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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore the kinds of support and challenge that new school leaders need in the early years of their career. Semi-structured in-depth interviews and appreciative inquiry were used to collect the stories of new school leaders. The study outlined the kinds of support that were productive in helping school principals learn their craft and shape their leadership style. The project enriches the literature on mentoring by providing the voices of new school leaders to add depth to the characteristics of successful mentoring programs.

Keywords

educational leadership, leadership, leadership development, mentoring

Introduction

In response to the increasing need for school leaders, numerous leadership development programs have been and are being established (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). While there has been debate about the nature of the leadership development programs (Murphy, 2003; English, 2007), it is clear that one of the important components of many of these programs is support for new school leaders as they embark on their responsibilities (Gray et al., 2007).

The two tasks facing beginning principals described by Daresh and Playko (1997) are surviving and becoming an educational leader. Survival centers on being able to manage the technical side of the task, grasp the social and cultural norms of the school, and to be aware of the leader's special role in the school. In an exploration of the school leadership challenges and reasons why principals leave their position, Barth (1990) and Duke (1988) list the sacrifices in personal life, stress, the withering array of personal interactions, the politics of dealing with various constituencies, the tendency of managerial concerns to supersede leadership functions, fatigue, lack of preparation for the realities of being a principal, desire to care for

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others placing demands on time and emotional energy that were sometimes impossible to meet, the feeling that they could never relax or let their hair down, that they were always 'on', and lack of support from superiors. After interviewing successful principals, Duke (1988) concluded that the challenge was not so much in becoming educational leaders as sustaining educational leadership over time.

On the basis of their work with urban school superintendents, Jentz and Murphy (2005: 359) described what they came to call the lost leader syndrome: 'No matter how capable or well prepared, managers regularly find themselves confronting bewildering events, perplexing information, or baffling situations that steal their time and hijack their carefully planned agendas'. Even the highly successful leaders who presented themselves as confident and with a take-charge appearance were confronted with situations in which they found themselves not sure about what to do.

The contradictions involved in school leadership were outlined by Duke (1988). He interviewed highly competent principals about their work, and found that the position brings tremendous satisfaction and, at the same time, overwhelming frustration. The principals he interviewed 'cared about the needs of others, but they felt overburdened by the weight of their responsibilities; they had diverse interests, but they were drained by competing demands; they enjoyed recognition, but they felt pressure from high expectations placed on them' (p. 308).

In a narrative way, Barth (1990) described his experiences as a principal in terms of wondering what was accomplished at the end of each day and the exhaustion from emotional stress. He reports that the stress that principals face has increased with the number and variety of problems that are being faced: 'The bottom line is that the work life of the school principal is depleting. Depletion of leadership leads to depletion of faculty, of the school, of community, and ultimately of the learning experiences of students' (p. 66).

Leadership is a difficult and deeply personal task. During the formative early period in their first leadership position, new leaders need to be nurtured as they face challenges and make hard decisions in their work. Daloz (1986) framed this nurturing in terms of providing support and challenge simultaneously. Support has the connotation of holding and carrying, but also includes affirmation of the new leader's experience. Challenge serves to hold a mirror for the leader to see him or herself by introducing contradictory ideas and questioning tacit assumptions. In this way, challenge creates tension that can lead to growth. One of the important tasks of the educational leadership community is to find ways to provide these crucial elements for new leaders. This project examined leadership support and challenge through interviews of leaders in the first years in head of school positions, seeking to paint a picture, in their words, how some of the elements of support and challenge can be carried out. This study investigated the kinds of support that was productive in helping school principals learn their craft and shape their leadership style, thereby developing into successful educational leaders.

Leadership Development

To understand the challenges required for good educational leadership, several aspects of leadership development are reviewed. These aspects include the different approaches to leadership development program structure, learning from experience, mentoring, and leadership development metaphors.

Leadership Program Emphasis

The literature on leadership development outlines the approaches taken in a variety of training settings as well as in personal development programs. These programs fall into four types: training through skill-building, leadership development through feedback, training in leadership concepts, and training through formal personal growth experiences (Conger, 1992). In addition, leadership development through learning from experience (McCall et al., 1988; McCall, 1998) and mentoring are described. Successful programs are built on a mix of these activities.

