

Identity and the Principalship:

Another lens through which to examine the principalship

A vice-principal researches how life experiences and identity play important roles in the leadership styles of school leaders.

by Simon Blakesley

This article presents findings emerging from a study of the principalship in Canada's Yukon Territory. Specifically, it identifies the seemingly under-examined roles that life experience and identity play with respect to how Yukon principals construe and enact educational leadership. This finding has implications for the study of educational leadership and how it may be understood by both practitioners and students of the field.

The author and the Yukon context

Educational leadership, and the study of it, has been an endeavour which has intrigued and consumed me for as long as I have been immersed in the field. Upon reflection, my professional practice, particularly at the beginning of my career, was disproportionately influenced by what could be referred to as a Eurocentric conception of leadership. As a practicing school administrator in the Canadian North for the past 16 years, I've been intrigued by the lack of contextualised and culturally sensitive approaches to educational leadership in the extant body of literature exploring the phenomenon.

The more I have studied educational leadership, the greater has become my uneasiness with much of the literature and current trends specific to

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the field. I base my apprehension on the predominance of conceptions of leadership often grounded in popular business and management paradigms applied to schooling, which are focused on achieving primarily economic ends. Underpinning this sentiment is the language that has edged into educational leadership conversations — often in generalizing yet prescriptive ways. No longer is it foreign to educational conversations to hear phrases containing the words “competition,” “economic advantage,” and “products.” “Stakeholders” now include “customers” and “consumers of education” who have “choice” in where and how they come to school as a means of ensuring economic competitiveness in a global economy.

This is not to suggest that the educational leadership field should be immune to ideas generated in other disciplines. Nevertheless, the historical reliance on paradigms rooted in other fields and an inordinate focus on human capital approaches to education, has, I believe, served to confound the epistemology, or knowledge-base, of educational leadership and hindered the emergence of broader, more contextualised understandings of educational leadership.

Based on these misgivings, and quite frankly, my dissatisfaction with what I believed to be an under-examination of the lives and work of principals in the body of educational leadership literature (particularly in the Canadian North), I commenced a study of the principalship in the Yukon Territory in 2008. The relevance

of the BC educational context to the Yukon is not a tenuous one: what is taught in Yukon classrooms is based on the BC provincial curriculum. Many senior managers in the Yukon Department of Education have had prior careers in the BC educational system, and the *Leadership Standards for British Columbia's Principals and Vice-Principals* (2006) has underpinned the policy decision to develop a similar document (in the Yukon referred to as “guidelines”). Professional development opportunities and access to post-secondary study in BC are opportune, given the geographic proximity of the two jurisdictions.

Study design

Given my aforementioned concerns, I designed my doctoral study around a number of research questions: the first being “How do non-Indigenous Yukon principals construct their professional identity and their role as educational leaders?” With respect to identity Clarke (2009) offers the following definition: “Identity references individuals’ knowledge and naming of themselves, as well as others’ recognition of themselves as a particular sort of person” (p. 186). To shed light on this question I employed ethnographic methods, conducting extensive interviews with two male and two female principals in both rural and urban schools. The aim of these interviews was to present their voices, feelings, interactions and meanings of interactions of the participants around their work as school principals. The

extensive narratives shared by four experienced principals — Jim, Rose, Bob, and Gina — were then analyzed using qualitative data analysis software to identify and elaborate upon emergent themes. Over a period of months, detailed observations and document reviews also served to create unique “portraits” of the schools in which they worked.

Experience, identity, and educational leadership

One finding emerging from the study was the importance of the principals’ own identities with respect to how they thought about and enacted their practice. Specifically, their reconstructions of their childhood and adolescent experiences in schools were foundational to the ways they enact educational leadership. The stories about their past school experiences in public schools across Canada, marked by fear, corporal punishment and an oppressive organizational culture, were key to their identity as principals. On this point, Bob, an experienced rural principal reflected:

I was the baddest of the bad when I went to school ...literally ... I went to Catholic school ... run either by nuns or priests depending on the school ... I fooled around a lot so I got the strap a lot. I hated school. (Bob, interview 3)

When asked how his own experiences informed the way that he views his role in the present, Bob shared:

To come full circle, what that has done for me as an administrator and a teacherfor me it's really important to go out of my way to give these kids guidance, and I do it in a very friendly, joking,

and reward-based way ... and the kids love it. My experiences in school were always pretty negative, so as a teacher and administrator I've gone 180 degrees totally opposite. (Bob, interview 1)

Jim's recollections surfaced memories of what he viewed as disaffection on the part of his parents in relation to school in the 1950s:

I also think that school was a relatively unwelcoming place as a kid. It wasn't horribly hostile, but I mean you could see it in your parents. Your parents were tense when they walked into the school and I can remember it to this day, and I think it's just institutional, that's how institutions work. (Jim, interview 1)

Now a principal with more than 40 years of experience, the lasting influence of Jim's memories on his professional practice was underscored in a subsequent interview:

It just seemed to me to be such a restrictive atmosphere at my school. Even the building. I think over the years as I've actually had the opportunity to be an administrator and realize that I had the power to affect change. Those are the memories that directed me. (Jim, interview 3)

The diverse life experiences of principals were also brought to bear on how they construed and enacted their roles in relation to parents and the community. Looking back over her extensive career as a teacher and principal, Gina reflected:

You know, I think that more than the courses I've taken, and I don't know how professional it is or whatever, is I rely on life experiences. The reason I'm saying that is for many, many years I was a single parent raising kids. Now, as a grandparent, you know, with the kids, the little ones again, [I relate] to parents and the school community on that level. (Gina, interview 1)

Similarly, Rose, principal of a rural K-12 school, drew upon her experience as a parent as being foundational to informing her practice:

I think being a parent for me has been my hugest asset because once I became a parent and watched my kids go through the school system I knew what it was like from the other side of the fence. (Rose, interview 2)

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While principals did draw upon particular theories, authors or books, they indicated the greatest benefit of engaging in post-graduate study was the space it created away from the steady stream of demands one faces as a school administrator.

