

Learning Networks for First-time Vice-principals:

**A Process of Socialization to a New Role in the Ontario Context of Educational
Leadership**

Submitted by:

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Statement of Purpose:

The issue of educational leadership has a long and tumultuous history (Donmoyer, 1998; Mitchell & Ortiz, 2006; Greenfield, 1978; Hoy & Miskel, 1982; Ryan, 1999; Bates, 1980). For over a century policy-makers, scholars and practitioners have grappled with issues and constructs of leadership (Donmoyer, 1998; Mitchell and Ortiz, 2006; Greenfield, 1978; Hoy & Miskel, 1982). In the opening years of the twenty-first century the discussion has gone global. The worldwide exchange of ideas and practices is now a routine phenomenon as key stakeholders seek an understanding of what good school leadership is and what its purposes are. The Ministry of Education for the province of Ontario has added its perspectives to this discussion. This took place when the Ministry introduced The Ontario Leadership Strategy (OLS) in 2006 (<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/framework.html>). The Strategy is comprised of a four-point action plan. The components of the plan are: a Common Provincial Framework, leadership development activities that are aligned with the Framework, support mechanisms for school leaders, and an Institute for Education Leadership.

The Framework is divided into five ‘Leader Competencies and Practices’. These competencies and practices are:

- Setting Directions
- Building Relationships and Developing People
- Developing the Organization
- Leading the Instructional Program
- Securing Accountability

Each of the competencies and practices is then subdivided into four sections: Practices, Skills, Knowledge, and Attitudes. These sections articulate very specifically

what principals do, are capable of, know about, and are committed to. As stated in the OLS, the Common Provincial Framework "...describes what good leadership looks like".

Even though policy direction has been established through the OLS, the implementation of the Strategy has thus far been left to individual school boards. However, some resource supports are available to school boards that apply for them.

In one large Ontario school board, some action has been taken to implement this provincial policy. This has been done through the creation of a continuum of support relative to the 'Leader Competencies and Practices' outlined in the Strategy. The continuum of support includes elements such as: leadership coaching for newly-appointed vice-principals and principals, workshops relative to the core competencies, the creation of a board Leadership Development Policy, and the appointment of currently-practicing principals to serve as resource supports to system leaders, school administrators, and on-going support for learning networks for vice-principals.

It is the intent of this paper to examine just one element of this continuum of support – the learning networks for vice-principals. This will be done relative to concepts such as approaches to educational administration, leadership, policy and politics, and change.

Rationale:

Internationally school leadership is being researched and debated as never before. In my current role as principal of leadership development in one Ontario board I have participated directly or indirectly in such discussions involving Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, China, the United States, England, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Spain just within

the last few months. It seems that everywhere, educational leadership is the topic of the day.

At the local level, here in Ontario, the focus of these discussions is the board level response to the Ministry's Ontario Leadership Strategy (OLS). School leaders have found themselves rather suddenly needing to respond to the expectations in the OLS by setting the direction of the school, building relationships with all stakeholders, developing their staffs, developing the board organization, leading the instructional program, and, of course, being accountable not only for their work but for the achievement levels of the students in their schools. Not surprisingly, newly-appointed vice-principals find their move from teacher to school administrator to be a challenge! The range of duties, responsibilities, and accountabilities can be rather overwhelming.

It is for this reason that it is valuable to examine how newly-appointed vice-principals socialize into their new roles within the context of the current paradigm of educational leadership.

Vice-principal Learning Networks – What they are:

The board I am examining is divided into four geographic areas for the elementary panel. Each 'area' has approximately 40 elementary schools and one network for vice-principals for a total of four vice-principal networks. Approximately half of the schools have vice-principals thus there are approximately twenty potential members for each vice-principal network. The vice-principal networks are informal in that they are organized and chaired by the members, the agendas are set by the members, attendance is voluntary, and supervisory staff do not attend the meetings. Supports are available to the networks based on the needs and wants of the individual networks. In my support role as

principal of leadership development, I support two of the networks. A colleague of mine is responsible to support the other two networks if they wish to have that support. The two networks with which I work have asked me to attend all of their meetings, to help them in planning their sessions, and to facilitate the learning processes they choose.

As a support person for their professional learning I have guided the participants through facilitated processes to help them determine what their learning needs are – the content – and the mode in which they wish to learn. The participants have been clear in their requests. They want to work with case studies based on real and current events in schools from their area. They have asked not to have guest speakers on content. They want to be engaged in discussion and analysis of the case studies. As a result, a template for case study analysis was created to help guide the conversations held within the group. The group processes used in the sessions are regularly revisited and the participants have repeatedly confirmed their commitment to this form of learning.

Meetings of the networks are held monthly. At the end of each session participants speak briefly about recent events at their school. The group generally selects two of these events as the content for the next session. The participants who presented the event then write up a short one-page case study to use at the following month's meeting.

The format of each meeting is usually about forty-five minutes each to work through two case studies. The participants usually work in groups of three or four – using the case study analysis template. Whole group discussion time is part of this discussion so that all participants can share insights and questions. Frequently, ideas for new case studies emerge from these discussions. After the case study work there is

usually time set aside for open discussion of current or pressing situations that individuals wish to discuss with the group.

In addition to this group work, many of the vice-principals will contact me directly for one-to-one meetings concerning their own learning. Thus I have developed over the past two years quite a deep knowledge of the concerns and learning needs of first-time vice-principals.

The following four sub-sections of this paper will connect the work of the vice-principal networks with a number of leadership themes. These themes are: approaches to educational administration, leadership, policy and politics, and change.

