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AUTHOR Williamson, Ronald; Hudson, Martha
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ABSTRACT

This report describes a study of the factors that contributed to decisions by women to abandon their careers as school leaders. The purpose of the study was to extend analysis of socialization factors, particularly when they persuade school leaders to reconsider their careers in education. The study followed 25 women who completed the masters of school administration program at a state university in North Carolina. The study tracked them as they entered the program, throughout the program, upon graduation, and 4 years following graduation as they became assistant principals and principals. As a group, they worked in all levels of the K-12 educational system, in schools of all sizes, and in a variety of settings. Demographic information and career paths of the participants are presented in tables. Data for the study were gathered from participant interviews, short surveys, reflective journals, and focus-group discussions. Data were analyzed using a grounded-theory approach. The study found a number of reasons why the participants chose not to continue their careers as school leaders. The reasons are organized within the broad categories of school and community contexts, personal perspectives, time demands, and the interface of work and family. (Contains 67 references.) (WFA)

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Walking Away: New Women School Leaders Leaving the Career Track.

Ronald Williamson
Martha Hudson

April 22, 2003

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Walking Away: New Women School Leaders
Leaving the Career Track

Ronald Williamson, Ed.D.
Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, MI
(734) 487-7120 x 2685
e-mail: ron.williamson@emich.edu

Martha Hudson, Ed.D.
University of North Carolina at
Greensboro
Greensboro, NC
(336) 379-9094
e-mail: mlbhudson@aol.com

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Educational leaders face an increasingly complex work environment, characterized by difficult and often contentious issues. Adoption of curricular standards and accompanying accountability standards, the changing demography of schools, the need for strengthened family and community support, and the competition for resources from an aging electorate characterize the milieu in which school leaders work.

Faced with the need to deal with a rapidly changing work environment, many school leaders elected to retire or move to other employment. The pool of aspiring school leaders continues to drop, while the need becomes even more acute (Educational Research Services, 1998; University of North Carolina, 2001).

To address the need for an educational leader with a different set of skills and to provide a strong pool of candidates, many states adopted new standards for the preparation of educational leaders (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996). At the center of nearly all proposals for reform was the call for a "new" kind of school leader, but not everyone agreed on how to proceed. Some suggested a focus on the improvement of teaching and learning (Murphy, 1999), others advocated modification of licensure requirements (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996) and still others questioned the ability of colleges and universities to reform themselves (Achilles, 1998, Haller, Brent & McNamara, 1997; Schneider, 1999).

Responding to the demand for a different type of school leader and the need for an expanded pool of potential leaders, many universities modified their preparation programs. Some incorporated the knowledge, skills and dispositions advocated by national accrediting bodies (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996). Others worked to identify the knowledge base reflective of contemporary school leadership (Murphy, 1999; Thomson, 1993), built programs around teaching and learning as the core activities of schools (Achilles, 1998; Schneider, 1999), and included more purposeful clinical activities including school-based

internships (Leitwood, Jantzi, & Coffin, 1995; Milstein & Kreuger, 1997; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2002).

Once hired, new school leaders are confronted by the weight of tradition and history in their new jobs (Hartzell, Williams & Nelson, 1995; Marshall, 1992). Often they are counseled to adopt "old" norms about priorities and decision-making. Some find that to gain acceptance they must adhere to values and leadership behaviors counter to those that attracted them to school leadership or were espoused in their preparation (Hartzell, Williams & Nelson, 1995; Marshall, 1992).

The induction of new school leaders often shapes behavior throughout their career (Greenfield, 1985). A pioneering study of the assistant principalship (Marshall, 1992) offered a framework for examining socialization to the role and suggested explicit tasks that shaped the assistant principal's sense of competence and contributed to the way they were viewed by others. The beginning years were found to be defining (Hartzell, Williams & Nelson, 1995). Attitudes developed and responses cultivated during the initial months as an assistant principal greatly influenced behavior patterns and leadership capabilities.

Context of the Study

In the early 1990s North Carolina, like many other states, altered administrator preparation. Based on the recommendations of the Educational Leadership Task Force, the state disestablished all administrator preparation programs and invited campuses of the state university system to submit proposals for creation of a new Master's in School Administration degree (MSA) (Quality Candidate Committee, 1994).

Paralleling the disestablishment, the Standards Board for Public School Administration developed standards for the licensure of administrators in North Carolina. The Standards Board created a set of ten standards, similar to the

national standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996) that articulated what the state's school leaders should believe, know, and be able to do.

Both the national and state standards emphasized the complexity of the leadership role (Bolman & Deal, 1997), the importance of moral and ethical grounding (Kouzes & Posner, 1993; Sergiovanni, 1992; 1996), the value of working closely with parents and community (Epstein & Salinas, 1993; Prestine, 1991; Sergiovanni, 1994), and the importance of student learning as the primary function of schools (Newman, 1991).

