Principal Voices from Across Canada: Knowledge and Understanding

Scott Lowrey

The purpose of this paper is to reconsider findings from my doctoral research—*Canada's Outstanding Principals (COP): A Mixed-Methods Investigation of Leadership Development, Principal Efficacy, and Transformational Leadership* through a lens of simplexity and my experience as an elementary school principal. Fullan and Boyle (2014) defined simplexity as a small number of core factors that are easy to understand and difficult to use in combination. Principal voices from all 10 provinces and three territories are represented in this paper. COP represents a national learning network of principals each coming from a unique context framed, in part, by regional diversity. COP recognition is based on a score against four characteristics: demonstrating instructional leadership, leading others to develop professional learning teams, partnering with families and communities, and enabling ongoing professional and personal learning initiatives. These characteristics are derived from a synthesis of Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) and Waters Marzano, and McNulty's (2003) work.

The inaugural COP Program was held February 2005 in Toronto, Ontario. The Learning Partnership, in association with the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management and the Canadian Association of Principals, initiated this annual leadership development program to celebrate, encourage, and support leaders in the role of principal. Each year, approximately 30 principals, with representation from all 10 provinces and three territories, receive COP recognition. This national network of principals was further extended and reinforced with the establishment, beginning 2007, of Canada's Outstanding Principals Academy (COPA). COP recipients automatically become part of COPA. Similar to COP, COPA meets annually each February in Toronto.

COP Program Processes and Leadership Development Elements

As a leadership development program, COP meets the six leadership development program elements or traits foundational to a well-designed leadership development program. The first element is that the program must have purposeful and reciprocal peer networking opportunities. Next, the program must foster developmentally appropriate learning opportunities for various career stage and trajectory needs of participants. Third, the program must support and strengthen the nexus of practice and theory. As well, activities within the program must be focused on improving instructional capacity of participants and ways to promote student achievement. Fifth, the program must contain content where daily job responsibilities are framed by a lifelong commitment to professional growth. A final point is that the leadership program is based on core transformational leadership practices. All six elements are necessary to leadership development; however, their relative priority may

change as one's career progresses. This process could be a function of the diversity of COP recipients in terms of career trajectory or career goals.

Exemplary school leadership is a reciprocal influence process, which means that effective leadership helps support the wellness of both school staff and the entire school community. In turn, school staff and school community enhance the wellness of school leadership. In essence, effective school leadership is about serving staff and the public. Some principals intentionally continue to serve publicly funded education in the role as principal, while others seek service to publicly funded education in different spheres of influence including system leaders, policymakers, and program developers. This statement explains that elements of well-designed leadership programs, while integrated, carry different weights. The relative influence of each element to enhancing leadership capacity changes over time, context, and self-direction.

Qualitative evidence from my doctoral research and professional experience, reiterates the importance of a theory-practice continuum in a leadership development program. Leadership development programs incorporate a theory-practice continuum integrating leadership wisdom from both educational and non-educational sectors as part of a multi-year program commitment. These are identified as having a positive impact over and above an existing skill set.

It is my belief that education systems exist to serve communities, not vice versa. The voices represented in this paper strongly advocate for balancing formal leadership development training and *job-embeddedness* within processes of collective reflective practice, continuous improvement, and shared learning. Simplexity is achieved when educational leaders seek precision while navigating personalized problem of practice. This personalized problem of practice must be defined by the school leader's current leadership challenge in the service of staff and community.

Core Transformational Leadership Practices

My research and experience suggest that high principal efficacy is a prerequisite of transformational leadership. By high principal efficacy, I mean a principal's belief in his/her ability to successfully address leadership challenges, complex or mundane, and influence change. By transformational leadership, I mean a principal's capacity to build a vision and set directions, build relationships and develop people, redesign the organization, and manage the instructional program (Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). In turn, once the principal embodies this high efficacy, transformational leadership ensues. Since COP recipients arrived to the COP program with high principal efficacy, they are ready to do the work of, or already engage in, transformational leadership. Canadian principals, by definition, are transformational leaders. What COP provides over and above an existing skill set, is a focus on the transformational practice of *building relationships and developing people* with the close second being *setting directions*. Building relationships and developing people is the core transformational leadership practice that appears to frame the other three. Simplexity is realized when building relationships and developing people is the focus of leadership behavior.

Principal Efficacy and Collective Principal Efficacy

The efficacy concepts referenced in this paper represent a synthesis of Bandura (1997), Seashore Louis et al. (2010), and Leithwood and Seashore Louis' (2012) work. Definitions of principal efficacy contain a number of common elements. First, principal efficacy is based on belief; it is not actual performance based. Second, principal efficacy is focused on an individual's self-perceived ability. Third, principal efficacy is intentionally planned. Fourth, principal efficacy is achievement-oriented. Definitions of collective principal efficacy contain similar common elements. The data generated from my doctoral research did not support the hypothesized, reciprocal relationship between principal efficacy and collective principal efficacy. This finding suggests that principals may be more comfortable being the leader in a school of subordinates, than as one among a collective of equals. Given my experience, there is clear reciprocity between principal efficacy and collective principal efficacy.

From an organizational perspective, how do we realize the collective leadership capacity of principals through a lens of student achievement, simplexity, succession, and sustainability? This question is both a challenge and opportunity for the future of school leadership. Principal voices assert that they and the communities that they serve, are up to both challenges and opportunities!

The concepts of transformational leadership and principal efficacy and their impact on student achievement are demonstrated as important in the research literature. This paper contributes to our understanding of principal leadership by applying these concepts to a leadership development program, establishing that developing leaders with abilities as transformational leaders, and tapping into principal efficacy, are insightful elements of leadership development. A reciprocal relationship between principal efficacy and collective principal efficacy must be fostered, not assumed. This point has organizational implications.

Principal Leadership: Knowledge, Understanding, and Simplexity

My doctoral research examined principals who have been recognized as being successful school-based leaders. Several of these principals have since successfully transitioned into new leadership roles in district, Ministry, or postsecondary roles. It is important to acknowledge and honor exemplary principal colleagues who make meaningful differences in the communities they serve. They do so on a daily basis without receiving or seeking formal recognition. While not generalizable to non-COP principals, COP recipient reflections on student achievement, community building, and influential leadership development programs, and experiences suggest exemplary best leadership practices. Consequently, COP recipients are well positioned to foster leadership capacity of others, extend and communicate exemplary best practices to non-COP principals, lead others to develop professional learning teams, partner with families and communities, and action ongoing professional and personal learning initiatives.

Leading contemporary Canadian schools is complex work in a time of constant change. Knowledge, understanding, and simplexity embrace the quest for precision. Precise principal problems of practice foster simplexity, and vice versa.

References

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York, NY: W. H. Freeman and Company.

Fullan, M., & Boyle, A. (2014). *Big-city school reforms: Lessons from New York, Toronto, and London*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Leithwood, K., & Seashore Louis, K. S. (2012). *Linking leadership to student learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Leithwood, K., Seashore Louis, K. S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences pupil learning: A review of research for the Learning from Leadership Project*. New York, NY: The Wallace Foundation.

Seashore Louis, K. S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K. L., & Anderson, S. E. (2010). *Learning from Leadership Project—Investigating the links to improved student learning: Final report of research findings*. New York, NY: The Wallace Foundation.

Waters, T., Marzano, R. J., & McNulty, B. (2003). *Balanced leadership: What 30 years of research tells us about the effect of leadership on student achievement*. Aurora, CO: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL).