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The Self-Efficacy of First-Year Elementary Principals: A Case Study

Meredith Mohanty
University of Nebraska at Omaha

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THE SELF-EFFICACY OF FIRST-YEAR ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS: A CASE
STUDY

By

Meredith Mohanty

A DISSERTATION

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Supervisory Committee:

Kay A. Keiser, Ed.D.

Elliott Ostler, Ed.D.

Amanda Steiner, Ed.D.

Tamara Williams, Ed.D.

THE SELF-EFFICACY OF FIRST-YEAR ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS: A CASE STUDY

Meredith Mohanty, Ed.D.

University of Nebraska, 2021

Advisor: Jeanne Surface, Ed.D.

Abstract

The principal holds a pivotal role within a school community. Approximately 15–22% of principals in their first 5 years resign from their positions (Fuller et al., 2018; Goldring & Taie, 2018). High principal attrition rates decrease student achievement, the quality of learning, and staff morale and retention (Fuller, 2012; Louis et al., 2010; Wallace Foundation, 2013). This qualitative case study evaluated the relationship between the experiences and self-efficacy of first-year elementary principals serving in Midwestern schools. Within semi-structured interviews, seven research participants described experiences that shaped their self-efficacy during their first year of their principalships. The relationship between the research participants' mentorship experiences and efficacy beliefs reveals opportunities to enhance professional mentorship for new principals. School districts should align mentor selection with the mentee's needs and provide professional development to mentors regarding mentoring strategies to support novice principals. In addition, mentors and mentees should establish clear expectations and goals to guide their relationship. Quality mentorship provided to novice principals could improve their self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and retention.

Dedication

Mom and Dad

It is a privilege to call myself your daughter. Dad, you have taught me the value of hard work, honesty, integrity, and resiliency. You are a constant source of inspiration. Mom, you are my best friend. From you, I have learned the importance of compassion, empathy, and unconditional love. Words cannot adequately describe my love for you both. You have given me the world.

Rahul

Mun jeun muhartare rey tumaku dekhili sehi muhartare rey mo aatma janithila je aamara jeebanakala ekathi beetaiba pain oodhishta. Tume mora dinaku aseema hasa khusi rey bhari dia. Tume mora sabu katheena samayare saahas aaui shakti dia. Tume mate seekhayicha prakrutare prema kana, aaui mun bhala paibaku jogya atey.

Friends

You have filled my life with love and laughter. With your support and encouragement, I have the confidence to pursue my dreams. I am blessed to have you in my life and look forward to the adventures we will share in the future.

My Elementary School Teachers

School was never easy for me, but I was able to overcome my obstacles because of your willingness to always go above and beyond expectations. Your love and compassion inspired me to become a teacher and dedicate my life to serving children. I only hope that I can make the same impact on my students that you have made on me.

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Chapter I: Introduction to the Study

Without a doubt, my first year serving as an elementary principal was one of the most challenging, intense experiences of my life. No amount of professional development, mentorship, or training could have adequately prepared me for all that this position encompassed. The specific experiences of first-year principals are unique; however, I have found that first-year principals share common feelings, perceptions, perspectives, and challenges.

On the first day of my principalship, I instantly became responsible for leading the systematic evaluation and improvement of a school community about which I had no prior background knowledge. I found myself bombarded by a plethora of decisions, tasks, and urgent matters but lacked necessary experience, relationships, and historical context. I found that it felt nearly impossible to keep up with the demands and responsibilities of this new role: Someone always needed support, situations constantly required my attention, and administrative work seemed endless.

While serving the diverse population of students, I faced an array of challenges associated with student disabilities, mental health, trauma, poverty, and military service. Dysregulated students frequently became physically violent, verbally aggressive, destructive, or suicidal. Day and night, parents and guardians confronted me at school, over the phone, through e-mail and text messaging, on social media, and in the surrounding community. I found the impact of stress, violence, secondary trauma, and serving in a hostile environment to be all-consuming. However, I felt that—as a school leader—those around me expected me to be resilient, confident, and knowledgeable regarding how to address the difficult situations that I encountered.

