



Canadian perspectives on beginning principals: their role in building capacity for learning communities

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper sets out to posit that the new economy places a new set of demands on schools and those who lead. Mindfulness, intentional engagement of people and adaptive confidence are needed developmental features of beginning principal success. The paper examines how beginning principals in Canada respond to the capacity-building work of leading learning communities.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper examines data from a number of Canadian studies of beginning principalship and makes sense of these data using learning community and leadership literature.

Findings – Beginning principals must create a learning community culture that sustains and develops trust, collaboration, risk taking, reflection, shared leadership, and data-based decision making. Mindfulness, engaging people in capacity building and the development of adaptive confidence are key features of new principal maturation.

Originality/value – Beginning principals need to first develop personal, then collective efficacy, as well as mindfulness of their own learning and the learning culture. Further, beginning principals must intentionally engage people in acts of capacity building, together with conveying adaptive confidence in order to effectively foster professional learning communities.

Keywords Principals, Socialization, Learning processes

Paper type General review

Introduction

How does the beginning principal lead in a complex environment? The environment is ambiguous, lacks clarity or consistency in reality, causality or intentionality (Calabrese, 2002). Ambiguous situations cannot be coded precisely into exclusive categories and the outcomes are often fuzzy. In a modernist environment, our theories and assumptions were grounded in mechanistic, hierarchical, and bureaucratic views of the social and organizational systems. From this perspective, control and power resided at the top of the school organization and responsibilities, roles and decision-making structures were clearly delineated. In the contemporary school, the context within which the work of beginning principals unfolds is characterized by a global community, a pluralistic social order, a multi-textured goal set, accountability, new technologies, and a diverse student and teaching cadre (Sackney *et al.*, 2005a).

We are entering an era of profound change. Hartle and Hobby (2003) argued that our industrial age assumptions about schooling are being challenged. We are teaching for a knowledge economy (Hargreaves, 2003; Mitchell and Sackney, 2000). The growing importance of knowledge requires that schools need to be different from what they are at present. Hartle and Hobby (2003), paraphrasing the Demos study, stated:



Schools remain hierarchical, vertically organized institutions, which operate for about one-third of a day on five days each week. The ability of this kind of organization to sustain motivation and engagement for each individual learner and employee – fundamental demands for the acquisition of the complex skills demanded by the knowledge economy – is increasingly doubtful (p. 383).

Evans (1996) noted that there have always been chronic tensions in leadership: between managing and leading, and between resources and demands. This is, however, not new when one considers the increasing expectations being placed on beginning principals. What is new, Evans suggested, “is the extent and intensity” of the job (p. 152). These changing demands serve to decrease school leaders’ sense of efficiency and heighten their feelings of isolation, insecurity, and intensity (Portin and Shen, 1998). A study conducted by Daresh and Male (2000) revealed that principals have concerns in the support, or the lack thereof, they receive in their first year on the job.

During the past decade, various reform efforts have attempted to change schooling, but have met with minimal success. Part of the reason is that most changes have not transformed the culture of the schools to align with or attune to both internal and external demands. Stoll *et al.* (2003) contended that in a fast changing world, “if you can’t learn, unlearn and relearn, you’re lost. Sustainable and continuous learning is a given of the twenty-first century” (p. xv). Many of the current reform strategies – inquiry, shared leadership, collaboration, collective responsibility – are elements of capacity building at the individual, interpersonal and organizational levels (Mitchell and Sackney, 2000). In this regard Newmann and Wehlage (1995) found that “schools with strong professional learning communities were better able to offer authentic pedagogy and were more effective in promoting student achievement” (p. 3).

These recent initiatives have focused on transforming schools into learning communities (Barth, 1990; Huffman and Hipp, 2003; Mitchell and Sackney, 2000; Stoll *et al.*, 2003). To build a learning community is to build capacity for learning. A learning community has been defined as “a group of people who take an active, reflective, collaborative, learning-oriented and growth-promoting approach toward the mysteries, problems and perplexities of teaching and learning” (Mitchell and Sackney, 2000, p. 5). Such a focus represents a fundamental shift in how teaching and leading are perceived.

This alternative perspective of teaching and leading is grounded in a wholeness worldview, “which assumes that everything is intimately connected with and embedded in everything else, that different elements are unique manifestations of the same underlying reality, and that any change in one element eventually leads to some sort of change in other elements” (Mitchell and Sackney, 2000, p. 130). The learning community ideology is grounded in a constructionist and ecological perspective of learning.

