

Three Orders of Leadership Development:  
Abecedarian to Manager to Entrepreneur

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose was to highlight aspects of principals' work that are problematic and the degree to which they feel prepared to address those aspects. It profiles principals' pre-appointment learning.

**Research Methods:** The study was conducted in Alberta with principals in the first three years of their appointments. A questionnaire was administered to novice principals in a range of school jurisdictions. Data were analyzed using SPSS and thematic coding.

**Findings:** There were aspects of the principalship that respondents found highly challenging. Items in a second tier were ascribed lower levels of concern but still considered problematic. Together, these were called foundational elements. A second order was classified as transitional, i.e., issues of lower immediate concern but still important. Respondents also provided perceptions about how adequately they were prepared. Respondents indicated the dominant features of their preparation.

**Implications for Research and Practice:** Study participants had a strong locus of control and professionalism perhaps fostered best through a configuration of accessible learning experiences, embedded but not mandated expectations, and selection of principals from a pool of aspiring leaders. Postsecondary institutions should retain their focus on theoretical and empirical dimensions of educational leadership but reconsider the assumption that foundational elements can be learned on the job. Postsecondary institutions should revisit curriculum content in educational leadership programs and re-evaluate the expected practical experience base of university faculty members. Other providers should examine how to enhance pragmatic learning for principals and not assume that principals have basic leadership skills and are ready for advanced learning.

The International Study of the Preparation of Principals (ISPP), currently being conducted in 13 countries, is designed to investigate the research question “*How useful are principal preparation programs to novice principals?*” The ISPP is a three-stage investigation of novice principals’ perceptions of the effectiveness of their formal and informal leadership preparation experiences. Stage one involved the mapping of leadership preparation opportunities available to aspiring and newly appointed school leaders, e.g., Tanzania (Onguko, Abdalla, & Webber, 2008), Canada (Webber & Scott, 2010), and stage two consisted of case studies conducted with principals in the first three years of their appointments, e.g., South Africa and Canada (Mentz, Webber, & van der Walt, 2010), Tanzania (Onguko, Abdalla, & Webber, 2012), Canada (Scott, 2010), England and Scotland (Cowie & Crawford, 2009), Mexico (Slater, García Garduño, & Lopez Gorosave, 2008), and Australia (Wildy & Clarke, 2008). In stage three of the ISPP, a survey instrument was developed collaboratively by members of the larger ISPP research team (<http://people.ucalgary.ca/~cwebber/ISPP/>) and administered to samples in various cultural contexts.

This article presents stage three findings from Alberta, Canada. The article highlights aspects of principals’ work lives that are most problematic and the degree to which they feel prepared to address those aspects. It also profiles principals’ pre-appointment learning experiences, ranging from the informal and loosely structured to the formal and tightly structured. We emphasize the types of leadership development needed for principals to serve the public good more effectively in the context of increasingly pluralistic societies.

### **Significance of the Study**

There is a longstanding question about the efficacy of schools in promoting success for all students. One of the key elements influencing the success of schools is the quality of the leadership in the school. Therefore, if principals are pivotal in the establishment of positive school cultures, effective

educational programs, and building the capacity of teachers, it is imperative that effective leadership development is available to aspiring and new principals.

Findings from the early stages of the ISPP from, for example, Australia, Mexico, Kenya, and Tanzania indicated that there is a dearth of leadership development opportunities (Onguko, Abdalla, & Webber, 2008; Slater, García Garduño, & Lopez Gorosave, 2008; Wildy & Clarke, 2008). In other nations, the effectiveness of principal preparation, particularly university graduate programs, has been challenged (Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2002). These findings emphasize the need to identify the kinds of experiences that prospective principals ought to have prior to their initial appointments to ensure their competence and efficacy in this pivotal role in schools. The main purpose of this article is to inform the principal preparation debate by reporting novice principals' perceptions of their work lives, levels of preparedness, and the range of leadership development activities in which they participated. Therefore, this research will be of interest to district administrators, trustees, leadership development providers - both formal and informal, as well as aspiring leaders who wish to become more innovative and entrepreneurial in orientation.

### **Guiding Assumptions**

This paper is based upon several key assumptions. First, good leadership can be taught and nurtured (Mulford, 2008). Second, the primary purpose of leadership is to facilitate high-quality teaching and learning for both staff and students (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Third, the leadership development needs of principals vary as they progress through their careers (Scott & Webber, 2008; Steffy, Wolfe, Pasch, & Enz, 2000). Fourth, educational leadership for the twenty-first century must have an entrepreneurial dimension characterized by action as well as critical thinking (Robertson & Webber, 2002; Scott & Webber, in press). Lessons from the literature (e.g., Leithwood, 2007; Schwahn & Spady, 1998) tell us that thinking without action rarely changes anything.

### **Related Literature**

Research about the principalship emphasizes the importance of this role in establishing and sustaining constructive and effective school environments (Fullan, 2007; Leithwood, 2007; Mulford, 2008; Sergiovanni, 2009). Related research underlines the expanding demands placed upon school leaders (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006; Scott & Rarieya, 2011; Webber, 2008). Principals are expected to facilitate optimal learning organizations, increase the educative capacity of their staff, forge more transparent relationships with their communities, lead evidenced-based decision making, and promote socially-just environments within pluralistic and multicultural schools. Additionally, expectations of society in the information age require educational leaders to engage with new perceptions of time and space, seek equitable access, and reconsider instructional leadership (Webber & Mulford, 2007). Therefore, we advocate that leadership development needs to be readily available to novice principals across cultural contexts and reconceptualized to be more effective, relevant, and career-stage specific.

