A Phenomenological Study of Principals: Using Their Stories to Help Future Principals

Neil Kelly, EdD

New England College

For comments or questions for the author, contact Neil Kelly at nkelly_gps@nec.edu

Abstract

In this article, I detail my journey through which I have experienced phenomenology. The article includes theoretical connections, personal aspirations, methodology, data collection, and themes that I have identified as I analyzed the data. I have deep personal connections to the phenomenon in the study, the journey to becoming a school principal, and I explain how those connections influenced the research design for my study. The stories that were shared with me by the participants, school principals from the elementary and secondary level in Massachusetts, are central to my experiences as a researcher in this project. I have included my reactions to stories from participants to develop perspective into my experience that aligns with my personal aspirations of becoming a school principal. The article contains quotes from the participants and takeaways that have emerged through the course of revisiting and analyzing the array of responses provided. As pressures mount and problems become increasingly complex in education, principals shared the responsibility of remaining responsive to these challenges. Though demands of time, energy, politics, and resources have placed complex issues onto school principals, the positive influences that effective principals have on their students, staff, and community cannot be overstated. As one participant recounted, "As a leader, you have the ability to really make a difference in such a profound, broad way." My hope is that their stories can become part of my story and the stories of other future principals.

Keywords: phenomenology, qualitative data, educational leadership, authentic learning, story telling

I have wanted to be a school leader ever since I began teaching, but as I listened to and read about all of the pressures being placed on public schools today, I was beginning to wonder, "Is it worth it?" So, I developed my phenomenological dissertation study to gather the stories of principals in the field in my state. I wanted to hear the stories of people who have chosen and continue to choose to be school leaders. When asked why, one of my participants summed up the feeling of many of the administrators in my project when they responded:

I get to see kids and adults doing so many incredible things in a given day and know that how I act, the decisions I make to support them, and how I make myself available to them matters. It's a tough job, but it's also the best there is.

Rita Pierson (2013), in her famous TED Talk, said, "Every child needs a champion." From my work in my study, I have come to believe that every school needs a champion, a person who believes in every individual in the school; a person willing to stand up to help every person in the building be whom they can be; a person willing to be the principal. My dream is that one of those people will be me.

The Problem

According to DeMatthews et al. (2021), principals are vital for school improvement and principals are critical in the creation of inclusive and high-performing schools. DeMatthews et al. also reported approximately one in five principals leave their school each year, and the rate of change in principals is higher in schools that serve low-income students of color. Studies have also indicated that effective principals play a crucial role in improving schools and student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2008; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). Robinson et al. (2008) found that principal leadership style also plays an important role in the success of teachers and students.

Unfortunately, a 2022 National Association of Secondary School Principal's (NASSP) survey reported that half of the 1,000 nation-wide principal participants reported they were

considering leaving the field or retiring due to the stress levels of the job. In the same study, 70% of principals reported having been personally threatened. Additionally, 73% of the surveyed principals reported they had needed help with their emotional or mental help during the previous year. This is important because, according to Snodgrass Rangel (2018), principal turnover can be disruptive and is negatively related to achievement, teacher turnover, and a healthy and positive school climate According to Fink and Brayman (2006), teachers who work in schools in which there is rapid principal turnover more often report poor working conditions, negative school cultures, a lack of a coherent vision or mission, staff cynicism about principal commitments, and a lack of work on continuous improvement. DeMatthews et al. (2021) recommended added emphasis is needed in both principal preparation programs and professional in-service development to recruit and sustain highly effective principals in public schools.

Purpose

There are two main purposes of my phenomenological study of a small group of principals in my state: To gather the stories and recommendations from current principals in my state to enhance the abilities of (a) universities and colleges in their efforts to prepare educators who will develop into effective school leaders; (b) school districts to hire and retain effective school principals. In order to accomplish the purposes for this study, I developed two research questions: (a) In what ways do school leaders describe their journey to becoming school principals? (b) In what ways can the stories of school leaders becoming school principals support the preparation, retention, and efficacy of aspiring principals?

Theoretical Connections

As I began to develop this study, I had to take the time to consider the theoretical connections that developed the context under which knowledge and understanding of our world take place. It did not take long for me to gravitate towards two theories that resonated in ways

that aligned with how I felt knowledge acquisition and understanding would be represented in the study: constructivism and social constructionism. Though similar, each learning theory offers unique elements that I felt would help me more fully understand the journey of becoming a principal.

Based on my experiences in schools and in my research about the topic of becoming a school principal, it became clear to me that leadership style matters (Obama et al., 2015). Principals in my study concurred with the idea that how principals behave and interact with people is tremendously important. The climate of any school is affected by the school leader's style and effectiveness of dealing with the myriad of issues which affect students and teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). Thus, the theoretical connection of leadership style to the job of principals helped me formulate this study.

