

Becoming a School Leader: Voices of Transformation from Principal Interns, 12(7)

Becoming a School Leader: Voices of Transformation from Principal Interns

Donna Cooner, Rose Quinn & Ellyn Dickmann

ABSTRACT: This article describes a two-year longitudinal study of how potential principals recorded shifting challenges during their internship process. Interns were trained to use a thinking process called Habits of Mind and an online journaling process called Journey Mapping. The study recorded 6,491 electronic reflections, which were coded qualitatively into critical themes. The most challenging situations for principal interns were those concerning students; next were interactions with the principal; and the third were interactions with staff. This study includes tables of two-week intervals during which interns recorded their challenges and quotations from the challenges. This study is the beginning of the process of recording the data and looking at change in the minds of new leaders.

Nearly everyone will agree the most important leaders in our school systems are principals. However, effective leadership in schools is rare (Schmoker, 2005). In the past several years, the principalship has been deemed a challenging position (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Gilman & Lanman-Givens, 2001; Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Hall, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2003; Hess & Kelly, 2005; Levine, 2005; Schmoker, 2005). Hess and Kelly write that today's school principals are "asked to lead in a new world marked by unprecedented responsibilities, challenges and managerial opportunities" (p. 1). School leaders assume heavy obligations, and the most important obligation is to create good schools (Grogan & Andrews, 2002). Good schools are created by using "learning and professional practice to develop the structure of relationships within classrooms, schools, and school districts so that the human energy in schools is transformed into desired student academic and social growth" (p. 234). School principals are expected to focus their schools on student learning; however, children are coming to school less prepared to participate in learning activities. Children have enormous stresses put on them by the breakdown of family and community structures, in addition to time required for out-of-school demands.

Levine (2005) says the role of the principal has changed dramatically. Economic, technological, demographic and global changes all have contributed to the change in superintendents' and principals' jobs. As leaders, they must totally redesign schools. They are required to move schools from the past to the present by rethinking "goals, priorities, finances, staffing, learning resources, assessment methods, technology and use of time and space" (p. 10).

In the new environment of accountability, school improvement rests to a remarkable degree on the quality of leadership in schools. Superintendents now state that they hold new and high expectations for principals. The principals themselves say they are not always fully prepared for the challenges thrown their way. Many scholars are asking whether traditional approaches to preparing and licensing principals are adequate (Hess & Kelly, 2005; Williamson & Hudson, 2001), given increasing demand from both student needs and societal expectations.

This article describes a two-year longitudinal study of how potential principals work through their preparation programs, and face the daunting task of school leadership. In this study, students were required to perform a 300-hour internship, mentored by an experienced principal. The interns reflected on the challenges and concerns they experienced using a thinking process called Habits of Mind and an online journaling process called Journey Mapping. The study recorded 6,491 electronic reflections, which were coded qualitatively into critical themes. The challenging situations and concerns for principal interns fluctuated with time during the internships. As some of the interns began to see themselves as true administrators, they reevaluated concerns and challenges.

Review of the Literature

Is the Lure of the Principalship Waning?

Most educators agree there is a shortage of highly qualified personnel to lead their schools. While current leadership programs meet the need in numbers, many graduates never enter into administrative positions as a personal choice or they are not hired. According to anecdotal evidence, over the last twenty years, thousands of teachers completed educational administrative programs, but did not practice school administration (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2001; Gilman & Lanman-Givens, 2001; Levine, 2005). There is a decreasing population of both experienced teachers and administrators as they depart from the profession (Levine, 2005).

Why are teachers no longer entertaining the idea of becoming administrators as in the past? While teachers usually comprise the pool of principal candidates, they and other talented candidates are now less interested in pursuing administrative certification or degrees for various reasons. According to Gilman and Lanman-Givens (2001), the pay differential between experienced teachers and principals has decreased recently, leading teachers to believe the responsibilities of a principal do not commensurate with the financial rewards.

Another problem is the many roles the school principal has to fulfill. She is disciplinarian; community relations director; marketer; enforcer of policies, laws, and regulations from various levels of the government; medical supervisor; fundraiser; and the list continues. These roles leave very little time for instructional leader, which initially was the principal's primary task. Principals often have too little authority. Further limitations may be put on the principal's ability to decide what is best for the students and the school by collective bargaining and site-based management. Changes to these problems are necessary to ensure that teachers become qualified candidates for principalships (Gilman & Lanman-Givens, 2001).

