

Becoming an Assistant Principal: Mapping Factors that Facilitate or Hinder Entering the Role

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The phase of entering the role of assistant principals and the coping strategies assistant principals use upon entering their role have barely been studied. Most studies that dealt with assistant principals focused mainly on the role of the assistant principals and their readiness to advance to the position of school principal, while the study dealing with the transition from teaching to the position of assistant principal is extremely limited. The available studies indicate that it is a complicated transition having an emotional, social and professional effect, described in terms of "shock" and an "unpleasant surprise". This article presents the assistant principal role at school and the challenges at the induction to this role. It offers a model for mapping the factors that influence the process of entering the role. This model can enable the education system to trace beforehand assistant principals who experience difficulties in entering office, so as to provide them with support and proper preparatory training procedures.

Keywords: assistant principalship role, entrance to a role (induction phase), transition to management.

The common assumption in the education system is that the transition from the role of classroom teacher to that of assistant principal does not involve a change in professional identity, since the assistant principal remains in the same organizational space and continues to work with the same team toward the same objectives. And yet, the scant research on the transition from the role of teacher to that of assistant principal testifies to its being a complex one, carrying broad effects – emotional, social and professional, described in the literature in terms such as "shock" and "unpleasant surprise" (Armstrong, 2015; Spillane & Lee, 2013). The transition often takes place with no prior preparation, no suitable induction for this unique role, no orderly training nor tools for assessing the processes of change involved (Armstrong, 2015; Lattuca, 2012).

The majority of studies dealing with school assistant principals – mostly quantitative – have focused mainly on their tasks and on their preparedness to be promoted to the role of principal (e.g., Cranston, Tromans, & Reugebrink, 2004; Oplatka & Tamir, 2009). However, the research dealing specifically with the stage of entry into the role of assistant principal, which is an essential phase shaping one's managerial career (Lattuca, 2012), is limited in scope (Armstrong, 2015; Oleszewski, Shoho, & Barnett, 2012).

The first part of this article presents the role of assistant principal and the challenges involved in entering this role. Further, we present a circular model that maps the main factors affecting the level of difficulty that new assistant principals experience as they enter their new role. The model includes three levels of relating variables: variables relating to the school principal, variables relating to the professional staff and variables relating to the assistant principal. The purpose of the model is to allow the education system to identify in real time assistant principals who might encounter difficulties and objections while entering their role and even beforehand, in order to allocate them specific resources and tools for coping.

Assistant Principals: Mapping the Role and its Challenges

The Assistant Principal – "The Forgotten Leader"

In contrast to the large number of studies relating to the principal's role and its contribution to school performance, research on the assistant principal's role and its significance is insufficient (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2012; Bukoski et al., 2016; Morgan, 2014). There is limited research providing a "conceptual framework of understanding assistant principalship" (Lee, Kwan, & Walker, 2009, p. 188) and there is almost no formalized job description covering their roles and responsibilities. Thus, the assistant principal acts with low functional visibility (Barnett et al., 2012) and is referred to in the literature as the "forgotten leader" (Cranston et al., 2004, p. 224).

Though no direct link has been found between student achievements and the assistant principal's role (Tillio, 2015), the latter is still seen as playing a significant role in the school's success. The assistant principal's role is becoming increasingly more complex due to the constant demand for student-achievement improvement, and to the assistant principal's being an integral part of the school's leadership team (Morgan, 2014; Oleszewski et al., 2012). In addition, assistant principals are major providers of personal and professional support to principals (Hohner, 2016).

The Assistant Principal's Tasks

The assistant principal's multiple and often vaguely defined tasks vary from one school to another according to the specific needs of the school, the teachers, and mostly those of the principal (Mertz,

2006; Morgan, 2014). As the academic and pedagogical requirements from the school grow higher, so does the assistant principal role change from the traditional one of attending to disciplinarian and administrative matters to that of management of various tasks and responsibilities.

According to Barnett, Shoho and Oleszewski (2011), who survey the assistant principal's tasks, the assistant principal's role comprises two main tasks: a) managing student needs, regarding mostly discipline and welfare issues; and b) instructional leadership.

