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The principalship in an era of transformation

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Abstract (Summary)

Drawing on previous analyses, emergent themes concerning the evolving role of the principal in several countries are identified, focusing especially on the manner in which the policy context of educational organizations is leading to a decentralization of management and the resulting impact on the administrative practice of principals. Some of the implications of these changes for the preparation and development of principals are suggested. The transformation of the principalship has been stimulated by changes in the policy context of schools. The self-managed school will require the leadership that has moral, technical and educational foundations. Whether a single person, the principal, will be able to fulfill these diverse functions is open to question.

Full Text (5108 words)

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As the authors in this issue (nated in parentheses) and other analysts of reform have shown, "the last few years have seen change on an unprecedented scale" (Weindling); and "the scope and pace of change in education at the start of the 1990s is nothing short of breathtaking" (Caldwell). At the same time, as the seriousness of education's problems become clearer, it appears that this already rapid rate of reform is accelerating. What we know is that these international efforts at reform promise fundamentally to alter our conception of education and our understanding of schooling. Indeed, if current efforts to restructure schooling take root, nearly every element of the current educational enterprise will be transformed.

The component that holds our attention herein is the principalship. To date, there has been a good deal of conceptual work on the role of the head in tomorrow's schools [1]. Others have drawn pictures of the principalship in the future from the reform documents that have dominated the educational landscape for the past decade [2]. Few investigators, however have begun to examine the question empirically [3]. It is here where the authors in the volume add most to our understanding of restructuring and school leadership; they provide glimpses of how principals' roles are changing in response to the overhaul of deep-seated notions of schooling. By addressing the issue from five different perspectives, they considerably enrich our understanding of the type of leadership needed for the twenty-first century.

In this concluding article, we build on the work of our colleagues--especially those in this issue--to provide a macro-level view of the activity unfolding in educational administration throughout the world. We acknowledge at the outset the limitations of this analytic approach, especially the fact that the search for patterns masks important contextual differences. Our belief is that the micro-level analyses provided by the authors herein provide alternative prisms for viewing the principalship in this era of transformation and that together the two approaches provide a useful framework for examining emerging changes in the role of the school head. The article is organized as follows. In the first section we examine the context for changes in the role of school heads. We then turn our attention to the changing nature of the principalship itself. In the final section we draw implications for the preparation and professional development of principals for tomorrow's schools.

THE CONTEXT OF CHANGE

It is obvious from the data that the ro!e of the head has changed, largely because new legislation has changed both the internal and external context (Weindling).

PRESSURES FOR REFORM

Elsewhere the causes for the educational reforms of the 198Os 4! and 1990s 5! have been considered. Based on that work, and the analyses provided in this I issue, we discern six forces propeling fundamental changes in the policy world surrounding schools. Increasing inzportance ofeducation. As the world has moved from an industrial to an information age, "the significance of education has intensified dramatically" 6, p. 210!. Unlike in earlier eras, "the educational intelligence and creativity of its citizens are becoming a nation's most significant economic assets" 6, pp. 210-11!. Perhaps nothing has helped to direct the policy spotlight on to education as much as this emerging understanding.

Cometitive forces. At the same time, many countries have concluded that their economies are growing increasingly anaemic-that in places like the United States and Australia, for example, competitive positions are slipping and standards of living are falling. Schools are being held accountable for the problem. Not only are they failing to educate today's students well, they are judged to be woefully ill-equipped to educate students to the higher levels needed for the twenty-first century. Not surprisingly, "the maxim of economic salvation through educational excellence" 7, p. 28! is taking root throughout the policy world.

Demands of a changing population. In a number of countries (e.g. Israel), economic dilemmas are being exacerbated by demographics. Population patterns are changing. The types of students for whom schools have historically been least successful--linguistically different, low income, racial and ethnic minorities--are increasing. Compounding this problem is the fact that, for these under-served students, potential positions in the workforce are becoming increasingly scarce in the post-industrial world. The job of schooling is now to educate all students to levels of achievement previously reserved for those from more advantaged homes.

The changing political landscape. Sweeping across the landscape at the same time are increasingly blustery political winds. Deep-rooted political values are receiving new attention. The notions of grassroots democracy and public participation in the organizations set up to serve them are enjoijng renewed interest throughout the world. Models of organization and governance--both market and political--which legitimatize constituents' voices are becoming increasingly popular in policy circles.