The most commonly used approach to leadership development is training in the skills associated with successful leaders—interpersonal communication, team building, coaching, and mentoring. Training in the simple task-versus-people-skill distinction was an early approach to leadership skill development. ‘Unfortunately, the identification of specific leadership skills requires breaking the process down into discrete and mechanical behaviors. Such a mechanistic and reductionist view discounts the “whole person” view of leadership’ (Csoka, 1996: 36.) This approach is useful in addressing some of the practical realities of leading.

A second approach to leadership development, emphasizing the use of feedback, assumes the trainee has some form of leadership style that can be strengthened. Using a variety of tests, questionnaires, and one-on-one feedback sessions, leaders receive information on their performance and interpersonal behaviors. Conger (1992) reported that the approach had the strongest effect on those who received feedback that contradicted their self-image and those who received positive feedback that was favorable and unexpected.

The conceptual training approach takes a larger view of leadership by exploring the range of possible leadership approaches (Csoka, 1996). It is based on the idea that knowing a concept allows one to act on it. This approach consists of training in the models and concepts which are synthesized into general principles and rules that provide the tools for responding to rapidly changing environments. This training allows leaders to have a choice in finding options to organizational challenges. In addition it builds leader confidence and diminishes feelings of isolation by giving leaders a sense of the larger world of leadership thinking (Frederick and Dalglis, 2000).

A fourth approach to leadership development is through formal personal growth experiences founded on physical adventure activities and psychological exercises. This approach is based on the belief that leaders are people that are in touch with their dreams and talents and will act on them. The activities generate reflection on personal values and desires. The reflection is designed to free the inner potential of the leader to act on those values and desires: ‘While most leadership training doesn’t work to change the individual, such programs are designed to provide experiences that give us a deeper sense of self-awareness—to tap into our hidden talents—and help develop the personal characteristics, like self-confidence, that separate hard-charging, success-driven corporate managers from leaders’ (Csoka, 1996: 35). Ralph Frederick of General Motors reported: ‘In our experience [leadership development] has to do with letting people reflect on and reexamine things they have come to believe about themselves, the organization and other people in the organization. It’s those beliefs and assumptions that drive their current behavior’ (cited in Lee, 1989: 21). Research studies carried out by Kempster (2006) as well as Amit et al. (2009) found that those who emerge as leaders proved to have had more leadership experiences in their youth, and that these experiences helped shaped their self-perception as leaders.

The current focus on standards-based leadership development programs in the United Kingdom and in North America, particularly in education, tends to emphasize the first and third

approaches—skill development and conceptual overviews (Murphy and Vriesenga, 2006; Riley and Mulford, 2007; Brundrett et al., 2006).

Learning from Experience

Johnson (2008) noted that the development of effective leaders depends on changing their mental models as much as relying on acquiring new information. Moreover, changing mental models is effected more by experiences that challenge existing meaning structures. When leaders were forced to critically evaluate their assumptions they were more likely to develop new ways of facing challenges.

The importance of deep reflective practice in leadership development is described by Lemley (1997) and Daresh (1997). Focusing on and clarifying leadership practice is a way of understanding and developing insight into what causes leaders to act the way that they do, particularly at a personal level. 'Professionals who think about what they do, why they do it, how to do it better, are likely to be more effective than their counterparts who react to problems as if each one was a new experience . . . If leaders learn to reflect on *what* decisions should be made and *for what reasons*, they are likely to become more adept at making effective decisions' (Daresh, 1997: 4).

Shamir and Eilam (2005) described the importance of the life-story approach in developing authentic leaders. Authentic leaders are those whose actions are based on values and convictions. They perform their leadership functions as self-expression and arrive at their values and convictions, not through imitation, but internalized through personal experiences. The values they hold are believed to be true, not just socially or politically correct. Shamir and Eilam suggest that that self-knowledge, self-concept clarity, and the incorporation of the leader's role into their self-concept are achieved through the construction of life-stories.