Managing student needs. Dealing with student management and taking care of student welfare include aspects such as dealing with discipline problems, taking responsibility for equipment, administrative matters, coordination with out-of-school factors (such as school transportation) and logistics (Bukoski et al., 2016). According to a study on assistant principals in New York, 90% of the participants testified that most of their time was spent on dealing with students' disruptions and parents' complaints, organizing meals and transportations, handling teacher replacement in the school schedule and doing administrative paperwork (Glanz, 2004). Similarly, a study on assistant principals in Maine indicates that assistant principals allocate most of their time to student management (Hausman, Nebeker, McCreary, & Donaldson, 2002). A study conducted in Hong Kong also found that assistant principals devoted a disproportionate part of their time to dealing with student needs, although they considered this as less interesting and less important than their other various school tasks (Kwan & Walker, 2008).

Instructional leadership. This kind of leadership deals with shaping school vision and goals, teacher assessment, the development and management of teaching programs, keeping in touch with subject coordinators and making use of information received from them to decide on student learning contents and processes (Loren, 2015). However, research indicates that most of the assistant principals do not deal with this sphere in the framework of their role (Arar, 2014; Cranston et al., 2004; Morgan, 2014). Most of their time is devoted to administrative tasks, attending to student needs and discipline (Loren, 2015; Morgan, 2014;).

The Transition from Teaching to Assistant Principalship – "An Unpleasant Surprise"

According to Ashforth (2001), entering any new role entails the need to redefine one's personal identity deriving from the role and reconstruct meaning, control and a sense of belonging. Many consider the transition from teaching to assistant principalship as an insignificant change, given that the organizational space, the professional staff and the common goals remain unchanged. In addition, in many cases the assistant principal continues to perform as a teacher for a few hours a week. Yet, research indicates that while entering their role, most assistant principals undergo a difficult emotional, social and professional process without proper preparation (Armstrong, 2015; Spillane & Lee, 2013). The "unpleasant surprise" includes the following factors:

Heavy Overload, Task Ambiguity and the Challenge of Home-work Integration

Studies attempting to map assistant principals' tasks at school testify that the main challenges facing them are significant work pressure, as well as balancing between work and their personal life. The ambiguity of the role along with the task overload lead to emotional and mental fatigue and low functionality (Celik, 2013), in addition to a lack of role satisfaction and reduced willingness for promotion to higher management positions (Morgan, 2014). Moreover, the multiplicity of tasks leads to the phenomenon of "putting out fires", that is, assistant principals are required to carry out more tasks, in order to provide response to ongoing situations beyond their assigned tasks. The

overload and the mental pressure involved grow higher, especially for assistant principals who are new in the system and wish to prove themselves at the beginning of their way, but are also common among senior assistant principals (Barnett et al., 2012).

The Transition from Working with Students at Micro level to Working with the Grownups at the Macro Level

Another key challenge found among assistant principals was that of dealing with central factors within and outside the school system: teachers, subject coordinators, managerial staff, parents and the community. The position of assistant principals entails an inherent difficulty stemming from its placement in the system and its mission of balancing between various groups that have differing and sometimes even contradictory needs within and without the system (Celik, 2013; Morgan, 2014). A study conducted in Texas found that 30% of new and senior assistant principals mentioned the field of managing the teaching staff, and in particular, conflicts with the teachers, as a challenge second in the order of importance. These difficulties arise especially when dealing with issues of low motivation among staff members, senior teachers opposing change, and anger and other harsh emotional reactions from the staff. Although assistant principals spend a great deal of their time dealing with conflicts within the teaching staff, many of them report that they do not feel adequately prepared to cope with such situations involving stress, anger and conflict (Barnett et al., 2012).

The Transition from Pedagogical Homeroom Teaching and Education to Administrative Work

The transition to the role of assistant principal often involves the new role holder with bureaucratic, administrative work and with discipline problems. Research in the US, Europe and Hong Kong indicates that most of the assistant principals complain that a large portion of their time is devoted to dealing with discipline problems, student transportation and meal, and paperwork, and less time is left for instructional leadership (Loren, 2015; Morgan, 2014; Vick, 2011). Moreover, these administrative tasks hold potential for conflicts and confrontations with the staff, with no prior preparation for complex issues of human resources, imposing authority, attendance reports etc. Furthermore, primarily focusing on administrative work affects the assistant principals' wish to proceed further into managerial roles (Lee et al., 2009).