Both male principals looked back not on parenthood but on work experiences that shaped their identity and role as educational leaders. Jim reflected that his early years in the stock market and as a railway worker were key factors propelling him towards a career in teaching. For him, this diversity of life experiences resonated with the assertions of an educational philosopher he encountered when completing his post-graduate study:

I think it is Thomas Greenfield [who] emphasizes in his writings that principals should have a certain degree of life experience because why should there be a distinction between life out there and school? It's all really the same package. And I think in my case, just living in the North, and all the experiences I've had in the North, outside the school as well, shapes the way I look at kids in the school-formal training, very little indeed in that area at all. (Jim, interview 1)

For Bob, rural principal of a K-9 school, having an extensive background upon which to draw is also important as it informs how he engages with the children in his school. After dropping out in Grade 10, he describes the wide range of experiences which, ironically, led him back to the classroom as a student:

So, I quit school in Grade 10. After that I got my millwright's papers, heavy equipment operator, I got into flying. Anyway, did all kinds of really crazy jobs. I worked for [a Yukon department store] for a little while even. I worked for [a trucking company] for a number of years in the Yukon, and then, after my stint with [the trucking company] I took off to Europe for two years... So, I did a lot of reflecting and I decided when I got back that I'd go back to school. So, I packed up everything, went down to College, got my Grade 12. It took me a year, so I did it. (Bob, interview 1)

While Bob's recount of his disengagement from school and subsequent pursuits may be interesting, how does this breadth of experience inform how Bob constructs his professional identity and role as an educational leader? Entering teaching and the principalship later in life, and informed by this diversity of life experiences, as a principal, he answers this by acting in particular ways that are grounded in his desire to make school fun for his students:

I think, because when you go back to school in your forties, you've got a whole lot of life experience behind you and nobody's going to pull the wool over your eyes. You're pre-seasoned although I'm pretty zany

and crazy and stay very young at heart. That, I guess, is another thing is my childish nature, if you will. I think it's really served me in good stead here because I'm not afraid to make a fool of myself with the kids and I do lots, like purposely. (Bob, interview 1)

Having an extensive background upon which to draw is important, as it informs the way Bob engages with the children in his school. As someone who believes he has a "childish nature" he walks a fine line between being the principal, and someone who the children do not take seriously. Bob clarified this in a subsequent interview, stating that the children do see him as principal, but not through the traditional lens of principal as authoritarian and someone who metes out punishment.

Metaphors for the principalship

The four principals were asked to describe their role, the challenges they faced, and how they addressed them. Their responses shed light on their professional identities: the principals did not use the term "educational leader," but rather invoked unique metaphors to describe themselves. Jim saw himself as an "orchestra leader" who, as the public face for the school, kept things running smoothly. Bob framed his role as that of "buffer" between parents and teachers and his community and the school, while Gina perceived her role as that of "parent" for the children attending her school. Arguably, the most metaphorically vivid was Rose, a K-12 principal in a rural community. With tension in her voice, she described the staccato pace of her role as akin to that of an "air traffic controller" who tried to keep pace and

deal with everyone's needs at once, all the while concurrently averting collisions and avoiding emergencies.

Discussion

While the excerpts in this article present only a small example of the rich stories and reflections that these principals shared, a number of points for discussion emerge. First, the surfacing of identity calls into question the dominance of narratives of educational leadership from a Western-centric point of view that appear limited to external notions of organizational power, control and authority. In contrast, for the principals in this study, educational leadership is situated primarily in one's own experiences, their memories mediating their professional identities as principals and the manner in which they engage with the social world of their schools.

Reinforcing the importance of school memories and life experiences was the absence of any reference to the utility of Masters-level study specifically in educational administration and leadership by the study participants. While principals did draw upon particular theories, authors or books, they indicated the greatest benefit of engaging in post-graduate study was the space it created away from the steady stream of demands one faces as a school administrator.


From their perspectives, the de-

contextualized and de-personalized curricula of the educational leadership and administration programs they engaged in, with their emphasis on 'training for skills' rooted in managerial and business fields, excluded the importance of life experiences. In contrast, the metaphors they invoked stand as powerful identifiers for the principals in this study with respect to how they perceive themselves and enact their practice.

Contributions to the study of educational leadership

While this article provides only a brief illustration of a much broader study, it nonetheless serves to illuminate an aspect of the educational leadership field heretofore unexamined: the extent to which the identities, lived experiences, and specific contexts in which principals

are immersed mediate their practice. Attempting to address this gap in the knowledge base, this research opens up principals' unexamined lives and perceived experiences, surfacing the importance of identity with respect to how they understand and perform their role as educational leaders.

This research endeavour also sheds light on the previously unexamined daily lives of principals in a particular location in the Canadian North. While the findings of this study, located in one small jurisdiction in Canada, may not lend themselves well to generalization across contexts, it nonetheless reinforces the intersections of experience, individuality, and context. In closing, this research serves as a call for deeper study into the personal and professional lives of principals as a means of better understanding educational leadership. 

Know More

Simon Blakesley's complete study, *Remote and unresearched: a contextualized study of non-Indigenous educational leaders working in Yukon Indigenous communities*, can be downloaded at <https://circle.ubc.ca/handle/2429/24852>

References

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