While there is limited research on the socialization experiences of new school leaders, there is abundant research about socialization in other settings (Merton, 1968; Schein, 1971; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). From these works emerged a definition of socialization. Merton (1968) suggested that socialization is the process whereby one acquired the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to perform a role. Van Maanen and Schein (1979) described it as the "process by which one was taught and learned 'the ropes' of a particular organizational role" (p. 211).

Studies of socialization in educational settings suggest that the process is informal rather than formal, intense and short in duration (Augenstein & Konnert, 1991; Crow, Mecklowitz, Weekes, 1992; Duke, Isaacson, Sagor & Schmuck, 1984; Greenfield, 1985). The informality of the process, coupled with the short duration reflects an emphasis on what Schein (1971) describes as a custodial orientation, an unwillingness to challenge traditional norms for the role.

Researchers also suggested that a major part of socialization is learning the regularities of the job---daily routines and tasks, and coming to grips with the newly assumed role. Gussner (1974) described this as "internalizing" the new role. Marshall (1985) saw the transition differently, describing it as "professional shock."

A study of socialization for teachers found a distinct sequence of career phases (Huberman, 1989). It reported that entry to the field was driven by a desire to survive in the new role as one confronts the "reality shock" of the first

year. This is followed by a phase described as stabilization, 3-5 years into a career, where one develops an increasing sense of mastery reflected in greater confidence, longer-term objectives, and a sense of responsibility for one's work. Huberman further suggested that after this phase one begins to consider the future and may consider career options. He described it as feeling "locked in (and) trying to break out" (p. 352). Others described this period as similar to the "mid-life crisis" and "reviewing one's life and career and contemplating, with a certain sense of urgency, other careers 'while it's still possible'" (p. 352). This period in one's career was often followed by a time of 'serenity' frequently characterized by increased reflection and acceptance of their career.

While describing the multiple phases that many transverse during their career Huberman (1989) found no uniform pattern. Individuals responded differently to their careers based on setting, context, and personal preferences. Nothing suggested that everyone moved through the phases in a linear fashion or that everyone experienced each of the phases.

Theoretical Framework

This investigation examined the factors that students cited as having the greatest value in their preparation program and impact on their careers. It gathered data from students during the first four years of their career as school leaders and examined those factors that either accelerated interest in school leadership or prompted students to consider other career options.

In a pioneering study, Brubaker and Coble(1997) found that the most critical factor was the tension between professional demands and their personal lives. Other frequently cited factors included maneuvering the political environment and a lack of personal fulfillment. Brubaker and Coble's work identified factors similar to those revealed by Huberman (1989, 1993) in an examination of influences shaping the career trajectory of teachers. Clausen (1995) found that significant life events shaped the career paths. Therefore, consideration was given to the

impact of family and other significant life events that shaped the professional work of school leaders.

The induction of new school leaders often shapes their behavior throughout their career (Greenfield, 1985). That induction is influenced by both the personal and social contexts of socialization. What new school leaders take with them to the assignment, the role expectations of others, and the context of the setting are critical factors. All contribute significantly to how new leaders see their role and carry out their responsibilities. They also help shape the lens through which the success of the new leader is measured (Hart, 1991; 1995).

A pioneering study of the assistant principalship (Marshall, 1992) offered a framework for examining socialization to the role. The concept of "professional shock" (Marshall, 1985) was used to suggest seven explicit tasks that shaped assistant principals' own sense of competence and contributed to the way they were viewed by others in the school.

The beginning years were identified as defining to the role (Hartzell, Williams & Nelson, 1995). Attitudes developed and responses cultivated during the initial months as an assistant principal greatly influence behavior patterns and leadership capabilities.

Because the subjects of this study were women, the investigation included any impact that gender-associated leadership preferences had on their socialization. Though Eagly, Karau, and Johnson (1992) found significant differences only in the preference for a democratic style and in higher task orientation, other studies suggested additional differences. Shakeshaft (1987, 1999) offered a summary of such findings. She suggested that in schools headed by women, relationships with others are central to all actions. The leaders spend more time with people, communicate more, care more about individual differences, are more concerned with teachers and marginal students, and devote more energy to motivating others. In these schools, teaching and learning is the major focus, perhaps because women tend to know more about and be more personally involved in the teaching/learning process.

Interest in the way that women are inducted and socialized into educational settings became the topic of extensive investigation in recent years. As part of a report on women school executives, Brown, Irby and Smith (1993) advocated for a more inclusive profession, suggesting that "certain female leadership skills are especially effective in bringing about systemic change" (p. 71). They also found that female school leaders were skilled at balancing the product orientation of schools with the human concerns of both employees and students.

Other research on the socialization of women to school leadership identified the powerful influence that established norms play on the way newly hired leaders perform their work. Conformity to existing norms rather than adoption of new practices and approaches was found to characterize the hiring of women in school leadership (Riehl & Byrd, 1997). A recent study of two women high school principals (Lad, 2002) found that women school leaders continue to be judged on their ability to sustain the traditional roles of women (wife, mother) as well as their skill as a school leader. Similarly, Brunner (1997) found that successful women superintendents were aware of the predominantly male culture of the superintendency and the attendant expectations for "appropriate" behavior.