Previous articles by members of the ISPP research team indicated a wide range of formal and informal opportunities to prepare for assuming the role of principal in different cultural contexts. Webber and Scott (2010) provided a detailed description of formal leadership preparation experiences available in Alberta, Canada, including graduate certificate and graduate diploma programs, master's degrees, and doctoral programs at universities. They reported that master's degrees, although not formally required for the principalship, had become the de facto requirement for appointment as a principal. The formal programs were complemented by non-credit professional development initiatives offered by regional consortia, teachers' unions, school districts, and private consultants. In contrast, principals in Kenya and Tanzania had fewer opportunities for formal preparation and, indeed, formal preparation was not required or expected (Onguko, Abdalla, & Webber, 2008). Even when university degree programs in educational leadership were offered by public or private institutions, access was restricted due to distance and cost. Another significant contrast between the Canadian and East African

settings was the relative absence of technology-mediated learning opportunities in Kenya and Tanzania, which contributed to limited access for educators at a distance. In addition, relatively small numbers of admissions to formal programs limited access even more. Interestingly, limited access to principal preparation programming also was reported in Mexico (Slater, García Garduño, & Lopez Gorosave, 2008).

Stage one ISPP papers also highlighted differences in content across nations. For example, East African programming focused primarily on management skills intended to prepare school leaders for maintenance of schools rather than leadership that would bring about change and innovation (Onguko, Abdalla, & Webber, 2008). That is, East African educators focused heavily on the pragmatics of the principalship, such as “management of human and material resources, financial management, conflict resolution and planning” (p. 722). On the other hand, institutions in Alberta, Canada, included content specifically focused on change and innovation, plus communication, policy studies, organizational theory, decision making, and school culture (Webber & Scott, 2010). It is possible that the foci of the East African and Canadian formal leadership preparation programming deliberately reflected the immediacy of the issues facing principals in each context.

Stage two papers included the observation that formal leadership preparation, although important, was only the beginning to a much longer learning process for school principals in Scotland (Cowie & Crawford, 2008). In fact, Cowie and Crawford concluded that “no preparation programme or experience can quite prepare people for the experience of headship and the reality of ‘being’ a new headteacher” (p. 687). The observation that leadership preparation is just a beginning should be understood in light of García Garduño, Slater, and Lopez Gorosave’s (2011) claim that “leadership is a cultural construct” (p. 101) and may vary across regions. Nonetheless, the observation by the same authors (2009) that the primary reason for studying the principalship is to inform how educational

leaders influence student learning, which we argue is a common focus in all of the ISPP cultural settings.

In their stage two paper, Nelson, de la Colina, and Boone (2008) noted that most American school principals participated in formal preparation programs delivered by postsecondary institutions. Importantly, the principals who participated in the case studies perceived that even though their preparation programs had served them well there were still aspects of the principalship for which they did not feel prepared. These included inadequate understandings of the technical aspects of leadership, such as budgeting, and of managing the complex relationships within schools.

Perceptions of insufficient leadership preparation also were reported in the very different cultural context of Tanzania. Onguko, Abdalla, and Webber (2012) noted the continued limitations of access to formal leadership preparation, citing the prevalence of an inadequate ad hoc apprenticeship model in which aspiring school leaders learn from their current headteachers. Moreover, Tanzanian headteachers were reported as dealing primarily with student misbehavior, garnering resources, and problem solving with community members, rather than with instructional leadership initiatives. In addition, any attempts by Tanzanian headteachers to navigate the complex postsecondary context in their setting were problematic because of the varied providers and uncertain funding. The relevance of leadership preparation in Tanzania also is thwarted by unpredictable appointment processes. For example, Onguko, Abdalla, and Webber (2012) identified the unfortunate “common practice of teachers paying money to education ministry officials in exchange for appointments as headteachers” (p. 103).

Feelings of inadequacy also emerged in discussions among Canadian and South African principals (Mentz, Webber, & van der Walt, 2010). Although the cultural, political, and economic contexts in the two settings contrasted dramatically, novice principals in both countries noted the variety of relationships that must be established and maintained within school communities and emphasized the value of informal networks. Differences in principals' views included the importance

that South African principals ascribed to learning from practicing school principals, much like the ad hoc apprenticeship model reported in Tanzania. Their Canadian colleagues, on the other hand, had been required to complete master's degrees prior to their appointments but continued to see the value in going beyond formal training to engage in informal mentorship arrangements.

An interesting question that emerged from the South African and Canadian comparison related to whether formal principal preparation should even be expected to prepare “principals for the intense emotional and social aspects of the role of the principal” (Mentz, Webber, & van der Walt, 2010, pp. 164-165). Indeed, these authors theorized that focusing on emotional and social aspects might be better addressed in ongoing professional development rather than in formal preparation initiatives.

Other recent research that we conducted was informed by ISPP findings. For instance, the importance of the role of principal in leading assessment as part of educating in support of a civil society (Webber & Scott, 2012) became evident in an analysis of student assessment policies and practices in Alberta, Canada (Webber, Aitken, Lupart, & Scott, 2009). Similarly, leadership development that promotes principals' knowledge and expertise in leading inclusive education practices emerged as a salient factor in the implementation of Canadian International Development Agency project in Ukraine. The project was “designed to address the goal of creating and sustaining inclusive schools so that children and youth with special needs can learn and experience success in the regular classroom” (Webber & Scott, 2009, p. 88). In both the Canadian and Ukrainian studies, the pivotal role of principals in promoting a just society emerged as a significant component of optimal leadership development.

### **Methodology**

The larger ISPP research utilized a mixed-methodological approach within the pragmatic paradigm and addressed the question, “*How useful are principal preparation programs to novice principals?*” Stages one and two, described earlier, were conducted in a range of Western and non-



Western countries. Stage three involved the development of a questionnaire (See Appendix 1) that was based upon the qualitative data collected in stages one and two of the ISPP. The researchers used a questionnaire that employed rating-type and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was created collaboratively by the members of the ISPP research team through an iterative process that accounted for differences in cultural conceptualizations and terminology. Members of the ISPP research team piloted the instrument with educators in each of their contexts to identify problems with wording and to ensure uniformity of understanding of intent, even when the questionnaire was translated into other languages such as Kiswahili, Spanish, and Turkish. The questionnaire was modified based on feedback and subsequently administered to early career principals in the various ISPP settings.