McCall (1998) contrasted two views of leadership and leadership development. He described the 'right stuff' model, where leaders are born with the raw material of leadership potential, and over time life's experiences refine those leadership qualities. When difficult situations are encountered the 'fittest' somehow survive. Becoming a good leader is the action of surviving all of the challenges that are placed in one's path. To find leaders in the right stuff model, we need to develop a list of leadership qualities and look for people that fit the criteria on the list. This important and common view is based on the assumptions that a person either has leadership abilities or does not, and the best will naturally rise to the top of the organization through the testing of their mettle.

In contrast to this 'darwinian' model, McCall (1998) proposed one in which leadership potential is not the demonstration of inherited assets, but rather the demonstration of the ability to acquire assets for future situations. This is a subtle but important distinction. Leaders are not those who pass all the tests, but those who learn from challenging experiences and are able to put that learning to use in future situations. McCall noted that the competencies that differentiate leaders from followers are the result of experiences, not their antecedent. Leaders in the right stuff model described above know how to respond to difficult situations. In the second, what he called an agricultural model, McCall asserted that leaders are those that have the ability to learn from experience and then use that in the future. This model focuses on raising strong leaders, not about eliminating the weak ones. While noting that it is impossible to produce leaders in a production line operation, Gardner (1990) wrote that we can promote leadership development by giving opportunities to potential leaders to learn through experience. Along with McCall, he believes that time and events, as well as mistakes and failures, can serve to develop leadership potential.

Mentoring New Leaders

Mentoring is an approach to supporting leadership development that is based on learning from experience: 'Mentoring links tradition with the future through helping the coming generation become its best' (Simon et al., 2003: 19). Mentoring can range from relationships in a business setting between a mature supervisor and younger subordinate in the same office to peers in different organizations separated geographically.

Kram (1985) describes the mentor relationship as one that enhances career development. McKenzie (1989) portrays mentoring as guiding an individual's personal and career goals. Using the metaphor of a journey to reflect on the mentoring relationship, Daloz (1986) sees the mentor as a trusted guide who helps through transitions in life. Walker and Stott (1994) define the mentor as helping a less experienced colleague with personal, professional and career guidance.

Mentoring can become confused with counseling or coaching. McKenzie (1989: vii) observed that counseling and coaching focus on transferring the ability to perform tasks; mentoring on the other hand 'is an interactive process that leads to the attainment of managerial potential'. Emotional bonds not present in the other two types of relationships characterize mentoring. Counseling is a relationship that focuses on defining problems and outlining solutions. This relationship lasts for a short time, typically a few hours. Coaching goes beyond counseling in that the coach works with the protégé to extend skills and develop new ones in a process that extends over a longer period of time. Mentoring has more of a relationship rather than task focus, and often lasts from one to two years and emphasizes longer-range expertise.

Leadership Development Metaphors

While program descriptions are important to shaping and carrying out the work of leadership development, exploring the metaphors that subtly inform these activities is vital. Kouzes (1998) illustrates leadership development through the description of viewing an art show with an artist friend. The friend observes that there are three periods in an artist's life—painting exterior landscapes, painting interior landscapes, and painting themselves. Artists only begin to have their own style when they paint themselves. Kouzes (1998: 65) notes that emulating the great leaders is being stuck at the first period:

Few artists and few leaders ever make it to this third period. I don't fault only leaders for this lack of awareness—it's endemic to our cultural assumptions about leadership practice and development. After all, how many leadership development processes are we aware of that insist every leader spend the equivalent of 40 days and 40 nights in the desert discovering who he or she is? We are so focused on action and results that we give almost no attention to reflection and soul-searching.

In her work with a group of teachers, Mullen (1997) used the image of breaking the circle of one. This picture is helpful in visualizing supportive leadership development. Having someone to help a developing leader examine their own beliefs and deal with the organizational struggles they face does indeed break the circle of one. Another image comes from Vaill (1989) who used the metaphor of permanent white water to describe the milieu in which leaders must work. Having a guide to help choose the direction of the watercraft is often vital to safe passage. Vaill's metaphor is useful because, while we hope that the turbulent stretches will turn into calmer waters, he is suggesting that this is not the case. A third metaphor was provided by a mentor who saw herself walking alongside a colleague in the first year of being a principal (Boerema, 1999). These metaphors

