

THE EFFECTS OF PRINCIPAL CENTERS ON PROFESSIONAL ISOLATION OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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In recent years, the number of educators aspiring to leadership roles in school administration has been decreasing. A study conducted by the Educational Research Service (1998) found that there is a shortage of qualified aspirants to the position of school principal because of a lack of interest. The top three reasons given for this lack of interest are insufficient compensation for the job responsibilities, long work hours, and job stress.

Because of the long work hours and the stress, many principals experience loneliness and/or professional isolation (Duke, 1988; McCreight, 2001; Tirozzi & Ferrandino, 2000; Yerkas & Guaglianone, 1998). Principals experience isolation because there is usually no one with whom to share the responsibilities of decision making. “Although surrounded by teachers, students, staff, and parents, a leader can easily be isolated and have to bear the burden of leadership alone” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002, p. 11). Lack of collegial support is cited as the main reason for beginning principals to leave the principalship (Daresh, 1988). Professional isolation is defined in relation to the job of the principal.

Loneliness, on the other hand, may be emotional—such as the feeling one has after suffering the loss of a loved one or being dissatisfied with an existing relationship (Peplau & Perlman, 1982)—or social—such as the absence of a connection to a

Principal Centers and Professional Isolation

social network (Weiss, 1985). One reason that principals experience loneliness is that there is no one to turn to for collegial support (Herlihy & Herlihy, 1980). Loneliness in the present study is defined as social isolation. Forsyth and Hoy (1978), in a study of friendship networks in schools, described four dimensions of isolation: “(1) isolation from individuals in positions of authority; (2) isolation from those perceived as influential in the organization; (3) isolation from friends in the organization; and (4) isolation from respected coworkers” (p. 81).

Social networks provide individuals with a sense of belonging and attachment, problem-solving assistance, and an arena for individuals to support others (Heller, Price, & Hogg, 1990; La-Forge, 2004). Attachment to a network is critical to the elimination of social isolation. Indeed, Pierce (2001) advocated that principals learn to create networks both inside their schools and with principal peers outside their schools to provide the support system necessary to reduce their feelings of isolation.

Petzko (2004) asserted, “The capacity to improve schools depends on the quality and effectiveness of the leaders in each school. The national outcry for school improvement, the anticipated retirement rate of current principals, and the increased accountability of the position demand that comprehensive professional support systems be designed and implemented for all stages of the principalship” (p. 21). Whitaker (2001) interviewed local superintendents in a western state regarding their perceptions of an impending principal shortage, and they commented that now more than ever, principals need support groups where they can seek the advice of their peers in a trusting relationship. Herlihy and Herlihy (1980) recommended that principals connect with a mutual support group of other principals as one of four suggestions for alleviating loneliness in their jobs. Colgan (2003) asserted that principals need connections to their peers because their peers are the very ones who understand the challenges of the work they do, and the experiences of their peers can provide guidance. Skrla, Erlandson, Reed, and Wilson (2001) indicated that peer networking is the most effective method for professional growth because it leads to reflection, questioning, and problem solving. Principal centers provide

the trusting, mutual support group of principal peers.

The concept of a principal center as a means of providing professional development and collegial support to school principals originated at Harvard University in the 1980s. Since then, many principal centers modeled on the Harvard prototype have sprung up all over the country. Principal centers often provide a gathering place for principals to develop collegial relationships, reflect on their practice, and learn necessary leadership skills for educational reform. Although the principal centers may have differing emphases, they all share some common features—most are governed by principals, participation is voluntary, and the main objective is professional development of principals; many are linked to universities, state and federal government agencies, professional organizations, and private business (Barth, 1986, 1987, 2001).

A survey of the Lowell Leadership Academy in Massachusetts found that it effectively reduced isolation among principals (Boccia, Ackerman, & Christenson, 1997). Principals in the New York Principals' Center reported being internally motivated to participate and receiving benefits such as renewed enthusiasm for their work, acquisition of leadership skills, and attachment to formal and informal support networks (Hallinger & Greenblatt, 1990). In describing a professional learning community of principals in Lincoln Public School District called the Developing Thoughtful Leaders program, Scott (2004) indicated that "Developing Thoughtful Leaders has increased the power of collaborative work and diminished the feelings of isolation and loneliness of the principalship in Lincoln Public Schools by building on principals' skills and knowledge while nurturing their hearts and minds" (p. 25).