The questionnaire contained four sections. The first section gathered demographic information and the second section explored various leadership responsibilities – such as school culture, community relationships, principal credibility, poorly performing staff, conflict management, time management, maintaining a life-work balance, school budgeting, and staffing appropriately– in terms of their difficulty and the degree to which the principals felt prepared to deal with these matters. The third section requested information about the types of leadership experiences in which respondents had participated, for example, formal/informal, voluntary/mandated, local/centralized, and profession-based/university-based. The final section included open-ended response items related to participants' perceptions of the adequacy of their leadership preparation experiences.

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were processed using the statistical software package SPSS®. Open-ended data from the questionnaire were processed using an iterative thematic coding process to identify priorities and to clarify quantitative findings. The coding was done concurrently by the research team members to allow inter-rater reliability checks. Once main themes and subthemes were identified then the quantitative data and open-ended response data were triangulated to provide broader and deeper explanations of the research findings.

The questionnaire data reported here were collected from a sample of fifty-two experienced educators (21 male, 31 female) within the first three years of their initial appointments as principals. Approximately sixty-one percent were within their first year, 23% were in their second year, and 15.5% were in their third year as principals. Just over 90% of respondents held master's degrees, with two respondents holding a graduate certificate, and three with a bachelor's degree as their highest qualification. These demographics endorsed the findings in an earlier stage of the ISPP (Webber & Scott, 2010) that the de facto qualification requirement was a master's degree although it was interesting that five respondents did not have their master's degrees completed and yet had been appointed to the principalship. The majority (90%) of respondents had up to nine years of experience in formal leadership/administrative positions prior to their appointments as principals. Fewer than 10% were experienced leaders reporting 10-19 years of experience in formal leadership/administrative positions other than the principalship, most likely vice/associate or assistant principals. Forty-six percent of the respondents reported more than 20 years of teaching experience and 34.6% reported 10-19 years teaching experience. Surprisingly, 19.2% reported 5-9 years teaching experience.

The principals represented small-to-large public, Catholic, urban, rural, and remote schools in Alberta, Canada. The principals' schools were representative of elementary through senior high schools. The small sample size was proportionate to the number of new principals appointed each year in the districts where the questionnaire was administered. It was not possible to calculate a return rate for the questionnaire because privacy legislation prevented nearly all school district leaders from informing us of the identity of new principals in their districts. Therefore, senior district leaders administered most of the questionnaires without the involvement of the researchers. We selected large school districts to maximize the number of potential respondents.

Half (50%) of the respondents were in urban schools, 32.7% were in rural schools, 15.4% were in suburban, and one respondent was from a remote school location. School size varied considerably

across the sample. Nearly 33% were leaders of schools with a population of 300-399 students. Just over one fifth (21.2%) of the respondents were in relatively small schools with a population reported as between 100-199, with four respondents (7.7%) leading schools of under 100 students. Slightly over 17% were in schools with 200-299 students. Only four respondents (7.7%) represented schools with student populations from 400-499. There were two principals (3.8%) in each category reporting their school population as 500-599, 600-699, and 700-799 students, respectively. One respondent reported his/her school population as over 800 students. Just under one fifth of the respondents (19.2%) were principals of senior high schools, 9.6% and 7.7% were in junior high schools and middle schools respectively; just under 50% were in elementary schools; there were six respondents (11.5%) reporting their schools as K-9; and two principals (3.8%) indicating their schools were K-12.

### **Findings**

The questionnaire respondents provided information that led to the following observations. First, there were aspects of the principalship that respondents found highly challenging and, in fact, could be described as issues that threaten the survival of early-career principals. Items in a second tier were ascribed lower levels of concern but still were considered by respondents to be quite problematic; these concerns were categorized as operational elements. Together, the survival elements and operational elements were grouped in a category called foundational elements of concern. The analysis of questionnaire results led to a second cluster of concerns that were classified as transitional elements, i.e., issues of lower immediate concern to new principals but still important in the overall context of leading schools. Respondents also provided their perceptions about how adequately they were prepared to deal with a number of leadership responsibilities. Finally, respondents indicated on a continuum the dominant features of their leadership preparation experiences prior to their initial appointments as principals. The following sections describe in detail each of the four categories that emerged from the

questionnaire analyses: foundational elements, transitional elements, perceptions of preparation adequacy, and dominant features of leadership preparation experiences.

### Foundational Elements

The foundational elements appeared in two forms: survival elements and operational elements. Table 1 portrays the five elements that emerged as survival elements that most principals perceived as problematic. These included work-life balance, poorly performing staff, time management, budgeting, and managing paperwork. The five elements were of highest immediate priority and perhaps formed the first stage in the development of new principals' competencies.

**Table 1.**

#### Survival elements

| Elements considered problematic    | Agreement (%) |
|------------------------------------|---------------|
| Achieving a work/life balance      | 71            |
| Addressing poorly performing staff | 52            |
| Organizing my time                 | 52            |
| Managing school budget             | 49            |
| Managing paperwork                 | 48            |

Responses to open-ended questionnaire items aligned with the five survival elements in Table 1.

