

The Principal's Role in Teacher Development

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This study is based on qualitative data from interviews and observations with seven principals representing two urban high schools, two urban middle schools, and three elementary schools. The study analyzes the views held by these principals about what novice teachers need to learn and grow, and examines what these principals are doing to meet these needs. The study contributes to a better understanding of the principal's role in furthering novice teachers' professional growth. The principals' responses address three issues: What novice teachers need to learn, how they learn, and what principals should do to help novices grow professionally.

While it is generally assumed that the principal's role as instructional leader includes attention to and support of teachers' professional development (Glanz, 2005; Holland, 2004), the literature and research is surprisingly thin on what it is that principals should actually do to support such development, particularly of teachers in their early years of practice. While it is clear that principals must attend to novice teachers' instructional needs and performance, the knowledge and skills principals need to discharge this responsibility are not well understood or defined.

In an effort to better understand the principal's role in furthering novice teachers' professional growth, this study analyzes the views held by seven principals about what novice teachers need to learn and grow, and examines what these principals are doing to meet these needs.

Literature on the Principal's Role

It is now two decades since Hord (1988) outlined a role for principals as teacher educators. It is interesting that since that time there has not been scholarship or research that defines the principal's role in this way. Instead, scholars within the field of teacher education quickly turned to describing the principal's role as one of directing, overseeing and participating in teachers' professional development. Morine-Dersheimer

(2002), for example, in her editorial introduction to an issue of *Teaching and Teacher Education* that included articles on teachers' development, focused on teachers' need for principals who support professional development. Lieberman and Miller (1990) described the importance of principals' active involvement in teachers' development in professional practice schools. These examples illustrate a subtle but important shifting of focus from what the principal does to what the teacher needs. It is a distinction that can be argued as having deflected teacher educators' attention away from specifically delineating the principal's role in supporting teachers' development.

What attention that has been paid to the principals' role has come, perhaps not surprisingly, from scholars in educational administration. Liethwood (1992) described teacher development as "arguably the most central function of educational leadership" (p. 86). He went on to explain the difficulty principals face in fulfilling this function, saying:

"Even principals who acknowledge their responsibility to foster teacher development often claim that is not a function they feel capable of performing well" (p. 86). Nonetheless, many educational administration scholars recognize the principal's role in teacher development and link it to the popular notion that principals are instructional leaders (eg. Glanz, 2005). However, this

connection carries its own set of problems from a teacher education perspective in that it leads to a focus on how the principal's leadership affects students' learning outcomes rather than on teachers' developmental needs.

Among the works that focus specifically on the principal's role in furthering teachers' professional development are a study by Blase and Blase (1999) that presents data from an extensive qualitative study of what teachers identify as characteristics of principals who have had a positive effect on teachers' classroom instruction. The authors also identify strategies that principals use to effectively support teachers' development. Payne and Wolfson (2000) make a similar case for the principals' role in supporting teacher development from the perspective of principal practitioners. There are also two books specifically addressing the principal's role in teachers' professional development: Tallericco's (2005) *Supporting and Sustaining Teachers Professional Development: A Principal's Guide* and Lindstrom and Speck's (2004) *Principal as Professional Development Leader*.

Context of the Study

Seven principals participated in this study, representing two urban high schools, two urban middle schools, and three elementary schools—one each in an urban, near-urban, and suburban setting. These principals were all part of a study of collaborative leadership for school reform, the focus of which was to better understand relationships between collaboration in schools and teachers' learning and professional growth.

Information on how these seven principals perceive their role in helping new teachers learn and grow was collected over the period of a year, primarily through interviews, but also during informal conversations held during site visits and "shadowing" of the principals as they observed in new teachers' classrooms and met with these teachers to discuss their teaching. It is this

qualitative information that is summarized here, with the intention of raising questions at both theoretical and practical levels about principals' responsibilities for novice teachers' professional growth. The principals' responses address three issues: What novice teachers need to learn, how they learn, and what principals should do to help novices grow professionally.

What Do Novice Teachers Need to Learn?