Purpose of paper

Leading for a learning community is not an easy role for beginning principals. In essence, principals have to create a culture that sustains and develops trust, collaboration, risk taking, innovation, reflection, shared leadership and that is data sensitive. This article selectively reviews research pertaining to the beginning principalship; building learning community capacity; and teaching and learning for a knowledge society. Data from a number of Canadian studies on beginning principals is

used to show how principals are prepared, socialized and learn to build learning community capacity in their schools. The argument is made that beginning principals have a difficult task in the early years of their career without the support systems and leading learning community frameworks necessary to survive in the complex school environment. We conclude that beginning principals need to first develop personal, then collective efficacy, as well as a mindfulness of their own learning and the learning culture. Further, beginning principals must intentionally engage people in acts of capacity building, together with conveying adaptive confidence in order to effectively foster professional learning communities.

Early experiences of the principalship

In this section, we deal with the pre-appointment dispositions of beginning principals, their socialization and early learning, as well as their learning styles and reliance structures.

Pre-appointment dispositions of beginning principals

We were interested in what has influenced new principals to apply for this challenging position because, in our studies (Sackney *et al.*, 2003b; Walker and Sackney, 2001a; Walker *et al.*, 2003b), these initial dispositions and motivations tended to mark the nature and direction of their influence within the school learning community. Principals expressed a variety of reasons for applying for the position. For example, beginning principals indicated that they wanted to avoid “getting stuck in a classroom rut”, and “felt ready for the challenge after several years as a vice-principal”(transcript files). Some confessed to “always having aspired to be a principal” and others “wanted the opportunity to influence staff and students by putting theory and values into practice”. When interviewed, it was common for beginning principals to say they simply “wanted to work with committed teachers to provide excellent educational opportunities for students”, “to have opportunity to have more influence in making important decisions”, or “to work with a community of leaders (teachers) to put together a challenging and rewarding program for students” (transcript files). A consistent, but sometimes assumed, consideration for many principals was that they felt they had particular skills to offer.

When beginning principals were asked how their initial experiences of the principalship compared with what they had anticipated, most indicated that they were not prepared for the pace of the job, the amount of time it took to accomplish the tasks, and the number of tasks that was part of the position (Walker *et al.*, 2003a, b). A few principals indicated that the job was lonelier than they had anticipated. Another commented, “I didn’t realize the level of communication required for not only parents but for staff. You end up dealing with everyone’s problems”. Some principals expressed concern about the amount of time they devoted to dealing with student behaviour problems. The greatest concerns were, however, related to the demands of the position.

Socialization and early learning experiences of beginning principals

Early in their tenure, beginning principals experienced “culture shock” and nothing in their training prepares them for the “change in perceptions of others or the intensity of the job” (Daresh and Male, 2000, p. 95). Hargreaves (2003) contended that no matter

how ready candidates think they were, “it’s always a shock to their system when they finally get into the driver’s seat” (p. 288). They quickly discovered that their job was one of brief encounters and multi-tasking. As a result, many principals floundered as they attempted to juggle the multitude of demands with little if any support. They were also haunted by a fear of failure and some found the work less rewarding than they had originally anticipated. Further, the long hours, excessive workload, increasing responsibility and great expectations from various quarters led to considerable stress.

Davis (1998) found that principals were often faced with maintaining a semblance of order within an increasingly hostile, unpredictable and conflict-laden environment. Dwindling resources, increased paperwork, crumbling facilities, increasing numbers of special needs students and demand by stakeholders for participation in decision making “pose serious challenges to principals at virtually all levels and in nearly every area of the country” (p. 3). In addition, principals are faced with conflicts over personal, professional, and organizational values (Begley, 1999).

The fundamental changes to the family structure also create tremendous pressures on the work of the beginning principal (Sackney *et al.*, 1997, 2003b). The increase in the number of special needs and at-risk students has placed tremendous pressure on principals, and especially beginning principals. The relevance of these forces and complexities stems from the fact that merely surviving and maintaining oneself and the basic orderliness of a school provides the minimum platform upon which learning communities can be built. While “surviving” is prerequisite to flourishing, it is not sufficient for the transformation of schools into vibrant learning communities.

Just as a person entering a new country must learn a new language and a different set of ways of doing things, beginning principals must also learn how to behave and how to get things done in a new organization. Sociologists call this process socialization. Brim and Wheeler (1966, as cited in Greenfield, 1977) described socialization as “the process through which one acquires the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to adequately perform a social role” (p. 2).

