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Talk of Calling: Novice School Principals Narrating Destiny, Duty, and Fulfillment in Work

Carolyn P. Swen[1]

Abstract

Purpose: School principals' commitment and motivation have not been systematically investigated, but concerted research is needed as 25% of principals leave their jobs each year. This article investigates how new school principals make sense of their motivation to challenging work in a high pressure, high turnover field. Understanding principal motivation is important for recruiting and retaining talented educators. How principals understand their motivation may significantly affect their actions, practices, and persistence. Therefore, insight into principals' motivation is important. **Research Methods:** Data come from interviews with 35 new principals in Chicago Public Schools. As initial phases of inductive analyses around principal's career narratives were completed, this grounded theory inquiry focused on how principals use discourses of calling to make sense of their motivation. Data were analyzed through three iterations of coding: open, focused, and closed. **Findings:** School principals used themes of calling to make sense of their motivation in challenging contexts. Specifically, they described their destiny to work in education, duty to serve students, and fulfillment in work. Calling narratives explain past action and elevate the importance of the work, likely fueling continued motivation. **Implications:** This work adds a narrative component to research on principals' motivation

[1]Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA

Corresponding Author:
Carolyn P. Swen, Northwestern University, Annenberg Hall 208, 2120 Campus Drive, Evanston, IL 60208, USA.
Email: carolynswen2018@u.northwestern.edu

and transition, focusing on principals' efforts to manage challenges. The results provide novel empirical data on principals' sense-making, efforts to manage multiplying work demands, and on how professionals *use* calling to make sense of and bolster work motivation. Future work should determine whether calling narratives predict retention among principals.

Keywords
calling, career identity, leadership, accountability, principal practice

Introduction

What motivates school principals has surprisingly not been systematically investigated, though how principals motivate teachers has been explored (Eyal & Roth, 2011; Richards, 2007; Whitaker, Whitaker, & Lumpa, 2013). This research tackled the question: How do novice school principals understand and make sense of their motivation to take on new roles in challenging circumstances? The new urban school principals in this sample used ideas related to having a calling as they made sense of their motivation and purpose in new roles as school leaders. Calling includes ideas of a transcendent summons or fatalistic pull to a line of work (Dik & Duffy, 2009), service to society (Duffy, Dik, & Steger, 2011; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007), a meaningful or consuming passion (Dobrow, 2013), and personal fulfillment (Novak, 1996). Examining interviews with 35 school principals during their first year in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), this study investigated how principals made sense of why they do what they do. As the new role, challenges, and pressures prompted sense-making, the principals in this study used ideas and themes of having a calling to make sense of their motivation in and to the role of principal.

Based on the data, I argue that principals use themes of calling, or *calling narratives*, to make sense and meaning of why they became principal. The three calling themes narrated by principals in this study are as follows: a *destiny* to be educators, a *duty* to serve students, and a *fulfillment* (or delight) that comes from their work. Calling narratives help principals make sense of why they do what they do despite difficulties encountered on the job.

Sense-making occurs often in response to challenging circumstances—such as a new job as school principal in a low-income or low-performing school—as individuals narrate their understanding of the situation—to literally "make sense" of the circumstances and their place or purpose in it (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). First-year principals' sense-making reveals how principals make sense and meaning of their motivation when the

realities of the work conflict with their values, beliefs, and expectations. Principals' sense-making reflects their values, intentions, emotional, or identity needs. Furthermore, sense-making is shaped by evolving professional philosophies, institutional constraints, and cues from their context. Through calling narratives, principals constructed professional selves that were attuned to and ready to work through the challenges faced, even though pressures and realities of the job clashed with principals' expectations and visions. New principals in a large urban district, in particular, are an ideal case for studying how principals make sense of their motivation. Novices allow for an understanding of early sense-making and urban contexts offer an opportunity to understand principal sense-making in contexts most linked to low principal retention.

Principal motivation is an issue of great concern given that about a quarter of all principals in the United States (approximately 25,000 principals) leave each year (School Leaders Network, 2014). Effective principals play a critical role in the academic achievement of their students, though principal turnover disproportionately affects low-income, urban schools (Béteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2012; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Half of new principals leave by Year 3, and those that remain do not often remain at high-poverty schools (School Leaders Network, 2014). In Illinois, only about 28% of first-time principals were still leading their original school after 6 years (DeAngelis & White, 2011). Furthermore, fewer and fewer qualified candidates want to become principal due to the perceived disincentives associated with the role (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Howley, Andrianaivo, & Perry, 2005). Numerous stakeholders, in- and out-of-school politics, underresourced schools, community challenges, and other concerns clamor for priority, attention, and resources (Spillane & Anderson, 2014; Spillane & Lee, 2014). The principal's job is complex, poorly defined, and can be extremely isolating (School Leaders Network, 2014). It is important to reduce principal turnover and to retain effective principals for as long as possible.

Recent work has shed some light on principals' career trajectories, socialization, and why they do what they do; however, a greater understanding of principals' identity, educational values, beliefs, and career narratives is needed (Crow, 2006; Crow, Day, & Møller, 2017; Davis, Gooden, & Bowers, 2017; Spillane & Anderson, 2014). How novice principals cope with early job experiences—how they understand their contexts and select responses, including making sense of challenges—has not been fully described in the scholarly literature. This research provides insight into the transition from teaching to the principalship, an important and necessary focus for research (Davis et al., 2017). It also provides a richer understanding of the values, beliefs, and practices that shape principals' professional identities and

trajectories (Crow et al., 2017). Understanding how new principals experience and make sense of motivation in light of challenges could inform newcomer preparation.

Research on turnover among newcomers suggests that how novices cope with entry experiences is related to turnover (Louis, 1980). Understanding principals' values is important because people may become angry, unhappy, and prone to leave when their values or identity do not match up with work realities (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017). For example, beginning teachers find that their idealism clashes with the realities of the job, leading to burnout (Cherniss, 2016). As one principal in this study said, "[I] . . . ask [myself], 'what in the world were you thinking?' [in becoming principal]." Studying how principals understand and make sense of their motivation on entry reveals principals' values and points to strategies for retention.

A study of educator calling seems bound to delight or dismay, depending on whether one believes an educator "should have a calling." This research is not meant to suggest that *having a calling* is the ideal *state of being* for an educator. Instead, what it shows is that the principals studied tell—and *use*—*narratives of calling* that work for them. Calling narratives emerged from the data as a rhetorical tool, not a reified state of being.[1] Calling, as it is approached in this article, is understood as a narrative tool that people use to make sense of and give meaning to their lives.

In the next section, I outline the theoretical framework grounding the analysis. I then discuss the data and methods used. Reporting my findings, I describe in depth the three main themes of calling that the principals expressed, and what these narratives accomplish. Finally, I discuss the implications of the research and potential future research directions.

Framing the Study

In this section, I first briefly describe principals' work setting in urban public schools, suggesting novice school principals in Chicago are an ideal setting for this research. I then present the sense-making framework used to analyze principals' narratives and how I approach calling as a cultural discourse or tool that principals use in sense-making narratives. I discuss literature on calling to facilitate an understanding of my analytical treatment of calling as a discourse *used* in sense-making, rather than a "thing" that individuals have or do not have.

New principals in urban contexts. First-year CPS principals offer a rich and fascinating setting for studying sense-making. Though several projects have

explored principals' understanding of job challenges, changes, and accountability policy, this article fills a gap by undertaking an examination of principals' narratives about themselves and their motivation—how they understand their purpose and motivation and construct a coherent and cohesive sense of their occupational selves during their first year in the principalship.

The urban principalship is challenging. Success is intangible and almost no one agrees on exactly what metrics measure success (Cohen, 2011). Because no handbook of how to be a great principal in every circumstance exists, principals on the ground must do their best to respond to multiple constituencies (Cohen, 2011). Careers in public schools generally can be prone to burnout and attrition (Cohen, 2011; Lipsky, 1980; Lortie, 2002). In recent decades, U.S. public school systems have faced multiple reform efforts aiming to improve student learning by tightening control over school practices. Generally, accountability demands have prompted dissatisfaction among educators (Crocco & Costigan, 2007) and can diminish commitment (Rowan, 1990). Principals in this study reported their most frequently anticipated challenges as accountability pressures (the pressure to raise test scores, quickly produce outcomes, implement policy reforms, and performance management systems); budget (not having funds necessary for all staffing, facility, or other needs); school climate; and other complex pressures including gaining trust of new staff, weeding out "bad" teachers, learning new systems, the vastness of new tasks, and facility management (Spillane & Anderson, 2014; Spillane & Lee, 2014).

Being a new principal is especially challenging. Despite having entered the principalship from at least several years as a classroom teacher, and usually having had some experience as an assistant principal or other school administrator, moving into the principal's office is a massive shift for most new principals. Studying a subset of the principals included in this study, Spillane and Lee (2014) found that new principals consistently experienced "ultimate responsibility shock." New principals emphasized that it was not just *increased* responsibility but being *ultimately* responsible for their school that felt overwhelming or shocking. Interestingly, principals experienced this responsibility shock whether they were moving directly from the classroom to the principal's office or even if they had held other school administrative positions before becoming principal (Spillane & Lee, 2014).