Hess and Kelly (2005) have a different point of view and write that due to increasing school choice, the rise in charter schools, and "more flexible teacher compensation and hiring have granted thousands of principals new opportunities to exercise discretion and operate with previously unimagined leeway" (p. 2).

What Makes a Good Leader?

The Learning First Alliance did a large-scale study of successful schools, *Beyond Islands of Excellence*. This study determined school leadership needs to be redefined. The most important finding was that successful schools replaced customary professional development with formal times for self-managing teams to improve and prepare their lessons together. The teams "worked on working together" and this makes leadership simpler (Schmoker, 2005, p. 4). The leadership change may be drastic and challenging but also much simpler. Schmoker says about leadership that less is more, and research shows how poorly conceived plans of improvement have overloaded, complicated, and distracted leaders from simple and continuous focus on students and teams.

Hall (2005) writes that the role of the principal was that of facilitator and manager, far from the increased public scrutiny, heightened accountability standards and pressure to increase student achievement. The primary responsibilities were that of maintaining the facility and overseeing the operation of the school. Teachers taught and students learned. He continues with the principal of the 21st century that has a new role: educational leader. The principal relies almost exclusively on the school's teachers to help with the focal point: the growth and achievement of all children-the focal point of all decisions and practices. The principals most valuable resource, teachers, deserve and require more than management. Hall has found teachers need individual attention, fair treatment, strong relationships, consistent support, and authentic feedback. As an educational leader, establishing a daily presence as an involved and active member of the school can help build relationships with stakeholders of the school community. Benefiting from those relationships, the principal can have a leg up on improving instruction and student achievement (Hall, 2005).

Role Transformation: Becoming a Principal

Browne-Ferrigno and Muth (2001) write that principal preparation programs are about transformation. They are designed to socialize those in transition from a teaching culture to an administrative culture. The transformation process centers on learning new skills, concepts, language, and preparing to change from one educational climate to another. Therefore, it is essential that opportunities to work with and observe aspiring and practicing principals are provided during internships. Research says these opportunities will increase technical expertise, help develop significant skills and professional behaviors, and increase role clarification (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003).

More recent research on multiple cohorts of aspiring principals provides support for the development of role socialization through mentoring during clinical practice. This research contends that the shaping of a principal really begins before formal training of the aspiring leader, and needs to continue after completion of a preparation program.

Principals need to become school leaders with continued support through the novice years. Principal mentors can provide them with support and information, and offer constructive feedback. Mentor principals committed to fostering novice and aspiring principals are valued for their contributions to the field of leadership and respected for the guidance they provide to the next generation of school leaders. (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004).

Design of the Study

Research Methods

This study was designed to identify specific themes in reflective journal writing entries from principal interns during their principal internships. The focus of this research examined challenges during field experience. The data was collected from three different cohort groups longitudinally over a two-year period. The students documented their internship experiences approximately every other week over a nine-month period using the online Journey Mapping framework. From reflective journal entries, 6,491 paragraphs were read and coded. The coding resulted in 456 challenges faced by these intern principals during their internship.

Description of Respondents

A total of 61 students were in the three cohorts, 30 males and 31 females. Thirty- six percent of the interns were elementary teachers, 26% were from a middle school background, and 25% were from a high school setting. The remaining 13% were from central office or other positions. Of the participants who reported their years of teaching experience, 25% had more than 15 years of teaching experience, 26% had between 11-15 years of experience, 31% had 6-10 years of experience, and 16% had 0-5 years of teaching experience.

Data Collection

As a part of the internship seminar sessions, interns were taught to use Journey Mapping and the Habits of the Mind. Throughout the nine-month period, interns answered instructor-generated questions regarding internship experiences by describing critical incidents. They reflected on significant situations during their internships using the online program called Journey Mapping. The interns reflected on their internship journeys and recorded them electronically. In their own words, they responded to specific pre-designed probes. The probes were layered: Describe a challenging situation or incident that you encountered during the past two weeks of your internship. Second, the interns were asked to journal answers to these subsequent probes: What concerns do you currently have regarding your internship? How might these best be addressed? The questions were designed to elicit deep reflection from interns while immersed in new internship experiences. Over the span of the internships, the challenges described by the interns changed in theme and frequency.