The deburaucratization ofsociety. Buttressing this growing acceptance of more responsive models of goverance are expanding attacks on the place of bureaucracy in the post-industrial world, especially in human service organizations. Academics and practitioners alike are joining forces to level a devastating attack on the effects of bureaucratic school structures on children, teachers and parents. It is argued that bureaucracy is failing in such a profound fashion that the employment of alternative organizational forms is imperative 8!. Concurrently, the private sector is experimenting with some of these alternatives, especially decentralized models of management. Schools are being both drawn and pushed to adopt these alternative designs. They are also increasingly being directed "to the underlying assumption of school improvement projects proposed over the last 20 years" (Vandenberghe)--an assumption heavily coloured by conceptions of self-management.

The decentralization of problems. As Goldring (in this issue of/EA) astutely I notes in her analysis of the principalship in Israel, an often overlooked force in current efforts to restructure schooling is the desire of centralized governmental units to pass responsibility for deep-seated and somewhat intractable problems to others. Faced with dilemmas for which answers are difficult if not impossible to discern, it is becoming increasingly fashionable for those in policy positions to pass the baton to others--"Decentralization to local levels is also! a method employed to avoid potential conflicts, especially regarding issues where broad-based consensus cannot be reached" (Goldring).

THE POLITICAL RESPONSE

Given this description of reform pressures, it is not surprising to find that decentralization is at the heart of nearly every school restructuring effort unfolding throughout the world--a theme very nicely conveyed by the authors in this issue. In most nations, the political response is occurring along one or more fronts at the same time: deregulation, open enrolment, school-based management, accountability, and systemic decentralization.

Dergulation. Vandenberghe (in this issue of JEA) observes that "a principal lives nowadays in three worlds: the first being! a (deceased) set of regulations coming from the central government". Schools throughout the world are also increasingly being freed from reulations promulgated by local educational agencies (LEAs) and, in some

caseS, unions. Consistent with the evolution from bureaucratic to professional and political models of educational management, schools are being asked to assess themselves more on the basis of outcomes and client satisfaction and less in regard to adherence to externally imposed rules and regulations 6!.

Open enrolment. As a result of allthe pressures discussed earlier, especially economic forces (e.g. recognition by public officials "that Israelies are capable of mature consumer behaviour" Goldring!) and political forces (e.g. "parents may freely select a school for their children in accordance with their ideological or political opinion" Vandenberghe), schools that "previously only took pupils from their local catchment area" (Weindling) are rapidly being decentralized to the extent that parents are able to send their children to the schools of their choice.

School-based management. A third foray into the area of decentralization is the movement to what Weindling (this issue) calls the local management of schools and what Caldwell (this issue) labels self-managing schools. Two elements define this phenomenon:

(1) structural decentralization, or the dismantling of larger organizational units into smaller ones; and, more importantly,

(2) the devolution of authority, or the passing of control over decisions historically made by LEAs, states, and federal agencies downward to local school communities. Expanded local decision-making power is usually realized in one or more of the following areas: goals/mission, budget, personnel, curriculum, and organizational structures.

Enhanced accountability. As the authors of this issue have shown, decentralization thrusts are almost accompanied by changes in the locus of accountability-by enhanced responsibility at the local level. Concomitantly, there is a major shift in the type or substance of accountability. As we noted above, bureaucdtic accountability (compliance with rules and regulations) gives way to accountability for outcomes (student performance) and customer satisfaction (parents choosing to enrol their children in a given school).

Systemic decentralization. Political responses to reform pressures are increasingly becoming more complex, bundling multiple decentralization strategies in an effort to speed up school improvement. The most recent attacks on the problems confronting schools--grant-maintained schools in England, charter schools in the United States and, to some extent, the school of choice experimental education project in Israel--are good examples of these more complex and advanced reform strategies. For example, charter schools combine deregulation from state and local agencies, open enrolment, school-based management and enhanced accountability through customer control.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF THE PRINCIPALSHIP

Twenty years ago, being a principal was like conducting an orchestra playing an unfinished symphony-there was always something interesting to do. Now I've the feeling to conduct a group of musicians playing an ongoing cacophony. (Vandenberghe, citing an anonymous principal) .

In essence, it means that individual members principals! have to set aside dynamic conservatism, allow part of their professional self to die and be bereaved, as it were, and then negotiate a new and dimly perceived future in the emerging organization 5!.

