

Patterns of Stress and Coping Mechanisms for Novice School Administrators

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Abstract

The author of this study examined patterns of stress and coping mechanisms for practicing school administrators. Specifically sources of stress and coping strategies of first year principals were compared and contrasted with stressors and coping mechanisms of first assistant principals. At two established professional development cadres, the researcher facilitated discussions among participants, and reflective questions were posed about stressors and stress management. Individual and group responses were recorded, summarized, categorized, and tallied. The findings were that first year principals and first year assistant principals were most stressed by: uncontrollable demands on their time, the negative impact of the amount of time that the job required on their personal lives, their prospective staffs, and the amount of conflict encountered. The findings from this study support previous research in regards to problems faced by first year administrators. When contrasting first year principals to first year assistant principals, differences in the source of stress between the groups occurred in two key areas: job roles and policy issues. When examining the results in regards to recommendations for ways to cope with stress, first year principals and first year assistant principals had these strategies at the top of their lists: sense of humor, venting, and exercise. Assistant principals specifically mentioned that talking with their colleagues and significant others were helpful forms of venting. These findings were similar to previous research studies. In examining differences between the two groups, first year principals had prayer as one of their top strategies. In addition, first year principals seemed to cite more strategies that they could use during the work day whereas the first year assistant principals listed more strategies to be used outside of the work day.

Introduction

Attracting, developing, and retaining future administrators has become a major concern in the field of education. Nationwide there is a shortage of qualified candidates for openings in the principalship (NAESP, 1998). One possible way to address these concerns is to focus on the transition that occurs during an administrator's first year. The beginning administrator faces some unique challenges, and it is important to identify factors that may cause him or her to leave his/her position. Once these factors are known, intervention and support can be provided through such mechanisms as professional development, discussions with peer groups, and journals to reduce the likelihood of attrition. This study focuses on the following specific questions:

- 1) When comparing first year assistant principals with first year principals, to what extent do their sources of stress vary?

- 2) How different are the coping mechanisms for first year assistant principals as compared to first year principals?

Review of the Literature

First year administrators are faced with problems that are unique because of their transition in roles. In many situations, new administrators are poorly trained to assume their new roles (Michel, 1996). Ricciardi (2000) found that overwhelming job demands and time constraints made job adjustment difficult for new administrators. She also found that volatile conflicts with faculty further hindered job adjustment.

Of the literature reviewed, almost all of the researchers studied the effects of stress on the principal versus the assistant principal. There were some writers who conducted research on assistant principals in terms of job transition. Hartzell (1994) described several challenges for the first year assistant principal. The first year assistant principal must deal with socialization to a new work environment, the interactive atmosphere of the administrative office, the tension between teachers and administrators, learning the school organization, defining their own role in the organization, resolving conflict, and learning how to be in a secondary leadership position.

In examining the literature on principals and stress management, the general consensus of the researchers was that being a principal is a moderately stressful job. A few authors sought to determine the sources of stress in a variety of studies on principals. General factors that contributed to stress in principals included: human resource management, finances, management of time, and relationships (Doring, 1993; Campbell & Williamson, 1987; Friedman, 1997). Coleman and Conaway (1984) described the specific problems that principals face in a very succinct way. They said, "School principals may experience stress due to interpersonal clashes and conflicts, excessively taxing administrative responsibilities, time constraints, and conflicting role expectations." (Coleman and Conaway, 1984, p.3).

If one assumes that being a school administrator is moderately stressful, what are the recommended coping mechanisms? Dardick (1990) believes that the use of humor is critical. Other authors feel that administrators should focus on their attitudes in regards to stress (Terrill, 1993; Doring, 1993). People who see themselves as effective in coping with job demands often times are not stressed (Hiebert & Mendaglio, 1988). Some specific suggestions for stress management include: initiate or maintain a hobby or exercise, initiate a new professional focus such as time management, and delegate when possible and appropriate (Terrill, 1993).

The coping mechanisms described above are suggestions for the school administrator, but what should the upper administration of a school district do to support their school administrators, especially the new ones?

According to the literature, first year administrators need time to talk with other administrators (Michel, 1996; Hartzell, 1994; Educational Research Service, 1999;

Marnik, 1997; Regules, 1997; and Goodson, 2000). The Educational Research Service (1999) suggests peer study groups and/or support networks where administrators meet regularly to build knowledge, share concerns, and bond with one another. Marnik in his article on professional development of school leaders says that:

Relationships with colleagues were critical as a form of professional development and a means of support and feedback on the behavioral changes they worked to incorporate in practice (Marnik, 1999, p. 1166).

In addition, professional development should be provided to give school leaders an opportunity to acquire needed skills in areas such as stress management and time management. Cohen (1989) believes that school administrators should be given the chance to anticipate, prepare for, and seek group support in order to solve problems and reduce stress.

Data Sources

Educational leadership faculty at the University of South Florida developed two different professional development cadres. Faculty at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg in conjunction with Pinellas County Schools designed and implemented a program for fourteen new assistant principals during the 2002-2003 school year. The purposes of this cadre were to increase participant's knowledge and skills as an assistant principal, to increase his/her performance in all areas of the assistant principal evaluation, and to reduce stress associated with their transition into an administrative role.