Though there are various formal models of socialization, Greenfield (1977) posited that socialization to school administration is mainly random and informal and occurs over a variable time frame. Unfortunately, our studies (Sackney *et al.*, 1997, 2003a; Walker and Sackney, 2001b) affirmed that this assessment has not progressed much further during the intervening 30 years. Socialization processes tend to perpetuate the existing administrative subculture and do not engender and sustain innovative orientations.

Traditionally, socialization has been viewed as a static model with a beginning and end, both individually and organizationally. More recently, socialization has been viewed as transitional and transformational (Gorius, 1999; Nicholson, 1984). In essence, socialization is viewed as a “constantly evolving phenomenon; a continuous learning of oneself, of others, and of the organization” (Gorius, 1999, p. 2). At no point in time does the principal know everything about the school, as other individuals continuously impact on the principal’s environment and the principal continues to change his/her perception of the environment through the interaction process.

Becoming a principal is an intricate process of learning that requires being socialized into a new community of practice and a new role identity (Browne-Ferrigno and Muth, 2004, p. 488). The principal’s socialization process entails role-taking and role-making (Mathews and Crow, 2003). Role-taking involves accepting the assigned

roles and responsibilities and role-making entails molding the job to fit the principal's perspective, values and expectations (Mathews and Crow, 2003, p. 262). Stakeholders also hold strong expectations about how the role of principal should be enacted. For example, teachers expect principals to keep things running smoothly and buffer them from interruptions and irate parents. They also expect to be given voice in those decisions they care about. Another source of socialization is the predecessor (Mathews and Crow, 2003; Weindling and Earley, 1987). The school culture responds to everything that is different from the previous principal and informal influences play an important role in the socialization process (Duke, 1987; Hart, 1993). Further, there are external sources such as central office administrators, other principals and the community that impact on the principal's socialization.

Hart (1991) identified four themes in the socialization process of principals. First, socialization tactics involve the collective or individual socialization context in which the principal finds himself or herself (p. 454). Second, Hart (1991) delineated three socialization stages:

- (1) the encounter, anticipation or confrontation stage;
- (2) the socialization adjustment, accommodation, and clarity stage; and
- (3) the stabilization, role management, and location stage (p. 29).

Third, the social structures facilitate beginning principal tendencies to increase their interactions with those similar to themselves and to decrease interactions with those whom they perceive to be dissimilar to them (p. 35). Fourth, the outcomes or effects are the cumulative effect of socialization experiences.

Beginning principals have normally been expected to "sink" or "swim" on their own. They are usually judged through the same lens as that of their colleagues with many more years of experience. In many instances this sense of expected expertise negates their having contact with more experienced principals because it may be perceived as a sign of weakness (Sackney *et al.*, 2003a; Walker and Sackney, 2001a).

Early in their tenure principals were surprised by the number of personnel issues that they had to deal with. Sigford (1998) stated, "Dealing with staff issues is one of the most difficult parts of being an administrator" (p. 7). Much of what a principal does entails resolving problems. They are "victims of a constant barrage of negative comments, complaints and interactions" (p. 25). It is up to the principal to listen beyond anger and to resolve the issue in a calm fashion. They also quickly realize that they make hundreds of decisions every day and these decisions are made "through certain lens that the individual brings to the job" (Daresh, 2001, p. 96).

Principals may experience loss of friendship with teachers who were former peers. The resultant behaviour on the part of some beginning principals is to depersonalize their job. Some principals may reject their role as administrator and strive to appear as part of the teaching staff. Another approach is to hide behind rules, regulations, policies, and procedures. One principal stated that you had to "think like an administrator not a teacher. Another principal spoke about needing a highly developed skill of diplomacy: "Whether it is a 'job expectation' or not, one of the hardest things to learn is being diplomatic . . . and keeping my mouth shut and some of my gut reactions to myself" (Walker *et al.*, 2003b). This is consistent with Sigford's (1998) view that new principals need to see themselves as administrators and not teachers (p. 14).

How beginning principals learn

Our studies (Carr-Stewart and Walker, 2003; Sackney *et al.*, 2003a) of beginning principals have led us to conclude that most beginning principals learned about the school culture through observations, by asking questions and by talking less and listening more. "You learn through observations by watching teachers, students and parents. Talk to people but mostly quietly observe" (transcript files). Another principal offered that school culture is gleaned from a variety of sources: "present staff, students, parents, community members, former school alumni, school yearbooks, school display cabinets, school newsletters, and so forth. Changing school culture is an ongoing process, shaped daily by one's actions and words" (transcript files). But mostly principals learned about the culture by observing and asking questions. They quickly became aware that culture had a large impact on what happened within the school. They also recognized that in order to make any change within the school they had to be cognizant of the culture. Many of the initial changes they made were small (Walker *et al.*, 2003b).