Data Analysis

The data were initially independently coded to identify challenging situations. There were 456 challenging situation passages entered. The challenges were pattern coded for themes and then categorized by frequency (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Findings

There was a wide variety of themes interns found challenging over the nine month internship period, revealed in Table 1 below. Themes most identified were problems with students, principal mentors, and staff. Student issues were coded separately from discipline, as discipline also covered staff consequences. While student issues amassed the most entries, student discipline was seventh in the number of entries. (Quotations from journal entries sometimes include spelling and grammatical errors, as interns usually typed their journals at the end of a long day.) Student issues were sometimes traumatic, as described in the following quote

The students in this group where involved in a fatal car accident. . . one of the student's girl friend died and another student's twin brother was killed. The two boys who survived the crash are now both seniors and are at risk for dropping out and not graduating. . . I am providing academic coaching and support for these students during my planning period one time per week. . . It is one day at a time, some times moment to moment but if we can help these boys succeed we will have been successful.

This entry depicts a challenge with staff as well as school function for an intern

Back-to-School night was this last Wednesday and I have to say that it was a lot more stressful than I thought that it was going to be. The counseling staff didn't show up early like they were supposed to and so I had over 30 sets of sophomore and junior parents waiting to pick up their student's daily schedule.

Below is an example of a discipline issue:

I was tasked by our principal to seek out solutions to a locker/bully situation between four boys. I spoke to the student who had brought the issue forward . . . I then spoke to each of the other boys individually to get their side of the story. After reviewing the situation, I again spoke to the three boys and instructed them that they will be monitored and if the situation escalates they will be facing detention.

Many interns found that their decision to become an administrative leader was not always supported when they did their internships at their home school. Teachers and colleagues challenged the principal interns in a variety of ways in the first weeks of internship

A few teachers were really angry with the new Site Based Plan. They made comments that inferred that I was going to the dark side, speaking like "them", and I had better watch what I am learning in my classes.

There were ten themes with enough entries to show them as important to the interns, with numerous other entries grouped into the Others category, including finishing internship hours, time management, and working with a team.

Table 1

Themes of Challenges Described During Principal Internship

Themes	Number of Entries	Percent of Challenges
Students/kids	100	21.9%
Principal	93	20.4%
Staff	66	14.5%
Parents	21	4.6%
Job interviews	19	4.2%
Job Applications	15	3.3%
Discipline	10	2.2%
Time Management	12	2.6%
Colleagues	10	2.2%
Policy	8	2.0%
Other	102	22.4%
Total	456	100%*

*Total does not equal 100 due to rounding to one decimal

While there were 456 journal entries coded, many of the entries included two or three challenges which were recorded, discussed, and reflected on by the interns. Below, tables and quotes show the challenges and changes in challenges faced by the interns during their nine month internships. There were 578 challenges recorded by Invivo In the first three months of the internship, principal interns completed six journals over a period of every two weeks. The major themes for the first interval were personal issues and managing impulsivity. Concerns with personal issues included these phrases: "I tend to get tongue tied. . ." and "Sometimes I simply shut off others if I don't agree with

them or have nothing in common with what they are saying." The following journal entry typifies what principal interns reflected on themselves and were mentally preparing for new challenges

... if anything I become too wound up in, but I see my approach as one where I have learned to trust my "gut" reactions to situations, people, etc., and as a rule have benefitted from going with what I sense is right. However, in that context, I am sure that I will be faced with a person or situation that will require me to broaden my analysis of a situation or temper my "knee jerk" approach to a new circumstance.

In the second and third interval, the major theme was student discipline. Ambivalence about becoming a principal was the major theme for the fourth interval, and meetings and committees was the major theme for both the fifth and sixth interval.

Table 2

Frequencies and Percentages of Internship Challenges During First Three Months

Intervals	Themes	<i>f</i>	%	Rank
<i>Interval 1 (first entry)</i>	Personal Issues	29		1
	Managing Impulsivity	11	18%	2
	Student Issues	4	6%	3
	Staff Issues	3	5%	4
	School Function Issues	2	3%	5
	Others	13	21%	
	Total Number	62		
<i>Interval 2</i>	Student Discipline	8	12%	1
	Staff Issues	8	12%	1
	Teachers & Colleagues	6	9%	2
	Meetings	6	9%	2
	School Functions	4	6%	3
	Troubleshooting	4	6%	3
	Feeling Overwhelmed	4	6%	3
	Did Not Handle a Situation Well	4	6%	3
	Problems with Principals	3	4%	4
	Teaching Environment	3	4%	4
	Training/Presenting	3	4%	4
	CSAPs	3	4%	4
	Changing/Dual Roles	3	4%	4
	Internship Requirements	2	3%	5
	Teacher & Staff Issues	2	3%	5
	Others	6	9%	
	Total Number	69		