Between 1990 and 2020, the average length of principalship for my school was approximately 3 years. I felt that staff members were reluctant to support or trust me as their new school leader because of this high turnover rate. I believed that they thought I was temporary and was using the principalship as a springboard to a more desirable role. I perceived that the teachers had become accustomed to a cycle of succession in which an entering principal implemented change and resigned a few years later, at which point the cycle began again. As a 30-year-old woman, many staff members appeared to believe that I was too inexperienced to be an elementary principal. For these reasons, I found it difficult to navigate staff dynamics and politics. I had to recognize, adapt to, and respond to each individual's communication style, background experiences, needs, perceptions, tolerances, and interpersonal relationships. Each day, I strove to prove myself reliable, competent, and worthy of the position through my dedication to servant leadership. In alignment with the work of Robert Greenleaf, the father of the modern-day servant leadership movement, several key characteristics of servant leadership were embedded in my communication: listening, using power ethically, seeking a consensus in group decisions, practicing foresight, demonstrating acceptance and empathy, and nurturing community (Frick, 2004).

The chronic stress associated with serving as a first-year elementary principal was nearly insurmountable. It impacted my physical well-being, mental health, and cognitive functioning. I constantly battled exhaustion, compassion fatigue, insomnia, hypervigilance, and anxiety, all of which were compounded by feelings of isolation and inadequacy. Authors have encouraged administrators to find balance between their personal and professional lives (Shoho & Barnett, 2010; Stephenson & Bauer, 2010).

However, achieving balance is challenging for first-year principals as they acclimate to their new responsibilities.

When I began as an elementary principal, my district did not have a program for inducting new principals. Instead, the district administrators assigned me a district supervisor and a principal peer mentor. Unfortunately, I received minimal support from my mentor because the mentor was busy with building responsibilities. I learned primarily from experience, failure, my district supervisor, and by seeking guidance from other veteran principals. I felt overwhelmed by the isolation, pressure, demands, and stress levels, and by the end of the first semester I doubted whether I could sustain a long-term career as an elementary principal. Ultimately, I remained in my position for several reasons: hope that my experience would improve over time, fear of disappointing myself and my school community, and determination to overcome my challenges. What happens when new principals lack the resiliency or determination to continue serving in their role?

Problem Statement

The events and emotions I experienced during my first year as an elementary principal were not unique: New principals across the nation have reported feeling stressed, exhausted, isolated, burned out, and overwhelmed by their responsibilities (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Crow, 2006; Fuller, Young, Richardson, Pendola, & Winn, 2018; Shoho & Barnett, 2010). Between the 2015–2016 and 2016–2017 school years, approximately 16.6% of principals with less than 3 years' experience and 15.5% of principals with 3 to 5 years' experience resigned from their positions across the country (Goldrink & Taie, 2018). Fuller et al. (2018) conducted a 10-year national study and found that 22% of elementary principals with less than 5 years' experience in their roles

reported they planned to pursue district-level positions or leave the field of education within 3 years.

According to Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004), school leadership is the second most influential factor on student learning after classroom instruction. Wahlstrom, Seashore-Louis, Leithwood, and Anderson (2010) said that “leadership effects on student learning occur largely because leadership strengthens professional community; teachers’ engagement in professional community, in turn, fosters the use of instructional practices that are associated with student achievement” (p. 10). Principal attrition adversely affects school improvement, climate and culture, communication, systems management, curriculum and instruction, and staff recruitment and retention (Fuller, 2012; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Wallace Foundation, 2013).

Principals with strong efficacy beliefs are better equipped to handle the demands of their roles. Exploring the impactful experiences of new principals with respect to their self-efficacy may reveal important themes that can be used to inform professional induction programs, training, mentorship, and graduate coursework (Kelleher, 2016; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). Given the ramifications of high principal turnover rates, it is important to investigate ways to better retain principals.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe the self-efficacy of first-year elementary principals serving in Midwestern schools. Self-efficacy is “the beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1977, p. 3).

Research Questions

Two research questions guided this study:

1. How do elementary principals describe their self-efficacy as school leaders during their first year in the role?
2. What experiences shape the self-efficacy of new elementary principals?