Beginning principals were asked about previous experiences that helped them to learn (Sackney *et al.*, 1999, 2003a; Walker *et al.*, 2003b). They responded in five basic ways: they learned through mentorship, graduate studies, experience as a vice or assistant principal, professional development, and through experience as a teacher. Numerous principals attributed their learning to working closely with a former principal, a vice-principal or a teacher.

Beginning principals named many professional development events, programs or experiences that had helped them to learn the principalship (Walker *et al.*, 2003a). Amongst these were:

- principal association leadership institutes;
- short courses;
- conferences;
- leadership modules;
- leadership development programs; and
- certificate workshop programs.

As part of the learning process, beginning principals identified a number of technical and interpersonal skills that they needed to perform their work better. They desired better teacher supervision, conferencing and evaluation skills. In large part many noted that they lacked the skills to improve instruction. In addition, they needed better financial management and communication skills. A number of respondents felt that they lacked proper record keeping skills to do the job more efficiently. Another area that needed attention dealt with conflict management, and in particular how to deal with angry parents. Dealing with students with severe behavioural problems was also a big concern for principals.

Beginning principals were asked how they managed to acquire the additional skills and knowledge needed for their role (Sackney *et al.*, 2003a, b; Walker *et al.*, 2003a). The most common sources of information were:

- discussing issues with other experienced principals and superintendents;
- taking graduate classes;

- networking with other administrators and working with central office administrators;
- forging alliances with the superintendent;
- taking advantage of numerous professional development activities, professional reading and observing other role models; and
- attending monthly principal meetings and through mentor relationships.

Principal reliance structures

Principals take advantage of a variety of sources for their learning. In one survey (Walker and Sackney, 2001b), we posed the question: To whom do you turn for advice and what areas has good advice been difficult to find? Typically beginning principals sought advice from their superintendents and other school administrators. The majority of our respondents noted that they had no difficulty in finding advice on particular matters, given their network of relationships. Areas that principals found difficult to find advice included timetabling, budget and financial management, teacher preparation, and integrating students with special needs.

In several of our studies (Sackney *et al.*, 2003a; Walker *et al.*, 2003b; Walker and Sackney, 2001b), principals were asked about the type of advice that they sought. Examples of advice sought were home-school communication, budget issues, legal issues, teacher morale, dealing with difficult parents and teachers, confirming procedures on student suspensions, teacher contracts and the code of ethics. A number of principals indicated receiving advice to “confirm their gut instinct or to cover their posteriors”(transcript files). Principals also asked teachers for advice. They particularly used this strategy if the decision had to be implemented by the staff.

Emerging Canadian policy reality: capacity building for learning communities

Considerable recent attention has focused on developing a particular type of culture: the learning community (Barth, 1990; DuFour and Eaker, 1998; Huffman and Hipp, 2003; Mitchell and Sackney, 2000). In a recent survey of Canadian provincial governments most provinces have made the learning community the centre piece of their school reform initiatives (Sackney, 2006). The goal of these improvement initiatives is to improve student learning and performance by fostering projects that reflect the unique needs and circumstances within the school districts and schools. The policy framework requires that a culture of continuous learning be implemented.

As part of the improvement process, it was expected that schools, in consultation with their stakeholder groups, will develop improvement plans based on a variety of student achievement and school effectiveness measures. The improvement plans must be vetted by the district board and copies forwarded to the Ministry. At the end of the year schools must assess the goal outcomes and report to parents, the school district and the Ministry. These policy frameworks have a tremendous impact on the lives of beginning principals.

We know that building capacity for a learning community is more complex than we previously thought. Principals require skills in communication, group process facilitation, inquiry, conflict mediation and dialogue, and data management. Considerable evidence exists that the principal is the pivotal person in securing high quality learning, continuous improvement, and system transformation (Fullan, 2001;

Harris, 2002; Lambert, 1998; Mitchell and Sackney, 2000; Speck, 1999). Newmann and Wehrlage (1995) found that leadership was central to building school-wide collective focus on student learning of high intellectual quality. By keeping issues of teaching and learning at the forefront of the dialogue, these leaders built organizational capacity by consistently expressing the norms and values that defined the school's vision and initiating conversations about improving teaching and learning.