The issue to which we turn is the effect of the forces discussed above on the principalship. We start by examining how the environment in which principals work is changing. We then focus our attention on changes in the role itself. As we noted earlier, the authors in this issue provide some of the earliest empirical portraits of activity in this area.

THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

To begin with, the environment in which principals must function has changed dramatically over the past five years. We let the descriptions of the authors herein speak for themselves (emphasis added):

A movement towards decentralization was associated in large part with inereasing complexity in the administration of education (Caldwell).

This represents a significant inmease in the degree of uncertainty and ambiguity they principals! experience in

their work (Hallinger).

Many heads felt that it Local Management of Schools! would greatly increase their workload...it was not just a change of emphasis; it was also a change of intensity (Weindling).

The school and the principal have to work and survive in a very complex, changing and turbulent policy environment (Vandenberghe).

Most schools are suffering from "innovation overload" or initiative fatigue. Many things that were taken for granted are now in a state of flux (Weindling).

Decentralization and diversity in the system are creating a dynamic atmosphere...Israeli principals are facing much more environmental uncertainty (Goldring).

Add to this the sense of schizophrenia that accompanies the simultaneous efforts of central agencies to both decentralize and yet hold on to authority and the picture of the exceedingly complex environment confronting principals is completed. We refocus our attention now to see how principals are responding to rapidly changing environments and job expectations.

THE TRANSFORMED ROLE

Given the portrait we have painted so far, it will come as no surprise to discover that the clarion cry of reformers today is for better "leadership" for our schools. This search for leadership during periods of rapid change and crisis is well documented. Thus, principals are being urged to step forward to assume this mantle as well as the more proactive role it entails. They are being asked to undergo a metamorphis, to change from transactional to transformational leaders.

As we noted at the outset, while a number of scholars have begun to flush out conceptual views of transformational leadership in education 10!, investigations of how the principalship actually changes in response to extreme political pressures and an exceedingly complex environment are more difficult to uncover. The authors in this issue provide some valuable insights on this latter issue. They also show that "the success of local school initiatives depends upon principals' abilities to adapt their roles to new realities" (Goldring). Their indings can be grouped under two broad headings: changes in internal opeations and alterations in relationships with the larger school environment.

Internal leadership. One important change is a movement away from the notion of the principal as "routine-manager" (Goldring)--away from "the principal as the manager of a set of routinized institutional and school improvement practices conceived by policy makers outside the school" (Hallinger). The principal's role as an implementer of imported solutions is much diminished. The head in a decentralized system is much more concerned with helping to develop within organizational members the capacity to craft solutions to locally identified concerns.

The new context of the principalship also dramatically highlights the importance of participatory leadership and principals' interpersonal communication skills. A trend for principals in restructuring schools to "become more consultative,more open and more democratic" Oeindling), to promote staff ownership of change, and to create an internal support structure that allows for the development of a leadership team is becoming obvious.

The evidence on the principal's role in technical core activities is mixed. On the one hand, Chapman and Boyd report that "one of the immediate results of decentralization and devolution was to put great pressure on the principal as a curriculum leader" 11, p. 42!. This is consistent with the literature that holds that "principals will have to be instructional experts" 12, p. 229! in schools with empowered teachers. Weindling (this issue), on the other hand, concludes that decentralization is forcing heads to assume more administrative responsibilities--that they are moving from their role as "leading professional" to a role as "chief executive". The trend towards an expanded educational leadership role for teachers creates a potentially confusing scenario with respect to ihe instructional leadership role of the principal.

Environmental leadership. There is considerable evidence in these articles and elsewhere that, in decentralized schools, establishing and nurturing relationships with the larger environment will require more of the principal's

time--"that principals are changing dramatically in regard to the extent to which they must contend with the external environment of their schools" (Goldring).