Other studies examined other factors that might contribute to our understanding of the induction and success of women in school leadership. Hantrais (1993) found differences in career path. She reported that "men more often pursue a linear career path" and "that path for women is more likely to be cyclical as they adapt professional life to match changes in their family situation" (p. 139).

Earlier studies found that a linear conception of time and career failed to incorporate the complexity that some leaders, especially women, handle in their professional and personal lives (Davies, 1989). They suggested that women often engage in a multiplicity of activities simultaneously and therefore conceptions of a linear career path do not appropriately reflect the reality of feminist life.

Out of this interest in women in school leadership emerged a “feminist-inclusive” theory of leadership (Irby & Brown, 1995). This model identified distinctly feminine responses to leadership roles (e.g., handling situations, supervision, authority, leadership style) and advocated modifications to the current theory of leadership to both acknowledge and incorporate these perspectives on successful leadership.

This framework and the assumptions described earlier formed the basis for this study. Together, they suggest that ways in which new school leaders enter the profession can have a significant impact on the way they conceive leadership and the way it manifests itself throughout their careers. Examination of the impact of socialization on a new generation of school leaders can inform leadership preparation programs.

As part of a multi-year study of the transition to school leadership, the researchers found that a number of new school leaders were electing to abandon their careers and seek other employment. Frequently, these folks entered their school leadership with great enthusiasm, committed to making a difference for students, and confident of their ability to impact the quality of teaching and learning. Three years later their enthusiasm waned and their commitment dissipated.

The Study

North Carolina’s revised preparation programs were launched in 1995. Shortly thereafter a longitudinal study of the impact of the newly designed program at one campus began (Williamson & Hudson, 1998a). Data were gathered from students as they entered the program, throughout the program, upon graduation, and for four years following graduation. These data provided insight into the development of educational leaders and their induction and socialization into their new role. Prior papers reported on student perceptions of their preparation (Hudson & Williamson, 1999), on leadership in diverse settings

(Williamson & Hudson, 1998b) and on the socialization of new school leaders into the field (Williamson & Hudson, 2001, 2002).

The Subjects

This study followed the career of twenty-five graduates as they exited the preparation program over a three-year period and entered school leadership. Table 1 includes detailed demographic information about each of the subjects. As a group, they were primarily Caucasian and in every case entered the preparation program after several years of teaching. Most of the subjects were in their 30s or 40s, though a handful were either younger or older. While in the program they lived in a variety of communities, representing the diversity of the geographic region served by the preparation program. Most subjects lived in a large urban area and contiguous suburbs or nearby small towns.

The career track of the subjects is detailed in Table 2 and illustrates the diverse roles these graduates assumed as they exited the preparation program. As a group they worked at all levels of the K-12 educational system (elementary, middle, high, alternative), in all sizes of schools (small, medium, large), and in a variety of settings (rural, suburban, urban).

Methodology

This particular study was designed to uncover the factors that contributed to decisions by women to walk away from their career as school leaders. So that we might gather, directly from the subjects, data about their experiences as school leaders, their integration into the profession, and the ways they processed their socialization to school leadership, a multiple case study approach was selected.

Data were gathered in a number of ways. First, while still students, the subjects completed a short survey providing demographic data and information about their perceptions of the role of a school leader. The subjects then participated in interviews about their experience in the preparation program and their transition to school leadership. Interviews were open-ended, but guided by

Table 1

Demographics of the Subjects

Subject	Age at Graduation	Ethnicity	Type of Community
1	40-49	C	Rural
2	30-39	C	Urban
3	<30	C	Small Town
4	40-49	C	Urban
5	30-39	C	Suburban
6	40-49	C	Rural
7	30-39	C	Small Town
8	<30	C	Urban
9	30-39	C	Urban
10	<30	C	Rural
11	30-39	C	Suburban
12	30-39	C	Urban
13	<30	C	Suburban
14	30-39	C	Urban
15	<30	AA	Urban
16	30-39	C	Small Town
17	30-29	C	Suburban
18	30-39	C	Rural
19	30-39	C	Suburban
20	30-39	C	Rural
21	30-39	C	Small Town
22	30-39	C	Small Town
23	30-39	Native Am	Medium Size Town
24	>49	C	Rural
25	<30	C	Rural