For instance, concern about work-life balance was reflected in one principal's comments:

*As a principal you need to have a family and get out at a reasonable time – that work-life balance. By Christmas I knew that I had to either change what I was doing and not do it all myself. I learned to delegate and that you have to trust people to do good work. They will impress you with what they do and you build a greater knowledge of your staff. After*

*Christmas my attitude had changed. It was not fun those first four months and that has helped me to rely on my VP [Vice Principal] more ... if you have a good one mind you.*

Concern about dealing with poorly performing staff members resonated for respondents who offered the following observations:

*[I had] difficult performance management issues with three staff members.*

*[I had to deal with the] inappropriate involvement of a previous retired principal to support charity initiative.*

*Dealing with underperforming staff is likely difficult no matter the amount of training.*

*Having gone through the process once, I know I learn things I would do differently.*

It was surprising for novice principals to learn about all of the extra duties that are expected and the time frame given to complete them. Time management was described in the following ways by respondents:

*Lots of the principal's tasks are 'administrivia' and it is difficult to get into the classrooms to observe teachers.*

*I don't recall any preparation in regards to the balance of admin duties and teaching, and what might be an appropriate teaching load.*

Feelings of inadequacy emerged in relation to managing school budgets:

*I was not prepared for budgeting and making sure that I was allocating resources properly or as effectively as possible.*

*The big things in this school we are funded by casino money and I needed to know how we could spend the money and what on and the rules – like the parents don't pay fees, the casino does, and you have to apply.*

*The Bishop stopped the use of casinos because he felt that it was feeding into the addiction – when Alberta Ed gives us the money a lot of it comes from the casino money.*

The challenge of managing paperwork was described in these ways:

*I wasn't prepared for the district reports, e.g., deadlines for school reports.*

*[I] could have used a list of expectations of what a principal needs to submit to district/government and the dates these were due.*

The principal's role is a very challenging one and the amount of paperwork means less time and energy in the important work of bringing practice forward and developing key relationships.

Table 2 portrays the responsibilities that were deemed quite problematic but of less immediate concern than survival elements. The lower concern elements are clustered under the operational elements heading. Between 24% and 40% of respondents indicated that nine operational elements were problematic. Some of these included staffing appropriately, adjusting to the isolation of the position, sustaining school improvement initiatives, enhancing the capacity of their staff, and conflict management.

**Table 2.****Operational elements**

| <b>Elements considered problematic</b>        | <b>Agreement (%)</b> |
|---|----------------------|
| Staffing appropriately                        | 40                   |
| Adjusting to the isolation of the position    | 38                   |
| Balancing system imperatives with local needs | 33                   |
| Acquiring appropriate resources               | 31                   |
| Initiating school improvement                 | 28                   |
| Applying system policies                      | 27                   |
| Sustaining school improvement initiatives     | 24                   |
| Enhancing capacity of staff                   | 24                   |
| Handling conflict                             | 24                   |

Respondents shared their concerns about operational elements. For example, one principal commented on the isolation of the principalship:

*The “isolation” was something I didn’t expect.*

*I get along well with my staff, but there is always an invisible line there.*

Respondents also described their concerns about system policies and the political nature of the principalship:

*Doing formal leadership qualifications (doctoral level) – it is like doing this and taking these steps they admire but it has set up apart. Maybe it intimidates them because everyone might be expected to do that. And two out of three superintendents don’t have that level of qualifications*

*and they don't know how to handle us. They (the superintendents) are walking on eggshells and it is a feeling you get.*

*Promoting the right people for the principalship has been a concern. Sometimes it is obvious that some people are promoted based on who they know. Also, some principals abuse their status when they are asked to recommend individuals for the principalship. It is extremely easy for a principal to "Black List" individuals for personal reasons.*

*I was definitely not prepared for the intense political nature of this position. The politics of being a principal is often times a huge obstacle to the success of the school.*

Handling conflict led to angst being described in the following manner:

*Conflict is a great challenge. Conflict between students and with parents is pretty manageable; however, conflict amongst staff is very difficult. It is hard to find resolution that does not negatively impact the rest of the school and it is very emotionally draining.*

*Difficult parents - If they are violent or unstable then we need to know what to do.*

### **Transitional Elements**

Transitional elements were lower immediate priorities for questionnaire respondents but had been identified in stages one and two of the ISPP as important dimensions of the principalship. They included eight elements: principals' credibility in the community, relationships between the principal and the community, public visibility of the principal, confidence as the school leader, understanding the culture of the community, working with parents, relationships with staff members, and accessing system personnel. Table 3 outlines the eight elements in relation to the degree to which principals considered them problematic.



**Table 3.****Transitional elements**

| <b>Elements considered problematic</b>              | <b>Agreement (%)</b> |
|---|----------------------|
| Feeling credible as the principal in the community  | 14                   |
| Developing relationships within the community       | 14                   |
| Coping with public visibility in my day-to-day work | 12                   |
| Feeling confident as the school's leader            | 12                   |
| Understanding the culture of the community          | 12                   |
| Working with parents                                | 8                    |
| Building positive relationships with staff          | 8                    |
| Getting access to system personnel                  | 6                    |

Responses to open-ended questionnaire items added detail about the transitional elements. With regard to principals' credibility in the community, two respondents observed:

*During my first year as principal I learned through "screwing up" due to lack of preparation.*

*[I had to deal with]... demands to bend to other people's agendas*

Respondents described the challenges associated with developing relationships within the community in these ways:

*[It was a challenge] getting to know the students, the building, building trust.*

*We don't talk about trust issues enough and that people need to trust you and they need to understand that you care about their children.*

They also shared their concerns about developing confidence in themselves as leaders:

*... and the real leaders have to be those who present alternative ways of doing things.*

*I am not negative per se but sometimes it is hard to be always motivated.*

*I don't think there is a lot of work you could do to prepare. It is a learning process.*

Questionnaire respondents described the challenges associated with understanding the culture of their educational communities:

*Knowing what I have power to address and not (my roles).*

*The day-to-day requests that I have never dealt with before.*

*The specific operating procedures for this school district/area.*

### **Perceptions of the Adequacy of Leadership Preparation**

Table 4 summarizes respondents' perceptions of the adequacy of their leadership preparation experiences. Twenty-two elements are listed alongside indications of the degree to which respondents agreed that they were adequately prepared in these areas. These twenty-two elements had emerged from stages one and two of the ISPP and were presented to respondents in the questionnaire to gauge their perception of the adequacy of their preparation to deal with these elements. This enabled a comparison to be made between novice principals' perceptions of what has been problematic for them and their perceptions of preparedness gained through leadership preparation.