To build capacity for a learning community requires "disturbing people at a rate they can absorb" (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002, p. 20). Heifetz and Linsky (2002) claim that "to change the way people see and do things is to challenge how they define themselves" (p. 27). Habits which are culturally embedded are hard to give up because they give stability. It is important that principals remember that building capacity will not happen without teacher leadership (Murphy, 2005).

The focus on improved learning outcomes, or what Beck and Murphy (1993) called the "standards raising movement", is transforming schools from control to empowerment and a focus on success for all students. The traditional focus on content coverage and rote learning is being replaced by the learning community focus on in-depth treatment of topics, higher-order thinking skills, and teaching for understanding. In essence, the new ideology calls for creating a "community of learners" (Mitchell and Sackney, 2000). This is a difficult task for beginning principals, but the language of reflection must be part of the talk of the school if quality teaching and learning is to occur. Beginning principals initially tend to be more inner- rather than outer-focused (Gorius, 1999; Walker *et al.*, 2003b).

Building a learning community is the most important and demanding responsibility of the beginning principal. Speck (1999) stated, "The essence of principalship is creating a collaborative school where learning really matters and the community of learners cares deeply about each student's achievement" (p. 5). As such, the school learning community has to be a place of interdependency, mutual obligations, commitments and love of learning (p. 10).

In developing learning communities, Speck contended that there are some essential questions that the principal and staff need to confront. What do we want students to know and be able to do? How will we know that students can do these outcomes? What does it take to transform schools into places where this happens? And who is responsible for ensuring the desired results are achieved? Speck (1999) stated that the principal "must be the reflective practitioner who is capable of continuous learning and reflecting on practice as opportunities for leadership and modeling throughout the school" (p. 34).

In order to build a learning community a school staff needs to have a sense of shared vision and purpose. The vision needs to be based on cooperative learning relationships and the establishment of a caring, respectful environment based on trust. This focus on learning entails that beginning principals exhibit a number of leadership metaphors: principal as leader, principal as servant (enabling leadership), principal as architect (change agent), principal as social architect (redesigner of purposes and structures), principal as moral agent, and principal as relationship builder (Beck and Murphy, 1993; Lambert, 1998; Speck, 1999). However, the central focus of the principal has to be on teaching and learning. As Lambert (1998) stated, "It is what we talk about, struggle with, decide about, plan for" (p. 23).

Learning to lead learning communities

Given that principals are expected to lead efforts to build learning communities as we have described, what are the required skills and frames of understanding? From past research, we know that beginning principals lack the skills of knowing how they are supposed to act, what they are supposed to know, and even what they are supposed to do in a given situation. Leithwood and Steinbach (1999) found that beginning principals are not good at delegating authentic leadership responsibilities and collaborative decision-making processes. They are also not good at developing systems and systemic thinking (Fullan, 2005). To lead learning communities principals need to be enthusiastic learners themselves.

During the past three years we have been studying schools that build capacity as learning communities (Sackney *et al.*, 2005a, b). We have concluded that a number of practices assist in building capacity for teaching and learning and that leadership plays a pivotal role in that process:

- *Shared understanding and responsibility* – In the high capacity learning community schools, the staff had a shared understanding of teaching and learning by sharing their instructional strategies, by taking collective responsibility for student learning, by focusing the school vision on student learning, by taking risks and engaging in action research, and by taking generative leadership roles focused on enhancing student learning.
- *Reflective practices* – It was commonplace in these schools for teachers to reflect on their practice and to examine educational alternatives. Their reflections and research efforts were informed by their tendency to collect a wide array of classroom and school-wide data.
- *Organizational resources* – These schools had adequate technological, curricular and library resources, as well as numerous opportunities for professional development.
- *Currency* – School staff kept current on the latest research on teaching and learning. They were active learners who constantly read new material and talked about what they had read.
- *Learning opportunities* – In the high capacity learning schools there were greater opportunities for staff, students and parents to learn. Staff saw failed initiatives as learning opportunities and their learning was supported and encouraged by the principal.
- *Interactive instruction* – Teachers collaboratively sought ways of improving teaching and learning. They made numerous uses of authentic curricula to enhance student learning.
- *Learner engagement* – Student engagement (cognitively, behaviourally, and emotionally) in these schools was high. Students and staff in these schools experienced what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) referred to as “learning flow” – by getting better at learning.
- *Community of leaders* – Leadership in these schools was distributed. The principals were the architects for the success of these schools. These leaders were good at obtaining consensus around the school vision and purpose, and on the desired culture. They were good at building trust and quality relationships.