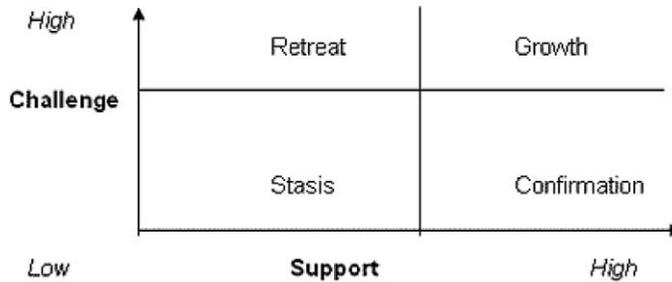


Figure 1. Effective teaching and mentoring
Source: Daloz (1986).

help us to understand and feel the parts of leadership development that are supportive, in the sense of not being alone. We can also sense the guiding nature of walking together as down a path. The experienced educator has been here before and helps the protégé decide what choice to make at the forks in the road. Having someone who knows the pitfalls and give a sense of direction can help the new principal in their leadership activities.

Writing from the context of minority and non-traditional managers, Morrison (1992) maintains that effective leadership development programs have three components in the same relative proportions—challenge, recognition, and support. The challenge component provides opportunities to learn lessons that can be used to perform at higher levels. Recognition includes acknowledgment and rewards, while support is made up of acceptance and understanding. In the area of support, she includes collegiality, acceptance, advocacy, permission to fail, information, feedback, flexibility, and stress relief.

Varying combinations of challenge and support, in the conceptualization of Daloz in Figure 1, can lead to retreat, stasis, confirmation or growth. Growth, the goal of mentoring, occurs in environments in which there is a combination of high support and high challenge.

Methods and Data

To arrive at a deeper understanding of challenge and support in leadership development, semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to collect the stories of new school leaders. This approach was chosen to reveal the ‘taken-for-granted visions and versions of reality that make up people’s day-to-day life-world, bringing their unquestioned assumptions, views, and beliefs out in the open and displaying them for inspection’ (Stringer, 1996: 59). In-depth interviewing (Mishler, 1986; Rubin and Rubin, 1995) is an activity that provides one ‘with a deeper understanding of the issues, structures, processes, and policies that imbue participants’ stories . . . [and] give a fuller appreciation of the complexities and difficulties of change’ (Seidman, 1998: 112).

The questions which guided the interviews were based on an appreciative inquiry approach. Appreciative inquiry is an mode to studying and working with organizations and individuals that reveals forces or aspects that are life giving; focusing on what is positive rather than problems (Cooperrider, 1990; Bush, 1995). In his description of how appreciative inquiry can be used in interviews, Bush (1995: 19) noted that ‘getting stories that people have about a topic is what is most important . . . Fresh images and insight come from exploring the real stories people have about themselves and others at their best’. The appreciative inquiry approach was chosen for use

because stories that surface during the interview and conferences give us images that can change the way we think and act.

Interviews were carried out in 1999 with a purposive sample of administrators in independent schools in British Columbia, Canada. Education in Canada is a responsibility of the provinces, each province having a unique educational system. Independent schools have operated in British Columbia for over 150 years. During a campaign to win provincial funding for their schools, the group decided to refer to themselves as 'independent' schools rather than 'private' schools to remove the connotations of elitism. Independent schools operate under their own authority.

The sample consisted of eight school administrators. At the time of the interviews, all of them had fewer than three years of experience as principals. The sample also included those that had left the principalship after fewer than three years of experience in the role. This sample was chosen to get a sense of the kind of support required by principals that were just starting in a senior administrative position, and the support that those that had relatively short experience would have liked early in their tenure as well as the continuing support they needed as they developed their leadership ability.

The in-depth interviews were to gather information about each principal's experience with support. Three initial prompts or questions were given to each person interviewed.

- (1) Describe a time when you felt supported in a new task that you took on. What were some of the key elements of that support?
- (2) Describe ways in which you felt supported in your role as a new principal.
- (3) If you were going to help a new principal during his or her first year of service, what kinds of things do you see yourself doing for that person?