Principal centers claim to make a difference in the lives of the school principals they serve, but there has been little evidence other than anecdotal to support that claim. The present study explored the phenomenon of principal isolation and the perceptions of isolation of principals who are members of the Fellows program of the School Leadership Center of Greater New Orleans (SLC). The SLC was modeled after the Harvard Principals' Center, but it added the critical component of principal networking as one of its

Principal Centers and Professional Isolation

four major features: (1) the Fellows program, which emphasizes leadership development and professional networking; (2) conferences and workshops throughout the year, which provide professional development and a venue for developing collegial relationships; (3) research, school development, and evaluation; and (4) learning initiative (LaForge, 2004).

The SLC's emphasis on leadership development and professional networking is consistent with the assertion of the National Staff Development Council (2001) that professional development for principals must tie activities and new knowledge to prior learning, actively involve the learners (principals), and be job-embedded and ongoing. Ginty (1995) recommends that professional development programs for first year principals promote peer interaction and collegiality among beginning administrators, who should "come together periodically to share common problems, gain peer support, and acquire additional insights from colleagues" (p. 40). Petzko (2004) asserts that "[s]uccessful networks consist of individuals with common concerns who meet on an ongoing basis and have some element of structure to their setting" (p. 33) and adds that the strategy should not be limited to the beginning principal but should include aspiring as well as experienced principals.

The School Leadership Center of Greater New Orleans selects from its pool of applicants a cadre of 24 principals each year from New Orleans area public, private, and parochial schools to be fellows in the two-year Fellows program. "Fellowship reflects the primary way the Center strives to build a network among school leaders" (Bauer, 2003). During the first year, SLC Fellows participate in three pre-institute professional development sessions dealing with building vision, improving schools, and analyzing school performance data. Fellows also participate in a week-long summer institute for two consecutive summers that focuses on enriching leaders' ideas about how to promote quality teaching. Each Fellow designates a school leadership team for school improvement called SLC-Learning Initiative. Each SLC-LI team must submit to the Center a proposal that outlines its plan for school improvement, acceptance of which results in a \$10,000 grant to the Fellow's school. In addition, each Fellow receives a laptop computer and whatever

technology training is needed in order to promote the use of and to develop the skills in technology (Bauer, 2002).

Although the Fellowship program lasts two years, many remain active well beyond their two-year commitment by continuing their networking with other SLC Fellows, by participating in the many conferences and workshops that are offered throughout the year, and by availing themselves of the research briefs and resources that are made available to Fellows through the research office. Action research at school sites is also conducted by the research office, and SLC personnel are available to conduct research projects, prepare summaries of school performance data, and make presentations at the Fellows' requests. A new component focused on teacher leaders and aspiring leaders has recently been implemented.

In the present study two research questions were addressed: (1) Do principals perceive themselves to be isolated in their position?, and (2) After becoming Fellows, in what ways did the School Leadership Center affect principals' perceptions of professional isolation? Twelve principals who represented a cross-section of Fellows were individually interviewed in this qualitative multiple case study, after which within-case and cross-case analyses were performed. The data suggest that principals felt less isolated in their positions because of the professional networking experiences and the professional development opportunities provided by the School Leadership Center. The finding has implications for educational policy makers, who are being urged to support principal centers. Quality programs do make a positive difference.

Study and Methodology

The purpose of this multiple case study was to understand the perceptions of isolation experienced by principals who belonged to the SLC; thus, a qualitative approach was used for data collection. The overarching research question was, "If principals perceive themselves as isolated in their positions, how has involvement in a principals' center affected the loneliness experienced in the job of school principals?"

Twelve principals who are Fellows of the SLC were pur-

Principal Centers and Professional Isolation

posefully chosen to participate in this study. Three participants from each of the cohorts under study were selected to achieve broad representation of cohort, gender, and ethnicity. Fictitious names protect the identities of the participants.