- *Parental and community involvement* – These schools were able to obtain high parental and community involvement in the learning process. Leadership played a crucial role in this effort.
- *Coherence* – There was coherence to the work of these schools. The intensive emphasis on student learning kept teaching and learning at the top of the conversational agenda. These leaders were able to build coherence at the individual, interpersonal and organizational levels.

What does this mean for beginning principals? They need to focus their energy on teaching and learning and ensuring that there is coherence in what the school is trying to accomplish. One of the first tasks is therefore to build a sense of shared vision and purpose. Another task is to develop a culture that encourages learning at the individual, interpersonal and organizational levels. Beginning principals need to be the head learners and the ones to model the way. They need to develop a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility. The development of an interactive and supportive environment is crucial and trust is the foundational element.

Another task is for the principal to ensure that the school has the resources necessary to do its work. Learning can only be supported if teachers have the time, materials and technology needed for growth. Further, an expectation of continuous improvement has to prevail.

Beginning principals also need to develop learning teams and an appreciation of working together. They also need to encourage others to take on leadership roles. Many beginning principals tend to be reluctant to share leadership, which is unfortunate.

Leveraging beginning principals as leaders of learning communities

To build capacity for a learning community requires that principals function as learning leaders rather than merely instructional leaders. Unless principals make this transition, the ability to establish a collaborative, results-oriented learning community is extremely difficult.

Fullan (2001) contended that the principal of the future has to be a cultural change person who is attuned to the big picture, a sophisticated conceptual thinker who transforms the organization through people and teams. Five essential components characterize leaders in a knowledge society:

- (1) moral purpose;
- (2) an understanding of the change process;
- (3) the ability to improve relationships;
- (4) knowledge creation and sharing; and
- (5) coherence making.

Sharing one's knowledge with others is the key to continual growth and beginning principals have to foster those relationships. Lambert (1998) viewed the learning of colleagues as the center of what constitutes leadership. She stated:

Today's effective principal constructs a shared vision with members of the school community, convenes the conversations, insists on a student learning focus, evokes and supports leadership in others, models and participates in collaborative practices, helps pose the questions, and facilitates dialogue that addresses the confounding issues of practice (p. 40).

This type of leadership requires skills that beginning principals are not likely to have. We contend that beginning principals need to be mindful of the school's culture, enabled in their own learning processes, and intentional in their engagement of people in capacity building efforts. Further, beginning principals must be persistent in the development of adaptive confidence in themselves and other members of the professional learning community (individual efficacy towards collective efficacy). We elaborate on these attributes in the subsequent sections as frameworks for building the school's capacity as a learning community through the acumen of the beginning principal.

Mindful engagement of the school culture

The beginning principal quickly discovers that the school has a culture that defines how things get done. By culture we mean "the stable, underlying social meanings that shape beliefs and behavior over time" (Deal and Peterson, 1999, p. 3). The culture of the school is grounded in the shared assumptions of individual participants. As such, school culture results from a complex web of traditions and rituals that build up over time and that is highly enduring. These cultural patterns have a powerful impact on performance, and shape the way staff think, act, and feel.

The beginning principal needs to realize that the staff expects some things to change with the appointment of a new leader. How the staff view the leader is important because that involves making emotional investments. Powerful elites on staff will attempt to impose their assumptions on the new principal. Consequently, the beginning principal needs to realize that unless s/he takes a proactive approach to developing the type of culture s/he desires, others will do it for them. The advantage the beginning principal has is that during the transition phase the staff tends to be anxious and ready to be socialized to learn the assumptions, values, beliefs, and behaviours necessary to reduce anxiety (Ott, 1989). Staff often wants to be able to control its environment and cultural change that is too abrupt will not be readily accepted. (Deal and Peterson, 1999; Fullan, 2001).