In short, the boundary-spanning role is becoming even more salient for principals. Increasingly, "principals are expected to display independent initiative and power over their environments to achieve both organizational effectiveness and efficiency" (Goldring). As a consequence, in decentralized schools, principals "assume a more public role, interacting with people in the wider community, and! forging linis between the school and the environment" 11, p. 48!. Hallinger similarly stresses the more public and visible aspects of leadership that attend policy-driven forms of shared decision making and school-based management. Specific dimensions of this enhanced boundaryyspanning role were chronicled throughout these articles. Goldring, Vandenberghe, and Weindling emphasize the new role of the principal in marketing their schools. Principals who "traditionally functioned as somewhat passive resource receivers" (Goldring) are being forced to get into the resource-recruitment business. The public relations function is becoming increasingly more significant. With one eye, principals are being encouraged "to look more carefully at the school reputation, its publicity, its relations with the community and its involvement with industry" (Weindling); with the other, they are expected to be scanning the larger environment, "keeping abreast of trends and issues, threats and opportunities in the school environment and in society at large, nationally and internationally; and anticipating their impact on education generally and on the school in particular" (Caldwell).

One final aspect of external leadership is embedded in Caldwell's conception of "responsible leadership", i.e. the enhanced role of principals in what Vandenberghe labels the "justification process" and what Weindling labels "accountability". What is clear from these reports is that principals in decentralized schools spend more time "in justifying the (daily) decisions and related activities" (Vandenberghe) in a variety of ways to an expanded set of players. As Vandenberghe concludes, "The more deregulation from the top, the more responsibility for the principal and, as a result, the more justification is expected at the local level".

PREPARATION AND TRAINING FOR NEW ROLES

To cultivate and develop school leaders who can meet the challenges of creating new structures and reforming schooling practices will require a dismantling and restructuring of the ways in which such leaders are prepared and trained 13!.

In this last section, we turn our attention to methods for preparing administrators to lead decentralized schools 14!. In particular, we examine the implications these articles suggest for the content of leadership preparation and training programmes 15!.

The authors in this issue contend that the current restructuring of educational organizations is creating new responsibilities for the principal in two general domains. First, there is an increased premium on the principal's capacity to manage the internal operations of the school, particularly as they concern the teaching-learning process and school-wide decision making. Second, restructuring efforts are resulting in more complex linkages between the schooland its external environment, raising the stakes for principal accountability. Given the wide variety of reforms that fall under the rubric of school restructuring, we cannot imagine a single set of competences that will apply to all principals. At the same time, the general direction of these reforms suggests new foci for adminstrator preparation and development.

THE CONTENT OF ADMINSTRATOR PREPARATION PROGRAMMES

Prior to the 1980s, the preparation of school administrators, particularly in the United States, focused heavily an the process skills identified with successful management. Communication, decision making, conflict management, and problem solving were viewed as key skills for the principal as a school administdtor. Principal prepaation progdmmes contained relatively little content that addressed the heart of education: the teaching-learning process.

With the advent of the effective schools movement in the early 1980s, however, there was widespread dissemination of the finding that instructionally effective schools are characterized by administdtors skilled in curriculum and instructional leadership. There was a growing recognition that school leaders needed a sound base of knowledge in curriculum and instruction if they were going to be responsible for co-ordinating local school improvement efforts 16!. Over the course of the decade, this led to a shift in the emphasis of administrative training programmes, particularly staff development programmes.

Consequently, in many training and development programmes, the technology of education--curriculum and instruction--replaced general management as the focus in training for school leaders 17!. Programmes focused increasingly on developing the instructional and cuniculum knowledge needed for principals to guide their schools towards greater productivity 18!. Pressures for instructional and school improvement led to an increasing focus on issues of educational improvement, instructional leadership, effective schools and instructional supervision.

The changes in education governance undertaken in the countries represented in this issue add additional dimensions to the principal's leadership role in the school. In particular, accountability for educational results is now being linked to increased responsibility for school-level governance and with shared decision-making processes. This means that principals must not only fulfil their newly designated instructional leadership responsibilities, but also manage under a very different set of decision-making assumptions.

In our judgement, the foremost implication of these developments for the content of adminstrative training programmes is the need for a continuing focus on instructional leadership, but with renewed attention to the general process skills needed for effective group leadership. We contend that the development of principals' leadership capacities must be built on a foundation of the domain-specific knowledge that is critical to educational leadership in schools, i.e. the teaching-learning process. Even in a context where leadership responsibilities are shared, the principal needs a firm grounding in education in order to lead change efforts effectively. We would suggest that governance-related reforms (e.g. school-based management, shared decision making) stand little chance of penetrating the classroom in schools where principals lack a sound knowledge of curriculum, instruction and change implementation.