School setting

The principals were unanimous in identifying novice teachers' need to learn, and learn quickly, about their particular school settings. According to the principals, novices' learning needs begin with immediate survival needs such as learning their way around the school—especially in the case of the large secondary schools. Novices also need to learn the details of school bureaucracy, such as how to complete electronic attendance and grade forms, or learning the daily bell schedule.

Beyond survival, principals noted that novices need to learn the social and cultural norms of the school. One principal, for example, mentioned the need for novices to know which doors to use to keep traffic flowing through the halls. Two principals observed that teachers need to learn how to work together in clusters, grade level or content area teams. And one principal said it is important for teachers to learn what to say when they call parents. The principals also mentioned more subtle dimensions of the schools' structures that teachers need to learn: such things as who are the unofficial leaders in the school, and which of their teaching colleagues are approachable and willing to share materials and ideas.

Several of the principals also mentioned that novices need to learn about the principal. One principal expects teachers to develop and understanding—and hopes for their appreciation—of her strong management skills. Another principal

was adamant in insisting that teachers share a commitment to her goal that the school “meet the total needs of the child,” and illustrated the point by telling of a teacher who sent a child who had missed breakfast to the principals office, knowing that “there are rules and there are rules,” and that a hungry child would not be learning much.” The point the principal was making is that teachers could count on her to interpret rules in ways that would meet the needs of teachers and of students.

It was often difficult to separate whether what teachers are really being asked to learn are the principals’ personal goals for the school, or a more general school mission. Take for example, the expectation of the principal of a primarily minority student high school that teachers work toward the “primary goal of the school” which is “learning what motivates minorities.” While this particular interest in motivating students appeared to be the principal’s own idea about how best to support the school’s larger mission of helping minority students be successful, it was unclear whether the principal or teachers understood the distinction.

Other cultures

The need for teachers—in this case both experienced and novice—to learn more about the cultures from which students come was also universally acknowledged by the principals. This agreement among them is no surprise given the diversity of the students in the schools in which they work. What is interesting, though, is the consistency of the principals’ views, to the extent that even the principal of the one suburban elementary school which has well over ninety-five percent Anglo, middle class students, the principal—like her urban and near-urban counterparts—wants teachers to learn how to interpret the behaviors and understand the values of students from other cultures. Such learning includes information about the community in which students live. A couple of principals mentioned how important it is for teachers to get a sense of the community by

driving through it. One high school principal told of taking teachers on a narrated bus tour of the school community.

In addition to learning about the community, principals believe that teachers need to learn about the conditions of students’ home-life, and develop skills for involving the parents and maybe older siblings of students to help them succeed in school. One principal, for instance, said that the teachers in her school have learned that it does little good to send notes home or to phone the parents of many Hispanic children in the school. The teachers have learned that what works to get parents involved is a parent conference. Novice teachers in this school are given this information and are encouraged to hold parent conferences.

Teaching techniques

While not all of the principals talked specifically about novice teachers needing to learn specific techniques of teaching, this need was implied. The implications were in the form of references to criteria specified on the state mandated observation form used for teachers’ annual evaluations and also to district-level staff development efforts focused on particular instructional strategies.

The most frequent references to the need for teachers to learn teaching techniques included both elementary and secondary principals’ references to novices’ particular need for techniques of classroom management. One elementary principal also made mention of novices needing to learn the “lesson cycle” that is promoted in her district as a template for planning and delivering instruction.

It should come as no surprise that the most specific comments about particular teaching techniques that novices need to learn came from elementary principals. These principals tended to have a better sense of the content being taught by teachers and of the instructional strategies

teachers were using, and they also were managing smaller schools and therefore fewer faculty than their secondary counterparts. So while a secondary principal talked generally about teachers needing to include critical thinking in their lessons, elementary principals talked of working directly with teachers as they learned how to pace their delivery of material in a new reading series, or of working with a teacher on how to make-up the work for a student who had been absent for eleven days.

People skills

Two of the elementary principals referred to new teachers needing to learn and refine skills of interacting effectively with others. For one principal this means learning to care about the children in ways that enabled the teacher to become better at identifying and meeting the needs of children that extend beyond the academic. In talking about how teachers must care about the children, the principal revealed how similar her view of such caring is to the nurturing provided by a good parent. She said that a teacher must have the sensitivity to solve the kinds of non-academic problems that the kids bring with them when they come to school. "If you don't have the time," she said, referring to teachers, "if you don't have the caring necessary to work with the total child, it's like an empty home."