Follow-up questions for clarifications were given to keep the conversation flowing. The major limitation of using open-ended questions of this nature is the volume of material that is generated during the interviews (Palys and Atchison, 2008). The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed using open coding, followed by axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Findings

Entering into the lives and experiences of those interviewed and listening to the deeply personal stories from colleagues who experienced both joy and loneliness in their work as school leaders was an enriching and enlightening activity. The interview data provides a picture of how leaders experience support and challenge.

Support

When interviewees were asked to describe times when they felt supported in their work, their stories of support described many instances of actions by others that were helpful. The supportive role included listening, expressing concern for the protégé's well-being, giving encouragement, affirming the work of the protégé, and recognizing the uniqueness of each one.

Listening played a large role in the experience of being supported. Almost all of those interviewed referred, at least once, to being listened to, even as simple as someone saying, 'I understand'. One principal in his first year working in a relatively remote school said, 'I haven't had

a lot of people to talk to here, but I have called people up on the phone just to talk to a couple of times'. Another, in her first year observed, 'Sometimes, if I have a problem like a disciplinary situation or something with a teacher that I had a concern about, [it was good] to have another ear, another point of view'.

The lack of having someone willing to listen was also expressed.

[I would like to have] someone that I can go to when I am in trouble. And I don't know if that is just a new principal's thing necessarily. In my second year there were some board problems, and I didn't really know exactly what they were; they kind of evolved. I didn't really know where to go, because you don't want to go to somebody totally outside and disclose confidential information.

Support was also evident in expressions of concern for the well-being of the school leader. One principal observed that he felt the demands of the job were heavy, but recognition by his school board was important. 'From the first day on they said, "You have a difficult task, we are there, we're behind you one hundred percent, we're going to help you walk through this"'. A second principal reported, 'I guess the people that have been really supportive are some of the board members and the staff. The staff said, "Be careful, we don't want to lose you"'.

The encouragement received from respected colleagues or superiors was perceived as support by several principals. One described support in her leadership of a new program: 'It was my principal encouraging me, giving me positive feedback as the [new learning assistance] program got going. It was just somebody that was not necessarily on your back'. Another received encouragement to apply for a principalship: 'He gave me a lot of encouragement, he said, "You can do it. You have the gifts for it"'. And I guess that's one of the reasons that [I applied for the principalship]'.

Affirmation, while similar to encouragement, was also reported as an important form of support. Hearing from members of the teaching staff, board members, or parents, that one was doing good work at the school was an important source of support for principals. Feedback on performance was seen as a form of affirmation: 'When I started the new learning assistance program at the school I was given positive feedback [on how] the program was going'. Another observed, 'What did support look like? I think it looked like people coming to me for advice or support for themselves or for affirmation in their own work. And I realized they trusted me to give that to them'. Affirmation was as simple as, 'I remember often talking to parents after chapel and they would say, "It's so nice to have you here"'.

Particularly during difficult times, affirmation was important: 'Especially when crises happened, [the board was] very supportive and they affirmed the decision-making that I did during that time'. One expressed the importance of getting affirmation in terms of feedback, 'You don't necessarily get any thanks for the work you're doing. You know, that would help. I know we're not working here for strokes, but you do have to know where you stand with your board'.

Affirmation was also seen in the acceptance of new principals by peers into their leadership roles: '[W]hen I was new, I felt accepted, and I don't know why, because I sure didn't feel that I was worthy of that but it was really important. And I see that now, how important that is, even as a newcomer, you know you're part of the group. You don't have all the answers, but you're there'.

Two principals noted that it was important for a mentor to understand the uniqueness of the person in the principal's office and the uniqueness of the school situation. While there are common experiences in educational leadership, each school situation and each leadership style is unique. It was important to them that this was recognized.

Many principals reported that an important element of support was being able to count on someone that was familiar with the principal's situation that they could call at any time: 'I think [it's important to] designate somebody to just keep in touch, you know, to call every once in awhile, to ask, "Okay, how are things going?"'. One new leader described the support that he received from a colleague nearby: 'He gave me a call in the first week of school or so to touch base. We had lunch. He kind of wanted to see where I was coming from and develop a relationship. So that's been personal support. I can call him and ask for help and get it'.