Table 2

Subjects' Career Track

Subject	Year of Graduation	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
1	98	CO	CO	CO	CO
2	98	AP/HS	AP/HS	AP/HS	AP/HS
3	98	AP/ES	AP/ES	P/ES	P/ES
4	98	AP/ES	AP/ES	P/ES	P/ES
5	98	AP/ES	AP/ES	AP/ES	AP/ES
6	98	AP/MS	AP/HS	AP/HS	P/HS
7	98	AP/MS	AP/MS	AP/MS	P/MS
8	98	AP/ES	AP/ES	AP/ES	AP/ES
9	98	AP/A	AP/A	P/A	P/A
10	98	AP/ES	AP/ES	AP/ES	AP/ES
11	98	T	T	AP/ES	AP/ES
12	99	AP/ES	AP/ES	P/ES	P/ES
13	99	AP/HS	AP/HS	AP/HS	P/MS
14	99	AP/MS	AP/MS	AP/MS	AP/MS
15	99	AP/ES	AP/ES	AP/ES	AP/ES
16	99	AP/HS	AP/HS	P/ES	P/HS
17	99	P/A	T	T	T
18	99	AP/MS	AP/ES	AP/ES	AP/ES
19	99	AP/ES	P/ES	OE	OE
20	99	AP/HS	AP/MS	P/MS	P/MS
21	99	AP/ES	AP/MS	P/MS	P/MS
22	99	AP/ES	P/HS	P/HS	P/HS
23	00	CO	CO	CO	•
24	00	T	T	T	•
25	00	AP/MS	CO	CO	•

KEY:

Position:

T – teacher
 AP – assistant principal
 P – principal
 CO – central (district) office
 NW – not working
 OE – out of education

Level:

ES – elementary school
 MS – middle school
 HS – high school

general questions and focused around specific topics. Each interview was taped and later transcribed and analyzed for commonalities in language, themes, and perceptions. Neither rigid adherence to an interview guide nor forced respondent compliance was utilized. The interviews were used to gather descriptive data in the students' own words so that the researchers could develop insights on how students interpreted their transition to school leadership. Priority was given to the dynamic and spontaneous nature of each interview and to the development of a trusting relationship between respondent and researcher (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Glesne, 1998; Spradley, 1979; Yin, 1994).

We purposefully selected an interview technique designed to create a setting that was safe, invited conversation, and was unencumbered by concern about setting. An interview protocol was developed but priority was given to creating a setting where each subject felt comfortable. Therefore, the conversations regularly deviated from the protocol and provided an opportunity to probe thinking and elicit deeper and more illustrative description about the subjects' experiences. This approach, "accepting interviewees as collaborators, that is, as full participants in the development of the study and in the analysis and interpretation of the data" (Mishler, 1986, p. 126) contributed to the richness and vitality of the data.

Our interviews reflected an appreciation for the interactive-relational approach described by Chirban (1996) that resulted from a longitudinal study with "leading American women" (p. xiii). This approach balanced the professional responsibility of the researcher with the need to gain a full and complete understanding of the subject. Chirban suggested that the interaction shaped the dynamic of the conversation and contributed to creation of a setting that invited open and frank discussion. The relationship complemented this environment by assuring that both the subject and the researcher gain a deep awareness of one another, the purposes of the research and provides energy to sustain the interview.

Subjects also responded to e-mail prompts and a request to complete a Critical Incident Report (Angelides & Ainscow, 2000) about significant issues impacting their career as a school leader. Together, these data provided a rich and vibrant look at the transition of these subjects to school leadership and the issues that contributed to their development as school leaders

Data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Such an approach allowed themes to emerge from the analysis of disparate but interconnected data sources. This included comparison of student conceptions of leadership upon entry to the program, and upon completion of a series of required courses. These data, along with the surveys and interviews enhanced understanding of student perspectives.

Data Sources

The data sources used in this study were primary and naturalistic in nature (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using the natural setting as the direct source of data, the researchers as instruments, and students as key informants reflected the importance of context. Within the context of a standards-centered program, data collection allowed the researchers to explore student perspectives. Student views on their transition to school leadership were collected using surveys, individual and focus group interviews, writing samples and reflections on program preparation following two years as school leaders. Follow-up interviews provided data about school contexts and graduates' successes in maintaining personal and program-based values in the face of socialization efforts, and as they grappled with their career trajectory.

Data for this study was gathered over a five-year period and from a variety of sources---short surveys, student writing including reflective journals, interviews and focus group discussions. Central to the study was incorporating the student voice and listening intently to the experiences of students while in the program and as they transitioned to school leadership (Williamson & Hudson, 1999).

The primary source of data for this study was the interview. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The researchers designed an interview protocol for the conversations but freely deviated from the protocol in order to probe the subject's thinking and to allow the conversation to be guided by those issues, concerns, and topics that generated the greatest passion for the subjects. Follow-up questions were guided by cues provided by the interviewees, rather than rigid compliance to the protocol.

The researchers asked no questions that specifically referred to gender. Rather than lead the respondent into a discussion of gender related issues, the researchers allowed the subject to emerge in the nature context of the conversation. Frequently the subjects talked about gender related issues without specifically describing them that way.

The issues discussed in this paper emerged from this longitudinal study. Earlier papers reported on challenges in reforming preparation (Williamson & Hudson, 1999), on the importance of student voice in assessing preparation (Hudson & Williamson, 1999; Williamson & Hudson, 1999b), and on the effects of socialization on induction into school leadership (Hudson & Williamson, 2000; Williamson & Hudson, 2001, 2002).