Participants were interviewed, interviews were recorded, field notes were taken, and an audit trail was maintained. The interviews were reviewed and coded. The coded data was arranged in concept matrices so that common patterns, themes, and ideas could be discovered. A within-case analysis technique and then a cross-case analysis technique were used (Patton, 1990).

Peer debriefing and researcher subjectivity were utilized to ensure validity and trustworthiness of the findings. In an effort to reduce researcher subjectivity, the researcher clearly identified any personal interest in the research topic, presented a personal value system, and identified biases. Additionally, a reflection journal was maintained.

Respondents

In order to frame each participant in the study, a brief description of each principal was provided. This can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Respondents by Race, Gender, Age, Experience, School Type, and School Level

Year	Name	Race		Gender		Age	Exper. Years	School Type		School Level	
		W	B	M	F			Pub	Prv	Elm	Sec
1999	Caroline		X		X	56	>10		x	x	
1999	Fred		X	X		47	<10	x			x
1999	Katherine		X		X	50	>10	x			x
2000	Helene	X			X	62	<10		x		x
2000	Madeline	X			X	54	>10	x		x	
2000	Patty	X			X	58	>10	x		x	
2001	Aubrie		X		X	48	>10		x	x	
2001	Jack	X		X		62	<10	x			x
2001	John	X		X		54	<10	x			x
2002	Ann	X			X	45	<10		x		x
2002	Mallinda	X			X	53	<10	x			x
2002	Tricia	X			X	45	<10	x			x

Within-Case Analysis

The within-case analysis explored each participant's responses addressing the research questions pertaining to the principal's experiences with feelings of isolation and if involvement in the School Leadership Center had an impact on the isolation experiences.

Feelings of isolation were expressed by many of the principals. The phrase "it's lonely at the top" is one principals used to describe their experiences as principal. One principal, Helene, described her feelings throughout her years as principal as, "I feel by myself often. . . . I don't like to be lonely. I really don't." Caroline expressed similar feelings. "Sometimes I feel that I stand alone with this job, and it is because whatever the problem is, they expect me to fix it. And I can't fix them all, though I wish I could." Katherine described her experiences as, "This is a very lonely kind

Principal Centers and Professional Isolation

of job. Sometimes there are things that you just don't want to say out loud to anyone." For Jack, the principalship was life altering. "It [the principalship] isolates me from my family. I've given up all the things I used to do for enjoyment."

On the other hand, there were principals who did not feel alone in their positions, such as John. "I guess my personality is I just don't need support or affirmation. I work, you know, it sounds almost egotistical I guess, but I guess, I figure, I don't need a bunch of people telling me I'm doing a good job. I know I'm doing a good job."

Principals expressed deep feelings for the School Leadership Center. Fred's feelings were particularly strong, as for him the Center was a constant. It was inviting, accepting, and non-intrusive. "It [the Center] constantly puts principals in a position to feel good about who they are and themselves. And so I think it is extremely, extremely important." Caroline believed ". . . the leadership center has been instrumental in moving me to being a better person and to be a better principal."

Cross-Case Analysis

A cross-case analysis was performed to identify themes that emerged from the interviews. Themes were isolated in two conversation threads: loneliness and isolation and how involvement in the Center affected isolation and loneliness.

Loneliness and Isolation.

When loneliness in the principalship was discussed, eleven of the twelve principals either described their own feelings of loneliness in the principalship or understood how principals could feel lonely. One of the principals did not feel professional or personal loneliness.

Three of the principals had some lonely or isolating experiences in the principalship; however, in their current positions they did not feel isolated or alone. One had a strong support group in her staff and believed the key to not being isolated was collaboration. "You know, I don't feel isolated because I do feel, I think, they're all behind me or with me or right up there next to me. You

know, and we're working, we're pulling the plow together.”

The second principal who was not lonely in her position believed that loneliness could come from not knowing how to do something; however, the loneliness ceased once that knowledge became available. “I think it is hard for principals to ask for help. They're embarrassed. You are supposed to know it all; you are the principal. So I think you need to get your ego out of the way.”

The third principal who did not feel isolated in his current position could vividly describe isolating experiences in his former principalship. He also expressed the belief that principals find it difficult to ask for help. “I think part of the isolation is that we make ourselves isolated. We cause that to happen because we don't want people to see what we are doing in our box.”

