Got a minute? Can instructional leadership exist despite the reactive nature of principalship?

Sheryl Boris-Schacter
Hunnewell School (USA)

Got a minute? Can instructional leadership exist despite the reactive nature of the principalship?

Sheryl Boris-Schacter

Principal, Hunnewell School, Wellesley, Mass. USA

Sheryl Boris-Schacter, a former reading teacher, elementary teacher, special educator, secondary English teacher, high school administrator, and university professor, is back in K–12 education as an elementary school principal at Hunnewell School in Wellesley, Massachusetts. Dr Boris-Schacter resigned her professorship of 18 years at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts just this year to return 'to the point of service delivery'. She is the co-author with Sondra Langer of Balanced leadership: How effective principals manage their work (Teachers College Press, 2006), editor of *The changing relationship between the principal and the superintendent: Shifting roles in an era of educational reform* (Jossey-Bass, 1999), and the author and co-author of numerous articles on professional development, educational policy, and the American school principalship. She has a doctorate from Harvard University and resides in Newton, Massachusetts with her husband Bill, her son Blake, and her daughter Tess.

Abstract

Alarmed by mounting evidence of a national shortage of qualified and committed school principals, a colleague and I interviewed and surveyed over 200 public school principals from across the United States to find out why so many are leaving the profession and how those who stay persist in their role. Based on that data, we drew conclusions about how successful practitioners prioritize competing demands and achieve life balance, while keeping instruction at the heart of the enterprise. This analysis resulted in a book published by Teachers College Press in 2006, *Balanced leadership: How effective principals manage their work.*

Knowing all that I did about the principalship, the frustrations it holds, and the gap for most practitioners between the reality of the work and the ideal of instructional leadership, I still chose to accept an invitation from a local school superintendent to fill an interim position as an elementary principal. Consequently, one year ago, I applied for a leave from the professoriate, packed up some books and papers, and took what I had learned about education and leadership to a suburban school with 325 students in kindergarten through grade five. I was determined to find out if I could apply what I had learned from over two hundred experienced principals about keeping the majority of my time and the focus of my work on instructional practice.

> 'I can't imagine why being a principal now would have any appeal as a career. Despite the buzz that the principal is supposed to be an instructional leader as opposed to the person who buffers the people in the school from the horrible bureaucracy of the outside school department, the reality is that the outside school department, if left to its own devices, would make working in schools pretty well intolerable' (Principal interview, Boris-Schacter and Langer, 2006).

I am just completing my very first year as an elementary school principal. I am doing this after seven years as a special education teacher, five years as a high school teacher and administrator, and eighteen years as a professor of education at a university. Twelve of my years at the university were spent preparing experienced teachers for school leadership positions, primarily the principalship. This work drove my teaching as well as my research and scholarship, and got me back into schools, especially principal offices. Those visits led to conversations with practitioners that informed my thinking about what mattered in the schoolhouse, and what difference principals make to the enterprise.

The principal shortage in the US

In the midst of that work, in 1998, a colleague and I began reading mounting evidence of a national shortage of qualified principals (Educational Research Service, 1998; Keller, 1998; Yerkes & Guaglianone, 1998). A documented shortage commanded our attention because researchers and educators assume that an effective principal is central to school improvement and student achievement (Archer, 2004; Cotton, 2003; Education Writers Association, 2002; Educational Research Service, 2000; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Johnson, 1996; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Rosenholtz, 1985; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979). While policymakers and educational researchers were compiling laundry lists of reasons for the shortage and statistical projections of need, it seemed to us that no one was asking

the principals why the shortage existed or how it could be addressed. We wondered what American principals thought, so we asked school leaders from all geographic regions of the United States:

- why the principalship became less attractive

- why current principals were leaving their positions

- how those who persisted managed their work

- why America's schools lacked capable and willing new principal candidates

- whether the role could be rethought to improve recruitment and retention and better meet academic goals.

A national study to address the shortage

From 1998 to 2004 we received completed surveys and conducted interviews with just over two hundred principals from across the country. The principals came from urban, suburban, and rural districts. They were male, female, white, and people of colour. The principals led elementary, middle, and high schools in twelve states. Some were novices in their first or second years in the role and some were seasoned veterans with over twenty years of practice. Some provided unsolicited newsletters and memos as evidence of how they communicated agendas to the parents, teachers, and students of their schools. These documents provided additional data for analysis and inclusion. This data helped us interpret how principals addressed professional persistence, managed competing demands, achieved life balance, and imagined new models for the principalship.

What emerged from our analysis was that the respondents struggled with the same competing concerns as did our graduate students. Their lives were a balancing act in which they perpetually weighed the relative importance of three pairs of activity categories that we called 'principal tensions':

- instruction and management

- work and personal lives

- societal/community expectations and individual priorities

>   (Boris-Schacter and Langer, 2006)

For example, principals reported that when they wanted to go into classrooms, they had to complete paperwork. When they needed to stay at school, they missed dinner at home. When the community expected them to respond immediately, they wanted to gather information and carefully consider options.