Several reported a lack of support in this area. 'I would have wanted someone who would become familiar with my situation so that as things happened I could talk to them and say, "What do you think of this?" or "What would you suggest in this situation?"'.

Being part of a network of school leaders that faced similar challenges was important to several of those interviewed. This support was seen both in formal organizational connections as well as personal networks: 'When I first moved there, I was really relieved to see that the school was part of some larger organization . . . There needed to be something behind you. I felt like the [the organization] was there, and they were very willing to talk to me about things that I was struggling with'.

Finally, support was seen as providing information and resources. This was given by board members, colleagues, or previous principals. '[I would like] access to, or guidance to access to the literature, because there's so much good literature out there'.

One of the saddest aspects of the interviews was to hear the quiet loneliness that many principals felt because their role as principal tended to isolate them from colleagues, staff, and community members. When asked about support, one principal replied, 'If anything, I've been lonely. [Long pause.] I'm drawing a blank. I don't usually draw a blank'. Another said,

I guess, that's one of the, not complaints, but, in administration you live in sort of a, well, you're isolated. Since I have been hired I have been going to meetings, and implemented some changes. I've done some things. I don't hear about it first hand, whether things are going well, whether things should be changed. Well, you hear about it if things should be changed. But gradually little snippets come to me that tell that this community is accepting what I am doing or likes what I am doing. But it has been lonely that way.

Another described the loneliness they saw in colleagues: 'I have gone to a lot of these different principals' conferences and just hear the loneliness of the position. Now sometimes that's because we take ourselves too seriously or we take what everybody says too seriously but that's the human nature of the position too'.

One of the primary sources of growth is through supportive interactions. The interviews showed this to include the affective forms of listening, expressing concern for the leaders' well-being, giving encouragement, affirming their work, and recognizing the uniqueness of each one. Support was also reported in the tangible ways of checking in regularly, helping with getting connected to a network of other school administrators, and providing useful information.

Challenge

The interview questions did not ask about the role of challenge in growth, yet this theme emerged in the analysis of the transcripts. One principal who left the profession shortly after being interviewed noted:

But I think I didn't do some things because a lot wasn't expected of me. They expected me to be a decent teacher and to get the forms in on time. [It would have helped] if I could have been aware of some of the better things, some of the exciting things that some of the principals were doing in their schools.

Activities that play a role in providing challenge included: giving professional and practical advice, help with prioritizing, giving a reality check, giving performance feedback, and help in reframing or refocusing situations.

Virtually every person interviewed had stories and examples of receiving advice that was helpful from someone:

I remember sitting down with him, sharing some of the stuff that we had talked about at our [leadership] course, particularly when it comes to sort of sharing, setting the vision for the school . . . One of the things that he said to me was, 'Your skin is too thin'. And that has stayed with me since that day . . . In a way he was saying, 'Let some of these things roll off you shoulders. Don't take things quite so seriously as they might appear. Try not to take it so personally . . . try to see the bigger picture of the vision, of the school'. In fact after he left, after the leadership review was done, he sent me a brass apple, it's this thick (indicates with fingers half an inch) it's hollow, but the skin on it weighs a ton. He wrote, 'May this be a reminder'. It sits on my computer as a reminder that I do tend to see things as somehow my fault or I'm responsible for it.

Conflicting demands between home and school as well as within the school and the heavy workload create difficulties with deciding what should be done first. The challenge to make choices intentionally, rather than by default, was seen as important: 'I'd have to admit that the start of this year was pretty hectic. There was the age-old problem of not giving my family the time that they need'.

Conflicting interests in a school can cause confusion. Several principals mentioned the importance of having someone to tell them that what they were going through was normal or that their viewpoint was reasonable. This was a form of reality check for the new leaders:

She would say, 'Well, you know, that's not unique to your school. It happens everywhere'. Just for her to say that to me, that it was all right. This was not something totally brand new that no one else has gone through before. It was really important for me to hear that.