Constructivism

Constructivism (Mcleod, 2023) is a learning theory that emphasizes the active role of learners in building their understanding. Rather than passively receiving information, learners reflect on their experiences, create mental representations, and incorporate new knowledge into their schemas. This promotes deeper learning and understanding (Mcleod, 2023). Constructivism is an approach to learning that holds that people actively construct or make their knowledge and that reality is determined by the experiences of the learner. In elaborating on constructivists' ideas, Arends (1998) stated that constructivists believe in the personal construction of meaning by the learner through experience, and that meaning is influenced by the interaction of prior knowledge and new events (as cited in Mcleod, 2023). These ideas align with the notions of Piaget (1957), who is credited with the creation of cognitive constructivism, the theory that students construct their individual meanings based on their prior knowledge and the child's interactions with new understandings or knowledge.

According to Dewey (1938) and Vygotsky (1978), learning is not an abstract concept but rather a series of real social interactions in which people work together to make meaning. Each individual constructs their meaning but that is influenced by the environment in which the learning occurs. The interactions of the people (students and teachers) influence each person's ability to construct their own meanings. Thus, learning, or the creation of meaning, occurs both socially and individually, and the environment in which learning is taking place makes a huge difference in what and how students learn.

When thinking about how principals traditionally complete coursework practicum hours through an accredited institution prior to assuming their first principal position, I quickly gravitated towards constructivism. From my own experience and learning as a middle school educator for 8 years, I recall learning a great deal about educational practice and the profession at large from my experiences authentically engaging with my students and colleagues in the work as a new teacher. As such, my presumptions developing and beginning the study were that principals probably constructed their learning and understanding of leadership through their experiences of actually being a principal. I believed that by listening to their descriptions and stories, I would assess the validity of my hypothesis.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism (Nickerson, 2023) theory states that people develop knowledge of the world in a social context, and that much of what we perceive as reality depends on shared assumptions. From a social constructionist perspective, many things we take for granted and believe are objective reality are actually socially constructed, and thus, can change as society changes. Social constructionists, like constructivists, believe that knowledge arises out of human relationships. Thus, what a person takes to be true and objective is the result of social processes that take place in historical and cultural contexts (Nickerson, 2023). As I considered learning theories, I could not settle on constructivism without also acknowledging the merit of

social constructionism. Presumptuously, my experiences as an educator have allowed me to interact with my principal on many occasions, and observe my principal engage with many different individuals, groups, and stakeholders in and outside of the school community. From school committee meetings, district leader meetings, talking to parents and guardians, communicating with general and special educators, the amount and variety of social interactions in which a principal routinely engages is something I feel is important in the development and understanding of what the phenomenon of becoming a principal is like.

Leadership Styles

The way a school principal leads in their school community is impactful in many ways Özgenel, & Karsantik, 2020). In today's climate of heightened expectations, principals are under pressure to improve teaching and learning. According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2022), school leaders need to be educational visionaries, instructional and curriculum leaders, assessment experts, disciplinarians, community builders, public relations experts, budget analysts, facility managers, special program administrators, and expert overseers of legal, contractual, and policy mandates and initiatives. Principals are expected to broker the often-conflicting interests of parents, teachers, students, district officials, unions, and state and federal agencies, and school leaders need to be sensitive to the widening range of student needs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022).

Studies have explored and analyzed the relationship between principal leadership styles and school performance. Obama et al. (2015) found that principals' leadership styles do influence school performance either positively or negatively, and it has become clear that no single leadership style is appropriate at all times. These researchers' study found that democratic and situational leadership styles have a positive impact on school performance; while autocratic and laissez-faire leadership styles were found to have negative impacts on school performance. Leadership in education is a key component of a positive school culture

and profoundly impacts student learning and achievement (Obama et al., 2015). Using effective

leadership practices in schools is crucial to providing an appropriate learning environment for

students. In fact, with the right approach, effective school leadership can provide the key to

education transformation, changing a school or district into an extraordinary one (Obama et al.,

2015).

There are several kinds of leadership styles that characterize the approach a school

principal can assume in their role, that serve as a lens through which I have been able to

examine and analyze data in this study. For the purposes of this study, I included the following

leadership styles: authoritative, situational, democratic, transactional, and transformational.

Leadership styles can play a crucial role in regard to teacher performance and school

effectiveness (Obama et al., 2015). While a principal may have more than one leadership style

and prefer to use different leadership styles for different situations, research suggests the

leadership style or styles school principals have or prefer affects their leadership practices

which will affect the performance, motivation, and job satisfaction of teachers and staff (Ozgenel

& Karsantik, 2020).