Changes in the Staff Attitude to the Point of Social Isolation and the Absence of Support Group

New assistant principals entering their role often cope with the difficulty of leaving the familiar, safe collegial peer group and moving to a solitary role in the school system, up to the point of feeling socially isolated (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Hasson, 2011). This difficulty is compatible with evidence from new and veteran school principals about a sense of deep loneliness in the principal's role. While entering the new role, the loss of colleagues and friends that are no longer socially close is an unpleasant emotional experience. The loneliness stems both from the high and solitary position in the organizational hierarchy, and from the nature of the role that involves dilemmas, conflicts and continuous struggles, side by side with the expectations to provide a containing response to students, parents and the community (Oplatka, 2001).

The Lack of Preparation or Prior Understanding of the Nature of the Role

Many new assistant principals report a lack of appropriate preparation for the complexity of their role, as well as a lack of prior understanding of its actual nature and requirements (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). According to Marshall and Hooley (2006), despite the importance of this role in the school system, research indicates that induction for assistant principalship is insufficient. Where it does exist, it is designed for principal training and not for the unique needs of the assistant principal (Armstrong, 2015; Morgan, 2014; Vick, 2011), especially in the stage of entering the role and regarding issues related to daily coping with the role challenges. Respectively, both research and policy makers devote little attention to processes of assistant principal training (Lattuca, 2012).

A Model for Mapping Factors that Facilitate or Hinder Entering the Role of Assistant Principals

Based on the literature on entering the role of assistant principals, we present a model that maps the main factors that might affect the level of difficulty that new assistant principals experience as they enter their role. The model's objective is to identify in real time, and even before entering their role, assistant principals who might encounter difficulties and objections while entering the role, in order to allocate special resources to them, such as a mentoring senior assistant principal, or a close accompaniment of an organizational counselor and tools for coping.

The model contains three levels of reference: affecting variables regarding the school principal, affecting variables regarding the professional staff and affecting variables regarding the assistant principal. The model has a circular structure, since the factors affect one another, as will be demonstrated below. Thus, for example, the measure of support the principal provides for the new assistant principal affects the staff attitude. Or, the circumstances of an assistant principal's leaving the role (mainly when dismissed from office) might lead to a divided teachers' room, and to intense emotional difficulty for the new assistant principal, a difficulty in exercising authority and being acknowledged as having authority by the staff.

Figure 1 delineates the model mapping the factors that facilitate or hinder the process of entering the role. Following are explanations of the factors mapped by the model.