The element that early-career principals felt least prepared to address was adjustment to the isolation of their new positions, suggesting that the move from the position of an instructional leader or vice principal to that of principal was a major transition, one that may not be addressed adequately in formal and informal leadership preparation programming. In addition, the foundational elements—work-life balance, poorly performing staff, time management, budgeting, and managing paperwork—were most problematic for respondents even though the educational leadership literature often refers to

most of these elements as managerial tasks or as “normal responsibilities expected of a collection of professionals” (Leithwood, 2007, p. 43) rather than leadership. However, respondents did feel prepared to deal with transitional elements—principal credibility, public visibility, confidence as a school leader, gaining access to system personnel, understanding the community culture, and developing relationships with community members, staff, and parents—which are portrayed in some of the literature (e.g. Mulford, 2008) as more sophisticated and complex leadership capacities. There appears to be a relationship between the foundational elements reported as most problematic and the lower number of respondents who agreed that they were prepared adequately to address them.

**Table 4.****Perceptions of preparation adequacy**

| <b>Leadership element</b>                           | <b>Agreement (%)</b> |
|---|----------------------|
| Adjusting to the isolation of the position          | 48                   |
| Achieving a work/life balance                       | 51                   |
| Addressing poorly performing staff                  | 52                   |
| Managing paperwork                                  | 56                   |
| Staffing appropriately                              | 60                   |
| Managing school budget                              | 61                   |
| Organizing my time                                  | 62                   |
| Sustaining school improvement initiatives           | 63                   |
| Balancing system imperatives with local needs       | 65                   |
| Applying system policies                            | 67                   |
| Acquiring appropriate resources                     | 71                   |
| Coping with public visibility in my day-to-day work | 73                   |
| Enhancing capacity of staff                         | 75                   |
| Handling conflict                                   | 77                   |
| Feeling confident as the school's leader            | 77                   |
| Initiating school improvement                       | 77                   |
| Feeling credible as the principal in the community  | 83                   |
| Developing relationships within the community       | 85                   |
| Understanding the culture of the community          | 87                   |
| Working with parents                                | 87                   |
| Getting access to system personnel                  | 87                   |
| Building positive relationships with staff          | 92                   |

### **Dominant Leadership Preparation Experiences**

The features of leadership preparation experiences were identified from stages one and two of the ISPP and were presented in a dichotomous continuum. These features were incorporated into the questionnaire which included the following descriptors: informal—formal, ad hoc—intentional, fragmented—aligned to standards, self-initiated—employer-initiated, voluntary—mandated, reactive—proactive, local—centralized, profession-based—university-based, and general professional learning—learning linked explicitly to the principalship. Table 5 presents the average response to each feature.

Table 5 summarizes the characteristics of the learning experiences that principals had prior to their first appointments. A combination of formal and informal learning experiences were noted, even though nearly all had completed formal graduate studies in educational leadership. Clearly, informal learning experiences had a significant impact for the novice principals.

Responses to open-ended items reinforced the perceived value of the informal aspects of their pre-appointment learning experiences. For example, leadership development experiences such as mentoring and networking were reported by 42% of respondents as most useful:

*I was very fortunate to be mentored by an excellent principal, who I would call upon when I had questions.*

*I received very little explicit preparation for this principalship. I received excellent support from a principal mentor, who is a retired principal, and from my principal colleagues in our district.*

*The district's "mentorship program" is also very good because a variety of different topics are covered and you are able ask questions and suggest future discussion topics.*

*Some principals were better mentors than others – a couple of them were exemplary in what they did. Others were examples of what I would not do.*

*Having time to talk with the outgoing principal.*

*When central office did not return your calls you knew your mentor would be there and their secretary would find them and you knew you were not alone that you could ask anything and you were not alone.*

*Most of the useful experience I gained was through my principal at the time. However, it was only in that school context.*

*The learning curve was very steep but mentorship from an experienced principal colleague helped me to build personal capacity as a leader.*

*It has been great but it is like baptism by fire for a lot of it but thank goodness I have someone I can always call!*

Not all comments, though, were positive about the networking or mentoring:

*It falls on the shoulders of principals to do most of the training. The quality of training is inconsistent.*

*Relying on the luck of the draw as to which principal I was assigned to became an area of frustration.*

*It was useful but the best preparation came from my principal/mentor. Unfortunately, it was hit and miss.*

Learning experiences that can be considered formal include district leadership preparation programming and 38% of questionnaire respondents (20 respondents) indicated that their districts provided a range of leadership development experiences. All respondents' reports about their district-based leadership development were positive:

*I was able to participate in courses and camps that focused specifically on leadership dimensions.*

*Working with the Principal Quality Practice Framework [Principal Quality Practice Guideline] has been extremely valuable as it provides a framework for principals.*

*My aspiring leader course was good [provided by the division]. It provided an opportunity for others to share their journeys and experiences as well as studying the latest research.*

*It was supported by the division, but delivered by an outside organization.*

*PD in becoming a religious leader was also very helpful. Some VP training sessions were helpful as well.*

*I received excellent support from our central office staff,*

*Knowing that I could ask anyone in the organization for help. There was no one that I did not feel that I couldn't go to for fear of reprimand or fear of looking incompetent. Knowing the support is there makes learning it much easier.*

First-year new principal meetings helped with the following: building capacity, network support, finance/budget, staffing, and conflict mediation.