As the field of education has generally embraced technocratic logics of rationalization, cascades of school reform policies have resulted (Mehta, 2013; Spillane et al., 2002). School accountability efforts aim to improve student learning by tightening control over school practices. These continuing shifts in accountability have expanded and complicated principals' work (Spillane & Anderson, 2014; Spillane & Lee, 2014). Principals' role as

instructional leader has been expanded, requiring observation of and feedback to teachers (Kraft & Gilmour, 2016). Principals are held accountable—to central offices, superintendents, school boards, community members, parents, students, and teachers—for the performance of their school. The 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act mandated that schools meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) benchmarks in math, reading, and science on standardized tests. Failing schools were required to implement improvement steps and over time could be taken over by the district or state. Accountability pressures may be particularly strong in underresourced contexts (Johnson et al., 2014). In the United States, urban schools tend to have large class sizes, chaotic working conditions, and limited resources (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). Generally, principals must implement accountability measures while meeting a multiplicity of often overwhelming stakeholder demands (Spillane & Anderson, 2014; Spillane & Lee, 2014). In urban contexts, students' lives outside of school are often more difficult—for example, neighborhood violence, family transiency, and financial issues are all very relevant. Indeed, in the current study, 21 out of 35 (60%) of the first-year principals' schools were on or recently off probation for low performance (Spillane & Anderson, 2014; Spillane & Lee, 2014), allowing a subanalysis of how principals' sense-making about their motivation may vary with probation status.

As the realities of the pressures described above set in and the extent and variety of job demands proved shocking, these new principals engaged in sense-making—the process of making sense of how they got here, why they stay, and where they are going (Spillane & Anderson, 2014; Spillane & Lee, 2014). I next outline sense-making as the theoretical framework used to analyze principals' narratives.

Sense-making and cultural repertoire. The literature on newcomer sense-making frames this analysis (e.g., Weick, 1995). Newcomers experience "reality shock" (Louis, 1980). During this time, to help them make sense of the situation, principals extract cues from their environment as well as their own values and beliefs (Weick, 1995). Sense-making is the process by which people understand, or make sense of, their current situation. Sense-making involves noticing, interpreting, and focusing on cues in one's self or one's environment and using this information to craft a response to the implied questions: (a) What's the story here? (Weick et al., 2005) and (b) What do I do now? (Weick, 1995). Based on their interpretations of self and environment, people come to understand how to act in a way that makes sense (Louis, 1980; Weick, 1995). Sense-making involves not only just the interpretation of situations but also authoring new understandings that lead to action (Weick,

1995). As individuals make sense of circumstances, they author or narrate understandings of both the circumstances and themselves. They then act in accordance with their sense-making (Weick, 1995). Sense-making enables and constrains individual action.

New roles, challenges, disruptions, surprises, situations of ambiguity and uncertainty, and other types of "road bumps" prompt individuals to notice and reinterpret their understanding of their situation (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017). Through sense-making people come to new understandings of *themselves* as well as their circumstances as they author an understanding of self in the world (Weick et al., 2005).

Sense-making is thus grounded in identity formation and the maintenance of a consistent, positive, self-conception (Weick, 1995). From the meanings applied and derived in sense-making, people glean information about who they are, what they will or will not do, and what they want. Individuals' values, purposes, past experiences, and beliefs about what is right and wrong influence how they interpret, make sense, and craft strategies of action (Spillane & Anderson, 2014; Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). Through sense-making, people answer: What is good (or not good) for me to do based on who I am and how I understand the matter at hand. As people move forward, sense-making informs who they are and what they will do—will they stay committed or will they move on to another job?

As the principals in this study make sense of why they do what they do, they tell self-narratives. A self-narrative is a narrative, or story, that advances a point or idea about the narrator (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). This study analyzes sense-making by analyzing principals' self-narratives in the context of their work. In times of transition, self-narratives powerfully aid individuals in constructing a "transition bridge" (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), across gaps that arise in understanding old and new roles, and help people explain their background and future goals, make sense of confusing or unanticipated circumstances (Louis, 1980), and justify the transition to themselves and others (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

Sense-making offers analytical utility given the new challenges that new principals face. For novice principals, changing occupations, and often schools, leads to encountering situations that require the creation of new understanding (Crow, 2006). Principals' first year offers many new pressures and responsibilities, leading them to take cues from both their identities and their contexts to aid in figuring out why they do what they do (Weick, 1995). Individuals' sense-making reflects facets of both their identities and their contexts. It may also reflect efforts to construct personal, professional, and organizational "selves" that are coherent and consistent (Spillane & Anderson, 2014). Analyzing principals' sense-making offers insight into how they

understand and manage challenges on the job and potential avenues for boosting educator satisfaction and retention.

To narrate sense into life and transitions, people draw on meaning-making resources—ideas, words, stories, logics, discourses, symbols, and so on—to use as they make sense. Individuals' cultural exposure broadly, as well as their specific organizational context, provide a menu of meaning-making options from which people draw as they tell their stories. Swidler (1986) calls this menu a cultural repertoire or toolkit, from which people draw to craft strategies of action. People acquire this cultural repertoire in various ways: through interaction with others, by participating in culture, continuing formal and informal studies (education), reading books, blogs, and news, watching films, TV or plays, and via their own sense-making efforts (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Swidler, 1986; Weick, 1995). Socialization into the field of education provides an array of meaning making resources and logics from which educators may draw. Narratives that are accepted by others in the organizational setting are usually embedded in culturally acceptable discourses (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010)—such as the idea of having a calling among educators. Educators often report they have a calling (Serow, 1994; Serow, Eaker, & Forrest, 1994). The idea of a cultural repertoire is helpful in that it allows and assumes that principals pull from broader professional and social narratives in their sense-making.

In the next section, I briefly review the literature on calling. An understanding of calling is helpful for framing the methodology and interpreting the findings. However, calling was not a framing concept when I entered into this research. In the methodology section, I note alternate framings that were considered and describe how the data were analyzed inductively, according to grounded theory, and how calling was chosen in accordance with the themes that emerged from the data. Because role transitions and challenges can spark sense-making, I approached the data openly, looking for principals' sense-making about their occupational selves, purpose, values, and motivation in response to challenges. The literature on calling proved to provide the most comprehensive insight into the data: principals' self-narratives took the form of *calling narratives.* In other words, principals *used* the themes of calling, drawing from their cultural toolkit of useful stories and ideas, to make sense of why they do what they do. Calling among educators has been studied previously, and calling is very much a concept in the cultural repertoire of educators, as well as a legitimate narrative for educators to convey.

Calling. Most generally, calling can be understood as an idealized form of work that is considered intrinsically meaningful, inseparable from life as a whole (Bellah et al., 2007). Prior to the Protestant Reformation, a "calling"

meant an external summons from God to spread the gospel (Hardy, 1990). The Reformation broadened the concept to apply to all Christian believers. Reformation calling discourses centered on using individuals' gifts and transcending drudgery, but if these discourses suggested any sense of fulfillment, it was through the satisfaction of glorifying God (Hardy, 1990; Placher, 2005; Strohl, 2014; Weber, 2013). Calling comes from the Latin root *vocare* (to call) and was once synonymous with vocation and religious mission (Dik & Shimizu, 2018). However, the term *calling* is now preferred over *vocation* in the literature as vocation may simply refer to one's occupation (Dik & Shimizu, 2018).

Calling in contemporary society is not limited to religious meaning or usage (e.g., the popular job search site Monster.ca on its Canadian job search page has the header "Build a Better Career. Find your Calling"). Bunderson and Thompson (2009) discuss a more modern definition of calling that links to the concept's historic roots by emphasizing an external source of the call, a sense of duty, and prosocial motives. Along these lines, Dik and Duffy (2009) defined calling as

> a transcendent summons, experienced as originating beyond the self, to approach a particular life role in a manner oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation. (p. 427)

Contemporary ideas of calling sometimes emphasize personal fulfillment (Novak, 1996) or passion (Dobrow, 2013) in work, as well. As evidence of this, Serow (1994) remarked, regarding finding a service ethic among preservice teachers: "while service can certainly be part of one's sense of calling, it does not necessarily convey the sense of personal identity and commitment to one's work that is the hallmark of a true calling" (p. 67). Serow intimates that a "true calling" is found in a sense of personal fulfillment. In sum, multiple ideas converge in the idea of calling: (a) an external summons, sense of fate or destiny; (b) a duty to service or a duty to apply one's gifts and talents; (c) and personal passion linked to fulfillment.

Educators offer an ideal population within whom to investigate contemporary calling discourses. Previous researchers, including Serow, have explored calling among teacher education candidates, trying to understand teacher motivation (Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2012; Serow et al., 1994). Bullough and Hall-Kenyon (2012) discuss how teachers mainly focused on a care ethic in discussing their sense of calling. Serow (1994) found that a sense of calling was indeed a motivation among teachers, and this led to a willingness to make personal sacrifices and devote more time to work. Serow et al. (1994) found

that preservice teachers conceived of their work as an obligation, or duty, to serve students. In these previous studies, calling was not assessed narratively, as a discourse. Participants in the present study, however, were allowed to construct their work narratives freely—they were not primed with nor asked directly about a calling. First-year principals' narratives were assessed qualitatively without any preconceptions about themes that would emerge.