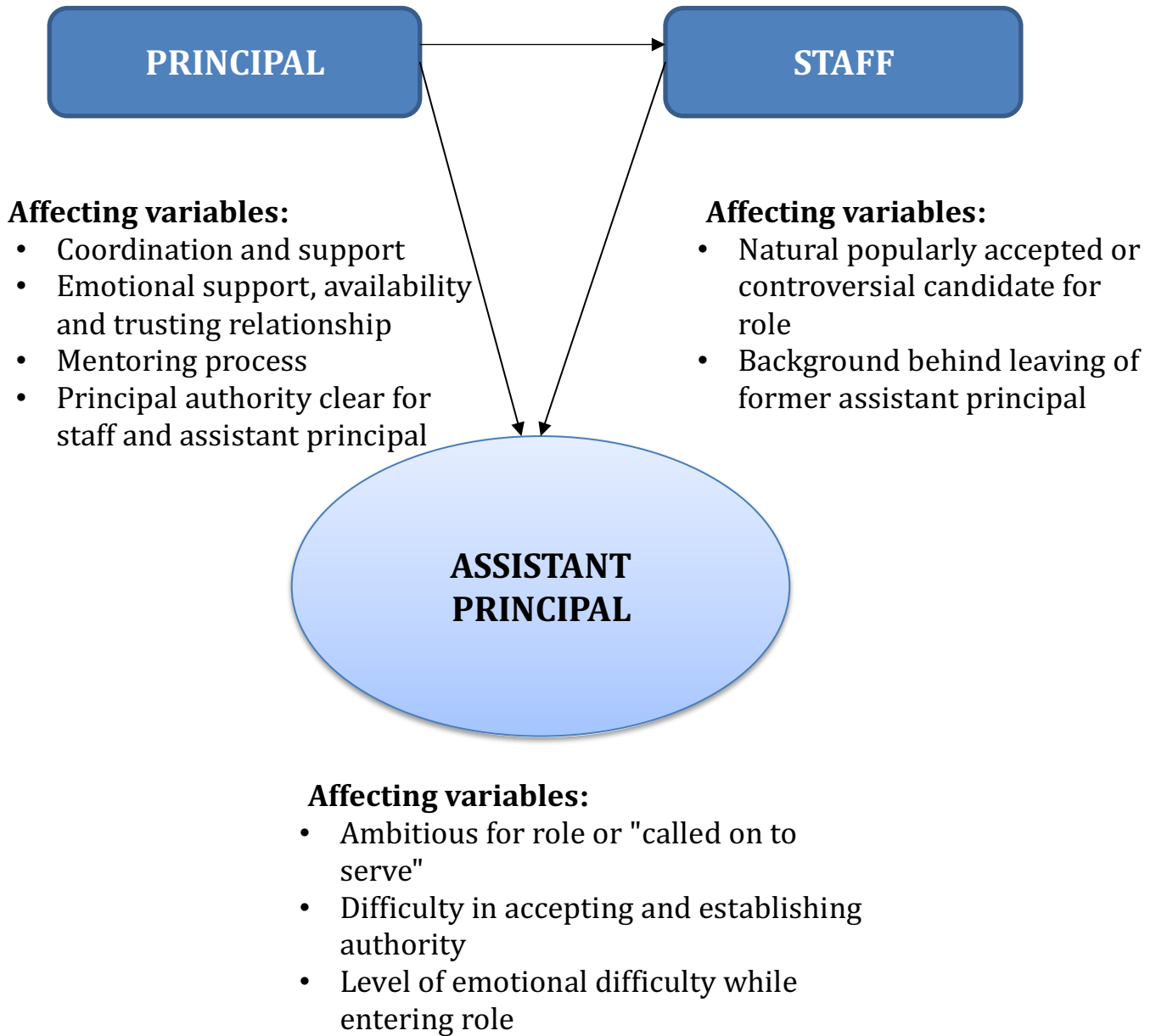


Figure 1. Main factors facilitating or hindering the process of entering the role

Mapping the Variables Affecting the Process of Entering the Role of Assistant Principals concerning the School Principal

The Level of Principal Support and the Measure of Coordination between the Principal and the New Assistant Principal

Deprived of the principal's status and authority, the assistant principals' rank of number two in the organizational hierarchy puts them in a problematic position vis-à-vis inner and outer factors (Vick, 2011). Assistant principals derive their professional and managerial authority and their power over the staff from the level of support they get from the principal and the measure of coordination between them. The literature considers the principals to be chief agents of socialization, due to their ability to influence and determine the assistant principals' tasks, assess them and their functioning and sponsor their future career promotion (Matthews & Crow, 2003). Principals can affect the process of socialization by providing skills, and serve as a source of psychological support and a model for conduct and expectations (Mertz, 2006). The staff learns fast whether they can override the assistant principal's authority and what the measure of coordination between the assistant principal and the principal is. In other words, the lower the measures of support and coordination between the principal and the assistant principal are, the harder it would be for the assistant principal to establish his or her authority over the managerial and professional staff (Hasson, 2011; Author 1, 2017).

Emotional Support, Accessibility, Emotional Availability and Trusting Relationship with the Principal

Coping with the absence of supporting collegial peer group and the transition to a solitary role often breed emotional and social difficulty (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Hasson, 2011). For the new assistant principal, the knowledge that there is a professional figure who is accessible and emotionally available for the sharing of feelings, difficulties and doubts and even mistakes, and that would nonetheless offer emotional support and a sense of safety, is important for the development of a sense of professional capability. Moreover, the typical sense of social loneliness that assistant principals experience is enhanced when the relationship with the principal is not close and there is no emotional support, or when there are differences of opinion between the assistant principal and the principal. The principal serves as a central figure in the process of socialization by means of offering mentoring, providing skills and presenting a model for imitation and a source of emotional support (Mertz, 2006).