*Our district has responded to our local needs, however, I was not prepared for the amount of lobbying required.*

Table 5 also indicates that respondents' dominant learning experiences were intentional, i.e., planned, rather than ad hoc. Similarly, their dominant learning experiences were aligned to standards, such as the Principal Quality Practice Guideline (Alberta Education, 2009), rather than fragmented and unrelated to criteria for assessing performance. The examples of learning experiences provided in the responses to open-ended items—graduate degrees, school district professional development programs,

professional association learning opportunities, and learning on the job—are all experiences that can be characterized mainly as self- rather than employer-initiated and this is reflected in Table 5. They also can be described as voluntary rather than mandatory, although this can be contested considering that most school districts expect aspirants to leadership positions to have enrolled in or completed graduate programs leading to master's degrees. The perspective that participation is voluntary is supported by respondents' perceptions that they were proactive about seeking learning opportunities rather than reacting to external influences.

The last three items included in Table 5 reflect written comments that novice principals value local, profession-based, general professional learning slightly more than they do centralized, university-based learning that is linked explicitly to the principalship. This view is reflected in the responses to open-ended questionnaire items which indicated that one quarter of all respondents had received leadership development through their previous roles as vice or assistant principals or other instructional leaders. Ten respondents commented positively about aspects of their experiential learning within formal leadership roles other than their principalship training.

*I received most of my preparation through my vice principal position at this same school.*

*This assisted me in many of the areas that I was responsible for but I was unable to receive training for my new principal position.*

*My preparation for the principalship was very useful because I was able to work with the community as a vice principal in the same school before taking the principalship this year.*

*Having spent many years as a vice principal helped immensely in my current position. In preparation for principal I received training in conflict management which was very useful.*

*I feel that I was very prepared due to the number of years that I was a junior administrator and had the mentorship of the principals that I had worked with.*



*Most of my previous experience had to do with the day-to-day operations of the school (assemblies, patrols, lunchroom, bussing, etc.) and that has proven to be useful. The AP [Assistant Principal] meetings were likely the most valuable in understanding system directions and networking.*

Generally, experience gained during assistant principal and vice-principal positions is very good training for the principalship only if you are working with knowledgeable, professional administration that is committed to professional learning and understands how to handle PD [professional development] for staff. Otherwise, you learn quickly what not to do when you are principal.

Other comments related to curriculum leaders or other system specialist roles which supported these principals' preparation for school leadership:

*Overall I would say that I was well prepared to be an instructional leader and less emphasis was put on the managerial aspects, which works well because I find the managerial aspects relatively easy to learn as I go.*

*My work as a system specialist also was a great preparation and helped me know who to call on to support initiatives within our school.*

*I was able to learn from strong prior leaders, as well as from their mistakes. I also had opportunities afforded to me to learn system-wide thinking through other leadership roles.*

*My continued work and succession into the principalship was key to giving me confidence.*

Even so, almost 10% of the sample indicated that other leadership roles were insufficient or ineffective in preparing them for the principalship.

*Until you are the principal you are never fully prepared it is a lot different than a VP [Vice Principal]. You need to have the experience.*

*Also, it is rare for an AP [Assistant Principal] not to have a significant amount of time assigned to the classroom, so the admin role was diluted.*

*Some principals are not effective so what happens to their VP – you don't have access to others in the district and even if you have meetings with your colleagues it is really controlled and only four meetings a year is just not enough – when I think of the richness of the meetings and discussions then it just does not seem equitable. And there is a perception of privilege because you are a principal and so you should have meetings and preparation etc. The roles of AP and VP were undervalued – their PD was cut in time and facilities. My background experience was such that I had expertise that the principal did not have – if you are VP and you have no one to talk to I am hooped and I have no one to pick up that information from – or you are expected to pick up with no direction.*

*In my opinion being an assistant principal in no way compares to being a principal. There is little preparation from AP to Principal even though that is the belief out there.*

It is important to note that both Table 5 and written responses indicated the strong value that respondents placed on their graduate studies. That is, over one-quarter of the respondents (n=14) reported that their graduate studies were valuable in preparing them for their leadership positions:

*I feel the university of XX gave me a great insight to administrative duties without this program I would have been struggling with school improvement.*

*My master's in Educational Leadership was very useful in a big picture way – helping me to focus on big ideas, current theories, and best practices.*

*My master's program was most beneficial. I went straight from teacher to principal and had little time in the office with past administration to prepare properly.*

*University of XX master's program was excellent – [it was] project based and [I] constantly use strategies and research methods from my courses.*

*The formal MA program XX was very practical and useful.*

*[My] Master's program assisted me to increase my reflective capacity. It gave me confidence in my own ability and reinforced the importance of my role in my [first nations] community.*

Only 6% (n=3) indicated that their coursework was not sufficiently practical in preparing them adequately for their leadership roles:

*I feel that most of my course work prepared me well for what they were intended.*

*Unfortunately, I didn't see courses offered in areas such as conflict management, budget management, staff development, etc.*

*Excellent in terms of theory and pedagogy but lacking in practical applications for day to day operations of a school facility.*

Five respondents commented about learning experiences that were offered by professional associations. All agreed that these programs were useful in supporting their leadership knowledge and skills:

*Very useful ASCD workshop. This included four days in Olds in early July. Covered all of the Alberta Education [ministry of education] accountability measures as well as work/life balance – it set up networks for people throughout the province paid for by [our school board].*

*The [College of Alberta School Superintendents] 'Start Right' program is also valuable tool that should be mandatory.*

The Alberta component of the research findings for stage three of the ISPP have been presented in four categories: foundational elements, transitional elements, perceptions of preparation adequacy, and dominant features of leadership preparation experiences. The following section presents a discussion of the implications that emerged from the study findings.