Nine of the twelve principals experienced loneliness at some time in their current position. Many expressed extreme loneliness and isolation in the first few years of their principalship and stated that as they grew in experience and confidence, those feelings diminished. As one respondent put it, “The bad part was in the beginning. I was a basket case.”

A lack of support was noted as an isolating experience. Commenting on this, one respondent said, “There is a price you pay for everything you do in your life, and there is a price you pay for being a principal.” The lack of collegial support and understanding of the unique job demands was consistent with the findings of Herlihy and Herlihy (1980).

Associated with this was the feeling that being the sole or primary decision maker served as a source of isolation. “It gets lonely because people just are not going to agree with you all the time and that makes it lonely.” Mercer's (1996) findings noted that typically, the principals have all the responsibility for significant decisions in schools, and consequently have all the blame.

Consistent with earlier research (Chaplain, 2001; Colgan, 2003; Dussault & Thibodeau, 1997; Evans, 1996; Evetts, 1994; Gray, 1987; Jones, 1987; Mercer, 1996; Weindling & Early, 1987), many of the respondents in this study cited not being a part of the faculty any longer as a source of loneliness in their position. “Coming from the classroom and having to be the principal for

Principal Centers and Professional Isolation

people who were your peers just a few weeks ago, was maybe a difficult situation. Probably the most difficult I've been in as far as realizing I'm not a friend anymore."

An interesting observation was that the high school principals did not express the same intense loneliness felt by the elementary school principals. Some of the explanation for this has to do with the prevalence of administrative support in secondary buildings. Three of the principals were in very large schools and had large administrative teams upon whom they could rely for support and assistance in decision making. The remaining three were small school principals with either a small administrative team or no team for support.

Involvement in the center and isolation.

All of the principals in the study credited the School Leadership Center with reducing their feelings of professional isolation. Even the one principal who did not feel isolated in his job noted a broader network of people to interact with, which helped him feel less alone in his job. The other eleven principals in the study felt the School leadership Center greatly impacted their feelings of professional isolation in a positive manner. The Center provided a network of collegial professionals with an understanding of the demands of the position, an outlet for stress reduction and socializing, and a source of knowledge and expertise in the form of professional development activities and workshops. Similar to the findings of Hallinger and Greenblatt (1990), for all of the principals, they noted great benefits gained from affiliation with the Center.

Principals described their feelings with emotion and passion. One principal summed up her Center experience with, "What I think the Center has done for me is made it easy for me to grow professionally and to continue to grow." The Center programs added to her knowledge base and were offered at times that were convenient and appealing to her. Another principal echoed her feelings when she said, "I am very, very grateful to the SLC. There had never been anything that I can think of that has done as much as they have to promote the professional development of principals."

Another principal credited the Center with helping her

understand her job better and therefore, feeling more confident in her abilities. She stated, “I feel more at home in my job after being a member of SLC.” A colleague had similar feelings about the Center and said, “I don’t know if they sometimes really know how much they have helped us as individuals and as principals.” She believed her experiences in the Center helped her grow not only professionally, but personally as well.

Two principals summed up the Center experience best when they stated: “The Center doesn’t bother you. It just always makes itself available for whatever. Any event, they always invite you. They always say, we want you and we need you. We think you are important. We think the work you do is important” and “It [the Center] constantly puts principals in a position to feel good about who they are and themselves.” These principals, like others in this study, felt validated and supported in their jobs and in their personal lives by the Center.

All the principals in the study identified changes in their leadership resulting from affiliation with the School Leadership Center. When asked if involvement with the Center impacted the way they did their jobs, principals gave a resounding yes. Principals reported personal growth in feeling less isolated, more orderly in their approach to their work, and less stressed. Professional growth was primarily via the learning acquired and knowledge of current research in the field.

All twelve of the principals in the study reported changes in their feelings about their jobs and their work as principals because of their involvement in the School Leadership Center. The benefits gained from their Center experiences helped them understand their jobs better and gain greater self-awareness. This in turn led to reduced feelings of professional isolation. They saw a connection between isolation and the School Leadership Center, noting that their involvement in the Center did positively impact their feelings of professional isolation.

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Principal Centers and Professional Isolation

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