Conceptual Framework

Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as a person's belief in his or her ability to succeed or accomplish tasks. Four sources influence a person's self-efficacy: enactive mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological and affective states. An individual's self-efficacy impacts his or her persistence, performance, and approach to or avoidance of situations (Bandura, 1997). The demands placed on principals call for high self-efficacy:

In today's climate of heightened expectations, principals are in the hot seat to improve teaching and learning. They need to be educational visionaries; instructional and curriculum leaders; assessment experts; disciplinarians; community builders; public relations experts; budget analysts; facility managers; special program administrators; and expert overseers of legal, contractual, and policy mandates and initiatives. They are expected to broker the often-conflicting interests of parents, teachers, students, district officials, unions, and state and federal agencies, and they need to be sensitive to the widening range of student needs. (National Association of Elementary School Principals & National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2013, p. 2)

These expectations have been compounded for first-year principals by the need to adjust to their new responsibilities and establish themselves as building leaders. An elementary principal's ability to lead a school community correlates with his or her self-efficacy (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004).

Operational Definitions

This section includes definitions of terms and concepts used throughout the proposal:

Anticipatory Stage is when a newcomer forms expectations about a new role and the organization that he or she will be entering (Robbins et al., 2004).

Elementary principals are individuals serving in a school with students below seventh grade.

Enactive mastery experiences are an individual's past successes and failures that serve as a source of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

Encounter Stage is when a newcomer starts his or her new role and enters an organization (Robbins et al., 2004).

First-year principals are individuals within the initial 12 months of their principalships.

Insider Stage is when a newcomer is comfortable in his or her new role and accepted within his or her organization (Robbins et al., 2004).

Organizational socialization refers to the process of an individual adjusting to a new role within an organization. This adjustment includes the various roles, values, expected behaviors, and social knowledge specific to the particular organization (Robbins, Alvy, & Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2004).

Physiological and affective states are an individual's feelings and physical responses to experiences that can be a source of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

Principal attrition or turnover occurs when one principal exits a school and is replaced by a new principal.

Retention refers to keeping a principal employed at the same school facility.

Self-efficacy is a person's belief in his or her ability to succeed or accomplish tasks (Bandura, 1977).

Verbal persuasion is a source of an individual's self-efficacy and includes experiences when an individual is told they are capable of succeeding (Bandura, 1997).

Vicarious experiences are a source of an individual's self-efficacy based on observing peer models (Bandura, 1997).

Significance of the Study

An individual's self-efficacy shapes his or her cognitive, motivational, emotional, and decisional processes (Bandura, 1995, 1997, 2008; Schunk & Pajares, 2006). According to Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, individuals' beliefs about their efficacy influence their leadership decisions (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Kelleher, 2016; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). New elementary principals typically have limited references for enactive mastery experiences, which are important sources of self-efficacy. Rather, new principals learn vicariously through the experiences of other principals and mentors, rely on verbal persuasion provided by valued individuals, and gradually learn how their bodies and emotions respond to their new roles and responsibilities.

During the first year, elementary principals are susceptible to low self-efficacy if they experience feelings of failure, doubt their potential for success, feel isolated from

peers, lack effective mentorship, or exhibit physiological or affective responses associated with feelings of inadequacy (Kelleher, 2016). Inefficacious principals demonstrate inadequate leadership, experience job dissatisfaction, and are more likely to resign from their positions than other principals (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; McCormick, 2001; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004; Walker & Carr-Stewart, 2006). Principal effectiveness and retention impact the entire school community and correlate with student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004). While researchers have conducted general studies on the experiences of new principals, this qualitative case study describes the specific experiences, perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and perspectives of seven first-year elementary principals. The themes derived from interviews with participants expand on existing research on elementary principal self-efficacy and may be used by school districts to improve principal induction programs.

Limitations and Delimitations

This case study is limited to seven elementary principals who have completed their first year of service in Midwestern school districts. I selected this sample because the districts share similar resources, experiences, and demographics. The participants in this study have (a) completed their first full school year as an elementary school principal, (b) served in a public elementary school with students below seventh grade, and (c) not started their second school year as an elementary school principal. I identified principals who met these criteria via the Nebraska Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and through the Human Resources Offices of school districts.

Organization of the Study

Chapters II and III describe the existing literature and the research methodology, respectively. Chapter IV describes the participants' demographic and background information. Chapter V summarizes the research findings based on new principal socialization and context. Chapter VI summarizes the research findings based on the sources of self-efficacy. Chapter VII presents the key implications of the study and offers professional recommendations based on the study's findings.

