

TITLE OF DISSERTATION

I FEEL LIKE A PRINCIPAL NOW: SOUTH AUSTRALIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS REFLECT ON THEIR EXPERIENCES AND SUPPORT DURING THEIR SOCIALISATION INTO THE PRINCIPALSHIP

ABSTRACT

Over the past twenty years, increased complexities and pressures on the school principal role, due to worldwide reforms in educational policies and practices, advances in technology, and an increase in the diversity of the student population, have made it much more difficult for novice principals to transition from their teacher role to the principalship. Recent research has indicated that many first time principals initially struggle with the heavy workload, the role responsibilities and early challenging experiences which, for some, may result in burn out, low self-confidence and even the early departure from the principal position.

The aim of this study was to investigate the effects of the early experiences and support that twelve South Australian novice primary school principals, in their second to fourth years, from across the main educational sectors in both urban and rural locations, encountered during their socialisation into the principal role and how these influenced the development of their principal identities. This qualitative research is intended to provide advice to aspiring principals and to inform educational sectors and principal training facilities about the possible leadership preparation, induction and support needs of first time principals particularly during their transition from their teaching role to the principalship.

Valuable data gathered from the participants' individual and focus group interviews found that, regardless of their background and previous leadership experience, the twelve novice principals were initially overwhelmed by the amount, diversity and unpredictability of their daily responsibilities, stressed by community and administrative expectations so early in their career, and uncertain about managing the legacy of previous principals' policies and practices. Many found their second year in the role was busier and more challenging than their first year. While some experienced stressful encounters with aggressive parents others, who had difficult or non-performing staff, suffered anxiety in implementing their sector's time consuming processes for managing underperforming staff. Rural school principals working in a small community environment and dealing with additional leadership responsibilities for their local or parish communities, as well as their school, found the lack of relevant preparation very confronting.

This study showed that after two to three years in the position most of the novice principals were able to overcome their early challenging experiences through gaining knowledge of their organisation and learning strategies to manage the unpredictable nature of the role, and felt they had become successful school principals. These results are significant as they demonstrate that encountering challenging and traumatic experiences early in their career does not necessarily lead to first time principals leaving the profession. The implications of these results for novice principals in SA indicate that, by viewing these challenging experiences as 'a rite of passage' and a valuable part of learning their new role, future novice principals may be assured of surviving their socialisation journey and, with the vital support of their colleagues and principal mentors, develop into school leaders with strong principal identities.

Future research into the 'rites' or experiences that novice principals encounter during their socialisation into their principal role is recommended for educational authorities and those involved in the planning of future initiatives in leadership preparation, induction and support programs for their aspiring and new principals.

Key words: Novice primary school principals, principal identity, transition, socialisation, early career experiences, support, principal mentors, rite of passage