Authoritative Leadership

Authoritative leadership can be described as a style of leadership that stresses personal

dominance, strong centralized authority and control over others, and unquestioning obedience

(Chen et al., 2014; Harms et al., 2018). Authoritarian leadership has been found to negatively

influence team interactions, organizational commitment, task performance, and morale (Chen et

al., 2014). Also known as coercive or dictatorial leadership, authoritarian leaders tend to keep all

the decision-making authority to themselves and make the decisions about policies, procedures,

tasks, structures, and rewards and punishment exclusively on their own (Chen et al., 2014;

Harms et al., 2018). The intention behind most authoritarian leaders is to retain control, and they

usually require unquestioning obedience and compliance (Chen et al., 2014).

Situational Leadership

Situational leadership can be described as a style of leadership where a leader adapts their style of leading to suit the current work environment or needs of a team. This style of leadership is not dependent just on the skills of a leader (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018). It is also based on a leader's ability to adjust to the requirements of a team or organization in order to be a better and more effective leader. This leadership style may also be referred to as situational leadership theory or the situational leadership model and was originated by Hersey and Blanchard (as cited in Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018). According to Henkel and Boudreau (2018), Hersey and Blanchard posited that a situational leader may use one of the following leadership behavioral styles depending on the situation: telling, selling, participating, and delegating. First, telling is a leadership behavioral style that is used when a team requires close supervision and constant guidance. Leaders using a telling style may make all of the decisions and then communicate these decisions to the team. The telling style is most commonly used when repetitive results are needed or when a team is at the novice level. Second, selling is a leadership behavioral style that is used when a team or employee is unmotivated to perform a task or job duty. Third, the participating behavioral leadership style is most commonly used when a team is competent in particular tasks but do not have the willingness or confidence needed to complete them. Fourth, delegating is a leadership behavioral style that is used when a team is efficient and effective at their jobs and requires little guidance. This kind of leadership is considered a hands-off approach. Leaders trust their employees and are confident in their abilities. They give guidance and take responsibility where needed, but this leadership style means that team members and colleagues have the real lead. A delegating leadership style is a low task and high relationship behavior approach to leadership where a leader empowers an individual to exercise autonomy. Employing this approach entails providing the individual with the big picture, then trusting them to deliver agreed-upon results (Henkel and Boudreau, 2018).

Democratic Leadership

Democratic leadership can be described as a style of leadership where school leaders give each person on a team a voice in determining how their company functions (Srivastava et al., 2022). This leadership style is also known as participative leadership, since a democratic leader encourages people to voice their opinions, help with decision-making, and collaborate. Overall, the decision-makers make choices that are in sync with what the majority of others want or desire. In addition to this, these leaders reject traditional "top-down" hierarchical organizational structures (Miller, 2022). These leaders are secure in sharing their power and letting everyone have the opportunity to lead the organization in the right direction (Miller, 2022).

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership can be described as a style of leadership where the leader assumes a more structured approach to management that relies on rigorous checks and balances throughout an organization (Western Governors University, 2021). Typically, employees are given their short- and long-term goals and are expected to work toward them under supervision. Everyone is expected to adhere to strict guidelines set by the leader. Employees who meet their goals are rewarded, while those who fail to meet their deadlines are reprimanded (Western Governors University, 2021). Transactional leaders work well in environments that thrive on structure and organization. Employees are allowed a certain degree of autonomy within the confines of the organization's policies, so long as they are capable of meeting their goals effectively and on time (Western Governors University, 2021). For employees who excel in an environment based on consistent company policies, transactional leadership can be a key motivating factor in encouraging them to realize organizational goals. Rules, regulations, and a high degree of organization create the foundation upon which transactional leaders build their organization (Western Governors University, 2021).

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is a leadership theory where a leader works with colleagues to identify needed changes, creates and enacts a vision, and executes the change in conjunction with their highly committed team (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). Transformational leadership focuses on charismatic and effective leadership elements (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). Transformational leaders are believed to tap into the potential and motives of colleagues to make it easier to reach the collective goals of the team. This style illustrates that leadership is different from power since it is inseparable from the needs of employees (Northouse, 2016). It means that the leader does not act because of the power given to them by the nature of their leadership position (Northouse, 2016). They act in the interest of those seeking to work with them to attain the collectively created vision. A transformational leader invests time seeking to inspire and support colleagues in their understanding and acceptance of the vision (Northouse, 2016).

Positionality

In a professional capacity, I have aspired to become a school administrator for some time. As someone who is deeply vested in public education, I am committed to serving in an administrative capacity that will allow me to affect an even greater magnitude of change beyond the classroom level. As a current 7th and 8th grade science teacher in Massachusetts, I am fortunate to work alongside and affect change amongst the students I teach, colleagues with whom I collaborate, as well as vested families and community members who care a great deal about the education of their youth. This project helped me to further develop and strengthen my skills, thinking, and competence as an emerging leader.