PREVIEW

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

The purpose of this study was to investigate the self-efficacy of first-year elementary principals. Studying the historical role of principals and the impact of principals on school communities provides context for the modern principalship. Following classroom instruction, research shows that school leadership is the second most influential factor on student learning (Louis et al., 2010). Due to the measurable impact of school leadership on student success, it is important to examine factors contributing to the national principal attrition rate—approximately 20%—and the effect it has on schools (Fuller et al., 2018; Goldring & Taie, 2018).

Bandura's theory of self-efficacy served as the conceptual framework for this study. An individual's self-efficacy is shaped by enactive mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological and affective states (Bandura, 1997). Efficacy beliefs impact actions, thoughts, emotions, and motivations and correlate with principal effectiveness (Bandura 1977, 1997; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Kelleher, 2016; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). This literature review will present research regarding the historical role of principals, the impact of principals, principal attrition, Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, and the self-efficacy of principals.

Historical Role of Principals

Few researchers have examined the historical role of principals. Researchers have tended to present social, institutional, and political histories of education and the specific experiences of students and teachers (Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2013b). Distinguishing characteristics associated with the role of principal have become blurred over time as researchers overgeneralized the position to the broader category of school administrator

(Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2013b). Kafka (2009) wrote: “With some exceptions, principals have essentially fallen through the middle—neither close enough to the ‘ground’ for social historians nor far enough at the ‘top’ for scholars of the politics and intuitions of schooling” (p. 320). Examining the historic role of principals in schools provides foundational knowledge for understanding their role in the 21st century.

Early in the 19th century, local communities generally funded their own schools, which consisted of one- or two-room schoolhouses. Within these multiage classrooms, teachers taught basic reading and mathematics and utilized any readily available texts. Without attendance requirements or a common curriculum, fewer than 50% of American students attended elementary school, and fewer still attended advanced programs (Rousmaniere, 2013b). Trustees or a community school board managed each school and were responsible for the employment, salary, working and living conditions, evaluation, and dismissal of teachers (Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2013b). Because schools were unregulated at the time, “early teachers monitored enrollment, maintained the building, disciplined children, abided by school board regulations and expectations, and taught whatever curriculum could be gathered and approved by the local community” (Rousmaniere, 2013b, p. 8).

Community expansion increased student enrollment, class sizes, and the number of schools throughout the 1800s. To effectively manage school facilities, many schools employed a lead administrator termed the *principal teacher*, *preceptor*, *head teacher*, *school master*, or simply *principal* (Rousmaniere, 2013b). These male educators continued to teach but had additional clerical, administrative, and disciplinary responsibilities, such as assigning classes, managing discipline, maintaining the facility,

monitoring attendance, developing and upholding schedules, and communicating with stakeholders and the district superintendent (Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2013b). As the number of children in a community increased, schools hired principals to support teachers with classroom management. By the conclusion of the 19th century, principals had become important figures within U. S. schools and left behind their teaching responsibilities (Kafka, 2009; Pierce, 1935; Rousmaniere, 2013b).

Education reformers known as administrative progressives sought to improve instructional practices by restructuring public school systems. The social efficiency initiative transitioned schools from individual community-directed facilities to systems of school districts (Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2013b). Administrative progressives centralized leadership hierarchies to create specialized administrative roles within school districts, improve the quality of instruction based on educational research, and foster common educational visions for communities (Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2013b). The shift to centralized public education systems originated in major cities between 1890 and 1920 but continued to expand throughout the United States during the 20th century. The development of centralized district offices increased the need for principals to serve as middle managers in schools and implement district policies (Rousmaniere, 2013b).

In 1884, the Chicago School District superintendent stated: “The prime factor in the success of individual schools is the Principal, and no amount of itinerant supervision can supply his place” (Pierce, 1935, p. 39). Between 1870 and 1898, student enrollment increased nationally from 7,000,000 to 15,000,000. As schools and districts continued to expand, central offices could no longer manage daily operations of schools. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, principals sought and obtained autonomy, authority, and

independence in building-level leadership from their superintendents (Kafka, 2009; Pierce, 1935; Rousmaniere, 2013b). The role of the principal continued to increase in prestige as principals created professional organizations, elevated professional requirements, and extended their role to include supervisory responsibilities (Kafka, 2009; Pierce, 1935; Rousmaniere, 2013b).