**Table 5.**

**Learning experiences prior to the principalship.**

|                               | 1.0 | 1.2 | 1.4 | 1.6 | 1.8 | 2.0 | 2.2 | 2.4 | 2.6 | 2.8 | 3.0 | 3.2 | 3.4 | 3.6 | 3.8 | 4.0 | 4.2 | 4.4 | 4.6 | 4.8 | 5.0 | 5.2 | 5.4 | 5.6 | 5.8 | 6.0 |   |
|-------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|---|
| Informal                      |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     | X   |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     | Formal                                      |
| Ad Hoc                        |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     | X   |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     | Intentional                                 |
| Fragmented                    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     | X   |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     | Aligned to Standards                        |
| Self-initiated                |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     | X   |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     | Employer-initiated                          |
| Voluntary                     |     |     |     |     |     | X   |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     | Mandated                                    |
| Reactive                      |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     | X   |     |     |     |     |     |     |     | Proactive                                   |
| Local                         |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     | X   |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     | Centralised                                 |
| Profession-based              |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     | X   |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     | University-based                            |
| General Professional Learning |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     | X   |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     | Learning Linked Explicitly to Principalship |

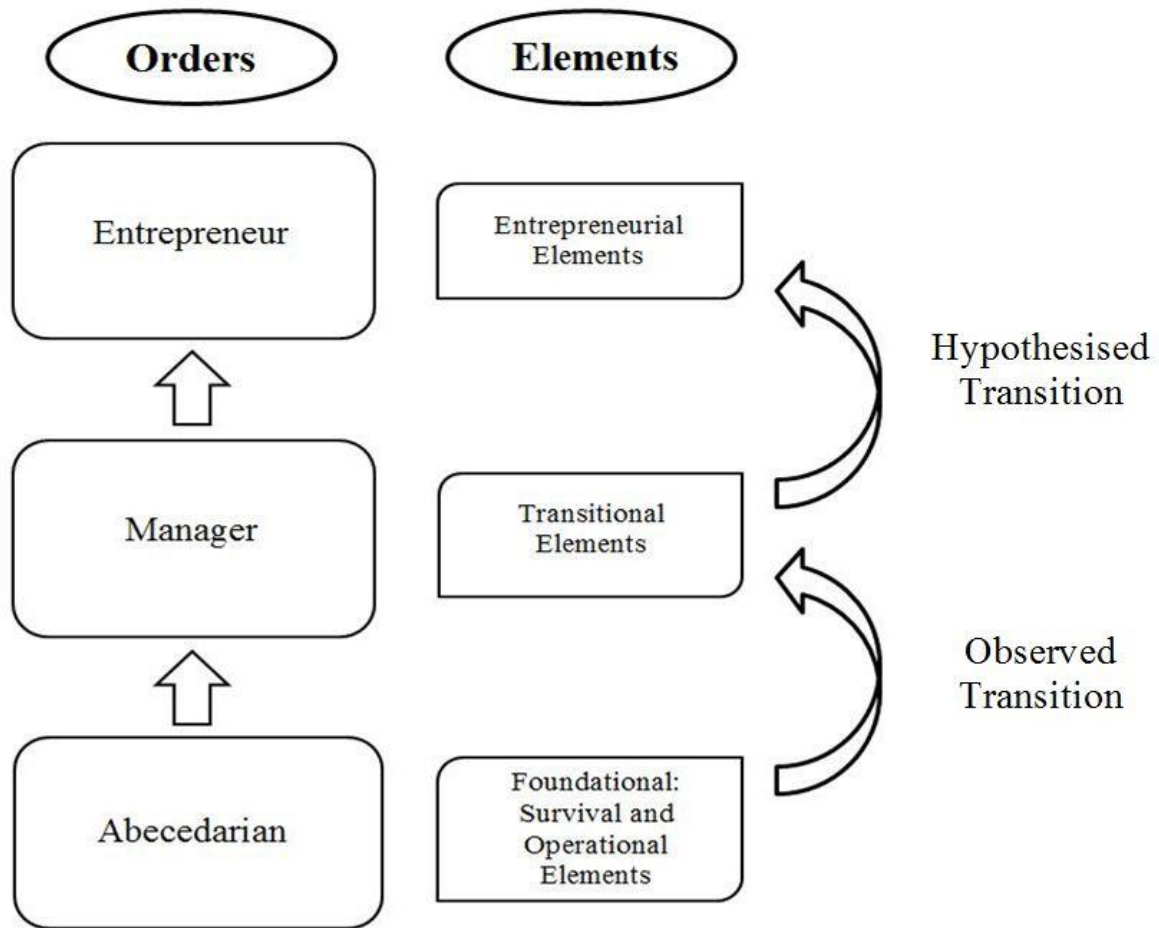
## Discussion

Our analyses of the questionnaire data suggest that novice principals may transition through two stages of development, with a possibility of a third stage. Therefore, in this section we argue for the conceptualization of the early-career principalship as consisting of three orders: abecedarian, manager, and budding entrepreneur (See Figure 1).

### **Abecedarian**

The first order was described in the findings above as foundational and it has two components—survival and operational (See Tables 1 and 2). Survival elements are features of the principalship that must be mastered if early-career principals are to remain in the job. Operational elements are principals' responsibilities that are basic to the operation of a school that can be considered successful by students, teachers, and community.

Beginning principals, or *abecedarians*, experience the education profession at two levels. That is, they are successful teachers who may be master teachers who are likely to be held in high regard by their teaching peers. Concurrently, they are only beginning to understand the role of principal and the complexities of “being” a school leader (Cowie & Crawford, 2008). As study participants noted, appointment as a principal constitutes a dramatic and sudden change even for those who had substantial experience at the vice or assistant principal level. Abecedarians are undergoing adjustments to almost every aspect of their professional lives. They often struggle to use their time effectively and may experience frustration with coping with paperwork, comprehending complex financial information systems, addressing obviously poor performing staff members, and maintaining a work-life balance.