Method

Participant Population

This study uses data obtained from a multiyear, longitudinal project exploring urban school principals' socialization over time. The broader study aimed to understand the struggles that new principals faced, and how they coped with them. The current article focuses on first-year principals' sense-making about their work paths, identities, and new roles. Interview data were collected from two successive cohorts of new school principals in CPS. Using a longitudinal, mixed-method design, a research team surveyed the principals over their first year. Cohort 1 began their principalships in the fall of 2009, and Cohort 2 began elementary school principalships in the fall of 2010. This study examines interviews conducted with subsamples from each cohort surveyed. Cohort 1 principals (n = 18) were purposively recruited for interviews with the goal of obtaining a diverse sample of novice principals in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, career pathway, and school characteristics (Spillane & Anderson, 2014). Cohort 2 (n = 17) was a random sample so that findings could be generalized to the population surveyed (Spillane & Lee, 2014). In total, 35 principals were interviewed for the interview study that forms the basis of this research (see Table 1 for gender, race/ethnicity, pathway, and school probation status of both cohorts). The goals of both the broader study and this specific study are closely aligned in exploring novice principals' sense-making as they cope with new roles. While this sample of first-year principals reflects significant variation in years of experience (years in classroom teaching range from 3 to 28+ years, and years in administration before becoming principal range from 0 to 12 years), in previous analyses, all but two of the principals from Cohort 2 (of varied tenures) experienced the shock of suddenly being ultimately responsible—even those who had been assistant principal for years. Prior research on these novice principals (Spillane & Anderson, 2014; Spillane & Lee, 2014), as well as newcomers in the midst of role transition (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Louis, 1980), suggest these principals, no matter their tenure or roles prior to becoming the principal, are candidates for sense-making.

Table 1. Principal Demographics.

Principal	Cohort	Race	Years Teaching	Years in Administration	School Probation Status During Year 1
Adriana	1	Hispanic/Latina	10	1	Yes
Alejandro	2	Hispanic/Latino	10	6	Became yes
Anastasia	1	White	6	2	No
Andrea	1	Black	17	12	Became yes
Angela	1	Black	12	4	Yes
Carol	2	White	20	8	Became no
Charles	2	Black	5	2	Yes
Damien	2	Black	10	3	Yes
Dennis	1	White	28+	9	Became yes
Emily	1	White	6	2	Yes
George	2	White	3	1	Yes
Janice	2	White	6	10	No
Jennifer	2	Black	14	0	Became no
Joanne	2	White	20	4	N/A—new school
Joyce	2	Black	6	5	Yes
Kara	2	Multiethnic	12	4	Became no
Kathy	2	White	17	9	No
Laura	2	White	17	1	Yes
Lori	2	White	12	6	No
Lydia	1	Black	10	3	No
Manuel	2	Hispanic/Latino	7	2	No
Nancy	1	Hispanic/Latina	4	0	N/A—new school
Nathan	1	White	3	3	N/A—new school
Nelson	1	Black	7	5	Yes
Octavio	1	Hispanic/Latino	20	2	No
Oscar	1	Hispanic/Latino	10	6	Became yes
Peter	2	Hispanic/Latino	10	7	Yes
Rich	2	White	5	1	Yes
Rosana	1	Hispanic/Latina	8	7	N/A—new school
Sally	2	Black	8	4	Yes
Sam	1	White	8	2	No
Samantha	1	Black	7	3	N/A—new school
Steve	1	White	6	4	Yes
Tim	1	White	22+	9	No
Yvonne	1	Black	19	3	Yes

Data Collection

Data were gathered through in-depth semistructured interviews conducted at the beginning and end of their first year. The research team developed interview protocols to ensure comparable data were collected. Interviews lasted 45 to 90 minutes and were conducted privately. Principals were asked about: What makes a good principal, transitions into the role, goals, challenges, stakeholders' expectations, and their path into education and administration (e.g., What challenges will you face as principal at ___ School? What do you think your staff at this school expect from you? How did you end up pursuing a career in education? and at the end of the first year, What was challenging? What was satisfying or rewarding? What was most surprising?). Data were collected across the interview protocol. None of the semistructured interview protocol prompts explicitly asked about principals' calling, purpose, daily motivation, or asked them to state their core values. This is an asset to this study, as it underscores the fact that principals brought up these ideas in response to other questions, as they made sense of their circumstances. There is no reason to suspect that the difference in interview selection mechanism—randomly versus purposively—would predict variation in response to interview questions. Interview questions were the same across cohorts with only one question being asked at varied points in time. Questions about career background—how one got into education and how one feels about becoming principal—were asked during Cohort 1's end of year interview and in Cohort 2's first interview. The varied timing of this question does not allow this study to draw any conclusions about the temporal effects of experience on calling-related thematic expressions of motivation over the first year.

Analysis

Analyses were conducted in two main stages. In the first, a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to identify salient concepts and themes related to career identity in the data. Data analysis consisted of open coding techniques and constant comparative analyses (Charmaz, 2006). During this initial coding, I wrote memos to convey my thinking about the open coding and emerging themes (statements of identity, commitment, motivation, goals, vision, and related themes) and discussed these with colleagues in sociology of education (the study's primary investigator) and narrative identity psychology. I refined and narrowed my research focus to an investigation of principals' sense-making around their motivation and purpose in their work. I undertook a round of more focused coding. I created three broad coding categories: "prosocial or community-based motivation/

meaning" (including subcodes like "wanting to do what is best for students" and "awareness of disadvantaged students' needs"); "path into education" (including subcodes like "knew from childhood," "close family educators," and "tried other careers"); and "self-oriented motivations" (including subcodes like "enjoying the challenge" and "wanting to grow").

These coding categories directed subsequent memos and discussions with colleagues. The primary analytical strategy was inductive, informed by the literature on sense-making. As common themes emerged, we consulted various literatures to identify theoretical precedents for data interpretation, which ultimately focused on the literature related to calling. Alternative interpretations of the data were considered and discussed. Some initial conversations considered whether the data revealed the hierarchical integration of agency and communion within motivational aspects of principals' personalities. For example, Frimer et al. found that morally exemplary leaders understood their own agency as a tool for achieving a final communal—or other-enhancing—objective (Frimer, Walker, Lee, Riches, & Dunlop, 2012). However, though interesting and related, this interpretation did not fit the data as well as understanding principals' narratives through the lens of *calling as sense-making.* Recall, the idea of calling includes the following: (a) an external summons, sense of fate, or destiny; (b) a duty to service or a duty to apply one's gifts and talents; (c) and personal passion linked to fulfillment.

As it became clear that the data pointed to a calling narrative, I reframed my broad coding categories, as well as identification of most relevant subcodes within each category. Informed by the literature on calling, a thematic coding scheme was developed around principals' descriptions of their motivation to and meaning in their work. The final codes of (a) destiny, (b) duty, and (c) fulfillment were used for closed coding. Destiny was coded based on a sense of intrinsic fit with or fate leading the person into education. Destiny narratives suggest a sense of fate, path dependency, or unavoidability. Duty was coded when principals used stories about either the importance of serving students through education or the moral importance of their work to author an understanding of why they do what they do and who they are in the midst of challenges. The duty code includes two subcodes: (a) an awareness of wanting to serve particularly disadvantaged students and (b) an obligation to do what is best for students despite difficulties or challenges. Fulfillment includes the following: (a) self-enlargement themes, including desire to grow, enjoyment of challenges, or personal exceptionalism and (b) personal fulfillment themes including loving or being passionate about or fulfilled by the work.

One theme from the initial round of more focused coding that I did not include in the final coding subcategories was the idea of being from a "family of educators." Twelve principals discussed someone in their family who had

been an educator having an influence on their career path. I considered incorporating this into the theme of destiny, but ultimately it did not fit with the literature on calling the way that the other narratives of destiny, fate, and innate fitness for work in education and work as principal did. Additionally, principals often spoke of the educators in their family more as a support network, less as a motivation.

I applied the codes of *destiny, duty*, and *fulfillment* and subcodes to all of the interview transcripts. An advanced undergraduate research team member experienced with the transcripts though new to this project was employed to evaluate the validity of the identified codes and confirm interrater reliability on a subset of data (20%). After reviewing the calling coding scheme, we coded the transcripts in NVivo, using NVivo to calculate Cohen's kappa as a measure of coding agreement, discussed instances of disagreement to reach mutual understanding, and recoded to reach agreement of 0.70 or above.

To further ensure the trustworthiness of my findings, throughout the development of the coding scheme, I discussed the emergent themes and coding schemes with my colleagues in sociology of education and narrative identity psychology, both with expertise in qualitative methods. These discussions were employed to ensure the coding scheme and claims I was making were reasonable. Within each discussion, the study's primary investigator offered alternative interpretations throughout the coding process via ongoing dialogue. We discussed my reasons for applying certain codes, other ideas about these data, differences and similarities in thinking about these data, and we worked through the data to revise any improbable interpretations.