Parental support for public education grew toward the end of the 1800s, when schools surpassed the church as the primary source of socialization for children. In the early 20th century, approximately 71% of Americans aged 5 to 18 years were enrolled in school for approximately 5 years; this percentage increased in the 1940s, when compulsory education laws required students to attend school (Rousmaniere, 2013b). The value of teachers, principals, and schools improved within communities as the number of students enrolled and the duration of their enrollment increased (Kafka, 2009; Pierce, 1935). Between 1920 and the present moment, despite the cultural, social, political, financial, and technological changes that have occurred, the principal's position and the fundamental components of schooling have remained consistent:

By the 1920s, the modern school principalship had been established and looked markedly similar to the position today: Principals had bureaucratic, managerial, instructional, and community responsibilities. They were expected to lead and instruct teachers, to monitor students, to communicate with the district, and to work with parents and members of the wider community. Moreover, they were seen as pivotal figures in any school reform effort. For many observers at the time, the principal *was* the school. (Kafka, 2009, p. 324)

One novel influence on the 21st-century principalship has been accountability (Crow, 2006; Hallinger, 1992; Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2013b). In the 1970s, policy makers began to craft federal and state educational policy with the intent of improving student performance while also creating equitable learning opportunities for students attending public schools across the nation (Crow, 2006; Hallinger, 1992; Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2013b). The accountability movement relied on the premise that “educators should not only be *responsible* for performing their work well, but also *accountable* to their students and taxpaying communities” (Rousmaniere, 2013b, p. 135). For this reason, policy makers designed performance objectives and assessments to hold students, teachers, schools, and districts accountable for student achievement. By the 1980s, publication of student assessment results began in accordance with accountability policies and to serve as an indicator of school quality (Rousmaniere, 2013b).

In 1983, the National Commission of Excellence in Education released *A Nation at Risk*, which underscored the critical need for educational reform. The commission suggested that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 9). This report prompted federal and state governments to address inadequacies of instructional content, expectations, time, and teacher quality. For nearly 20 years afterward, political and educational leaders constructed policy to evaluate and improve student achievement across the country. However, it was the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 that intensified the accountability movement across the United States (Rousmaniere, 2013b).

The purpose of NCLB (2001) was to increase student performance while also closing the achievement gap in schools receiving federal funding. NCLB required states to

1. establish standards and an assessment system aligned with federal requirements;
 2. hire highly qualified teachers;
 3. design a report-card system for schools to publicize assessment results, teacher qualifications, graduation rates, and various demographic data;
 4. define proficiency criteria with the expectation of 100% of students demonstrating proficiency in reading and math by 2014;
 5. hold schools accountable for demonstrating adequate yearly progress (AYP);
- and
6. impose a series of sanctions for schools that did not meet AYP expectations (Rousmaniere, 2013b; U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 replaced NCLB. ESSA reduced the federal government's role in public schools relative to NCLB (United States Department of Education, n.d, 2001) However, the act required states to submit accountability plans in alignment with federal requirements to the U.S. Department of Education. The federal framework for ESSA required states to design systems for academic standards, annual testing, school accountability, goals for academic achievement, plans for supporting and improving struggling schools, and state and local report cards. Although states gained autonomy to design their own accountability

systems, the climate of high-stakes accountability has remained in place (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.; Young, Winn, & Reedy, 2017).

Supporters of laws such as NCLB and ESSA have argued that they force low-performing schools to improve by creating a competitive, high-stakes accountability system (Hunsecker, Borman, & Merrifield, 2010; Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2013b). However, as Rousmaniere (2013b) said,

Critics argued that the punitive measures further undercut troubled schools and strangled educators in more bureaucracy, and that standardized testing was not an effective measure of teacher or student performance. Critics also argued that such “high-stakes testing” was based on the assumption that failing schools were the result of ineffective educators, not children’s broader social and economic handicaps or schools’ economic and structural deficits. (p. 137)

Although teachers have become accountable for the performance of their students on standardized assessments, it is principals who have become ultimately responsible for their schools’ compliance with state and federal law (Goodwin, Cunningham, & Childress, 2003; Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2013b). Under the existing system, failing to meet federal requirements can impact an entire school community, and principals face ramifications such as public scrutiny, loss of student enrollment, replacement of staff, loss of position, and school closure (Goodwin et al., 2003; Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2013b). Kafka (2009) wrote: “As government officials, policymakers, and district leaders increasingly seek to hold schools individually accountable for student achievement, they inevitably focus on the individual leaders of those schools—the principal—as agents of success or sources of failure” (p. 319).