The specific focus of this paper is to extend analysis of socialization factors, particularly when they lead a school leader to reconsider their career in education. It incorporates the experiences of three cohorts of students who completed the Masters of School Administration program at a state university in North Carolina and examines the career track of those students as they became assistant principals and principals. Each graduated from a redesigned preparation program built around state and national standards, focused on teaching and learning as the central role of schools, and committed to collaborative approaches as the best way to achieve shared goals.

Several specific questions guided the study and are summarized in Table 3 (O'Sullivan, 1990). The data sources complemented one another and provided

both quantitative and qualitative responses thereby providing a more holistic assessment of the students' experiences.

Table 3

Selected Study Questions

	Data Source			
	S u r v e y	W r i t i n g	I n t e r v i e w	I n c i d e n t R p t.
1. What did students believe about leadership preparation when they began their preparation program?	X	X		
2. What did they believe about leadership when they exited the program?	X	X	X	
3. What issues did students face as they were inducted into school leadership?			X	X
4. What critical events contributed to their induction as a school leader?			X	X
5. How did students view their career track as they entered school leadership and as they progressed in their career?	X		X	

X – Item covered by this data source

Data Analysis

A grounded theory approach was selected to analyze the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This approach permitted the themes central to the graduate's experience to emerge from the varied data sources. Central to the vitality of the study were the graduates' experiences while in the program, as an intern, and after employment as a school leader.

Analysis of the data began after the first interviews and continued until the study was completed. Initially, a deductive content analysis structured around the study's research questions was used. Data files were maintained for each subject so that subsequent interviews could build on earlier conversations. An inductive analysis complemented this process and utilized sequential analysis techniques described by Miles and Huberman (1994).

In order to assure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) a variety of strategies were employed. They included prolonged engagement, triangulation of data, member checks, and journaling.

This investigation followed graduates as they completed their preparation for school leadership and during their first four years as a school leader. It examined factors that they cited as having the greatest impact on their preparation and on their induction to the profession.

Most graduates acquired employment as a school leader within a few months of graduation. They typically entered school leadership with enthusiasm, committed to making a difference for students, and confident in their ability to do so. It became clear to the researchers, that after a few years, the enthusiasm of many waned and their commitment dissipated. Some considered career moves that would remove them from school leadership. Others considered leadership roles in other community service organizations such as churches.

Choosing Not to Lead

A number of reasons lead school leaders to consider leaving school leadership (Brubaker & Coble, 1997). They include dealing with political conflict, both within the school and school system and with external constituencies, differences in approach to leadership processes, and personal reasons. Brubaker and Coble suggested that the decision to leave school leadership was most often driven by a combination of issues, rather than just one.

The relationship between work and personal issues, such as family, may be more acute for women than for men. Doud and Keller (1998) suggested that women become principals at a later stage in life than men and that for women their work life is intertwined with their family life stage.

In order to fully understand the mobility of school leaders in and out of the profession it is important to examine the relationship between work and family. The evidence from several studies demonstrates that there are differences, based upon gender, in career tracks. Men's career paths are often linear while the path of women may be more cyclical, reflecting the interface with family issues (Hantrais, 1993; Hochschild, 1995).

Findings

Data collected at their graduation suggested that the subjects of this study saw themselves as both competent and confident new leaders (Hudson & Williamson, 2000). They were ready to lead schools where the primary focus was on quality teaching and learning, characterized by collaborative practices both within the school and the community, and where decision-making was driven by what was "right" as well as what was legal.

Follow-up data collected during the cohorts' third year as school leaders indicated that they had been successful at resisting the powerful socialization to old norms so characteristic of induction into school leadership (Williamson &

Hudson, 2001, 2002). Each graduate remembered the personal platforms (beliefs) they had written while still students, the statements of belief that would guide their practice. Not only did they recall them, they continued to live them. While some of those beliefs were tempered by the reality of school life, many graduates came to understand how general, theoretical propositions translated into real situations, frequently creating a world of “gray” rather than “black and white.”

However, to say that graduates saw themselves as true to their core beliefs and resisting “selling out” to old norms contrary to those beliefs, does not suggest that their work was easy or that all was well in their careers. Rather, many of the subjects reported frustrations with their transition to school leadership. Some were so disillusioned that they considered changing careers or shortening their careers as school leaders. Still others elected not to enter school leadership.

In qualitative research, new questions frequently emerge during the process of gathering and analyzing data. Such was the case with this study. As frustrations and doubts emerged from students, the researchers began to examine underlying reasons. What factors contributed to those feelings? What factors contributed to rethinking career choices? What might lead well-prepared, competent, confident new school leaders to choose not to lead?

Brubaker and Coble (1997) offered a number of reasons for the “detracking” of school leaders. Though none of the subjects of this study have been detracked after entering school leadership some are actively pursuing alternatives. Others have not yet become school leaders. In some cases, that was a personal choice; in others, the appropriate position did not emerge. In each case, however, the reasons proposed for detracking themselves was consistent with the factors that often contributed to rethinking career decisions and career tracks (Brubaker & Coble, 1997; Hantrais, 1993; Hochschild, 1997).

