topics to further develop and verify the findings of this research:

- There were nine secondary school principals from a fairly small geographic region that were participants in this study. This study could be replicated with a larger region or demographic to compare the findings.
- The gender of this study by chance was all male. The findings from this study could be replicated with all female participants to compare the findings.
- The phenomenological methodology of this study was to explore the perspectives of principals and to find the essence of their perspectives. Another qualitative methodology may have provided a comparison to theory or a study of each participant case by case.
- The ages of these participants varied along with their years experience. A study comparing new principals (1-5 years) in comparison to those more seasoned in their career (15+) may provide another dimension to this research.

- This study was inclusive of only secondary school principals. Expanding this study to include elementary principals or in comparison to elementary principals may provide a new aspect.
- The study included principals from rural and metropolitan school districts. An expansion of the study would be to include a sample from metropolitan and a sample from rural and compare the findings.
- The whole concept of the personal pursuit necessary to accommodate continuous learning for the principal is a concept that could be studied independently from this research.
- An expansion of this study could include the behaviors of an effective leader's influence from the principal perspective and then include a study of the teacher's perspectives of their principal's behaviors.

Discussion of Significance and Conclusions

This qualitative study was designed to add to the body of research on school principal leadership from the perspective of the school principal. The findings and interpretation of this study uncovered authentic insight from principals that aligned with a great deal of the literature review as well as provided additions to the previously reviewed literature. The significance of this research and the additions provided from the perspective of Nebraska secondary school principals was:

- The complexities in leadership were the premise for what impacted school principals the most in their experiences. Challenges, failures, doing the job, implementing change, creating educational opportunities for all students,

balance, doing the hard things, working with adults, and collaborating with mentors while they approached these things were the very source of the density of the principalship but also the same experiences which influenced them most.

- Knowledge and experience were identified as essential elements of an effective leader and there are specific behaviors these effective leaders display to influence effective schools. Those behaviors being: high expectations for self and others, empowering others, being a role model, and valuing student expectations and feedback.
- The perceived needs of the secondary school principal in continuously developing as a leader were summed up into four main concepts: (a) principals desired to develop as an instructional leader, (b) refine their skills to communicate to influence others, (c) they have a need to learn from others, and (d) apply what they learn.

As a researcher, it became clear that the qualitative approach of a phenomenology allowed me to get to the essence of the lived experiences of Nebraska secondary school principals, their definitions of effective leadership, and their needs in continuous learning as a leader. Another approach would not have allowed me to peer into the affective domain of all these topics and the findings that principals shared as important related highly to the emotional aspects of leadership. These themes are not easily measured, very subjective in nature, yet we know they make a difference in the leadership of schools. During my literature review, it was apparent that other researchers have

approached the impact that a principal has directly in a school, traits and characteristics that the observer views as important for the success of a principal, yet little to none of this research was from the viewpoint of the practitioner themselves. This study allowed for the voice of the principal to contribute to the body of research that others have defined as their practice.

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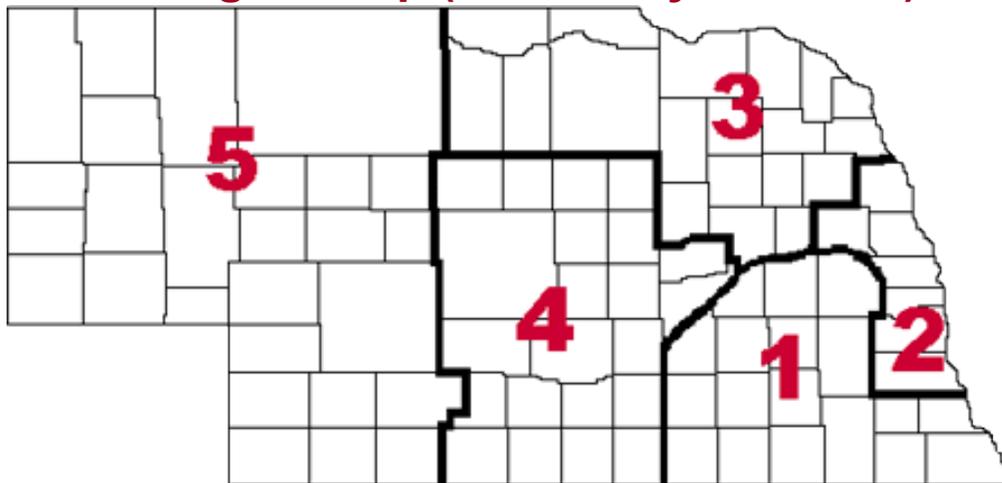
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Appendix A