<i>Interval 3</i>				
	Student Discipline	8	17%	1
	Teacher Issues	5	11%	2
	Staff Issues	5	11%	2
	New Responsibilities	5	11%	2
	Problems with Principals	4	8%	3
	Time Management	3	7%	4
	School Functions	3	6%	4
	Student Success	3	6%	4
	Meetings	3	6%	4
	Ineffective Leadership	2	5%	5
	Problems with Principals	2	4%	5
	Ineffective Leadership	2	4%	5
	Others	2	4%	
	Total Number	47		
<i>Interval 4</i>	Ambivalence about Becoming a Principal	11	19%	1
	Student Issues	8	14%	3
	Meetings & Committees	7	12%	4
	Time Management	3	5%	5
	Balancing All Demands	3	5%	5
	Student Discipline	3	5%	5
	Staff Issues	3	5%	5
	Parent Issues	2	4%	6
	School Functions	2	3%	6
	Wanting to Do More As an Intern	2	3%	6
	Finding a Mentor	1	2%	7
	Others	14	24%	
	Total Number	59		

<i>Interval 5</i>	Meetings & Committees	7	16%	1
	Leadership Challenges	5	12%	2
	Teacher Issues	4	9%	3
	Mediation	3	7%	4
	Student Discipline	3	7%	4
	Time Management	3	7%	4
	Staff Issues	3	7%	4
	New Responsibilities	3	7%	4
	Students	2	5%	5
	Student Teachers	2	4%	5
	Changing Roles	2	4%	5
	Making Mistakes	2	4%	5
	Others	6	14%	
	Total Number	45		
<i>Interval 6</i>	Meetings & Committees	10	18%	1
	Student Issues	8	14%	2
	Teacher Issues	3	6%	3
	Parent Issues	3	5%	3
	Staff Issues	3	5%	3
	Mediation	3	5%	3
	Accreditation Process	3	5%	3
	Feeling Overwhelmed	2	4%	4
	Changing Roles	2	3%	4
	Student Discipline	2	3%	4
	School Functions	2	3%	4
	Observations	2	3%	4
	Others	14	25%	
	Total Number	57		

In the next three months of the internship, the focus of concerns continued with issues around meetings and committees during interval seven, and then changed to the changing roles of the interns in interval eight. In interval nine and ten, the major issue was again meetings and committees, with changing roles and interviews for principal positions as the second major issue.

Some interns found it difficult to define their role. They feared embarrassment or worried about not "staying in my place" or figuring out what "my place" was, as an intern-not yet a principal and not a teacher

I will not chaperone with this principal again. She was looking for trouble where none existed . . . I could have "taken a responsible risk" and had a frank conversation with her about my concerns, but did not feel it was my place.

In the seventh interval, interns made five entries about problems with principals. One entry stated:

Principals: There have already been some situations that I have worked closely with My AP and have thought that I might go in a different direction than he has. One such incident I tried to work with him to go another direction with mixed success.

Table 3*Frequencies and Percentages of Internship Challenges During Second Three Months*

<i>Interval 7</i>	Meetings & Committees	7	12%	1
	Problems with Principals	5	8%	2
	Student Issues	5	8%	2
	Changing Roles	5	8%	2
	Mediation	4	7%	3
	Student Discipline	3	5%	4
	Staff Issues	3	5%	4
	Colleague Issues	3	5%	4
	Mentee/Student Teacher	3	5%	4
	Others' Perspective of My Changing Role	3	5%	4
	Uncertainty about Becoming a Principal	2	4%	5
	Others	19	31%	
	Total Number	62		
<i>Interval 8</i>	Changing Roles	7	13%	1
	Student Issues	6	11%	2
	New Responsibilities	5	9%	3
	Frustration with Principal	4	8%	4
	Meetings	3	6%	5
	Disseminating Information	3	5%	5
	Feeling Overwhelmed	2	4%	6
	Teacher Issues	2	4%	6
	Mediation	2	4%	6
	Student Discipline	2	4%	6
	Colleague Issues	2	4%	6
	Poor School Morale	2	4%	6
	Staying Focused on Internship	2	4%	6
	Others	13	24%	
	Total Number	55		