Principal's Authority Should be Clear to Both Staff and Assistant Principal

As stated above, one of the main challenges assistant principals cope with is the difficulty of dealing with staff overt or covert objections (Barnett et al., 2012). Though assistant principals are required to manage and motivate the professional and managerial staff, they do not share the principals' decision-making authority and power resources (Vick, 2011). The principal's level of professional authority as perceived by the staff determines the assistant principal's level of authority. Assistant principals derive their authority from that of the principal; when it is undermined or, inversely, too

dominant to allow the assistant principal authority, it might affect his or her authority over the staff and the ability to impose his or her managerial and professional authority (Author 1, 2017; Lattuca, 2012).

The Mentoring Process

The mentoring process for new assistant principals is usually carried out by the principals, and has been found to be a major factor aiding the assistant principals to develop a sense of high professional efficacy and the ability to cope with problems and conflicts that arise from the field. Principals are an almost exclusive source of helpful knowledge that can be of help (Armstrong, 2015; Hoffert, 2015). The absence of a proper process of mentoring might affect the level of difficulty that new assistant principals would face when entering their role. This is especially important as research indicates that training processes of assistant principals in teacher colleges and universities are unsatisfactory or incompatible with the unique needs of new assistant principals (Armstrong, 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Lattuca, 2012; Morgan, 2014).

Mapping the Variables Affecting the Process of Entering the Role of Assistant Principals Concerning the Staff

A Natural Candidate for the Role or a Controversial One

The way the staff perceives the candidate to the role affects the level of their objection to the new assistant principal. The staff might perceive the new assistant principal as a natural candidate, given his or her experience, seniority and previous roles in school, or might consider others as more suitable candidates. When the staff sees the new assistant principal as a novice, given his/her age or seniority, or view his/her promotion as based on wrong considerations, difficulties and overt or covert objections might be expected. The assistant principal might encounter difficulties in exercising authority over the staff, and the staff, especially senior teachers or ones who had applied for the role and had been rejected, might find it difficult to accept this authority (Hasson, 2011).

The Background and Circumstances of the Former Assistant Principal's Leaving

The background and the circumstances of the former assistant principal leaving is a factor that affects the process of entering the role for the new assistant principal. This is true whether the former one was a senior and appreciated assistant principal who retired, or one who was dismissed from the role. In the case of a former assistant principal dismissed from the role, the difficulties are more enhanced, for three main reasons:

- a) In such cases the teachers' room is usually divided, and the assistant principal has to establish authority over the teachers who supported the leaving assistant principal;
- b) Such a case is characterized by the absence of a proper process of mentoring by the leaving assistant principal;
- c) The entering new assistant principal is aware of the transience and lack of stability in his/her new role, and of the fact that lasting in the role depends on the principal's satisfaction with him or her.

This major social and personal difficulty does not contribute to the sense of security and self-efficacy of the assistant principals at the start of their professional career. It enhances their sense of

dependence on the principal, and strengthens their fear of failure and the emotional difficulties typical to assistant principals at the beginning of their career (Armstrong, 2015; Hasson, 2011; Lattuca, 2012).

Mapping the Variables Affecting the Process of Entering the Role of Assistant Principals Concerning the Assistant Principals

Have the Assistant Principals Undergone a Professional Socialization Process?

Assistant principals who reached the role at the call of the principal or some other authority have not undergone preceding professional socialization processes suitable for managerial roles. Therefore, they have not developed an identification with the managerial profession and the behavioral patterns that accompany it (Weindling & Dimmock, 2006). The absence of a process of professional socialization preceding the entrance to the role raises the new assistant principals' level of apprehension, and consequently renders harder the coping with the difficulties awaiting them at the start.