NCSA Regional Map

NCSA Region Map (defined by counties)



Region 1

Butler
Clay
Fillmore
Gage
Hamilton
Jefferson
Johnson
Lancaster
Nemaha
Nuckolls
Pawnee
Polk
Richardson
Saline
Saunders
Seward
Thayer
York

Region 2

Burt
Cass
Dodge
Douglas
Otoe
Sarpy
Washington

Region 3

Antelope
Boone
Boyd
Brown
Cedar
Colfax
Cuming
Dakota
Dixon
Holt
Keya Paha
Knox
Madison
Pierce
Platte
Rock
Stanton
Thurston
Wayne

Region 4

Adams
Blaine
Buffalo
Custer
Dawson
Franklin
Furnas
Garfield
Gosper
Greeley
Hall
Harlan
Howard
Kearney
Loup
Merrick
Nance
Phelps
Sherman
Valley
Webster
Wheeler

Region 5

Arthur
Banner
Box Butte
Chase
Cherry
Cheyenne
Dawes
Deuel
Dundy
Frontier
Garden
Grant
Hayes
Hitchcock
Hooker
Keith
Kimball
Lincoln
Logan
McPherson
Morrill
Perkins
Red Willow
Scotts Bluff
Sheridan
Sioux
Thomas

Appendix B

Letter to Participant

Dear Potential Participant,

I am a researcher as a doctoral candidate at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln in Educational Leadership who is conducting a qualitative research study. You are being recruited to be a participant in the study to describe the experiences of secondary school principals in leadership.

You are free to decide whether or not you wish to participate in this study. The advantages of your participation will be to assist and further the research on school principal leadership and potential opportunities for development in the field of the school leadership.

Please indicate your interest by returning this email with the following information:

Name _____

Position/Title _____

Affiliated School/District _____

Level of Principalship:

____ junior high (grades 7-8)

____ high school (grades 9-12)

____ high school (grades 10-12)

____ junior high/ high school (grades 7-12)

Total Years of Experience as a Principal _____

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

(Date)

“Leadership Matters: Perceptions of School Principals on Leadership Development”

Dear Participant,

The following information is provided for you to determine your decision in participating in the present study. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate at any time without affecting your relationship with myself or anyone affiliated with the study.

The study was designed to describe the leadership experiences of secondary school principals in Nebraska Council of School Administrators (NCSA) Regions 1 and 2 in eastern Nebraska and the essence of their needs in development as a school leader.

Data collection will involve a face to face, one on one interview with me as the researcher, audiotaping of the interview, as well as notes taken by myself. Do not hesitate to ask any questions about the study either before participating or during the time you are participating. I will share my findings with you after the research is completed. Your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way, and only I will know your identity as a participant.

There are no known risks associated with this study. The benefits associated with your participation are the information about the experiences of qualitative research, detailed analysis of the data, and insight upon research relevant to your chosen career.

Please accept this as notification of the process associated with the study. Consent will be received in person during the interview session. I will be contacting you in the next month to set up an interview opportunity.

Sincerely,

Melissa Poloncic
UNL, Researcher, Educational Administration Doctoral Student

Appendix D

Semi-structured Interview Protocol

Semi-structured Interview Protocol

Time of Interview:

Date:

Location:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position, school, and district of interviewee:

Number of years experience as a principal:

Questions:

1. Think of a secondary school principal that you hold in high regard and consider to be an effective leader. What are the personal traits, skills, and characteristics of that leader? *For the purpose of this study, effective as defined as the adjective "effective" by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, as one that produces a desired effect.*
2. From your perspective, is leadership an art or a craft; please explain?
3. During your professional career, what experiences have most influenced or impacted your growth and development as a secondary principal?
4. What are the three greatest challenges you face as a secondary school principal?
5. What are three to five characteristics of an effective school environment?
6. Consider the various dimensions of standards of ethics, which ones most impact you as a secondary school principal?
7. How does your effective leadership contribute to school effectiveness?

8. How does the Nebraska Department of Education Principal Frameworks for Evaluation standards impact your practice?
9. Identify the components of your personal professional growth plan as a secondary school principal.
10. As a building principal, describe your most meaningful professional development learning experience.