Similarly the faculty at the University of South Florida Lakeland who worked with Polk County Schools and business members created a program for thirty-five new principals during the 2002-2003 school year. For the program at Lakeland, faculty from the four campuses of the University of South Florida co-facilitated the training with administrators from Polk County Schools. The creators of this cadre took a comprehensive approach to professional development for school administrators through pedagogical and practical doctrine. The training consisted of a series of 12 interactive, empirical workshops/seminars grounded in theory. From training sessions, principals were able to connect experiences and events within their schools to national standards and guidelines. In addition, nationally acclaimed lecturers augmented these monthly seminars for each quarter of the year-long symposia.

Methodology

This study is a descriptive study using data derived from comparative case studies. The unit of analysis was each cadre as a single group.

The author facilitated discussions among participants of both professional development cadres. The author posed reflective questions about stress and stress management and asked participants to discuss their responses with others in small groups of four or five members. Group ideas were recorded on chart paper and then discussed as a large group. Individual ideas were put on sticky notes that were then placed on chart

paper and discussed as a large group. Individual ideas were then summarized on chart paper.

Findings

First year principals from the professional development cadre at USF Lakeland were asked what really causes you stress. Five groups with approximately six participants in each group discussed and responded to the question.

Stressors were also discussed with first year assistant principals from the professional development cadre at USF St. Petersburg. Three groups with approximately five participants in each group discussed and responded to the question. (For detailed analysis of both cadres, see Appendix A).

Findings from across all groups indicate that first year principals and assistant principals were stressed most by the uncontrollable job related demands on their time. Participants described how difficult it is to manage time when there are overwhelming job responsibilities, and they must juggle multiple tasks at once. When this occurs, most school administrators spend more time at work or bring work home. This in turn had a negative effect on their personal life and resulted in feelings of guilt for lack of time spent with family members and for their own health and well being.

Both cadres reported being stressed by their prospective staffs. They mentioned how difficult it is to deal with staff who don't follow procedures and how shocking it can be when adults are trivial, mean, and envious.

Another stressor that was common to first year principals and assistant principals was the amount of conflict that they encountered. Both cadres stated that conflict usually occurred as a result of their interaction with staff, parents, and sometimes students.

When contrasting first year principals and first year assistant principals, differences between the cadres occurred in two areas: job roles and policy issues. First year principals described stressors that were typical job responsibilities of a principal versus an assistant principal. These included: finances and pressures from accountability. On the other hand, stressors for first year assistant principals were bus complaints and problems, voluminous parent interactions, many student discipline issues, and discipline problems of special education students. First year principals reported stressors related to district politics and policy. They described frequent changes in policy, lack of direction or focus in relation to policy, and hidden agendas. First year assistant principals did not mention "politics," because more than likely they have not been exposed to them yet.

To determine how they cope with stressful situations or stressful days, first year principals from the professional development cadre at USF Lakeland were asked what strategies have worked for them in coping with stress. Individuals recorded their responses on sticky notes that were then put on chart paper. Thirty individuals

responded, and their ideas were summarized and discussed. For detailed analysis, see Appendix B.

Coping strategies were also discussed with first year assistant principals from the professional development cadre at USF St. Petersburg. Individuals recorded their responses on sticky notes that were then put on chart paper. Fourteen individuals responded. For detailed analysis, see Appendix C.

When examining the results from the cadre's recommendations for coping mechanisms for stress, 53% of first year principals suggested the use of laughter or humor. Some of these first year principals described how they reinforced positive cultures at their schools. For example, one principal described how she initiated a talent show at her middle school. Students, staff, and administrators were encouraged to perform. She said that the staff and administrators had the best time creating humorous skits that sought to teach the kids important lessons, and the students laughed the hardest when they saw some of the toughest teachers cutting up. Other first year principals described how they developed bonds with their assistant principals. One principal described how he and his assistant principal liked to play practical jokes on each other. He told the story of how his assistant principal was notorious for setting his walkie-talkie down and "losing" it. The principal would find it and keep it in his office. He laughingly described how much he enjoyed waiting for the assistant principal to say, "Hey...have you seen my radio?"

Fifty percent of first year principals said that they used venting to cope with the stresses of their job. Many mentioned that they opened up to those that they trusted to be discreet. First year principals said that they voiced their frustration and concerns to their spouses, other first year principals, their assistant principals, and occasionally their secretary.

Another coping mechanism described by first year principals was the use of prayer; approximately 40% of them said that they used prayer. One principal explained how she would cope with days where she dealt with back-to-back conflict all day. The principal said that as she drove home she prayed during the entire drive. Another principal told about his use of prayer. When he felt like he was running out of patience, he walked to the textbook supply room, shut the door, and prayed in peace.

Thirty-three percent of first year principals said that they used exercise to cope with stress. Several principals explained that they exercised every day; most of them mentioned walking in the mornings or late afternoons. Others were bicyclers, joggers, or swimmers.