Beginning principals must make sense of the school culture and interact mindfully with the learning community membership. Weick (1995) identified seven properties of sensemaking. First, sensemaking is grounded in identity construction. The individual is constituted through an iterative process. It is the discovery of who I am and what I think. Second, retrospective sensemaking is derived from an analysis of the meaningful lived experience. Third, sensemaking is enactive of sensible environments; it is a process of creating environments and environments creating the individual. That is, individuals receive stimuli as a result of their own activity and that from their respondents. Fourth, sensemaking is a social process. Fifth, sensemaking is ongoing and the longer the search for meaning, the higher the arousal, and the stronger the emotion (p. 49). Sixth, socialization is focused on and by extracted cues. Context affects searching, scanning, and noticing (p. 51). Noticing is a more informal, involuntary beginning to the sensemaking process than scanning (Starbuck and Milliken, 1988). Seventh, socialization is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. According to Weick (1995), what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story. Each of these sensemaking properties points to ways by which beginning principals can gain culture intelligence.

In order to improve schools, Hoy (2003) contended that schools need enabling structures and mindfulness. Enabling structures include:

- fostering trust;
- valuing differences;
- learning from mistakes;
- anticipating the unexpected;
- facilitating problem-solving; and
- encouraging innovation and flexibility (p. 92).

He claimed that individuals and organizations become “seduced by routine ways of doing things [...] indeed habit itself can become mindless” (p. 94). Mindfulness, according to Weick and Sutcliffe (2001), is:

... the combination of ongoing scrutiny of existing expectations, continuous refinement and differentiation of expectations based on newer experiences, willingness and capability to invent new expectations that make sense of unprecedented events, a more nuanced appreciation of context and ways to deal with it, and identification of new dimensions of context that improve foresight and current functioning (p. 42).

Weick and Sutcliffe suggested that leaders need to be alert to the condition of mindfulness and the effort it takes to increase one’s “mindful moments”. Consequently, if beginning principals are to develop the learning community they have to be more mindful of the things they may have missed, of unforeseen vulnerabilities, of foreshadowing new consequences, and “seeing old things in new ways” (p. 42).

When things are routinized and repeated there is no need for mindfulness but as we have described the work-world of the beginning principal, every moment is different and brings with it never before experienced challenges. Mindfulness and enabling structures are necessary if teaching and learning is to improve in school learning communities.

Learning in the learning community

Creating a learning community requires that processes be in place to engage in knowledge management, transfer and use. Knowledge management is a cyclical process that includes knowledge acquisition phases (creation or idea generation), a knowledge transformation phase (explicit/tacit), a knowledge-sharing phase (oral or electronic), and a creative destructive phase (knowledge evaluation and elimination). Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) noted the importance of knowledge creation in learning organizations. They found that extensive use of collaborative structures and procedures were capable of converting tacit knowledge, held by individuals, into shared knowledge. Teachers’ knowledge base is expanded through discourse and reflection and not solely from mandated practices. Although explicit knowledge is important, so too is a form of critical and creative knowledge that provides teachers with the appropriate foundations for being open to the ideas of others, being willing to share ideas, and maintaining a thirst for knowledge.

Paavola *et al.* (2004) in examining innovative knowledge communities contended that cognition and knowing are distributed over both individuals and their environments, and that learning is situated in these relations and networks of

distributed activities of participation. The argument is that knowledge and knowing cannot be separated from situations where they are used or where they take place. In essence, learning requires networks, collaboration and reflection.

Leadership for knowledge management is about learning together, and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively. As such, it involves providing opportunities for teachers “to surface and mediate perceptions, values, beliefs, information, and assumptions through continuing conversations; to inquire about and generate ideas together; to seek to reflect upon and make sense of work in the light of shared beliefs and new information; and to create actions that grow out of these new understandings” (Lambert, 1998, pp. 5-6). This type of leadership requires the principal to build capacity for learning at the individual, interpersonal and organizational levels (Mitchell and Sackney, 2000).

True learning communities encourage educators to acquire the knowledge and skills they need from many different sources, within and without the learning community. They openly share their own knowledge and skills with others because they realize that they are all working toward achieving personal and school goals. There are a number of cutting edge methods of doing this.

Aubrey and Cohen (1995) described learning as a journey. This is a powerful image and every leader concerned about learning within the school organization knows that it is often necessary to make the journey with the learner. They describe this as accompanying learning. Accompaniment has always been important in human development because it allows for growth. Parents know the value of accompanying their child in the early stages of their journey through life. Doctors accompany patients, lawyers accompany clients, and consultants accompany companies. To achieve accompaniment within an organization, they suggested the following:

- make the commitment to travel the same road as the learner and to share your experiences in mutual dialogue;
- be available to others, continually spell out your message, give clear support and expectations to staff, and provide resources that enable others to turn goals into reality;
- acknowledge the dignity of work and recognize the need for staff to organize their own learning efforts; and
- hang out, share stories, and show you care (Aubrey and Cohen, 1995, p. 54).