I understand that throughout my career there will be many different contexts and circumstances in which I will need to exercise the leadership frames in my thinking, decision-making, communication, and interactions with a variety of individuals. I will encounter adaptive

challenges and contexts that demand rethinking, reframing, and action that is reflective of my

district's mission and vision. I believe school leaders across the nation have experienced, and

will likely continue to experience, flux in their contexts that will impact their leadership practices,

including the core values, beliefs, and skill sets those in their communities wish for children to

develop through the course of their schooling.

Methodology

The main purpose of my study was to gather the stories and recommendations from

current principals in my state to enhance the abilities of (a) universities and colleges in their

efforts to prepare educators who will develop into effective school leaders; (b) school districts to

hire and retain effective school principals. In order to accomplish the purposes for this study, I

developed two research questions: (a) In what ways do school leaders describe their journey to

becoming school principals? (b) in what ways can the stories of school leaders becoming school

principals support the preparation, retention, and efficacy of aspiring principals?

I employed qualitative interviews of school principals to gather their stories of what

helped each participant, what hampered each person, and what recommendations they have for

colleges and universities, school districts, and for individuals as they begin their principal

careers. In reviewing the data, themes emerged, from the stories of the principals, related to

how principals might be better prepared to face the ever-growing complexities and pressures of

school administration.

Research Design

The design I used to research and describe the journey school leaders have taken to

become principals is a phenomenological research design. According to Creswell and Poth

(2018), a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of

their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon. An emphasis on a specific phenomenon is

prioritized (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The essence of a phenomenological study is to reduce

individual experiences with a specific phenomenon to a description of a universal essence (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study I conducted focused on examining how school leaders describe their journey to becoming principals and their experiences as principals. This phenomenological study includes descriptions of individuals at three stages of their careers including (a) their teaching experiences prior to becoming a principal, professional experiences they feel prepared them best for becoming a principal, and why they decided to become principals, (b) elements of their principal preparation program they felt prepared them best for becoming a principal along with elements of being in the leadership role that have resonated most with each participant, and qualities, skills, and/or goals they feel helped them begin their journey, and (c) how they describe their journey to becoming a school principal, and what they wish they had known going into the principalship.

Additionally, I asked each principal to share their advice for principal preparation programs in two ways: 1. What did their principal preparation program do that every principal preparation program should do? 2. What did their principal preparation program not do that the participants in this study believe all principal preparation programs should do to ensure their graduates are fully prepared on day one of their careers as principals?

In this study, I used a phenomenological research design to gather data for further analysis in order to answer two main research questions. First, in what ways do school leaders describe their journey to becoming school principals? And, second, in what ways can the stories of school leaders becoming school principals support the preparation, retention, and efficacy of aspiring principals?

Phenomenological research is oriented towards the interpretation of lived experiences and is useful for the analysis of the journeys that school leaders describe to becoming principals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus of the study was entirely on the phenomenon of becoming a

school principal, especially targeting the data collection to participants' experiences in that role. In the collection of this data, I gathered the stories of the participants in a way that highlighted their stories with meaning and purpose (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this process, the meaning and purpose of their journeys provided a rich account of how they became principals, perspectives and recommendations aspiring principals could consider before enrolling in a principal preparation program, information for university programs to consider to make their program, curriculum, and structure more effective, and help for beginning principals to develop ideas to enter their administrative roles better prepared to be successful and grow in their careers.

Setting and Participants

The setting for this study primarily took place in Massachusetts. My reasons for conducting the study in this state included my aspirations of becoming a licensed principal in the state and the state being my primary residence. I traveled to my participants to conduct the interviews in person. Alternatively, I utilized phone conferencing video chatting software if that was a more convenient option to the participant. I attempted to balance both male and female participants as well as diverse races and ethnicities to allow for equal representation of perspectives to the collection and analysis of my qualitative data.

As it was essential that all participants had experience with the phenomenon of being a principal. I initially intended to use purposeful criterion sampling. Criteria in this study was to include participants who had a minimum of 5 years of experience being a principal in the same school, successfully completed a principal preparation program through an accredited institution, been recommended for principal licensure, and were principals of communities with a median household income of $38,000–$200,000.

Something significant that changed about the study was the criteria through which I selected participants. I accessed a database through the Massachusetts Department of

Elementary and Secondary Education of principals in various communities. Using the database, I attempted to identify and narrow down potential participants using the aforementioned criteria. However, it soon became apparent that one of the criteria was limiting. A significant number of potential participants had not served as a principal for 5 years in the same setting. The reasoning for this element of the criteria for potential participants was to account for the time needed for a new school leader to become acclimated to a new school, district, and community. Broadening the criteria to 2 years instead of 5 made it more feasible to locate potential participants, accounting for an element of a problem that exists across many schools: retention. Though not surprising, this was not something I anticipated as I began the study and allowed me to adapt to and refine my methodology accordingly.