Similarly first year assistant principals had these strategies at the top of their lists: venting, use of humor, and exercise. Seventy-one percent of first year assistant principals specifically mentioned that talking with colleagues was a helpful coping mechanism for stress. Many expressed appreciation for the cadre that gave them the opportunity to be with their peers where they could discuss challenges. Likewise, 57% of them said that

venting to their significant others was helpful. Fifty percent felt that it was important to have a sense of humor and a positive attitude, while 21% thought that exercise was a good stress burner.

In examining differences between the two cadres, first year principals of the USF Lakeland cadre had prayer as one of their top strategies. In addition, these first year principals seemed to cite more strategies that they could use during the workday whereas first year assistant principals listed more strategies to be used outside of the workday.

Conclusions

The findings from this study (uncontrollable job demands, staff problems, and amount of conflict encountered) support previous research in regards to problems faced by first year administrators. Ricciardi (2000) found that overwhelming job demands and time constraints made school administrators' jobs difficult. Similarly, several studies reported that human resource management, time management, and relationships were general factors that contributed to stress in principals. (Doring, 1993; Campbell & Williamson, 1987; Friedman, 1997). First year principals in this study cited another general factor from the literature that was reported to add stress, finances (Doring, 1993; Campbell & Williamson, 1987; Friedman, 1997).

When examining the results from the two cadres' recommendations for coping mechanisms for stress, they suggested: sense of humor, venting, and exercise. These findings were similar to previous research studies. Dardick (1990) cited humor as being essential. Terrill (1993) and Cooper (1988) mentioned exercise. Several studies found that administrators needed time to talk with other administrators (Michel, 1996; Hartzell, 1994; Educational Research Service, 1999; Marnik, 1997; Regules, 1997; and Goodson, 2000). A unique finding from this study was that first year principals suggested prayer as a coping mechanism.

From the results of this study, one would probably concur that being a school administrator is moderately stressful. Being new in any role adds additional stress. The author of this article has identified stressors for school administrators from the literature as well as has provided specific stressors from the participants: first year principals and first year assistant principals. Furthermore with the help of the administrators in this study, the writer has given strategies for coping with stress. It is imperative that faculty of administrator preparation programs and upper administration within school districts pay attention to and address the damage that stress can do to future and current administrators. Intervention and support can be provided through such mechanisms as professional development, discussions with peer groups, and journals to reduce the likelihood of attrition. McCabe (1995) profoundly says:

Stress affects everyone in his/her work and everyday life. Some persons are more effective when they are under a certain level of stress, but there are limits to the amount of stress under which one can perform effectively. Because one cannot avoid stress, administrators

should try to manage the stressors that occur and minimize their negative effect. One form of stress is burnout, which happens when aspirations and expectations are thwarted and one becomes depressed and used up (McCabe, p.13).

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Appendix A First Year Stressors

Group Responses	Number of Groups Who Responded – First Year Principals	Number of Groups Who Responded – First Year Assistant Principals
Not enough time and uncontrollable demands on time	5	3
Deadlines; quick turnarounds.	1	3
Too many demands; unrealistic expectations; unfinished tasks.	4	3
Staff (i.e. not following procedures).	4	3
Negativity; whining; unreasonable people.	3	3
Conflicts	3	3
Guilt – family, health, etc...	3	3
Bus complaints and problems	0	2
Dealing with parents – volume, hostility, critical, protective	0	2
Volume of student discipline issues	0	3
Rules and regulations pertaining to special education students and discipline	0	2
Feel incompetent; don't feel that I was prepared for this	0	2
Cannot have a personal relationship with teachers	0	1
Trying to figure out how my principal wants things done	0	1
Assessment overload; pressure of accountability.	2	0
Frequent changes in policy; lack of direction or focus.	2	0
Finances – tight budget	2	0
Hidden agendas district office.	1	0
Older parents of students.	1	0
Being a workaholic.	1	0
Being a perfectionist.	1	0

Appendix B First Year Principal Suggestions for Coping with Stress

Individual Responses	Percentage Who Responded
Laughter/Humor	53%
Vent	50%
Prayer	40%
Exercise/take a walk	33%
Listen to music	17%
Take deep breaths	10%
Have a chat with a friend.	10%
Take just a few moments for quiet time in my office with the lights off.	7%
Tell myself over and over "this too shall pass."	7%
Hide out in the bathroom for a few minutes.	3%
Plan and go on a mini-vacation	3%
Spend time caring for your pets	3%

Appendix C First Year Assistant Principal Suggestions for Coping with Stress

Individual Responses	Percentage Who Responded
Talk with colleagues	71%
Unwind by talking to a significant other	57%
Have a sense of humor	50%
Exercise	21%
Eat a proper diet	14%
Socialize with other administrators	14%
Do something to get your self to laugh like play safe practical jokes on colleagues.	14%
Vegetate in front of a mindless t.v. program	14%
Pamper yourself with a manicure or pedicure	7%
Reflect in a journal	7%
Allow yourself a good cry	7%