Importance of School Context

In earlier analyses the researchers identified the school context and culture, especially the role of early mentors, as factors in the successful transition into leadership (Williamson & Hudson, 2001, 2002). An example of a good “fit” between school context and career characterized the experience of a new middle school principal who became principal of the school where she was an assistant principal during her second year as a school leader. According to her, “My awareness of school issues, knowledge of the faculty, knowing who and what to watch for, knowing the politics—all of that has helped and the transition has been smooth for the most part.”

Those same factors can lead to frustration and doubt about career choices. One graduate, for instance, moved more quickly on the career track than might have been optimal to get out of a difficult school setting. As the situation was described,

I was so anxious to get away from that situation that I would have done most anything. Nothing was open in the district, so I started applying around. I've come to a school that's had seven or eight principals in twelve years. I'm the first one to start a third year here since the 80s. To be really honest, I wish I had been in a situation where I could have remained as AP a while longer. I came to this principalship with only a year and a half experience as an AP. Looking back, I don't think I would have pursued a principalship as soon as I did, had the circumstances been different.

Another student, still an assistant principal in her third year, recognized the importance of waiting for the right school context. She described her career track:

My goal was to be an AP for three years and then see about it. I'll be one [a principal]. I'm not in a rush. I don't have to have all the power and all the decisions to make. It's a balancing act. It depends on the school.

Importance of Community Context

Data gathered at graduation and at the 3-year follow up asked each student to describe the community in which they worked. Graduates came to appreciate that school leadership was contextual, that practices differed somewhat depending on both the school and community context.

Subsequent analysis suggested, however, that the community context also factored into how graduates felt about their place on the career track.

The interface of personal histories and communities emerged as both a negative and positive factor. On the negative side, a young African-American woman from the city found herself in a largely white rural school. She described a critical incident in her transition into leadership:

If anything, it's coming here, to a community where I'm an outsider.

Everybody at [school] has been here for a long time...many, many teachers and assistants have been here for well over ten years, some in the same classroom, and some have only taught here. The [school] world is very insular...they live here, they work here. Driving 39 miles to get to school is a real exception.

Another graduate, a new principal commuting to a new community for family reasons, also perceived herself as something of an outsider. As she described it, Commuting wears you out and you're not part of the community you're the principal of...that's the downside. I don't think you can really be as effective as a principal unless you are part of the community. I'm not serving the kids as well as I might if I lived here.

For others, being in the "right" community was a positive factor in their level of satisfaction. One young woman, about to move into a high school principalship, weighed the balance and decided being a part of the community was more good than bad. As she described her move back into her "own" community, she said,

I live in the community. The high school is only ten to twelve minutes from my house. After my interview, my husband said, 'Why are you doubting

yourself? You loved high school. You were the happiest when you were at [the high school]. Go for it! We'll see how the high school goes.

Another older woman changed districts when she accepted her first principalship at a middle school. As she described the transition, I'm at home now. My whole family is at home now. My husband is happy here; he was not happy in [previous district]. We've moved to [new location], the side of town closer to my parents and my husband is back. This was the right offer. The others were from larger systems. I'm not a big city person...I'm just country...simple.

Personal Perspectives: Mission

How graduates saw themselves as leaders also contributed to their satisfactions and their level of frustration. The platforms they wrote as they exited the preparation program often conveyed a sense of mission. How happy or unhappy they were with their career choices three years later was connected to their ability to achieve their mission.

One young woman, for instance, found the discrepancy between her sense of mission and what she felt able to accomplish a source of frustration. She had a spiritually inspired drive to serve, to make a difference. In her third year, she was thinking about leaving school leadership to return to school, specifically to seminary. She was considering leaving education to enter the ministry, a career where she would be better able to "make a difference." Her frustration emerged this way:

It seems that I am always dealing with the politics of the situation, the politics of a small school where everyone knows you, your family, your personal situation, and the politics of the district---don't make waves, don't ask questions, don't change things. Behaving that way is not helping kids and I feel like I'm wasting my career. I want to do something that is really meaningful, that has a lasting impact. Perhaps it's leadership, but just not in a school.

An older woman, in her first principalship, had a similar mission grounded in her spirituality, but felt better about achieving it. As she related her move to a very needy school in an urban area,

I feel a special attachment to this population. It is needy. I feel like this is where God put me, to help this population. Fighting, violence, lack of parent cooperation...that has been rough. Helping teachers realize that changing kids takes time, helping them to know what these kids have lived with...those are tough. But I'm in the right place.

For another graduate, the "right place" was the assistant principalship, at least for the immediate future. She was working with a mentor she admired in a school characterized by caring and collaboration. She assessed her situation,

I'm doing what I should be doing...you know how you wonder. I really like this. I told my dad, 'If I won the lottery, I think I'd still do this.' That's how comfortable I am with it. I'm a better person for it. I'm growing because of it.