**Figure 1. Orders of development of educational leaders.**

Living through the first order of the principalship may involve striving to come to terms with perceptions of others of how they came to be appointed. It also may include struggling to understand the culture of the school through the eyes of a principal rather than through the eyes of a teacher. This involves reconsidering the “cultural values that give meaning to words and actions, delineate what is appropriate, and help ... to attribute motives to the behavior of others” (Webber, 1994, p. 152). Life as an abecedarian also includes navigating the policies and practices that must be applied and mastered if staffing is to be done appropriately, school improvement initiatives are to be launched, and system imperatives addressed. Indeed, abecedarians are determining the viability of the role for them personally, whether or not they are aware of the life-changing experiences they are undergoing.

## **Manager**

Abecedarians may come to understand foundational elements as the building blocks needed to shape the next iteration of their organizations. This growth may lead to the second order of development of the novice principal, that of *manager*.

Table 4 portrayed how fewer respondents agreed that they were prepared to deal with the foundational components of their role, with increasing numbers of respondents agreeing that they were prepared to address transitional elements. This suggests that available leadership preparation experiences may tend to emphasize transitional elements (See Table 3) rather than foundational ones. A possible explanation for this could be that leadership development providers emphasize the more complex and sophisticated elements, with the view to create the greatest impact on leadership practices.

Managers have become aware that there are higher order and more complex leadership issues than foundational elements, the complexity of which may escape abecedarians. Managers comprehend the importance of earning and sustaining credibility as leaders in the school community and, therefore, strive to develop strong relationships. They are coming to terms with the public visibility of their roles and gaining confidence from the acquisition of leadership expertise.

## **Entrepreneur**

The articulation of stage three entrepreneurial elements constitutes a projection beyond the questionnaire findings, i.e. the foundational and transitional elements. Previous papers (Webber & Robertson, 1998; Robertson & Webber, 2002; Scott & Webber, in press; Webber & Scott, 2008) were used to hypothesize the dimensions of the stage-three entrepreneurial elements that we anticipate will lead to a contemporary, entrepreneurial, boundary-breaking approach to leading and learning.

We propose that there is a continuum of leadership competence, portrayed in Figure 1, which is dependent upon career stage as well as individual competency. It would be unreasonable to expect principals in their first three years of experience to demonstrate entrepreneurial characteristics if their



development stages on the continuum were situated at foundational or even transitional. That is, abecedarians and managers may not demonstrate innovative behavior, networking, local-global linkages, and communication through time and space using information and communication technology, at least not to the extent that they will after continuing to grow in their profession.

### **Implications**

The focus of the International Study of the Preparation of Principals was to seek to gather information that will guide those who help to prepare principals for their first appointments. The primary research question was *How useful are principal preparation programs to novice principals?* Stages one and two provided opportunities to map the learning opportunities available to aspiring leaders in Canada and a range of other countries, and to investigate the adequacy of principal preparation experiences through case studies across the 13 countries represented on the ISPP research team. Stages one and two findings were used to create the ISPP questionnaire (See Appendix 1).

The results of the administration of the instrument in Alberta, described above, have several major implications. First, it is clear that, at least in Alberta, novice principals are individuals with a strong locus of control, evidenced in their proactive, independent, and deliberate engagement with leadership development opportunities prior to and during the years of their first appointments. Clearly, the wide accessibility of learning opportunities in Alberta—through universities, professional organizations, and school districts—make it possible for aspiring and novice principals to demonstrate such a high level of professionalism and learning autonomy. Nonetheless, new educational leaders in Alberta manifest an enviable level of professionalism.

The availability of an array of formal and informal learning experiences to aspiring school leaders demonstrates the importance that the Alberta educational system—ministry of education, postsecondary institutions, teachers' union, professional associations, school districts, and private providers—places on professional growth for all educators, including school leaders. It is noteworthy

that the high levels of principal professionalism and concurrent availability of learning opportunities are manifested in a context where professional standards are offered as guidelines but not currently mandated as they are in many other educational jurisdictions. An issue well worth investigating is the relationships among the professionalism of novice principals, the absence of mandated standards, and accessibility to leadership development. It may be that professionalism is fostered best through a configuration of accessible learning experiences, embedded but not mandated expectations, and selection of principals from a pool of aspiring leaders who emerge from such grooming mechanisms.

Another implication relates to the relative merit of graduate leadership development programming offered by postsecondary institutions. That is, stage three findings suggest that university-based master's degrees are valued by novice principals, perhaps because they recognize that a graduate degree is expected before appointment to the principalship in most public and private schools. However, aspiring and new principals perceived less formal, profession-based learning activities as slightly more dominant. Thus, it can be argued that postsecondary institutions should retain their focus on theoretical and empirical dimensions of educational leadership but reconsider the apparent assumption that foundational elements of the principalship can be learned on the job. Moreover, postsecondary institutions should revisit curriculum content in educational leadership programs and, more contentiously, re-evaluate the expected school-level teaching and leadership experience base of university faculty members who may not have credibility or accurate knowledge of the skills that new principals need to survive and thrive.

In addition, other providers of leadership development, such as school districts and professional associations, should examine how they can intensify and enhance pragmatic learning opportunities for novice principals during their early-career experiences. Potentially, there is danger in emphasizing instructional leadership and the pivotal role that principals play in school improvement to the exclusion

of foundational skill development. Leadership development providers ought not to assume that new principals have basic leadership skills and are ready for advanced learning experiences.

### **Conclusion**

Our proposal of three orders of development for novice principals—abecedarian, manager, and early entrepreneur—emerged from the three stages of the ISPP and is a response to the larger study focus and question. It is clear that the findings of our study conducted in Alberta, Canada, may not reflect the nuances of other cultural contexts. However, the results of stage three of the ISPP may resonate with leadership development providers and consumers in other contexts. In addition, the ISPP research team will use the findings reported in this article to conduct cross-cultural analyses of the demographics of novice principals, and the extent to which they are prepared to take on the role of principal in ways that are professionally and socially responsible.

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