At the same time, the increased responsibility being given to schools for self- management highlights the salience of group processes for school leadership. Whereas the school effectiveness literature focused attention on "the strong leader", the restructuring literature shifts the emphasis to the principal's ability to develop the geneal leadership capacity of tie school. If the trends identified in this issue proceed as suggested, we believe that the principal's role will increasingly involve developing the capacity of faculties and parents to tZnd (i.e. identify) and solve local educational problems. To carry out this role, principals will need to develop expertise in both individual and group problem-solving strategies 19!. Specifically, principals will need to develop the problem-solving and group process skills that enable them to tap and apply the educational expertise of teachers to school problems.

In a similar vein, the ability to manage group decision making in increasingly open settings will take on a higher priority in many school systems. The pressures for accountability, legitimation and justification of school-level decisions all increase under school-based management. As schools restructure, principals' performance will be judged not only the basis of their schools' educational outcomes, but on the process by which decisions are reached and implemented. Thus, training programmes will need to ensure that principals are skilled in applying effective group decision-making techniques.

Although our comments in this section have focused primarily on the principals' role in managing the internal operations of the school, it is clear that consideradble attention must also be given to what has been termed environmental leadershi. Environmental leadership encompasses both general leadership and specific administrative functions: building community support for the educational programme of the school, justifying the school's decisions, obtaining needed fiscal and human resources (including both staff and students!). Whereas, traditionally, public school administrators have been shielded from direct market and accountability pressures, in the future governing agencies and external constituencies will be more demanding, numerous and knowledgeable.

Training programmes will, therefore, need to address this role of the principal both in terms of practical administrative functions and general leadership strategies. In particular, we would note the special role that values will play in school leadership 19!. The dominance of the behavioural sciences in management education during most of the twentieth century led to an emphasis on the technical dimensions of school administration. In Sergiovanni's terms, conceptions of leadership were value-neutral rather than value-added 20!.

Interest in the moral dimensions of school leadership grew during the 1980s, as scholars and practitioners grappled once again with the core purposes of schooling 21!. Additional interest in the role of values in school leadership has been stimulated by recent empirical research on adminstrative problem solving. Moreover, as decision making is shared among more people, and as the boundaries between schools and communities become more fluid, the values that underlie the school's operation are more likely to become an arena for conflict. Together, these conclusions begin to suggest the importance of incorporating opportunities for school principals

to reflect on, clarify and apply their personal values concerning education and leadership as part of their training programmes 19!.

While these new foci for adminstative preparation programmes are indicated by the aforementioned contextual and organizational changes in schools, the nature of the educational experience that will be of greatest benefit remains less clear. During the 1980s, the instructional approaches used by many in-service development programmes evolved away from the didactic model common to many university programmes around the world. Whereas pre-service preparation programmes typically sought to increase participants' knowledge about school administration, the new in-service programmes were increasingly oriented towards the work of adminstrators. This reflected an interest in developing more subsantive connections between training content and the practice of school leadership 22!.

This experimentation with training designs stimulated a variety of new and adapted approaches to developing school leadership. Our own work suggests that substantial promise exists in the application of problem-based learning to school leadership development 23!. Problem-based learning seems ideally suited to management education because the content of the leader's role (e.g. legal issues, instructional supervision, staff development) are taught simultaneously with the management processes that lead to effective implementation of the role (e.g. communication, problem solving, decision making). That is, the domain-specific knowledge school leaders need to solve educational problems is developed as they apply the same decision-making and problem-solving processes that would be used in the school 24!.

If the literature on change implementation is a guide, the actual restructuring of our educational systems will depend, to a significant degree, on the response of school principals. Thus, in our view, those involved in the training of principals are faced with both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is daunting. We must develop and apply instructional approaches that increase the capacity of school leaders to respond effectively to a fast-changing and turbulent policy environment. Problem-based learning represents one promising alternative.

The opportunity is also significant. Current and future school leaders are being asked to support the local development and implementation of curricular and instructional reforms that create learning environments which are qualitatively different from traditional notions of schooling. We believe that the best place to start in developing this capacity among school leaders is in their own professional education.

The transformation of the principalship has been stimulated by changes in the policy context of schools. The self-managed school will require leadership that has moral, technical and educational foundations. Whether a single person, the principal, will be able to fullil these diverse functions is certaintly open to question. What does seem clear, however, is that the changes are here, they are real and principals will have to respond. Institutions responsible for the preparation and development of school leaders have a role to play, but success in this endeavour will require changes in the way we do business of an order similar to those being recommended for schools.

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