Personal Perspectives: Age and Experience

Age and experience also influenced personal perspective. Some of the younger graduates seemed to experience more tension between their ideals and the realities of their school situation.

One young graduate experienced some "trials" because of her gender and age as an intern. While she tolerated those situations as an intern, they felt different to her as an assistant principal. As she said, "I was insulted by teachers who believed I was too young to know what I was doing."

Another young woman described her first year as an assistant principal in a university town,

I always felt kind of young. I taught for six years; that's not a long time, so I wondered what the teachers would think of me. In addition, I was planning a wedding at the same time. Marriage has been big! The first two years were more just keeping my head above water. Now, in my third year, I'm finally real steady, real solid.

An older woman, a new principal already supervising an administrative intern, found age and experience important and problematic when the intern lacked both:

I had a bad experience with a young intern who experienced the lack of judgment that comes with youth and inexperience. So many mistakes were made in judgment because she was so young and had not even learned what good teaching is herself. She still had a lot to learn about teaching.

Even a middle-aged new principal, with significant and successful teaching experience, wished for more experience as an assistant principal. Reflecting on the career track, she said,

I think it would have been better for me had I had a few more years as an AP, as most do. I don't think I came into the principalship fully prepared. I think I needed another year or two of seasoning before I took on a school.

At the other end of the spectrum were several graduates who appreciated the perspective their age and experience provided for them. Further along in their career tracks, they somehow seemed more thoughtful about both the present and the future. For instance, one woman with grown children, reflected on whether or not she would take an offered principalship the next year. As she described her thinking:

There's a tremendous difference between, 'Am I ready?' and 'Do I want to?' It's not that I can't or that I don't feel prepared to. It's just, 'Do I want to?' It's going to take a while to come up with an answer. There are more important things than ambition. If it were about ambition, I'd say, 'Yes.' If it's about, 'How do you change a system to make it better and you believe you can change it better from within than from without,' then maybe not. I've been a mom far longer than I've been an administrator. Being AP keeps me in a support role.

Even when the situation is difficult, age and the promise of possible retirement seemed to put problems into perspective. One such graduate saw her age and experience as a positive. As she said,

Do I stick with it or do I get out? Retirement is an option. Do I seek a principalship or not? Am I ready for a principalship? I'm wrestling with it. I could retire in three years. Do I just work out to my retirement date or do I want a principalship of my own? One issue is the time it takes to be a principal.

Demands of the Job

The increasingly complex demands on school leaders emerged as a common factor in the frustrations these new administrators described. Among the most common complaints were the time demands and the fact that "busy work" kept them from doing what they really wanted to do.

As one new principal described it,

There are days when I go home exhausted and I think, 'What did I do today?' and there's nothing to show for it. My desk is piled high. I think, 'I should have done this and this.' Then I think back to the day...it's about putting out fires and building bridges, but there's nothing really concrete to show for it.

It is not simply the demands of the job that seem overwhelming and that contribute to the rethinking of career choices. It is also the ways that these demands interface with other factors. For instance, that same new principal described her early days in the job:

It's been a crazy life. It was hard last year, really hard. My husband left for three months. I was going through personal struggles, had a house to sell, plus commuting...going through a lot of personal stress made it more difficult.

A hard-working assistant principal in a high-needs urban high school described her reality as she contemplated a principalship: "You could just put a cot in the corner here and live at the school and still feel like you hadn't done the job adequately. My husband would have a complaint about the time it takes."

Another middle-aged woman with children still in school described her situation as the principal of a middle school in her “home” community. She cites her commitment to be accessible as both a strength and weakness, saying,

It’s very rare that that door is ever closed. But being too accessible is also a weakness. It makes it hard to take care of me. I find myself working late at night because I want things done right. Finding a balance is very hard. My days start at seven o’clock. Leaving at six o’clock is a good day, but sometimes it’s later. I’ve lost my mother and my father-in-law in the last two years. I’m so absorbed in this that I haven’t had a lot of time for reflection on those things.

Relationship between Work and Family

Other studies suggested gender differences in career tracks and a link, especially for women, between career and family (Hantrais, 1993; Hochschild, 1995). In this study, researchers found that such interfaces existed for both men and women, though more so for women. In addition, examples emerged of situations where the relationship between career and family served either as a hindrance or help, depending on the circumstances.

Work/Family Interface as Hindrance. Given the demands on current school leaders, it is not surprising that family factors and issues have an impact both on getting a job and doing the job.

One newly married young woman, for instance, applied for a principalship but was not offered the job. She reported that, when she pursued feedback from the director,

I was told that I was the best candidate for the job, but that because I was a woman and white, I wasn’t offered the job. When I informed her that I was unhappy with that decision and would consider moving, her reply was, ‘I didn’t realize you were mobile. You have a family.’ I felt insulted, as though

because I'm a woman I'm place bound because of my spouse. How little do they know!