Many educational organizations today are building a knowledge repository and network to enable employees to learn from one another. Tobin (1998) stated there are four major components to a knowledge network:

- a repository, most commonly a computerized database, of specific system knowledge and experiences;
- a directory of the specific knowledge, skills, and experience held by groups and individual employees throughout the system;
- a directory of learning resources, within and without the system, that educators can access to help them plan their own learning activities; and
- a set of tools, methods, and capabilities that enable educators to learn from each other and to learn together (pp. 98-9).

Although a relatively recent idea, the knowledge repository provides access to information about people's experiences. It is a deliberate effort to capture and record the wealth of tacit knowledge within an organization. In a flourishing learning community all are learners and all are educators, each member is encouraged to participate in the knowledge network.

Leading the learning community is not merely about the school principal; rather, it is about building the confidence of those who constitute the learning community. Principals need to ensure that the strategies, structures, processes, and systems are in place so that educators are touched with inspiration and mobilized to form relationships and thereby transform the school into a learning community. Adaptive beginning principals are able to engage the entire learning community in transformative knowledge transactions and authentic learning, and do so with an infectious confidence.

Kanter (2004) said that "confidence consists of positive expectations for favourable outcomes. [...] [It] influences the willingness to invest. [...] Confidence determines whether our steps – individually or collectively – are tiny and tentative or big and bold" (p. 8). Confidence entails having trust in the power of the group to do the right thing. When people believe in their ability then they can start to deliver. Quinn (2004) contended that "the practice of adaptive confidence means that we are willing to enter uncertain situations because we have a higher purpose and we are confident that we can learn and adapt as we move forward" (p. 148). Learning is about change, adaptation and transformation. These processes can be frightening and the challenge is "to be both adaptive and confident [...] because we have a higher purpose" (p. 151).

Tschannen-Moran *et al.* (1998) connected confidence to self-efficacy. They said:

Self-efficacy beliefs influence taught patterns and emotions that enable actions in which people expend substantial effort in pursuit of goals, persist in the face of adversity, rebound from temporary setbacks, and exercise some control over events that affect their lives (p. 210).

Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004) claimed that "a principal's sense of efficacy is a judgment of his or her capabilities to structure a particular course of action in order to produce desired outcomes in the school he or she leads" (p. 573). They stated that "a robust sense of efficacy is necessary to sustain the productive attentional focus and perseverance of effort needed to succeed at organizational goals" (p. 574). Lyons and Murphy (1994) said that:

... confronted with problems, high efficacy principals do not interpret their inability to solve the problems immediately as failure. They regulate their personal expectations to correspond to conditions, typically remaining confident and calm and keeping their sense of humor, even in difficult situations. Principals with higher self-efficacy are more likely to use internally-based personal power [...] when carrying out their roles. (cited in Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2004, p. 574)

Professional understandings arise from conditional confidence (Torbert, 1987). We act as if we are in control when everything is within our comfort zone. Unconditional confidence arises by our unwillingness to discard inaccurate assumptions and strategies that do not work. For beginning principals this is not easy. They begin to demonstrate adaptive confidence when they are humble enough to learn from their mistakes and failures and when they let others in the learning community learn as well. As Quinn (2004) stated, "Adaptive confidence is the capacity to walk naked into the

land of uncertainty and build the bridge as we walk on it” (p. 153). Beginning principals need to serve as role models of adaptive confidence if they are to create the conditions for a learning community to develop.

Conclusion

In this article we have argued that the work of beginning principals is complex given the Canadian emphasis on building capacity for the learning community. Leadership for the learning community requires skills and understandings that beginning principals are not likely to have. Our contention has been that beginning principals need to be mindful of the school’s culture, and intentional in their engagement of people in their capacity building efforts. Furthermore, beginning principals must be persistent in the development of adaptive confidence in themselves and other members of the professional learning community. As such, they need to develop first individual efficacy and then focus on collective efficacy.

Because leadership for a learning community entails knowledge management work, beginning principals need to ensure that the strategies, structures, processes and systems are in place so that educators are touched with inspiration and mobilized to form relationships that transform the school into a learning community. Leadership is also about culture building that allows educators, students and parents to be part of a team that learns together. This is a large task for beginning principals but one they must undertake if teaching and learning are to improve in twenty-first century schools. We know from our work, and that of others, that leaders provide the synergy, influence and role modeling for others to follow.

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