Data Collection

After a brief, initial interview with each participant to gain a better sense of their experience and where they presently served as a principal, I scheduled my first round of "formal interviews" with each participant. The questions posed in this interview included:

- Why did you decide to become a principal?

- Describe any professional experiences prior to becoming a principal that you feel prepared you to become a principal.

- Describe your preparation to becoming a school principal.

- Describe your level of knowledge and experience with the National Educational Leadership Program (NELP) standards.

- Describe elements of your leadership role that resonate the most

- Based on your journey, what were the five elements that were most important to your preparation?

- If you had a magic wand and could include anything in your preparation program, what would it have been?

- If you had a magic wand and could include anything in your journey to becoming a

  principal, what would it have been?

- What recommendations would you give to an aspiring principal to help them on their

  journey?

- What recommendations would you give to principal preparation programs to support

  more equitable learning outcomes for principal candidates?

- What advice would you offer to an aspiring principal?

When I thought about the kinds of questions I would pose to my participants, I imagined a "path" or "story" that each participant followed from beginning to present that led them to where they are today as a principal. Elements prior to the principalship (including what lead up to their deciding to become a principal, the kinds of experiences they had had leading up to becoming a principal, and the preparation program they enrolled in were elements that came to mind right away (and ones that were directly relevant in my journey to becoming a licensed administrator).

Data Analysis

Thus far, I have transcribed recorded interviews between myself and my participants. These included an introductory interview and two formal rounds of interviews with each participant during the 2022–2023 school year. This totaled three transcribed interviews per participant. I spent several months re-reading each transcript, making notes of codes in the text. These codes often consisted of words, phrases, or quotes that resonated or got to what felt like the essence or "bottom line" of addressing the question. Once I had taken the time to identify codes for the interview questions in each transcript, I devoted time to look for and identify particular patterns in the codes I identified to determine "themes" or broader abstractions that more comprehensively addressed the questions posed across all participants that responded. These themes will now be examined and used in a way to more succinctly and concisely

answer the research questions grounding the study: In what ways do school leaders describe their journey to becoming school principals? And, in what ways can the stories of school leaders becoming school principals support the preparation, retention, and efficacy of aspiring principals?

Preliminary Results

Themes

I have been fortunate to interview several principals at the elementary, middle, and high school level throughout Massachusetts during the 2022–2023 school year. Through the course of these conversations, I have been able to listen to many journeys to becoming a principal, an array of stories and experiences in leadership, and advice to those considering the role. From my initial reviews of the data, four themes have emerged in relation to ideas that are important for principals: 1. Leadership style, 2. Flexibility, 3. Inspiration, and 4. Making a difference.

As I listened to and considered these stories, it became apparent a principal's leadership style makes a difference in the kinds of outcomes a school and those in it experience. Two leaders recounted a negative experience working with leaders who would be considered authoritarian. "I knew right away I never wanted to be like her when I had my first job," one participant explained. Another principal contended:

They made everyone's life hell, including mine. It was their way or the highway.

Consequently, it became a terrible place to work, the staff were miserable, and, well, I

had a prime example of what I never wanted to be.

Though several styles exist, a second theme that emerged in participant responses was the need to be flexible with one's approach. One leader explained, "I've worked hard to be flexible with how I approach things and my style I guess you could say." Another leader stated:

I don't think it's effective to be static or that you could ever just stay in one style. It

depends on the context. Sometimes, I need to make a hard and fast decision. Other

times, there's the latitude of inviting others to play a part in sharing the decision made.

And still in some ways, I know and trust my staff well enough to be a bit more hands-off

knowing they are going to make choices and decisions that are right by our kids. For me,

it all depends.

This level of flexibility corresponds with another approach to leadership: situational leadership.

According to Hersey and Blanchard (1969), situational leadership is an adaptive leadership style

(as cited in Cherry, 2023). This strategy encourages leaders to take stock of their team

members, weigh the many variables in their workplace, and choose the leadership style that

best fits their goals and circumstances (Cherry, 2023).

Related to the third theme (inspiration), five out of eight participants recounted a leader

that had inspired them in their journey to becoming a school principal. Four out of eight of these

participants described their individual as "uplifting" and "empowering." All five of these

participants described the individual as "inspiring." It may not be surprising, then, that studies

have revealed many researchers have found that principal leadership style and staff perceptions

of leadership style have one of the greatest bearings on school performance (Tedla et al, 2021).