For another young woman, career decisions centered on motherhood. As she described her dilemma:

My next struggle is what do I want to do when I have a baby? I see working mothers coming late in the day to pick up their children from the after-school program. It makes me sad. I'm torn between career—I'm not ready to give it up—and my desire to be 'mom.' I don't want to give it up and a part of me is a little afraid to give it up for fear of not being able to jump back into it. But another part of me is thinking about that retirement thing...

Yet another slightly older woman, the single parent of an elementary school child, struggled with the conflicts even though she was thrilled with her job as a middle school assistant principal. She told a poignant story of having her son with her at an after-school soccer game when dogs ran onto the field, attacked one of the players and bit the coach.

I ran to the player on the field. I got the game called and the players off the field. Coming off the field, I looked for my son. In fear, he had run past the bleachers and was standing on the track, horrified. The dogs were between the bleachers and him. For that moment, the crowd disappeared. I had to get him from over there to with us.

Another coach ran the dogs away and she was able to get her son with her, then return her attention to the crowd and get the kids away before the police shot the dogs. As she reflected,

That incident made me realize that I was having to make a decision I shouldn't have to make...between my son and the crowd I was supposed to be in charge of. I couldn't be in that position and I couldn't put him in it. In retrospect, I'm just glad I ran the right way...to the child on the field.

For a middle-aged high school principal, family concerns added some hardships to the work. Beginning her third year as principal, she still commutes about an hour to and from work each day. She does so because she has two

school-aged children and is hesitant to move away from parents who live next door. The father is in declining health. As she described it,

I still have not moved to the area. I want to be sure it's where I want to be. Dad's situation has deteriorated quite a bit. He will get to the point where he will need more help and I need to be close.

Another graduate did not seek a school leadership position immediately following graduation, partly because of an elderly parent who needed help. In retrospect, she reported that,

There were no vacancies in my district and I did not look beyond that because I needed some rest time. My mother-in-law needs assisted living and her situation has a bearing on my choices. At this point, a half-time job is something of a blessing, given the time spent with her.

Work/Family Interface as Help. On the other hand, the support of family and loved ones can make a difference in how new leaders perceive and perform their jobs. Some stay quite happily on the career track due in part to a network of support. As one young woman assistant principal advised, "Have people who love and care for you to keep checks on you."

Even when the job is difficult, family support can make a difference, even informing a decision to stay on the career track or leave. As one new principal without an assistant described her situation,

My biggest difficulty was the transition from AP to principal. Now I'm doing all that stuff I did last year as an assistant principal, plus all the principal stuff he did...all of it! It's just me on my own and it's killing me. There have been times when I was ready to quit, to say, 'It's not worth it!' I could not have done this without a supportive husband. He's listened. He's been my rock.

Another woman with three school-aged children was about to become a high school principal when she talked with a member of the research team. She worried about high school, but knew she could count on her extended family, "a

mom, dad, grandma, and large extended family willing to do whatever is needed.” As she contemplated the move, she said,

I’ve tried to make my husband and older kids understand ball games and such. They [both two older children will attend the high school the following year] may suffer some repercussions from decisions mom has to make. But my family has been supportive. My mom tells me constantly, ‘You’re so lucky to have [husband] because he will help you.’ He does the laundry, is supportive, understands, gets the kids ready for school, whatever is needed.

Summary

When people make a significant move, like entering school leadership, it is common for them to rethink their decision. For many, they recommit to their new career, but for others the decision is to alter their career track and consider other leadership opportunities (Brubaker & Coble, 1997).

This study found that many recent graduates of one principal preparation program were rethinking their decision to become school leaders. School and community contexts, personal perspectives, time demands, and the interface of work and family contributed to the frustration they were feeling. Those frustrations prompted some graduates to decide to leave school leadership and fostered doubts in others about their career tracks.

Some remember fondly their days as teachers. One over-extended middle school principal said,

When I walk into a classroom and it’s not the best teacher, I want to teach so bad. I know I will not always do this job. I know that somewhere along the line, maybe after I retire from this job, I’ll go back to the classroom. I miss it.

Another graduate, who took a fast track to the high school principalship, recited the entire soliloquy from Shakespeare’s *Henry V* in which Henry describes the weight of leadership just before the battle at Agincourt, a battle he

is surely going to lose. The principal, identifying with Henry, said, "There's a very palpable difference in the weight I carry on me when I go to bed at night now and what I carried when I went to bed at night as a teacher."

Still another new middle school principal described her situation: "When I consider the future, I think about higher education. I wonder whether or not I could sustain my passion for the principalship for another fifteen years."

Each of these three graduates moved relatively quickly to the principalship. They love their work and feel they are making a difference in the lives and the learning of the students they serve and in their communities. All in all, they are quite successful, and still even they have doubts about the career.

What might that say for others who are less successful at coping with the factors that foster concern and doubt in the mind of new school leader about their career tracks? Have we identified the key factors or are there others? If we understand those factors, what role can/should preparation programs play in helping students deal with such factors when they arise?

Unless we address these issues and help students develop the capacity to confront them, it seems unlikely that we can prepare a new type of leader in numbers that will address the rising demand, leaders who will not only enter school leadership but will remain.

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