I also relied on the methodological assumptions of a grounded theory inquiry. Categories (or codes) emerged directly from the data and were not created in advance. Participants' narratives, or "textural" descriptions (Creswell, 2007, p. 60), of purpose and calling were analyzed to understand how they make sense of their motivation. Additionally, a "structural" (Creswell, 2007, p. 60) understanding of participants' conditions and context was also gained from participants' narratives, survey responses, and additional data on the probation status of principals' first-year schools. In this way, understanding principals' context played a role in how we interpreted the data and constructed findings. For example, 18 of the 35 principals were novices in schools on (or that went on) probation; 5 principals went to new schools, and 12 principals entered schools not on (or that went off) probation. All of the principals entered challenging work in a large urban district. Those who entered schools on probation faced increased pressure to perform and scrutiny of their school's test scores. Broadly speaking, all principals faced similar self-reported challenges. Both the textural and structural understand-

ings gained from the data were combined to present an understanding of principals' use of calling narratives in their contexts.

The remainder of the article presents my findings in detail and offers further discussion. Table 2 shows whose narratives included which themes, and the probation status of the school in their first year, according to data provided by CPS.

Findings

Principals used "calling narratives" to make sense of why they do what they do. During their first year, new principals' understanding of who they are in their new occupation was tied to their organizational sense-making. I begin below by presenting novices' challenging organizational context. Using principals' own words, I paint a picture of principals' settings, including the accountability pressures and new challenges faced. I then present a prototypical calling narrative through the lens of an individual principal. The remainder of the findings focus on a deeper exploration of each calling theme, offering specific examples of how each calling theme punctuates principals' sense-making. I report how many principals narrated each calling theme, as well as what each theme accomplishes. I lastly transition from discussing the specific calling themes as sense-making to an exploration of whether sense-making took shape differently in schools with different probation statuses and positions with respect to broader institutional accountability pressures.

Three specific themes of calling: destiny, duty, and fulfillment were highly prevalent within principals' interviews. Duty was coded in 31 out of the 35 principals' narratives. Destiny was coded in 31 narratives. Fulfillment was coded in 27 out of the 35 principals. No principals told stories of fulfillment without also including a sense of duty or destiny. Principals' stories reveal a commitment to the growth and fulfillment of their individual *selves* (destiny and fulfillment themes) as well as to the growth and development of *others* (duty themes). These findings suggest that as principals faced serious puzzles regarding accountability demands, tight resources, and challenging contexts, sense-making about their motivation led them to construct self-narratives of individuals who are called to the work and role.

Organizational Context

First-year principals found themselves suddenly ultimately responsible for raising test scores. At the same time, they deeply appreciated and acknowledged "so many other factors that make a great school." This tension they experienced sparked sense-making. Tim succinctly echoed the thoughts of

Table 2. Principals' Calling Narrative Themes.

Name	School Probation Status Year 1	Destiny	Duty	Sensitivity to Needs/ Disadvantage	Duty to Students Guiding Decisions/Despite Difficulties	Fulfillment	Desire Challenge/ Growth	Personal Fulfillment/ Love, Passion	Exceptionalism
Adriana	Yes	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Alejandro	Became yes	X	X		X	X	X	X	
Anastasia	No		X	X	X	X	X		
Andrea	Became yes	X	X	X					
Angela	Yes	X	X		X	X	X	X	
Carol	Became no	X				X		X	
Charles	Yes	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Damien	Yes	X	X	X		X	X		
Dennis	Became yes	X	X		X	X	X		X
Emily	Yes	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
George	Yes	X	X	X	X		X		
Janice	No	X	X						
Jennifer	Became no	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Joanne	N/A—new school	X	X			X		X	
Joyce	Yes	X	X	X	X				
Kara	Became no		X		X	X			X
Kathy	No	X	X		X			X	
Laura	Yes	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Lori	No	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Lydia	No	X	X		X	X	X		

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Name	School Probation Status Year 1	Destiny	Duty	Sensitivity to Needs/ Disadvantage	Duty to Students Guiding Decisions/Despite Difficulties	Fulfillment	Desire Challenge/ Growth	Personal Fulfillment/ Love, Passion	Exceptionalism
Manuel	No	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Nancy	N/A—new school	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Nathan	N/A—new school	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Nelson	Yes	X	X	X		X	X		X
Octavio	No	X	X	X		X		X	X
Oscar	Became yes	X	X	X		X	X		
Peter	Yes	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Rich	Yes	X	X			X			X
Rosana	N/A—new school		X		X	X	X		
Sally	Yes	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Sam	No	X							
Samantha	N/A—new school	X							
Steve	Yes	X				X	X	X	
Tim	No		X		X				
Yvonne	Yes	X	X			X			X

many new principals: "[the district's] expectation is just scores pretty much." At the same time, he said, "I don't think scores are the end-all. I never have. I think kids being happy in school. . . . There's so many other factors that make a school, to me, a great school." While Tim's school is not on probation, George's school is, and he said much the same:

> [The district's expectations are that we] primarily improve our [state achievement test] scores and no police reports. . . . Increase in student achievement, primarily measured by [the state achievement test] is the reality that we live in. That for me personally and professionally is not the ultimate measure of student achievement.

He then listed other goals he wants to pursue, beyond a focus on test scores: making the school a "positive place" where students feel "safe to be learners" and desired to focus more broadly on improving instruction. But he soon came back around to how the school is ultimately judged based on NCLB standards. Principals experienced tension between their desire to focus on students and schools holistically and the district's desire for quick quantifiable increases in test scores. Principals reported this tension and accountability pressures, regardless of the probationary status of their school.

Principals discussed operating in a context with challenges such as rival gangs in the building, high-poverty neighborhoods, students who come to school with more needs than the school can fulfill and without necessary supplies, as well as poor student performance and poor attendance. Emily described her school's challenges,

> They see so much, and they experience a lot of grief . . . what they have to navigate, the gangs . . . just danger in general. . . . They're afraid to come to school. . . . We have so much that we're up against and we're only one school.

Emily's observations suggest that that test scores alone capture neither a full sense of needs nor progress.

Principals at schools on probation were unsurprisingly very aware of [the district's] focus on data and their need to "produce results." Both Joyce and Rich became principal at turnaround schools (where the district tries to "turn around" the school's probationary status by replacing most of the staff). Joyce describes "the culture and climate" as "outta control, kids weren't learning" and notes that the district has

> become really, really more focused on data . . . [the] major concern is the data, the numbers won't lie . . . [I need to] create a school in these um, high-poverty communities where kids are being offered quality education.

Often, these principals noted feeling as though their job depended on rapidly improving student's achievement scores. Oscar, at a school on probation, spoke about concern for his job:

> The pressure . . . to fix things. . . . You are supposed to move the school forward . . . you see principals losing their jobs because the school is not performing . . . for years I've seen how [the district] . . . holds people accountable . . . I want to see the school out of probation.

Emily said, "I have 1 year to kinda get it together. . . . That's a challenge . . . [the most important goal is] test scores . . . you know yes, I wanna keep my job." Even as she said the most important goal is test scores and she wanted to keep her job—statements of the accountability pressures she faced—Emily acknowledged feeling tension between a laser focus on test scores and focusing on "whole child" concerns. She quickly noted, "but the whole point of us being here is to make sure that students who are traditionally underserved . . . can be something outside of the school walls," suggesting again that improving test scores—though they weigh on her and may decide her job fate—would not fully reflect success.

Even off probation, principals were aware of the need to satisfy the district's metrics. As Janice commented, "I know CPS is a little more focused on the data and making progress on paper and the [state achievement test], that's what we're being, you know, judged on." Similarly, Jennifer, whose school came off probation in her first year, noted,

> Everything is about performance . . . if I don't make, I would say, at least 5-10 percentage points of an increase [in student test scores], I'll be outta here. . . . They've marched out quite a few principals.

Manuel's school is, as he said, "a school that is out performing every single neighborhood school" in the area. However, he still felt under pressure, as "CPS expects me to make AYP . . . and this is not necessarily good news for me, there's a lot of expectations." Faced with the challenges of leading schools in underresourced settings, as well as accountability pressures and related tensions principals spoke of their work as a calling, using themes of destiny, duty, and fulfillment.

Prototypical Calling Narrative

Angela, a mom in her early forties, was hired to lead a school on probation, after she taught for 12 years and served as assistant principal for 4 years.

Angela began her principalship in a school the district planned to "phase out" over the next 3 years. Angela summed up her calling saying,

> I love what I do . . . I know that this is my life's calling . . . I have a greater responsibility to these young people. . . . Because of that passion . . . that makes it easy.

Angela spoke of education as almost a magical, intrinsic destiny: something she always knew.

> I have been teaching kids since third grade. . . . My teachers used to give me all the old dittos . . . I went into college declaring education as my major . . . I knew: *this was me* . . . it just was like naturally a part of me. (Italics added)

Angela was aware of a transcendent pull to education from early on. Angela's story gives coherence to her past actions, and fuels future action—both enabling her persistence in the job and constraining her departure from the field of education. For Angela, being an educator is being her true self. In Angela's narrative, being principal was an unavoidable destiny, and also a duty. She is bound to her duty, which is her work: "you really can't do anything but make it [the school] better." Angela talks about her duty to serve students using the explicit language of calling, "This is my life's calling . . . I have a greater responsibility to these young people . . . kind of like what pastors work to do . . . kinda holistic." Educating is her responsibility, which she treats with the reverence of someone going into religious ministry.