The focus of this paper is the tension that exists between instructional leadership and managerial tasks. The principals in our study were remarkably consistent in their assertion that they entered the principalship in order to be instructional leaders, and lamented that they spent the vast majority of their time dousing fires, fixing school facilities, attending meetings, and completing paperwork driven by state and federal mandates. Although they wanted to be reflective and planful, they found themselves being primarily reactive to non-instructional activities.

This is precisely what prevents many credentialed and experienced teachers from transitioning from the classroom to the office and has, I think, contributed to the principal shortage. The purpose of the principalship is vague compared to that of teaching. The mission of teaching is clearly curriculum and instruction, whereas the principalship espouses the centrality of pedagogy but crowds the work out with other time-consuming administrative activities

that are managerial in nature. Often, these managerial tasks are essential to maintaining the school but most principals feel they rarely improve the quality of teaching and learning.

When faced with the contrast between a teacher's life of direct service with children and a principal's necessary occupation with such activities as discipline, testing, and plant management, the study principals had to convince themselves that their work was worthwhile and that their focus, if not their time, was always on instruction. Even the more experienced practitioners felt that they did not focus sufficient time and thought on instructional improvement. Instead of spending after-school hours planning professional development activities, school-wide curricular themes, and reflecting on classroom practice, principals described this time as being filled with 'catch-up.' There was little artistry, problem solving, or craft enhancement mentioned.

I would argue that the struggle to find adequate time to be an instructional leader is no less than a struggle with professional identity and purpose. The challenge is to manage the cognitive dissonance between what principals imagined they would be doing before assuming the principalship and how they actually spend their time when they are in the job. Even more than the other tensions we identified in the role, the balance between instructional leadership and managerial tasks begs the question, 'What is the role of the school principal?'

Historically, the principalship has been one of 'head teacher,' but the position has evolved into one of data analyst, public relations liaison, and accountability officer (Pappano, 2003). Like principals in other studies (Lovely, 2004), our principals wanted little to do with these managerial aspects of the new principalship and much more to

do with pedagogy. It was no surprise that a popular alternative model suggested by our respondents was one of a dual principalship in which one person was in charge of instruction and one was in charge of management. All conceded, though, that few professional educators would opt to fill the role of principal for management.

Defining instructional leadership

In the context of our research, we never directly asked principals to define instructional leadership. However, it became easy to extrapolate definitions from the coupling of the activities with the use of the term, a list with a striking resemblance to the one cited in a Stanford University Report, 'Preparing school leaders for a changing world' (2007). Our respondents talked about their role as one of mentoring staff, modelling instruction, visiting classrooms, and providing customised professional development experiences. A middle school principal wistfully mentioned the following activities of instructional stewardship as those that would define her concept of 'the dream principalship':

> The dream principalship would be focused around teaching and learning. It would include maximum amount of time in classrooms, it would include minimal paperwork, it would include at least one period a day in which I could teach and model good instruction to other teachers in the building. The ideal principalship would involve enormous amounts of time mentoring staff people and developing professional development themes for the entire school (Principal Interview, Boris-Schacter and Langer, 2006).

This one principal's notion of a 'dream principalship' turned out to be a common paradigm. It was also, for almost all of the principals in our study, a dream not realised.

Knowing all that I did about this position, the frustrations it holds, and

the gap for most practitioners between the reality of the work and the ideal of instructional leadership, I still chose to accept an invitation from a local school superintendent to fill an interim position as an elementary principal. Consequently, one year ago, I applied for a leave from the professoriate, packed up some books and papers, and took what I had learned about education and leadership to a suburban school with 325 students in kindergarten through grade five. I was determined to find out if I could apply what I had learned from over two hundred experienced principals about keeping the majority of my time and the focus of my work on instructional practice.

What I learned in the principal's office about instructional leadership

I began my tenure with many advantages. Among these, I followed a principal who was thought to be indecisive so it would not be hard for me to appear capable; people held positive assumptions about my intellect and my capacity because I was coming from the university; and I had taken a one year leave and could return to my professorship. That being said, I made an agreement with the superintendent that I would approach the position as though it were permanent and I would be given free reign to make any changes I deemed necessary to improve the school. For this school, in a well-resourced district that enjoyed every economic advantage and much community involvement and support, it was not entirely obvious what needed to be done.

I began, as any new principal should, by interviewing the staff about themselves, about what works well, and about what they think requires attention. When I completed the interviews and analysed the data for themes, my blueprint was clear. I needed to re-establish a

positive school culture; be a reliable, action-oriented, and predictable leader; establish definitive boundaries between the faculty and the parent community; and bring fun and meaning back to the school. It seemed to me that the teachers were telling me, in a variety of ways, two things: that they were having difficulty getting their work done and they did not feel supported by the principal.