Indeed, such studies have substantiated schools that embraced more democratic and

participatory leadership styles, that encouraged group work and team spirit performed

significantly better on state assessments than those that used more autocratic leadership styles

that were largely dictatorial (Tedla et al., 2021). Similarly, those schools in which teachers and

staff felt supported, appreciated, and experienced happiness in their organization experienced

greater levels of staff retention, increases in student achievement, and increases in job

satisfaction expressed by staff (Tedla et al, 2021).

Related to the fourth theme (making a difference), principals shared with me how

important it is to them to make a positive difference in their schools. One principal stated, "You

know what I love about this job? I get to see kids and teachers in the zone." Another reiterated,

"I get to see my kids grow into incredible people." A third principal told me, "I get to hand them their diplomas, to be part of sending on to the next part of their lives."

What Do You Wish You Had Known?

I know there have been plenty of occasions, especially early on in my career as an educator, where I wish I had known certain things or been able to impart some words of advice to the 22-year-old that had just taken the leap into their first middle school teaching position. Things like "take care of yourself," "leave work at work," "work smarter not harder," and "you are a wonderful teacher even when 'those' days happen," are among things that come to mind when I think back on my journey, and what I wish I could have heard starting out. I knew this was something I really wanted to ask and be attuned to when the time came to hear, process, and digest the many stories into becoming a school principal I would hear.

While I heard many different stories and insightful words of wisdom in response to this question, one comes to mind that still resonates when I reflect. A principal of a combined middle school and high school in southeastern Massachusetts recounted that they had wished someone would have told them it is perfectly okay to be imperfect at this incredibly demanding job. With a wide smile and an infectious amount of energy, they stressed the importance of having fun, being a human alongside the many wonderful staff, students, and families one will meet, owning and learning from the many mistakes one makes along the way, and to enjoy every moment of the journey. This principal stated:

> You are going to mess up. And that is okay. Own it, learn from it, and move forward. Laugh with your colleagues, lean on them, be fun, be friendly, and make it all fun. It can be a thankless job and kill your energy. Don't let it. Be kind to you, be kind to your staff and students, and let them see you're perfectly imperfect just like the rest of them. Trust me, it goes a long way.

In full transparency, I am rather hard on myself. When I was an intern and was asked to self-assess a lesson, I had taught, I was notorious for selecting scores that were on the lower end of the rubric scale. When it came to debriefing the lesson with my evaluator, I mainly focused on the many components of the lesson I felt fell short of expectations. As time progressed and I gained more experience, confidence, and knowledge of professional practices and pedagogy from coursework and colleagues, I gradually learned to relinquish such negativity, and embrace appreciative feedback. As I reflect, I remember always wanting to be my very best for my students, and wanted to do just about anything to make it happen, even if it meant tearing apart lessons I had developed and taught as a new educator. Time and experience taught me you otherwise. And while I am confident there will be plenty of mistakes and stories to be had as I venture into the world of becoming a school principal, stories like this are the grounding force reminding me to appreciate the strengths and gifts I bring as a leader, learn from the mistakes, be human, and embrace the journey.

Advice

From my review the data to date, participants have given some sage advice for aspiring principals:

- During the preparation program engage in authentic experiences as much as possible.

- Engage in a formal mentor system during preparation and initiation of one's administrative career.

- Develop skills in the following attitudes and skills:

  o Maintain a sense of humor

  o Invest in relationships

  o Communicate often and with a wide range of people and groups

  o Expect the unexpected

- o   Exercise emotional intelligence

- o   Dealing with angry adults

Regardless of the journey described, the value participants placed in ample authentic experiences and mentorship as integral to preparing aspiring principals is unquestionably worthy of note. Seven of the eight participants emphasized a need for preparation programming to develop curricula that prioritized learning experiences that transcended what would be learned from a textbook reading or written assignment. A middle school principal participant shared, "The book stuff is great and certainly holds its purpose. But like teaching, ya know, until you're in the trenches actually doing the work, it doesn't carry the same kind of weight." Five of these participants compared this process to a student teaching internship (or rather a "student principal" internship) in which a principal candidate has the opportunity to experience undertaking the roles and responsibilities of being a principal for an extended period of time under the supervision of a mentor principal. One participant stated:

> I think for this job you really need to be given a larger, substantive window of time where you take the reins on everything. Taking on staff meetings, classroom observations, and evaluations, attending different meetings, working with other district leaders, taking the lead on issues or concerns that come your way on a given day. There's no better teacher than experience, especially when it comes to being the leader in your building.

Five out of the eight participants expressed a desire for new principals to have access to a mentor within the respective school district, or even a mentor within the same state, to guide, support, and be a resource to someone starting new to the role or moving to a new school. One participant noted, "I wish I had what I had when I first started teaching: a mentor. You don't usually get one, but yet they are so valuable and are your anchor as you're figuring everything out." These same participants recounted the level of difficulty and feelings of isolation they

experienced entering the role without the support of a mentor. One elementary principal

recounted their first year in the position:

> I was brand new and I really did not know anyone. I had other administrator colleagues
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> in the district who were nice but really did not have the same kind of camaraderie you
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> have when you meet your new teammates on your teaching team. I felt so on my own,
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> like my own island, and all alone. It really didn't feel good. And it didn't take me long to
>
> figure out that if I'm gonna be best at this gig, I need to meet other people and have my
>
> tribe. You cannot do this job alone.

Though a supportive superintendent and fellow principal colleagues within the district were said

to be beneficial by the same participants, a desire for more systemic support and structures was

a recommendation borne from revisiting these interviews.

Equally important were the many skills and/or attitudes participants shared that

resonated with their leadership practice. These ranged from being able to have a sense of

humor, investing in relationships, and being a presence before, during, and after school to

exercising emotional intelligence, expecting the unexpected, remaining calm, and knowing how

to communicate and interact with a wide range of individuals and stakeholders. One principal

shared, "You've got to be able to laugh every day in this job, otherwise it can and will consume

you." Another participant recommended:

> Get out there! See what's going on in the hallways, classrooms, the cafeteria. Be seen
>
> by folks and get dirty. I love when I can join in on a fun science experiment, help the
>
> cafeteria out serving up lunches, and chat up parents at drop off or dismissal. It makes a
>
> difference, it shows you are a human, and that you care.

Another principal recounted a stressful end to the school day:

> I had three things come up all at once. One of the secretaries brought a scheduling
>
> conflict to my attention, there was a student altercation in the hallway that had just

happened, and a staff member had just shared their cancer diagnosis. And this all within minutes. So, you keep your cool and think rationally and with your heart. Obviously, my staff member comes first. Schedule can wait, and I can deal with the fight in a bit as long as they are not still hurting each other and are kept apart.

Six out of the eight participants expressed the difficulty of handling irate parents or community members and the challenge of responding to several different matters that were otherwise unexpected or were ones that previous preparation efforts did not address. One participant recounted "I think that has been one of the harder things about this job. Knowing how to handle parents that are very upset, taking out their anger on you, sometimes even taking to social media . . . it's just so hard." Another participant shared, "It's just one of those things that's so tricky. When emotions run high, you have to keep your calm and think and act with a level head. But that's way easier said than done and can be so stressful."

Discussion

Broadening the criteria for potential participants proved more reflective of the realities of principals in today's context. I recall embarking on this study feeling confident I had a handle on who I would be interviewing, the kinds of stories and insights shared with me, and how they may contribute to the field of educational leadership. Though I had a solid base of knowledge and background, there was far more learning to be had! Adapting the methodology of the study allowed for richer narratives and deeper development of themes to responses. Epistemologically, the change in sampling complemented the nature of the study by affording a greater dimension through which interpretation of the data could be realized. Since the epistemological underpinning of this phenomenological study was to gather the stories of a sample of principals in my state, it was important to ensure the realities described included a range of experiences that principals have faced in their work histories (Creswell, 2013).

Something that immediately resonated with me as I have had the opportunity to revisit these conversations is the variety of pathways and journeys principals have undergone to become school leaders. Some have served as classroom teachers, coaches, and instructional leaders prior to become a principal. Others pursued careers that were not in education prior to making the change. Some have served in their school community for several years and progressed to becoming the building principal, while others have worked in a variety of schools, states, and in different roles. One principal recounted:

Prior to becoming the principal, I was a social studies teacher at the high school for 10 years. Then, I became the department chair. When I got my administrator license, I applied for and became the assistant principal. After a few years of that, one summer my superintendent came to me in a pinch to fill in an elementary principal position that had opened unexpectedly. And here I am now six years later.

Another described their journey as "crazy":

I started out working in the business sector years ago. I went on maternity leave to have my first baby. When it came time to go back to work, I just couldn't muster going back into that office. It didn't energize me. I had always thought about working in a school, more specifically with kids and behaviors so I went back to school and got my BCBA license. I got a job as a behavioral interventionist and did that gig for seven years till one day, my superintendent asked if I ever thought of going the school leadership route. I figured 'why not?' And it just became something I loved so much that I did the classes, the practicum stuff, got the license, and have been at it since!

Reflections

When I think about this study as a whole, I often describe myself as having been an outsider. As I have come to learn more about research in recent years, this term describes the idea that the researcher conducting the study has not experienced the phenomenon in question

that others have. In other words, going into this study, I never had any prior experience with or knowledge of what it is like to be a school administrator. Though I aspired to become one and could only surmise the kinds of challenges one faces in a role like that, my thoughts, questions, and curiosities permeated my thinking and desire to know more as an outsider.