Angela became principal at a school that was scheduled to be phased out by the district, because: "to them it hasn't been producing . . . they want the product to be good . . . 'keep that thorn [her school] . . . out of our side.'" In an environment where students "may not come prepared with pen and paper and you know some of the basic things" within a "high-poverty community," Though an assistant principal for 4 years prior, Angela remarked at the end of her first year that being a principal is "very overwhelming." At the same time, she made sense of how she was able to keep focus and persist:

> Because I love what I do . . . I have a passion and I know what is possible for kids . . . I know that this is my life's calling . . . it's even greater than just right here on earth and right now . . . I have a greater responsibility to these young people and these families that I meet than the right now. So I think because of that passion and what drives me as a human I think that it makes it easy; you know because I'm always thinking about how to make it better. And then I'm a little competitive and . . . excitable and I'm a mom . . . wouldn't want any less for any of my children than I would for my own children . . . you're developing whole people.

Angela understood her motivation as bigger than her expertise, career trajectory, or administrative capacity—she authored her sense of motivation as grounded in both passion and service. She loves her job, and in turn her job provides a sense of significance greater than the present struggles. Even as she recognized, "we're such a . . . data-driven society now—especially the district—it's all about numbers. It's not about anything else; it's about numbers," her sense-making invoked moral responsibility and passion. Principals author moral significance into their role through themes of moral responsibility and duty. By rehearsing their identities as dutiful servants, principals enhanced the moral importance of their role, perhaps promoting continued motivation during their difficult first year. But the work is fulfilling too. Angela used a metaphor of motherhood—a role that is exhausting, overwhelming, demanding, life-changing, as well as fulfilling—to make sense of both the challenges and her motivation. She cannot get away—but also implied an intrinsic link between duty and fulfillment. She narrated her calling as work that she is bound to, but also that she is fulfilled by. She noted simply that she loves her job—it fulfills her. With pressure from the district bearing down and the impending phase out of her school, she made sense of her motivation as a moral mission and passionate, self-fulfilling purpose. Angela's narrative is prototypical of the principals in this sample.

Destiny

Many principals expressed a view that their basic nature, hardwiring, or DNA predisposed them to a career in education. The vast majority (31 out of 35, 89%) expressed this path dependency or fate—either that they have known for a long time, found, or lucked into the right career for them. Samantha put it succinctly, "It's bred, it really is bred," using ideas of calling as intended or unavoidable destiny to be an educator. Octavio was similarly succinct: "I am an educator at heart. That's for nature." Joyce described a belief in being "born to do" her job:

> I decided . . . at about age 5. I would wake up early in the morning and with my dolls. . . . And what I would be doing would be teaching my class . . . I just think that I was born to do what I do.

Destiny themes allow principals to give sense to their decision to become principal as a coherent step in their career as an educator. In narrating their destiny, they linked their new situation—as new principal—to a longstanding, cohesive sense of identity.

Narratives of “nature,” being “born to do it,” explain to themselves and others that some educators are cut from different and specific cloth—they are uniquely suited for roles in education (similar to findings of Bunderson and Thompson [2009] among zookeepers). Damien said simply, “I was teaching in the summer at age 18, so I knew I’ve always wanted to be an educator.” By telling stories of destiny, principals revealed a deep identification with the role of *educator* (in contrast to administrator). The principal-as-administrator must respond to performance goals that may be at odds with other values, goals, or motivations the principal holds dear. Principals responded to and made sense of the tension they were experiencing between satisfying performance metrics and a more holistic view of their responsibilities by using stories of destiny to be an educator.

Principals’ entry into the *principalship* specifically was also told as a story of destiny, though often from an outside hand of fate or opportunity. While an inner sense of destiny gave sense and understanding to their motivation to become an *educator*, often stories about an external hand of fate (or external summons) gave sense to become an *administrator*. Indeed, if the call to education was innate, the call to the principalship was often external. Joyce described being encouraged by her husband to apply for her principal certification, and then though she was nervous to become principal, being encouraged by her coprincipal: “He said ‘Joyce, you can do it. Trust me. Joyce, you run the school.’” Stories of being encouraged to become principal also denote a sense of calling, in that the principal was presented with an external summons to do the work. Others expressed being summoned by community needs. Rich noted,

> I was keenly aware . . . that there were some things that I felt like were real missed opportunities with the school leadership . . . [I] really felt a lot of urgency in terms of . . . the effect that I thought I could have.

In understanding their entry into the challenging new role as an external summons, principals bolster themselves for their new commitment—they were called by someone else’s confidence in them or their own confidence in their ability to effect change. Principals’ sense-making revealed the fate and idiosyncrasies of their paths, families, genetics, and chances leading them to their place within the world—into education and then the principalship.

Duty

Similarly, the vast majority (31 out of 35) principals used ideas of a duty to help or serve students to make sense of work motivation. Often, they

emphasized their duty to students either (a) despite challenges that arose or (b) emanating from a particular awareness of underresourced schools, communities, or students. Only four principals' duty narratives were related to serving students generally and not specific to one of those two subthemes.

Kathy, whose school is not on probation but who nonetheless feels pressure to improve outcomes said,

> The kids come first. You know they [the kids] have to be here . . . none of the rest of us have to be here. And all our primary responsibility must be on children. It's a privilege that I'm here . . . if I wasn't happy I could leave . . . these little kiddos they're here and they're our first priority.

In fact, her point is *not* that anyone could leave, but instead that by focusing on the students, who "come first," her own level of commitment is the same as the students who are legally required to be there. Thus, Kathy employs ideas of duty to serve students by constructing her duty as a moral obligation to place students as her first priority or responsibility. This narrative fueled her motivation through the pressures she faced.

Awareness of disadvantage. Many (19 out of 35, 54%) principals ascribed to themselves a particular sensitivity to, awareness of, or obligation to serve underresourced, underachieving students, or otherwise disadvantaged students. Andrea used discourses of calling-as-duty to disadvantaged students saying:

> Not only is it the people we answer to at central office. . . . When I say higher calling . . . I mean: what are we preparing them [students] for? Your zip code does not determine your success in life. [They say about my school] "It's horrible. You know the kids are bad. It's the bad part of [town]." . . . It's about exposure and experiences. So the higher calling is that we provide that exposure and experiences to our kids.

Andrea, at a school newly on probation, recognized the tension of needing to answer to central office, but immediately used her "higher calling" to make sense of her role. She rhetorically elevated the significance of her work and rehearsed her inner motivations despite the tensions created by accountability pressures. Andrea authored her story as one-who-is-called-to-serve, a mandate providing her with moral authority. She did not implicate her ability to achieve certain outcomes (test scores, etc.) as a reason why she does what she does. She used themes of duty to help manage the tension between her personal and professional values and the demands of accountability she faced.

Adriana found herself in an extremely challenging context where, "many people in this building—kids and adults—are wounded. They're really, really wounded. . . . In pain and ready for a change." She talked about her duty to lead her school "out of a darkness" and authored a sense of calling saying "my passion is . . . the underdog . . . the kids that have been half dismissed . . . morale that's just given up." In this way, Adriana used a calling narrative of duty to serve underresourced students to understand and reaffirm her commitment to her challenging role. Nathan, a principal at a new school, narrated his desire to serve students in difficult school environments saying, "I get motivated because they're behind their potential." By narrating a duty to use one's talents to serve others—he wanted to be "of use"—Nathan's narrative explained and made sense of his choices. He talked passionately about how his motivation comes from a recognition of achievement gaps.

Lori's narrative employed ideas of both a sensitivity to the disadvantage of others, as well as awareness of her own exceptional abilities to notice, care deeply, and assist students with needs. She said,

> I felt bad for a child who didn't have any friends because she had special needs . . . I took it upon myself to learn how to sign to her in sign language because she was deaf. . . . So I got involved with um, becoming her friend and . . . I would help interpret for her because there were no interpreters.

Lori's narrative rehearsed her sense of self as one who can be of service—this is how she makes sense of both her path into the principalship as well as her ongoing motivation.

Principals like Andrea, Lori, Nathan, and Adriana made sense of their orientation to work by authoring calling narratives, specifically a call to serve students who need them most. Their stories reflect how many of the principals talk of a moral duty to serve, constructing their work as important, which aids them in understanding why they do what they do. Commitment to the growth of students is a core value in education. Principals' narratives made sense of their job by aligning themselves with this core value and elevated the moral purpose of their work and calling, which then reinforced their continued motivation to the difficult work of being principal. Talking about a duty to serve disadvantaged students suggested a motivation to carry the sense of self-as-educator into the principal's office, though the role is removed from the classroom.

Doing what is best for students, despite challenges. When principals encountered difficult tasks, narratives of duty gave onerous tasks meaning and significance: the task is so important that it must be done no matter what the

difficulties, no matter the cost. Many (17 out of 35, 49%) principals employed the theme of serving students despite difficulties. Adriana's narrative linked ideas of self-sacrifice with her motivation:

> I think in terms of loving kids, particularly in a school like this, they will challenge you. And they will make you work for their love. And if you don't walk in the door with an unconditional love for these kids there will come a point when they do something and you won't anymore, unless there is no other option.

Adriana's sense-making came in response to her difficult context and a response to the expectations she feels "to fix the kids . . . fix the neighborhood." She feared her school will be closed,

> It has been on the watch list and there's been lots of talk about closing Viburnam [not the school's real name]. If they close Viburnam it will be a disaster. Our kids need this school open . . . students that cannot be lost to the streets. I'm passionate about that.

Adriana made sense of continued motivation as the only alternative—there is "no other option" no matter what challenges students or others present.

For many, a key challenge arose when, as Dennis put it: "politics get involved." The politics involved may even threaten the "bottom line in teaching and education . . . [which is] 'Are we doing what's best for kids?'" because, as Dennis said, "when politics get involved, I don't think that [the best for kids] is always the main direction and focus of schools." Indeed, the pressures from outside the school created tension regarding what priorities principals needed to focus on. Many, when faced with such tensions, returned to the need to make students the first priority, despite pressure they felt to focus elsewhere. Charles said, "you want to come in with the focus on instruction" and "make sure that we're not allowing those other challenges to remove us from what our main goal is . . . which is to make sure the kids are learning." Both Charles and Dennis, principals of schools on probation, acknowledged pressures and challenges, but made sense of their motivation to press onward and remain committed by talking about their duty to serve students despite challenges.

Kara, whose school recently went on probation, said she felt that "CPS expects me to move the school off of probation" in her first year, and admitted she has questioned becoming principal saying, "[I] will sometimes . . . ask [myself], 'what in the world were you thinking?'" But she reminded herself: "this is about kids." Her words exemplified calling-as-sense-making in

action. Kara explained to herself and others that it is not about ease or immediate success in the role, but about her daily motivation to serve students. She used a metaphor: the "inhuman" feat of running a marathon to make sense of her extreme sense of duty—it is not for regular humans, but rather based on a calling suited to her unique (and exceptional) abilities. Kara fused her motivation to serve students despite challenges with a sense of her unique fitness to the job. Narrative themes of duty emphasized the significance and importance of the principals' work. Though the external demand is to raise test scores, these educators authored an understanding of their inner calling and motivation.

In addition to destiny and duty themes, principals also talked about their jobs as fulfilling. Fulfillment fits with a modern understanding of what it means to have a calling. It is the third and final theme presented. Using themes of fulfillment, principals discussed how their work enlarges and expands their selves. The following section illustrates the ways in which principals ascribed to themselves an overall self-fulfillment in their work.

Fulfillment

Many (27 out of 35, 77%) principals narrated themes of personal fulfillment or satisfaction, describing how the principalship is personally or professionally rewarding or fulfilling, or simply a job they love. Principals' narratives of enjoyment and fulfillment rhetorically counteracted on-the-job constraints, including strict accountability measures, to provide a discursive, identity-based sense of agency. Many noted that they were "competitive" or "liked a challenge" and the principalship offered just the ticket for stretching their professional wings. These themes of fulfillment included the following: love of the work, enjoyment in the challenge or the job, or being exceptionally suited for the work. In accordance with McAdams' (2013) work on generative adults, many of these principals demonstrated a fusion of duty themes with spirited self-enhancing fulfillment narratives. Nancy summed up the agentic theme of fulfillment well:

> I'm so personally motivated by it and it fulfills me on a personal level that nothing else has before, I think that would be the easiest part. The easiest part might be like oh my God, that was horrible or oh my God, what am I gonna do about that? And being like "and that's why I wanted this job because I wanted the challenge."

In employing meanings of fulfillment and enjoyment of challenges, Nancy constructed herself as an autonomous agent who *wants* her job, even though

she had an experience "that was horrible." As principal of a new school, Nancy certainly faced challenges. In her words, the challenges of operating a new school,

> should make you wanna run the other way. Because with that it's just, there's a ton of extra stress for sure, responsibility. And the fact that if we don't perform we get closed. Like there's no such thing as we're gonna continue working with you until you get better.

Nancy coped with the challenges she faced by narrating her fulfillment. In this way, principals made sense of their motivation by constructing work as self-fulfilling.

Nancy is one of six principals with less than 2 years prior experience in administration. Interestingly, as previous years in administration increased principals generally used fewer fulfillment themes in their sense-making. This relationship was statistically significant. Years in administration significantly predicted fulfillment themes, $\beta = -.05$, $t(33) = -2.4$, $p = .02$. Years in administration also explained a significant proportion of variance in fulfillment themes, $R^2 = .15$, $F(1, 33) = 5.74$, $p = .02$. The relationship remained significant when controlling for school probation status. The relationship was still significant when controlling for the school's probation status.

Self-enlargement—enjoying challenges. Many (21 of 35, 60%) interviewees talked about how the role of principal would provide professional growth or draw on and expand their talents in a way they either wanted or enjoyed. Ideas self-motivation, self-fulfillment, and a desire for the very challenges they encountered reflect contemporary understandings of calling as passion or fulfillment. Alejandro connected his desire to be challenged to seeking the role of principal in the first place:

> I really enjoyed myself [classroom teaching] for about oh 6 to 7 years. Then, it um, I started to lose a little desire. Not so much that I didn't enjoy the kids; it was just like, you know, it wasn't as challenging for me. And so I like to be challenged. I like my mind to be stimulated. And so um, I'm like, you know, what am I gonna do now? You know? And so um, during that time, I always had the feeling I guess that I wanted to be a principal.

Far from being simply motivated serve or to use his gifts without advancement, Alejandro's narrative integrated his desire to grow and be challenged. His calling is constructed as in part an ability to meet *personal* needs for challenge, growth, enjoyment—not only others' needs for education, care, and

support. His core identity as a challenge-seeker met the demands of the role, and shaped how he understands potential tensions in his context. He said, “[the district expects] a lot. But that’s good. I don’t mind expectations.” Oscar, at a school newly on probation where he felt pressure to “fix things,” also felt that the role must allow him to keep progressing and challenging him, even as he expressed concern about job security:

> I’ve always been the person who likes challenges and likes to keep moving up, keep progressing and learning new things . . . I’m learning some things that I didn’t know . . . when I was an assistant principal I got to a certain limit. You know there was nothing else for me to learn. But now as a principal there’s a lot more issues that I’m learning and I like learning. I think it’s always important to be learning, to be a learner.

Both Alejandro and Oscar made sense of the challenges in their roles as part and parcel of their desire for challenge, growth, and fulfillment. Difficulties only reinforced for them why they took the job in the first place. Talking of purpose, enjoyment, and embrace of challenges, principals made sense of their motivation as their *choice*, likely reinforcing their commitment.

Similarly, many made sense of their motivation as a desire for professional growth. For Rosana, career growth plans were narrated as of prime importance. She wants “to be a superintendent one day . . . in order for me to be a superintendent, I need to be a principal. So, then I said ok, let’s do that.” Similarly, Anastasia talked about how challenges will help her grow:

> Is this what I want to get into in terms of the diversity, in terms of the neighborhood aspect, in terms of my personal growth? . . . my commitment is to be in [the district] for a while. So that’s part of it. I want to be in an organization that’s making that change for the betterment of all the students. But it allows me also to become a better individual and then grow and be exposed to something that will not only benefit and grow others but grow me as an individual, professional and personal . . . I’ve never worked in a predominately African American school. So I needed that experience . . . with students always being in the forefront; the work always focuses on that. Every child is my child.

Anastasia also expressed duty toward students. Duty and fulfillment are linked in a narrative that is both virtuous and agentic or self-fulfilling. Anastasia used ideas of both duty and fulfillment: an autonomous agent seeking challenges while serving her students.

Anastasia’s concern for every child as though they are her own children demonstrates that she is concerned for the welfare of the next generation—themes of

generativity. McAdams described how generative American adults tend to tell life narratives which cast themselves as uniquely predestined to do good works (McAdams, 2013).

Self-fulfillment. Many (17 out of 35, 49%) talked about how their job—either the principalship specifically or education more generally—personally fulfilled them. Laura noted how she took pleasure out of both the challenges—"I enjoy this challenge"—and the students, "I absolutely have never lost my love of educating children, I just, I just love kids." Laura's sense-making used ideas of both duty and agency or self-efficacy: if she lost her love or did not enjoy the challenge, she could leave. Laura's school was on probation and she felt pressure of being "just totally on the [district's] radar . . . they expect to see immediate change, no sitting back and assessing the situation." Recall that Angela specifically fused the three themes of her calling in extremely difficult circumstances:

> It's easy for me because *I love what I do. And I have a passion* and I know what is possible for kids. I just know it . . . I know that this is my life's *calling* and I think that it's even greater than just right here on earth and right now. I think that *I have a greater responsibility to these young people and these families that I meet than the right now*. So I think because of that *passion* and what drives me just as a human I think that it makes it easy; you know because *I'm always thinking about how to make it better*. And then *I'm a little competitive* and I'm a little you know . . . excitable and I'm a mom . . . *wouldn't want any less for any of my children than I would for my own children*. (Italics added)

Angela noted that she is competitive, implying she enjoys challenges, and by likening her desires for her students to her desires for her own children invoked a metaphor of motherhood—deep sacrifice with deep fulfillment. In Angela's narrative, the sacrifice (duty) and the fulfillment are almost inextricably linked. Manuel felt pressure from the district "to see growth in the school . . . and this is not necessarily good news for me, there's a lot of expectations about me." As he experienced this pressure, he integrated his passion for service with his enjoyment of and love of his job saying, "Education has nothing to do with money; it's more about passion, it's more about true belief of helping people do better. . . . People still ask me, 'Why are you doing this?' I love it." He also said that while he currently loved what he does, "the day I don't, I might just change my setting," explicitly drawing the connection between how his love for his job proved his autonomy. Manuel used a running metaphor—"being a principal is like running a marathon"—to emphasize the dedication, patience, and effort required. The principals' focused not

only on finding their place to use their talents to serve the community but equally on finding the place their talents could grow and their selves find fulfillment. By ascribing a sense of joy or fulfillment, the principals rhetorically narrated autonomy into increasingly constraining work environments. They did this by saying they loved or found the job "very fulfilling."

Personal exceptionalism. Eleven of the 35 principals (31%) narrated themes of exceptionalism to understand their motivation. Lori's narrative captured the spirit of exceptionalism within many principals' narratives. She says,

> I'm just not your typical person . . . people tell me that all the time, "I don't know how you do it . . . I think it's just the way I've always been . . . I'm suited well to this job. I feel like, you know, people have asked me before, 'If there was a principalship in the suburbs 5 minutes from your house, would you take it?' Because they know I drive an hour and a half. And honestly, I don't want it. I don't feel that my skill set and the passion I have for deaf kids would be served in a suburban school. I feel like they need me more here."

Lori narrated a sense of personal exceptionalism to make sense of why she surmounts certain challenges, as well as why she is a good fit for her current role and school. Lori is not alone in casting herself as exceptional. Recall how Kara suggested her motivation is "inhuman," like what is needed to run a marathon.

Calling Narratives at Schools on Probation

All of the principals in this study have stepped into challenging environments, however, only principals at schools on or recently off probation expressed a fear for their job security, as described above. Sense-making theory suggests that sense-making relates to institutional environment and pressures faced. And indeed, as a general trend, as school probation status increased more principals tended to use calling themes. Table 3 shows the percentage and number of principals by probation status who expressed each calling theme. Probation is listed in a theoretically increasing order from "No" to "N/A—new school" to schools that went on probation during the principal's first year ("Became yes") to schools already on probation ("Yes"). A higher percentage of principals on at schools on probation narrated each theme compared with principals not on probation.[2] These are preliminary trends among a small sample size, but they align with sense-making theory and support the findings that calling narratives are used to make sense in context.

Table 3. Principals' Calling Narratives and School Probation Status.

School Probation Status During Year 1	All Three Calling Themes, %	Destiny, %	Duty, %	Sensitivity to Needs/ Gaps, %	Duty to Students Guiding Decisions/Despite Difficulties, %	Fulfillment, %	Desire Challenge/ Growth, %	Personal Fulfillment/ Love, Passion, %	Exceptionalism, %
No (n = 9)	44	78	89	44	56	56	44	33	22
Became no (n = 3)	33	67	67	33	33	100	33	67	33
N/A—new school (n = 5)	60	80	80	40	40	80	60	60	0
Became yes (n = 4)	75	100	100	50	50	75	75	25	25
Yes (n = 14)	79	100	93	71	50	86	71	50	50

Discussion

Principals made sense of their purpose and motivation, despite great challenges encountered, through calling narratives. Principals in schools on and off probation both (a) expressed feeling accountability pressures and challenges specific to urban principalships and (b) used calling narratives to make sense of why they do this challenging work. Effective principals can greatly impact student achievement (School Leaders Network, 2014). Unfortunately, principals often move on from the most challenging schools (School Leaders Network, 2014). This study aimed to understand how new school principals in challenging urban contexts made sense of their motivation to their new role. Understanding novice school principals' motivation and values could inform leader training, school policy, and district decisions potentially boosting the success of reform efforts (Davis et al., 2017) and retention by easing newcomer transitions (Louis, 1980). When policy reforms align with stakeholders' values and identity, the reforms are more likely to succeed (Cohen & Mehta, 2017). Understanding calling narratives could assist principal preparation by revealing how new principals developed narratives to "balance, or even hold in tension" conflicting values, emotions, beliefs, and identities (Crow et al., 2017, p. 274). Themes of calling are part of educators' cultural repertoire and helped the principals author an understanding of who they are and why they are there. Furthermore, the data reveal that self-narratives of those in service careers, such as these principals, closely track how calling is understood in the literature on calling. As suggested by recent scholarship on calling, contemporary understandings of calling often include a personal fulfillment component and are not limited to a call to serve or sense of external summons.

As principals stepped into their new roles, they grappled with the pressure to raise test scores, implement district and national-level reforms, and other challenges that served as sense-making triggers (Weick, 1995). Principals often find that their "existing and long-held educational values, emotions and beliefs may coincide, conflict with or differ in important ways from the expectations of others in the reform environment" (Crow et al., 2017, p. 274). Principals narrated themes of calling to make sense of their new roles, as their values, motivations, and purposes intersected with the challenges and puzzles provided by their organizational environment. Not all principals expressed each theme, suggesting a freedom of expression. Principals freely expressed difficulties they experienced in their work. Interviewers asked about path into education and perceived challenges and successes—not directly about calling or motivations, allaying concerns that principals answered with only socially desirable themes.

Destiny. By making sense of their long-held educator identity through themes of destiny, the role of principal became a continuation of their core purpose, mission, and passion as educator as sense was made. During times of transition, bridging past and future identities is important to individuals working to establish authenticity and integrity of self within and across situations (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). People are driven to construe themselves as constant, fulfilling internal psychological demands (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). In making connections between child or young adulthood interests or passions and their current career status, principals constructed a narrative that makes retrospective sense of their career path and self-efficacy (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Destiny themes within calling narratives demonstrated consistent, stable behavior, a coherent sense of self, and people who are both competent and effective in their work (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009).

Duty. Principals also used service-oriented notions of calling, emphasizing their identities as individuals responding to the call to serve. Using themes of duty to make sense of and describe their motivation likely worked in multiple ways. First, duty narratives elevated the moral importance of principals' work, potentially bolstering motivation as well as willingness to sacrifice for the job (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Second, duty narratives appealed to stakeholders closely watching the new principals, bolstering principals' legitimacy. Duty themes reflect both a broader social and professional narrative for educators, as well as a culturally acceptable narrative for educators: in a new role where outcomes are uncertain, principals' narratives painted themselves as having identities as ones who are committed and called. Such familiar themes produce narratives that "are more convincing than stories that do not follow agreed upon cultural rules" (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010, p. 143). These "good stories" help principals prove—to superiors, local school committees, even themselves—that they are a good fit for the job (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

Fulfillment. Through fulfillment themes, principals authored themselves as protagonists who wanted the challenges they are experiencing. By expressing themes of enjoyment and fulfillment, principals authored agency into their understanding of their motivation to work. Ideally, in good transition stories, the protagonist's agency provides a causal explanation for the story's events (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). In other words, challenges are not just happening to a passive individual. Principals authored agentic self-understandings of their motivation in relation to challenges: they talked about their unique fitness for the role, a sense of fulfillment and joy, and their desire to seek out challenges. Such agency-enhancing narratives may support principals' sense of self-efficacy and thus well-being in challenging times (Bandura, 2010).

Overall, fewer principals used fulfillment themes, lending credence to the idea that fulfillment may be a more dynamic aspect of calling as sense-making. The data presented in this article suggest that principals more consistently center calling narratives on destiny and duty rather than fulfillment, which interestingly reflects how calling has been understood throughout history. Self-fulfillment is considered a more "modern" addition to ideas of calling. Some calling researchers dispute the idea that fulfillment is an essential part of calling to begin with and emphasize instead transcendent summons and prosocial motives (Duffy, Dik, Douglass, England, & Velez, 2018). For principals, classical themes of calling such as destiny and duty may serve their sense-making needs better than themes of fulfillment. It is possible that the moral mandate of a job to which one is duty-bound proves a stronger sense-making narrative than themes of self-fulfillment, personal passion, and growth.

Principals with more years of experience in school administration used fewer fulfillment themes in their sense-making. If years in administration "causes" principals to be less fulfilled, we should be concerned. However, the data cannot prove this, and the correlation does not suggest causation. Sense-making is triggered as new challenges are encountered, and theoretically more time in administration, even at the assistant principal level, could reduce sense-making triggers. Perhaps these principals had more information or staff buy-in, easing the tensions, challenges, and problems of practice faced, or more familiarity with how the realities of the work intersect with principals' values, leading them to use less fulfillment themes. Alternatively, perhaps principals with longer administrative tenure are more aware of the challenging realities of administrative work and have found that sense-making using themes of fulfillment, desire for challenges, or personal passion does not help them understand their motivation to work in administration. Principals with varying tenures demonstrated similar use of destiny and duty themes. The relationship between administrator tenure and calling narratives needs further longitudinal or comparative study to capture the dynamic nature of principal sense-making responses to situational cues.