Difficulty in Establishing Managerial and Professional Authority over the Staff

The new assistant principals' ability to establish authority over the staff relates to three different perspectives of their role:

- The principal's perspective: the assistant principal's authority derives from the level of support he or she gets from the principal, from the level of authority of the principal as seen by the staff and the nature of the process of mentoring that provides the assistant principal with a sense of security and self-efficacy in the role.
- The staff's perspective: the authority of the assistant principal derives from the staff perception of the assistant principal's entrance to the role as a natural, appropriate process, as well as from their perception of the circumstances of the former assistant principal's leaving office.
- The assistant principal's perspective: the issue of having and exercising authority is related to his or her ambition, or lack of ambition for managerial roles.

As this is a principle variable in the relationship between the assistant principal and the professional staff, it should be addressed as being of major importance. The principal should empower the assistant principal, provide efficient training and mentoring processes and supply tools and strategies for coping with staff objections (Armstrong, 2015).

The Level of Assistant Principals' Emotional Difficulty at Entering the Role

The school system tends to see the role of assistant principalship as a continuity of other roles that the assistant principal performed prior to her entering this role, and disregards the emotional aspects of the transition from teaching to assistant principalship and the change in organizational status. The transition often causes an emotional turmoil and emotional difficulties that are surprisingly intense in strength and in their scope of effect on the assistant principals' personal lives (Armstrong, 2015; Hasson, 2011; Lattuca, 2012; Author 1, 2017). This variable affects the assistant principals' sense of self-efficacy and their success at the beginning of the way, being at the same time affected by

other variables in the model regarding both the principal and the staff, whose relationship with the new assistant principal would determine the intensity and scope of the emotional difficulties.

Recommendations for Facilitating the Transition from Teaching to Assistant Principalship

According to the model presented, based on the literature viewed so far, this section of the article offers recommendations for facilitating the transition to assistant principalship.

A Structured Mentoring Process

Apparently, preparation for the role of assistant principal is the name of the game. The education system invests in processes of learning and mentoring for principals and for novice teachers. The field of assistant principal mentoring in the system, however, is neglected. Moreover, the process of mentoring is not formalized and is unstructured, depending on the will and level of emotional availability of the principal. There are various forms of mentoring by principals. Some include regular, formalized mentoring meetings, while other principals do not offer any kind of mentoring or emotional availability. The process of training alongside the leaving assistant principal does not necessarily take place and depends on the circumstances and the reasons for leaving. Unlike principals who are usually members of a principals' forum, assistant principals have no such forum, though it could support, help and lead to exchange of views and ideas. Since the assistant principal's role is usually a solitary one in the school, there is no peer group of colleagues that could help, support and offer sources of information or a model to follow.

We recommend the setting of a formalized, structured process of mentoring for new assistant principals. If the principal is not available for such a process, or the leaving assistant principal does not offer an appropriate process of mentoring, the new assistant principal should have a colleague from another school in the region as a mentor, who would respond to his/her needs in the first year in the role. Experienced, senior assistant principals can also help by serving as guiding mentors. According to Hasson (2011) and Mullen (2005), the most suitable person for mentoring, guidance and emotional support is an assistant principal with three years of experience who has just finished the process of entering the role. It should be noticed that although the principals are logically the most recommendable mentors, according to a number of researchers they are not suitable for this mission, due to time constraints and lack of emotional availability (Sigford, 2005).

Continuing-education Programs and Courses Designed for Assistant Principals

The education system can construct continuing-education programs for principals, concerning the process of mentoring new assistant principals and its importance. In addition, together with the institutions that train assistant principals, the education system can define syllabi for training and continuing-education courses designed for new assistant principals. These courses should emphasize preparation and readiness for entering the role, including coping with emotional difficulties and other difficulties mapped here, and provide tools for coping strategies. Moreover, these courses should provide beginning assistant principals with tools and knowledge concerning issues of human resources, reporting in the system, designing school timetables, and dealing with teacher absences etc.

Assistant Principal Forum

Superintendents can establish a regional forum for assistant principals that would include both senior and new assistant principals, and would convene regularly for a period set ahead of time. The forum would discuss singular issues with which assistant principals cope. The discussions might provide practical response to problems arising from the field, along with an emotional response of help and support in the framework of collegial group.