I knew I had much to learn going into this study. There is only so much research and literature one can wrap their mind around and learn from. As I considered what this study was going to look like, I wanted to be sure I was as intentional as possible in the kinds of questions I posed to my participants who had lived this experience that felt so foreign to me. I spent time in the weeks and months leading up to finalizing my dissertation proposal jotting down thoughts and questions that popped up when I least expected it. I wanted to be sure the questions I brainstormed in the first round of interviews captured the journey and experience of becoming a principal, and the interview that followed continued to broaden and deepen the richness of each individual account that was shared.

It was nothing shy of a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak with and be afforded the many experiences, journeys, and stories of becoming a school principal as I conducted this study. Each story and recount offered something unique and thought-provoking as I considered the overarching purpose and questions driving the study. These same stories and experiences are those that will allow me to develop and propose recommendations to principal preparation programs to augment curriculum, resources, and support principal candidates experience prior to making the leap into this important role.

I would consider my own experience interviewing several school principals a gift. Their stories were impactful in how my own thinking, views, and mental models of what I envisioned becoming a school principal would be like. Though I am still of the belief that until I assume my first position as a principal I may not truly know and understand the weight of what it is like, the

perspectives I have gained and insights I have gained engaging with these stories is unequivocal and ones I hope to bring with me into a school principal role one day soon.

Experiences in Real Time

The study consisted of three different interviews that took place with each participant. The first interview was a brief opportunity to introduce myself, the study, and learn more about the participant. The two interviews that followed in fall and winter often took place in the afternoon during the school day, or shortly thereafter. The latter interviews allowed me to hear, and sometimes see in real time, the kinds of experiences principals face and are expected to address in a given day. This, in and of itself, was telling in terms of what the job of a principal entails.

By being able to experience, in real time, some of the issues with which principals must deal I gained invaluable insight into some of the stories and advice principal shared with me. I can recall an interview that was scheduled with a middle school principal in a neighboring district. We had rescheduled the interview a few times due to scheduling conflicts. It was not long after we began the interview that the phone rang. The receptionist had called to report an urgent matter that required immediate attention. I saw the expression in their face changed rather suddenly to one of concern, and they asked if they could step aside for a few minutes to attend to the information they had just received. I did not have to think twice to assure them it was perfectly okay, and we could reschedule if need be. Roughly half an hour later, they returned. Upon their return they explained that a student had gone missing at dismissal, and the student's panicked guardian had come to school very upset and irate. Thankfully, the student had made a last-minute decision to attend an optional after school program and was located within several minutes, though the student neglected to inform their guardian of their plans. When I had asked if they would like to continue the conversation at a later time, I was assured they were willing to continue. "You know, it's just telling of how this job can be sometimes," the

participant remarked. "No two days are ever the same. Expect the unexpected. And if you just keep a cool head and trust your gut, you will be alright."

In an interview with another participant, we were interrupted by a student at the participant's school pulling the fire alarm. In another interview, our interview was cut short by an emergency meeting the superintendent called. And on another occasion, the high school principal had requested to reschedule due to a pipe that had burst, displacing several classes, moments before the meeting. Though certainly stressful, each participant contended, in their words, that it is "part of the job". I can remember so clearly one elementary principal remarking:

> You will have a schedule all laid out for the next day. Your meetings, when you will do some observations, when you will make some phone calls or send some emails. And then the moment you walk in the door to start your day, or even as your day starts to get underway . . . boom! It all changes! But that's just it. And you learn to roll with it.

I will be the first to admit that there were times where I could sense the stress and frustration in my participant's voice, or thought to myself, "Wow, that is heavy. Can I actually do that? Is this something I actually want to do?" Those moments were very telling of just how taxing and demanding a job like being a school principal can really be. And though those were some of the harder moments, the energy and enthusiasm each shared about different parts of the job far outweighed some of the more challenging moments that came about. "You know what I love about this job? I get to see kids and teachers in the zone. I get to be a friendly and familiar face to so many. It's just the best" one participant shared. Another principal shared:

> These kids grow in leaps and bounds. You get to see them become some of the most incredible humans with the most brilliant ideas. I get to hand them diplomas and see them off to the next chapter in their lives. My partner and I go to all the games. They know him well, and we always get to chat with so many families, younger siblings, and you just become part of a big ol' family. I mean, how cool is that?

Final Thoughts

These anecdotes and the light that shone through my interviewees in their expressions and body language as they reminisced and shared their stories reminded me a lot of my experience with teaching. I have had some of the best days of my life in the classroom. I have had some of the worst I could imagine. I have days where I wanted to hand in my keys at the office and never look back, and I have days where I could not imagine myself doing anything else. The more I engaged with my participants and could immerse myself in their stories, the more it reminded me of my own and provided the reassurance I needed to be confident in moving towards this next chapter in my personal and professional life.

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