Probation status. The data suggest a general trend toward principals at schools on probation using calling narratives to a greater degree than those at schools not on probation. This trend could suggest that principals who face more pressures, tensions, dilemmas, and challenges (including those in large urban districts generally and schools on probation specifically) more frequently employ calling narratives to make sense of the tensions they experience. Indeed, sense-making is a dynamic process that involves picking up on and interpreting cues from one's environment. The data suggest that principals in

relatively more challenging contexts may have been cued to "lean in" to calling narratives as a way of understanding their situation and motivation. Interestingly, principals in schools on probation seem to use themes of having a particular duty to underserved students and an awareness of achievement gaps, as well as themes of desiring a challenge in making sense of their motivation, underscoring the cues to which they are likely responding in probationary contexts. Principals narrated themes of duty to students despite challenges regardless of probation status, suggesting a response to a broader organizational context such as the school district.

Some studies suggest technocratic logics of expertise are becoming prioritized over logics of care and service among service professionals (Brint, 2015). However, this data reveal principals' narratives emphasize traditional ideas of care and service, as well as fulfillment and passion. Principals play active policy roles by negotiating policy initiatives, as well as performing assessment and data-monitoring directives (Koyama, 2014). Given the burden principals face to couple school practices with policy reforms, it would not be surprising if principals' narratives in schools on probation focused more on demonstrating their expertise. However, rather than using narratives of managerial expertise ("I am an efficient manager, I am confident I can make the budget work"), principals reinforced longstanding missions, passions, and values, as they encountered organizational challenges and constraints related to accountability and school academic performance.

Race and gender. In this sample, principals' race and gender were not related to whether principals used calling narratives or specific themes. Though men and women showed no empirical differences, gendered associations of femininity and emotional displays of care and compassion—such as in calling narratives—should be probed for a potential to complicate women's attempts to exercise managerial authority (Ispa-Landa & Thomas, 2019). Similarly, implications for race and calling in urban education settings deserve critical follow up.

Potential pitfalls of calling. Perhaps in light of my findings, it is easy to think that narrating work as a calling is a purely positive experience, or something that should be pursued. Calling narratives do help these principals make sense of their roles during their first year in an intensely demanding job, so it is understandable if the idea of having a calling takes on a subtly rosy glow. Indeed, having a calling may relate to social connection and self-efficacy that leads to positive career and life outcomes like higher degrees of work and life meaning, and greater job satisfaction (Duffy & Autin, 2013). Duffy, Douglass, Autin, England, and Dik (2016) found that having a calling can buffer against burnout that might otherwise be experienced. But the degree to which

working in a calling might *always* predict positive outcomes is an active question (Duffy et al., 2016).

Managing a calling can be a challenge. Burnout, organizational exploitation, and workaholism may be related to the extreme commitments predicted by calling work orientations (Duffy et al., 2016). Research has demonstrated workers make sacrifices in terms of pay, career mobility, and health to serve their callings (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Additionally, many of the principals noted their struggle to be fully present both in their homes and schools—acknowledging that the schools were winning out in their first year (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Experiencing difficulties at work can be heightened when one works in a field with which they deeply identify (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017). The principals experienced conflict with stakeholders (like teachers or parents) over vision/mission and emotional/physical exhaustion. At the end of the first year, one principal choked up while talking about the "tremendous" pressure of the job, the "pressure to raise scores," and described a recent exhaustion-related health breakdown, after becoming disoriented and passing out.

Understanding work as a calling can offer benefits and fill life with meaning and purpose. But working in a job that is central to one's self-understanding can become extremely frustrating, even harmful, when challenges arise, especially if one's ability to achieve desired results (i.e., self-efficacy) are completely constrained by the situation. The constraints of being a principal in an urban school district in the throes of implementing accountability (during the time of NCLB), reduce the range of what individual principals can do in their schools, and perhaps their perceived self-efficacy. The stronger the sense of calling, the more potentially damaging if the calling cannot be fulfilled and one's sense of self-efficacy maintained (Bandura, 2010).

Implications

Understanding calling as a narrative resource allows opportunities to help novices understand their stories, personal and professional histories, goals, passions, missions, and to prospectively understand how these may clash with certain realities of the job (Louis, 1980). For anyone with a pull toward a career, a desire to serve, or passion to use their gifts, understanding calling as a way to make sense of "why I do what I do" when encountering challenges has potential to allow individuals more agency in guiding their career and taking care of themselves as they respond to challenges on the job. This final section offers implications for recruiting, training, and retaining joyful and productive educators, particularly principals.

In schooling contexts that have suffered from years of neglect and instability, such as turnaround schools in economically disenfranchised and racially segregated communities, participants' sense-making reveals possible pressure, as well as pressure-relief, points. Principal preparation could focus specifically on helping recruits understand "entry experiences" and how to manage this challenging time. Prior to becoming principal, individuals should be provided with a "preview of typical entry experiences and ways to manage them" (Louis, 1980, p. 247). If novices were more aware of challenging entry experiences and had information from others in similar roles prior to entry, they could be more prepared to craft appropriate strategies of action for managing the tensions inherent to the role.

Among highly motivated health professionals, those most invested in their profession were at a greater risk for burnout (Kearney, Weininger, Vachon, Harrison, & Mount, 2009). Defining one's self solely by one's work can be problematic not only if the job does not work out as planned or goes away but also due to the potential for overwork, an exaggerated sense of responsibility, and stress (Kearney et al., 2009). Principals should be encouraged to think critically about their identity in work and seize opportunities to grow and learn (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017). Ideas of being "born" to do the work, having special gifts, or being fulfilled by one's work are not bad, but could signal an overidentification with work and proneness to burnout if one's ideals are not met in reality. New principals should be encouraged to focus on learning and growing in response to challenges. Schabram and Maitlis (2017) describe how people who believe they have special identities or skills often burnt out more quickly in the animal shelter field. Challenging work was more sustainable among those who approached it as practice, in which they could grow and collaborate (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017).

At the same time, principals' talk of calling suggests potential avenues to support educator job satisfaction, retention, and efficacy that does not rely solely on principals' preparation. Often principals' sense of calling (their duty) was discussed in opposition to the political challenges they face, echoing teachers' stressors (Stauffer & Mason, 2013). Such narratives could be a red flag, denoting where principals' values and identity do not align with the realities of the role. If this mismatch persists over time, it could erode job satisfaction, well-being, or retention. School systems should work to alleviate the potential for tensions principals experience—encouraging principals that they have time to make change, rather than demanding instant improvement and fostering a sense of system-wide commitment to what is best for students. Calling narratives should not be used to justify low pay, challenging work conditions, or the exchange of physical or mental well-being for meaningful work (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009).

Finally, colleagues and mentors should realize their power to be the "external summons," calling principals forth from the ranks of teacher. More advanced colleagues and mentors should seek to encourage potential principals to enter the principal pipeline. As shown in the data, principals noted how having someone outside of themselves recognize their strengths and encourage them prompted them to apply for the job of principal. From the principals' point of view, the external summons was viewed as the hand of fate, ushering them into their destiny.

Future research. Future research should continue to follow these principals across time to investigate whether calling narratives predict persistence, burnout, or psychological well-being among educators who express them. Similar comparative work could be conducted with principals of different tenures, as well as with individuals who are leaving or have left the principalship, to help understand how different tenures and different challenges might relate to differing sense-making and retention outcomes. Comparative studies in suburban contexts could shed light on differences between principals who work in urban settings versus their suburban counterparts (Jones, 2016). It is possible that themes of calling could predict longevity in this field known for high turnover rates (Béteille et al., 2012). A fuller exploration of benefits and pitfalls to understanding work as a calling should be incorporated into future research (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014). By understanding calling as a narrative tool for sense-making, it is possible to analyze how calling themes help people make sense of their lives and challenges.

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Notes

1. Much research treats *having a calling* as a *thing*, which individuals either do or do not have (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014; Duffy et al., 2011; Steger, Pickering, Shin, & Dik, 2010). Calling should, however, be understood as more than a theoretical construct (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014; Rodriquez, 2009). Rodriquez investigates ascriptions of agency as a cultural object or social tool, rather than a "thing" that individuals had or did not have (Rodriquez, 2009).
2. I used Stata to perform hypothesis tests (*t* tests) to test correlations between probation status and calling narratives, using an alpha level of .05 for all statistical tests. Probation status was binary: schools listed as yes or became yes in Table 2 were coded as "1" and all others "0." Each calling theme was binary: 1 if present, 0 if absent. Probation status and destiny themes were significantly correlated, $t(33) = -2.29$, $p = .03$, with more principals on probation using destiny themes. Because the sample is so small ($N = 35$) it is unsurprising that most relationships between calling themes and probation status were not significant. Two correlations came close to statistical significance, with more principals on probation using: (a) all three calling themes, $t(33) = -1.93$, $p = .06$; and (b) personal exceptionalism themes, $t(33) = -1.73$, $p = .09$. As another confirmation that principals on probation invoked more calling themes, I regressed each theme on the probation status variable. In each case, except for the subtheme personal fulfillment/love/passion, the coefficient was positive, suggesting that in schools on probation principals may use more calling themes. Again—unless noted these trends were not statistically significant and warrant further study with a larger sample size.

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Author Biography

Carolyn P. Swen is a PhD candidate in human development and social policy at the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University. She studies the career and commitment narratives of highly committed adults with the aim of investigating how self-narratives may predict long-term commitment in work roles. She received a bachelor's degree from Princeton University, two master's degrees from the University of Chicago, and served in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Inspector General from 2009 to 2013.