Another elementary principal referred to skills that novice teachers need to learn in order to be able to deal effectively with parents. She is concerned that her teachers develop the ability to discuss children's problems with their parents in an informative as well as a sensitive way. She is also concerned that novice teachers gain the self-confidence that allows them to be more comfortable in their dealings with parents.

This concern about novice teachers needing to learn how to work with parents is the closest that any of the principals came to talking about novice teachers having learning needs

when it comes to their ability to work with other adults. The omission is interesting because all of the principals, both elementary and secondary, described their expectations that teachers work with other teachers in clusters, grade level, or content area groups, and that teachers also work with administrators.

Empowerment

There was evidence that all three of the elementary principals and one of the middle school principals believed that teachers should become more self-directed. It is interesting, though, that these principals make no distinctions between novice and experienced teachers' needs for autonomy and decision-making ability, nor of any process by which teachers can increasingly assume such power as their learning and experience increase. In the middle school, for instance, the principal organized the school into interdisciplinary clusters of five teachers, with each cluster responsible for one-hundred and fifty students. While the principal talked of the enthusiasm teachers, parents and students have for the cluster arrangement, he did not distinguish between its impact on novice and experienced teachers.

Among the elementary principals, there was an impression that they too, have not given much thought to the differing needs for independent decision-making by novice and experienced teachers. The principals' efforts to empower their teachers were directed toward the faculty as a homogeneous whole. During the course of the study one principal began to encourage her teachers to meet without her. Another has, on several occasions, been explicit with teachers about decisions they need to be making for themselves, and about the support they can expect from her for their decisions. The third elementary principal talked of teachers' needs to become "empowered," and of their need to learn to analyze and make decisions about their own instructional practice. She expressed her belief that teachers need the chance to be self-directed professionals.

How Do Novice Teachers Learn?

Theory vs. Practice

Invariably, the principals expressed their belief that novice teachers learn much, and learn best, from experience. Perhaps the most dramatic expression of this general belief was by a principal who described “the clinical approach to teaching” in which prospective teachers are actually working in schools and classrooms as a major part of their preparation program. He likened this training to that of physicians where the medical students learn by treating actual patients with a senior physician directing them to

Stick your hand in here, let’s feel for this part of the body...Let’s get your hands in there and feel it and touch it. Let’s get the different layers of skin and pull them back and let you see it and touch it.

Teachers, this principal maintained, need the same kind of experiential learning; they “need to see for themselves.” Or, as another principal said of how novice teachers learn “You just don’t know until you get in there and experience it and do it.”

Not only did principals believe that the most effective teacher preparation involves extensive experience in actual classrooms, they also believed that such experiences were the best way for beginning teachers to continue to develop their knowledge and skill. There was implicit (and occasionally explicit) recognition of the importance of mentors to support novice teachers’ on-the-job learning. One middle school principal thought back to his own experience as a novice teacher with his mentor, and said that he never would have made it as a teacher without the mentor’s help and support. Another principal leveled a sweeping criticism against programs that did not adequately prepare mentors to know how best to help novice teachers and did not provide mentors

with time to work with their novice protégées; she said, “What we are doing now is not cutting it, and we are losing a lot of good potential teachers.”

Related to the principals’ belief in the value of learning by experience was a corollary expression of their belief that there are some things about teaching which just cannot be taught. In this category were what might be described as personality traits such as “liking kids” or “really believing that all kids can learn.” The principals also suggested that skills of teaching are somehow acquired by a natural developmental process that doesn’t require any outside support or intervention. One principal described as “amazing” the difference between a teachers’ first and third year of teaching as a teacher becomes more confident and knows what to do. Another principal in an open elementary school says that teachers seem to learn by just being able to look around and see what is going on.

School’s influence

Several principals acknowledged what can be described as a socializing influence that the school culture exerts on novice teachers. Novices learn from their contacts with other teachers what the norms of behavior are in that school, for instance, whether teachers are expected to devote a lot of time to working in teams or whether individual work is more common. The principals recognized that while some of the contact among teachers is strictly business, there is also a social dimension that allows teachers to informally share information and experiences.