Many principals mentioned the frustration of not being sure of the quality of their work, especially how it was seen by the board members of their schools. The lack of feedback on their performance left them wondering what they needed to work on to improve their practice. 'That was one thing, by the way, I was not happy about. I wasn't evaluated once by my board when I was there. I kept asking for it'. The need for this feedback was seen to be an important aspect of challenge for growth. Frequently, principals reported that they needed help in seeing a situation in a new way. Reframing or refocusing by friends or spouse was helpful.

While a significant portion of the interviews discussed forms of support, challenging interactions were also reported. These included receiving professional and practical advice, getting help with prioritizing, having a reality check, performance feedback, and help in re-framing or refocusing situations. The interviews were a rich source of observations and stories about being supported and guided.

Discussion

Leaders at the forefront of educational institutions face a complex managerial and leadership terrain. While training for this work can begin in leadership development programs, it is believed that many of the competencies needed by successful principals are best acquired on the job. Supportive relationships can help new administrators as they develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions that they need to lead successful schools.

Daloz (1986) and Morrison (1992) indicated that two important aspects for effective leadership development are support and challenge. In the visualization of the effects of support and challenge, Daloz suggests that an appropriate mix of the two for growth is to have both high support and high challenge: 'If we are to believe that good mentorship can be learned, at least in part, then it is in our interest to expand our capacities and deepen our sensitivity' (p. 215). The transcripts of the interviews provide examples of how principals have been supported and challenged in their work by the people around them.

The analysis of the interviews confirms some of the leadership support activities presented in the literature, as well as suggesting new ideas. More importantly, the stories add depth to our understanding of successful supporting relationship by providing the voices and words of those struggling to be successful in new leadership positions.

New leaders need people to listen to them. In addition to listening, they need to be shown concern for their well-being, and given affirmation and encouragement. But it is important that those who provide this support have experienced the challenges of leadership themselves; in other words, they must have found their own way through their difficulties to establish their credentials. In addition, new leaders also need help in becoming connected to networks, as well as given information to help them be successful.

New leaders also recognize the importance of being challenged. When reflecting on support, they noted that being given a reality check or being challenged to reframe or refocus a situation was an important element in helping them in their tasks. They also reported on the importance of receiving professional and practical advice, and help with prioritizing.

The stories of support and challenge during the first years also point out the need for ongoing guidance. Leadership development doesn't end with the conclusion of the licensure or degree program. While programs provide a set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions based on course and internship experiences, the reality of being thrust into a leadership position requires personal support to face the difficult decisions.

Many of the stories and anecdotes reported came from informal discussions. While formal mentoring programs are important for supporting leadership development, it would seem that telephone calls and the informal conversations at conferences and workshops also play a significant and often serendipitous role in supporting and challenging new leaders.

Almost every principal that was interviewed mentioned the issue of loneliness. It almost seems to be endemic to the office of school administrator, especially in small schools. A question requiring further investigation is if loneliness occurs in this position because the kinds of people that accept the principalship tend to work alone, or whether the power and responsibility implicit in the role isolate principals.

While the current focus on standards-based leadership development addresses the important need for leaders to have the requisite skills and knowledge to carry out their tasks as heads of school, the interviews suggest that developing capable leaders goes deeper. The development of leadership dispositions requires intense personal work. While this study had a limited evidence

base with only eight interviews, it is suggestive that program elements that provide support and challenge are vital in helping leaders develop the inner strength and vision to lead educational institutions. Formal and informal support that assists new leaders as they face the inevitable challenges early in their careers is needed for this essential element of leadership development.

Conclusion

The analysis of the interviews confirms some of the supportive activities presented in the literature on leadership development. More importantly, the stories add depth to our understanding of successful supportive relationships by providing the voices and words of those finding their way as leaders.

One of the ways that we can improve leadership preparation practices is through providing both formal and informal supports for new leaders as they put what they have learned in their preparation programs into practice. This project adds to the literature on leadership development detailing the activities of those who are helpful in supporting and challenging new school leaders as they grow in their craft of leading schools. These characteristics are embedded in the voices and stories of young leaders.

Educational leadership is a complex enterprise. Beginning principals can be overwhelmed with the demands of the task. Supportive roles that ‘break the circle of one’, that have experienced leaders ‘walking alongside’ new principals, helping them ‘connect their voice and their touch’ can provide the support and direction that school leaders need.

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