<i>Interval 9</i>	Meetings & Presentations	7	13%	1
	Changing Roles	6	11%	2
	Mentor/Principal Issues	5	9%	3
	Applying for Positions	4	8%	4
	Parent Issues	3	6%	5
	Teacher issues	3	5%	5
	How Others See Me	3	5%	5
	Observations	2	4%	6
	Assessments & Tests	2	4%	6
	Student/Parent/Principal Interaction	2	4%	6
	Student Issues	2	4%	6
	Others	17	31%	
	Total Number	56		
<i>Interval 10</i>	Meetings & Committees	8	19%	1
	Interviewing for Positions	5	12%	2
	Mentor/Principal Issues	5	11%	2
	Teacher Issues	4	9%	3
	Mediation	4	9%	3
	Changing Roles	3	7%	4
	Applying for Positions	2	5%	5
	Students	2	5%	5
	Time Management	2	5%	5
	Others	9	21%	
	Total Number	44		

In the final three months of the internship, interns only recorded their journals once a month. The topics of concern shifted to more personal issues, such as applying for principal positions. In interval twelve, only one topic was mentioned twice-CSAPS. The other challenges mentioned were consistent with those from previous entries: not getting a principal position; parent concerns; not getting interviews; finding a job; questioning the decision to become a principal; death of a student; principal mentor unavailable.

Table 4*Frequencies and Percentages of Internship Challenges During Final Three Months*

<i>Interval 11</i>	Applying for Positions	3	15%	1
	Meetings	3	15%	1
	Students	3	15%	1
	Changing Roles	2	10%	2
	Colleague Issues	2	10%	2
	Others	7	35%	
	Total Number	20		
<i>Interval 12</i>	CSAPs	2	17%	1
	Other	10	83%	
	Total Number	12		
<i>Interval 13</i>	Changing Roles	1		1
	Interviews for Principal	1		1
	Total Number	2		

Table 5 records the topics with the most entries for each interval

Table 5*Most Important Challenges During Internship**(Table Unavailable)*

Conclusions

The role of the principal has dramatically changed and the way aspiring principals are trained is being closely reviewed. Research shows there is a large demand for highly qualified administrators across the country and that schools of education are not graduating enough qualified student to replace principals and others that are retiring or changing careers. New leadership is essential for the change school systems need. The different knowledge and skills needed by 21st century principals will be as leaders of curricular change, data-driven decision-making, innovative and diversified instructional strategies, and the use of accountability models for staff and students. It will be necessary for institutions of higher education to revamp their principal preparation programs.

In order for change to be meaningful and lasting, sustainable leadership must be an integral part of the work of leaders. Average people can metamorphose into strong school leaders by incorporating characteristics of self-presentation into their own identities and reaffirming their new roles through public commitment to an identity. Lastly, preparing new principals through role socialization from teacher to administrator is time consuming and requires investments in energy, time, and attention for the duration.

Implications

This study provides insight into the change process of educators becoming leaders. The thirteen journal entries that interns made during their internship process revealed a shifting focus of challenges and concerns, and deep reflection about each. It is important to uncover the process of how interns think about challenges in schools, how they analyze their actions, whether they have the ability to see more effective actions and whether they can change their actions to initiate change among others. In the welter of school chaos, this process is extremely difficult to document, and has not appeared to a great extent in educational research.

This study is the beginning of the process of looking at change in the minds of new leaders, and further research can probe more deeply into this topic. More research can provide data to guide the restructuring of educational leadership programs, which can then produce more effective and transformative leaders. Schools across the nation are in dire need of enthusiastic, knowledgeable and effective leaders who can initiate and lead others to higher levels of educating.

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About the Authors

Dr. Donna Cooner is an Associate Professor and Program Chair for the Educational Leadership program in the School of Education at Colorado State University. She is also the Director for Educator Licensing. Her research interests include principal internships, work in professional development schools, new teacher and principal induction, and program evaluation. She is the author of *Becoming a Teacher in a Field-Based Setting*.

Contact Information:

Dr. Donna Cooner
Associate Professor, Colorado State University
School of Education
243 Education Building
Fort Collins, CO 80523-1588
970-491-5292
dcooner@cahs.colostate.edu

Rose Quinn is finishing a PhD in the interdisciplinary program of the College of Applied Human Sciences at Colorado State University. Her dissertation research is on the experience of men adopted as infants. She is a Nationally Certified Counselor and a Licensed Professional Counselor in Colorado. Her 12 years of teaching experience includes teaching technological and biological science courses and psychology courses.

Contact Information:

Rose Quinn
Research and Development Center
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO
970-491-3168
rquinn@cahs.colostate.edu

Dr. Ellyn Dickmann is an Associate Professor in Educational Leadership at Colorado State University. Her research interests include leadership development, police in schools and school safety.

Contact Information:

Dr. Ellyn Dickmann
Associate Professor
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80523
970-491-5292
Ellyn.dickmann@cahs.colostate.edu