Constructing a System of Recruitment for the Role of Assistant Principal

The phenomenon of a call to the role by an authority in the system only when a vacancy is due is unadvisable. The system of education should develop a system of recruitment for tracing, fostering and training excellent teachers in a prolonged process for the role of assistant principal. Yet, when assistant principals arrive at this role responding to a call from principals with no prior preparation or ambition for a managerial position, the system of education and the principal should provide them with a process of close, formalized mentoring along with emotional response to the apprehensions and doubts expected to arise.

The Process of Transition to Assistant Principals: Recommendations for Principals

Principals should be aware of the extent to which their role is central and dominant in the process of professional mentoring and in providing the emotional support that new assistant principals need. The principal's mentor their assistant principals by guiding and supporting them, providing them with opportunities to prove themselves, offering feedback and reflection. Therefore, the relationships between principals and the assistant principals are critical for the latter's success in their new role. Moreover, principals play an important role not only in teaching and providing skills, but also in inspiring and developing a professional identity (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). On the other hand, the absence of mentoring relationship might lead to a sense of paralysis, fatigue, exhaustion, dissatisfaction and low morale. This means that principals should not ignore the process of mentoring, nor expect it to occur naturally through work (Mullen, 2005).

In addition to coordination of expectations on both sides, principals should allocate mentoring time regularly for the new assistant principals and supply other sources of information. If the principals do not have the time or information required, they should send the assistant principals to on the job education, initiate meetings with assistant principals from other schools or alternatively ask for help from outside. They should also make sure that the new assistant principals get emotional support in a way that allows them to pose questions, express their feelings and sometimes make mistakes without fearing that they might not get tenure or be dismissed at the end of the year.

Further Explorations and Summary

The field of education management lacks research on assistant principals in general, and on the transition to the role in particular (Mertz, 2006; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Vick, 2011). Global research indicates a shortage of principals and assistant principals throughout the world today (Read, 2011), in addition to the phenomenon of assistant principals who have no wish to be promoted to school principalship (Oplatka & Tamir, 2009). Furthermore, findings show that the stage of entering

the role also has a great influence on the assistant principal's ambition to advance in the future into higher management positions (Oleszewski et al., 2012). In view of the importance of the role of the assistant principal in the school system, extant research on this role should expand to include its unique challenges, as well as the process of entering the role. Such studies might add theoretical and practical knowledge that would facilitate the assistant principals in coping with the unique challenges they face in the school. Moreover, research on the stage of entering the role, which is, as stated above, a critical stage for a managerial career, would add knowledge about the processes of entering the role, which might have ramifications on building the next generation of principals.

Unlike school principals, assistant principals are not required to go through processes of learning and training as a precondition for the role. Thus, most of them do not experience proper processes of training, preparation or mentoring for the transition to their new role, or, alternatively, a formalized process of mentoring by a helping mentor (Oleszewski et al., 2012). In addition, the literature sees the existing processes of induction as not suited to the role of assistant principals and to the processes of socialization unique to their role and to their position in the organizational hierarchy (Barnett et al., 2012). Research in the field, then, might aid decision makers in the ministry of education and the institutions for principal training in constructing a program of theoretical and practical training for assistant principals, which should respond to their singular needs.

The article presents the role of the assistant principal in the school and the main challenges new assistant principals cope with as they enter their new role. Relating to these challenges, we have presented a model mapping the factors that facilitate or hinder the process of entering the role of new assistant principals. This model adds to the theoretical and practical knowledge on the process of transition from teaching to assistant principalship, to prepare new assistant principals for what they should expect in their new role, and to recommend efficient coping strategies. The model might thus contribute to the success of new assistant principals in their new role, and affect their readiness to advance to higher managerial roles in the future. Examining the factors that facilitate or hinder the process of entering the role of assistant principals might help policy-makers, the institutions for principal training and the principals themselves to recognize the unique needs and challenges facing new assistant principals. It might help toward a redefinition of the role of assistant principal, for constructing a suitable recruitment system for the role, and for designing training, mentoring and support programs for new assistant principals.

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