I made a conscious decision to define instructional leadership for me and at this point in time as being teacher-centered. I reasoned that happy, cared for teachers would translate into improved teaching and learning in the classroom. I also hedged my bets that, if I did this aspect of my job well, then teachers would reciprocate by offering support for initiatives that I introduce. I considered every problem teachers mentioned in the interviews and solved all that I could. My goal was for them to see and feel a difference when school opened. I was going to eliminate what I perceived to be distractions to improving classroom practice.

Beginning with the interviews, I made a statement that I was keenly interested in getting to know them as individuals and that I was an active listener. I was modelling how I wanted them to interact with children and parents – respectfully and with full engagement. That was relatively easy. The harder part was being action-oriented when I was new to a system and unsure of the protocol.

I relied upon my relationship with the superintendent who invited me to fill the interim position, the mentor principal he assigned to shepherd me through the system, and the assumption that I should just go ahead and do things that made sense within the confines of 'my building'. Before school opened. I solved the staff parking problem by securing additional spaces which I had been told were impossible

to get, and I made numerous improvements to a physical plant that had been a disorganised and dirty mess. I rearranged a dysfunctional main office and altered the expectations of behaviour for the school secretary. Once the staff saw these visible signs of leadership, they began asking for other items they had long since given up on such as fixing classroom drinking fountains and constructing hallway bulletin boards.

These visual and attitudinal changes were symbolically important not only to the staff but also to the parents. There was, apparently, an even shorter leap than I had imagined from a tidier building to a more focused educator. People were favourably impressed until I was challenged to take sides between the teachers and the parents, although I was unaware at the time that these actions would be perceived in that way.

The first such instance was my eliminating the morning line-up ritual during which students lined up outside, by class, and listened to announcements and/or student work. This happened at the 8:30 bell and parents were invited to stay and observe. I thought this ritual was problematic for several reasons and I chose instead to have children enjoy free play in the yard and go into the building a full ten minutes sooner, thus increasing instructional time. There was tremendous pressure on me from some segments of the parent community to reverse this decision.

The second example was in the third week of school when we had our Open School Night. Parents came to hear from the teachers about the curriculum. The schedule had been clearly communicated, with an ending time of 7:50 p.m. At 8:20, classrooms were still filled with parents and teachers. I went to each room and invited parents to leave. The teachers were grateful but some parents were incensed; emails flew for weeks. Early

on, these two instances defined my leadership style and identified my priorities: teachers and instruction. By maintaining the centrality of the classroom, I was able to make decisions that flowed from that philosophical stance. This helped me remain focused and consistent.

As I am at the end of the school year now and hindsight is revealing, I have heard repeatedly from parents and teachers that I have both 'brought joy back to the school' and 'refocused the school's work on instruction'. I feel that my putting my energy into getting to know the teachers and supporting their work and work lives was right, as was basing my decisions, large and small, on sound instructional and developmental practice. Although this approach is not usually characterised as instructional leadership, and indeed it was not by most respondents in my most recent research study, I found it to be at the heart of the instructional agenda for this nascent principal. It leads me to think that what is labelled as managerial is sometimes incorrectly positioned as being tangential to instructional leadership. Indeed, a principal's lens on ending an Open House on time, as managerial as it presents, may in fact be as an integral a component of instructional leadership as teacher supervision and professional development.

References

Archer, J. (2004). Tackling an impossible job. *Education Week,* 14(3), p. S3.

Boris-Schacter, S., & Langer, S. (2006). *Balanced leadership: How effective principals manage their work.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Cotton, K. (2003). *Principals and student achievement: what the research says.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Darling-Hammond, L., LaPointe, M., Meyerson, D., & Orr, M. (2007). Preparing school leaders for a changing world: Executive summary. Stanford, CA: Stanford University, Stanford Educational Leadership Institute.

Educational Research Service. (1998). *Is there a shortage of qualified candidates for openings in the principalship? An exploratory study.* For the National Association of Elementary Schools Principals and National Association of Secondary School Principals. Washington, D.C.

Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. (1998). Exploring the principal's contribution to school effectiveness: 1980–1995. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement,* 9(2), 157–191.

Johnson, S. M. (1996). *Leading to change.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kannapel, P., & Clements, S. (2005). http:/prichardcommittee.org/

Lovely, S. (2004). *Staffing the principalship: Finding, coaching, and mentoring school leaders.* Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Pappano, L. (2003, December 21). In many classrooms, a principal lesson. *The Boston Globe.*

Rosenholtz, S. (1985). Effective schools: Interpreting the evidence. American *Journal of Education,* 93(3), 352–388.

Rutter, M., Maughan, B., Mortimore, P., & Ouston, J. (1979). *Fifteen thousand hours: Secondary schools and their effects on children.* Cambridge: Harvard University.

Yerkes, D. M., & Guaglianone, C. L. (1998). Where have all the high school administrators gone? *Educational Leadership,* 28(2), 10–14.