The impact of the size of a school was noted by the principals to affect the relative ease with which novice teachers are able to enter and participate in the school culture, and to learn what they need to know about the school. In large secondary schools, principals admitted that they themselves can’t be aware of all of the facets of the school culture. All but one of the middle and high school

principals expressed the opinion that their schools are difficult and demanding places to work. The fourth principal agreed that his school is demanding, but he also recognizes as a benefit of size the fact that teachers can become more knowledgeable about content and instruction in their content area by having the opportunity to interact with a number of other teachers in the same discipline.

Occasions for learning

The principals mentioned a number of opportunities or “occasions” that help novice teachers learn and grow professionally. The principals all agreed that a mentor teacher should be assigned to help new teachers. All of the elementary principals and two of the secondary principals also mentioned what a great help it is to novice teachers to observe in other teachers’ classrooms. In addition, individual help from the principal, particularly in dealing with individual students or with classroom management, was identified as a valuable way for novice teachers to learn.

Invariably, in-service presentations and workshops were mentioned as opportunities for all teachers, novice as well as experienced, to gain new information, particularly about policies and practices that the district wished to see implemented in the schools. The importance of teamwork was also mentioned, although again, novice teachers were not singled out as the only ones benefiting from collaborative structures. One secondary and one elementary principal said faculty interdisciplinary teams made it possible for teachers to discuss and solve problems of practice with their team members. One principal spoke of teachers engaging in “professional conversation” for such problem solving.

Feedback

A final way that principals saw novice teachers learning was through the feedback they receive at various levels. Most obvious to the principals and cited by almost all of them are

data from student performance on the state’s high-stakes standardized test. It is certainly not surprising that principals placed importance on the state testing data, since every principal, teacher and school in the state is evaluated on the basis of students’ performance on these tests. What is surprising, however, is that the principals acknowledged no difference in their expectations of novice and experienced teachers either in terms of students’ test scores or in their abilities to interpret test data..

Student test data were not the only means of feedback available to teachers. One principal mentioned several other important sources of feedback to which novice teachers need to pay attention. According to the principal, parents will usually let the teacher know if there is some problem. So also will a teacher’s colleagues. The principal explained that a teacher receives important information from her fellow teachers “...if everybody is coming in and wants to know how you do something, or if people are turning their backs on you when they see you coming.” Finally, this principal saw the classroom observation required for teacher evaluation providing important feedback to a teacher about the quality of her teaching and classroom management.

How Do Principals Help Novice Teachers Grow Professionally?

Views of help

The principals exhibited differing notions about the nature and sources of the help that they can provide new teachers. Taken collectively, the principals’ comments presented a polarized view of their roles and responsibilities in helping novice teachers.

One view of such help was that much of it comes from sources outside of the teacher, the principal, and even the school. In this view, much help comes in the form of advice from an assigned mentor and from district-level staff

development. The principal's responsibility is to assign mentors and to identify teachers' staff development needs. Even more limited is the teacher's role in deciding what his own learning needs might be. Such a view sees helping teachers learn and grow as essentially external to the everyday responsibilities of principals. It also sees such help in hierarchical terms; the novice teacher is a compliant recipient of help, subservient to and dependent upon the givers of such help.

An alternative view of help is that it is generated within collaborative relationships—of principal and novice, of novice and mentor teacher, or of novice and other teaching colleagues. In this view the situations of actual practice within the particular school present questions and problems about teaching for which collaborating colleagues seek answers. While answers may come from outside sources, decision-making about the usefulness and utility of those answers is left to the teachers and administrators affected by the decisions. In such a view, the principal as well as the novice assumes the role of learner, each seeking to further their professional knowledge by addressing cases of teaching practice. This view assumes the working relationship of adults, each with her own knowledge and experience base, and each respecting what the other brings to the task at hand.

Observing instruction

The principals saw observation of instruction as the best help that can be given to a novice teacher. As mentioned above, classroom observation is part of the state system for evaluation of teaching, in fact, it is a legislative mandate that every teacher be observed annually. The principals believed that observing what novice teachers are doing in their classrooms provided an opportunity to offer "tips" on effective teaching methods that the principals gained from their own teaching experience. Perhaps, not surprisingly, elementary principals described such tips in terms of particular instructional strategies, while

secondary principals spoke in more general terms of classroom management or higher order thinking skills.

The principals saw themselves not only as the ones doing the observations and offering suggestions, but also as facilitators of a variety of observation options. Principals talked of arranging occasions for novice teachers to visit experienced teachers, of arranging for a teacher needing help with a particular area to observe a teacher skilled in that area, and for teachers to observe a colleague using new materials or instructional strategies.

Specific strategies

The principals also mentioned strategies other than observing in classrooms that they use to help teachers learn and grow professionally. One such strategy was offering teachers what several of the principals referred to as "strokes." While not all the principals used that term, they all mentioned the importance of giving teachers individual recognition. Principals referred to such examples as sending personal notes of appreciation or recognition of something the teacher has done, or complimenting the teacher for receiving some award or recognition, or recognizing a teacher's accomplishments in faculty meetings or to school district officials.

The principals also mentioned a number of specific ways they help teachers improve their practice. One strategy mentioned by two principals was providing new teachers with instruction on the criteria used on the state evaluation of teaching. Such instruction included specific details and examples of teaching techniques that constitute excellent practice. Another strategy mentioned by an elementary principal was for the principal to provide demonstration lessons. This principal acknowledged her underlying assumption that the principal should be a "master teacher" and therefore qualified to demonstrate excellent teaching. Another general strategy to

facilitate novice teachers' professional development was mentioned by another elementary principal. She takes it upon herself to remove what she called "distractions." In her view, ensuring that only the minimum of "paperwork" is required of her teachers, and that they do not have an extensive meeting and committee schedule, frees them to focus on their primary instructional role. Another principal mentioned that he finds it helps novice teachers to meet with them individually and discuss their professional goals and what can be done to meet them.

Limitations

The principals generally acknowledged that the help they actually give falls short of what they wish they could do for their novice teachers. The principals attributed this discrepancy to the severe time limitations they face as they try to fulfill all of their duties. All the principals said that they wish they could spend more time in classrooms helping teachers. While all of the principals acknowledged the time constraints within which they work, one high school principal also mentioned limitations imposed by his lack of knowledge in some content areas. Therefore, he questioned his ability to provide useful instructional assistance to teachers in those content areas. His solution was to delegate most of the responsibility for helping novices to mentor teachers.

Finally, three of the principals spoke of dealing with the limitations they face by executing an informal process of triage. Making decisions about how best to spend their time helping novice teachers and where these efforts can best be placed is informed by a realistic sense of having to cut one's losses. In some cases this means the kind of tough decision made by one principal that a new teacher who wasn't responding to the help she had been given by her mentor and other teachers was not qualified to teach. The principal redirected his efforts to getting this teacher to leave teaching or, at least his school. Such deci-

sions follow quite naturally from the principals' general belief that there are some things about teaching that can't be taught, and that good teachers are somehow naturally endowed with the ability to teach.

Conclusion

If we assume that the principals who participated in this study are representative of their colleagues, they offer three important insights into the role principals play in the professional development of new teachers. The first of these insights is that principals are well aware of the professional development needs of the new teachers in their schools. The second is that the role principals play in meeting those needs tends to be one of setting expectations and ensuring that structures are in place to support new teachers, rather than one of direct assistance. The third insight is that principals delegate much of the responsibility for novice teachers' development to mentors, staff development programs, or to the novice teachers themselves.

Given the demands on their time, it is not surprising that principals provide little direct assistance to novice teachers. Moreover, much of the direct assistance they do provide is done so in the context of bureaucratically mandated evaluation of teaching. It is important to recognize that such a high-stakes evaluative context is more likely to foster compliance with specified standards of practice than the kind of experimentation necessary for true professional growth.

For principals to have a meaningful and productive role in the professional development of new teachers, they must be mindful not only of the needs of new teachers in general but also as individuals. Principals must also carefully monitor the structures such as mentoring and staff development to which they delegate responsibility for meeting new teachers' professional development needs in order to ensure that these structures are, in fact, meeting those needs. Finally,

principals must recognize that they do, indeed, have an important role to play in the professional development of new teachers.

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