Approaches to Educational Administration:

Without doubt, one of the most significant issues faced by these first-time vice-principals is developing an understanding of the role of a school administrator in the current leadership context. Many of these vice-principals have had teaching careers with school administrators who had – or appeared to have - more of a managerial orientation than an instructional leader orientation. During discussions ‘managerial’ issues are often identified as areas for learning. These would include topics such as creating supervision schedules, developing a timetable for the school, and school bus transportation issues. The struggle for the participants generally is the tension between the need to know how to complete these tasks and the demonstration of the leader behaviours outlined in the Ontario Leadership Strategy. This tension reflects aspects of the ‘institutional productivity era’ of educational administration as described by Mitchell and Ortiz (2006).

The current context of educational leadership is certainly much more complex than in the past. No wonder some first-time vice-principals are struggling with the

leadership paradigm of their new role. They have been presented with the Ministry's most current version of the image of a leader in the form of the OLS but many factors have been at play over the years. As mentioned above, conceptions of leadership have evolved over the years (Donmoyer, 1998; Mitchell & Ortiz, 2006; Greenfield, 1978; Hoy & Miskel, 1982; Ryan, 1999; Bates, 1980). A plurality of perspectives has existed in research as well as in the field for many years. This has evolved, to some degree, because theoreticians have brought forward perspectives reflective of sociology, psychology, philosophy, behaviourism, political science, and the list goes on (Bates, 1980).

The philosophical orientation of educational administration is made yet more complex with the acknowledgement that it is a field deeply embedded with moral values and judgments (Ryan, 1999). Over time we have seen the emergence of a feminist perspective (Young, 1994) that helped bring to light the experience of women in educational administration and their ongoing impact. But the complexity grows as the field begins to tackle the full range of diversities within schools (Ryan & Rottmann, 2007). No longer is educational administration conceived and developed strictly from a white, male, middle-class, and heterosexual perspective. Educational administration is increasingly informed by differing perspectives from a wide range of diversities.

As the field itself begins to acknowledge these perspectives as well as what counts as knowledge (Bates, 1980; Young, 1994) it is not surprising that teachers making the move into vice-principalships are faced with complex and perhaps confusing understandings of the very nature of the field into which they have entered.

Leadership:

The current leadership context in Ontario is evolving as boards grapple with the policy direction of the Ontario Leadership Strategy and its expectation that school leaders work less as managers and more as instructional leaders. Again, this is a struggle for newly-appointed school administrators. The tasks they find themselves doing seem to them not to require leadership but rather managerial skills – efficient organization, communication, accurate technical skills, and task completion. They rarely see these tasks as those of leaders. This has provided me with an opportunity to work with the vice-principals to examine the work that they do through the myriad of leadership lenses.

This work can be highlighted by a specific example. During one session I asked all of the vice-principals to form in small groups and to list “all of the things that you do in the school”. These were recorded on sticky notes – one job per sticky note. Once each group had created a sizable pile of sticky notes, they placed them under one of two headings – *management* or *leadership*. The vast majority of the sticky notes were placed in the *management* pile. The next step was for each group to pick one task and to discuss it in terms of leadership. The participants were asked to consider questions such as: What are the leadership aspects of this task? Do I serve as a leader when I do this work? Am I engaging in any of the leader behaviours as outlined in the leadership competencies from the OLS? After a few minutes of this discussion each group shared their thinking. Every group found it quite easy to find the leadership elements of the task under discussion. Sharing the thinking group by group was helpful as new ideas and perspectives were shared. From this point on, each group worked through their sticky notes – one at a time – to determine if it was a management task or if it was one that called on them as leaders.

By the end of the session there were very few sticky notes left in the *management* pile. What became evident to everyone was that each individual could think of their work as purely management – task completion – or as leadership. What emerged from the conversation was that it was *how* the work was done that determined if it was leadership or not. The participants determined that it mattered if a task was done with a leadership perspective. That is, was it done as part of a longer term vision of the school, was direction set by the task, were relationships cultivated and nurtured in the process of doing the task, was the learning of all students considered, and in what ways did the task help to build knowledge and skills in others?

Even though the participants determined that it mattered if leadership informed what seemed to them to be managerial tasks, a critical question arises. That is, what form of leadership? From the Ministry of Education we have the Ontario Leadership Strategy. However, these beginning leaders are faced with a wide range of styles of leadership and leadership for different purposes.

According to Marzano, Waters, & McNulty (2005), “...of the research of the last 35 years, we found more than 5000 articles and studies that address the topic of leadership in schools...” (p.6) Marzano et al (2005) examined the leadership literature and identified the following styles to be both “influential” and “foundational” (p.13). In fact, Marzano et al state, “that much of what we found in our meta-analysis strongly supports the major elements of these theories...” (p.13):

- transformational
- transactional
- total quality management
- servant
- situational
- instructional.

At the same time, Richard Hatcher (2005) advocates yet another leadership perspective - the redistribution of power within the school among key stakeholders. Ryan (2005) also addresses the power aspect of leadership by promoting a collective approach that necessitates an inclusive and collective process of leading a school. Ryan (2003) articulates this concept in his advocacy of emancipatory leadership with the goal of inclusion and social justice.

How does a first-time vice-principal orient their own leadership when such a rich and diverse body of leadership literature exists? How do the vice-principals with whom I work reconcile their day-to-day work with the range of leadership orientations available to them? What do they do if they have a fundamental belief in advancing an agenda for social justice and inclusion in their schools? These are some of the questions with which they engage when they discuss their case studies. These are also issues which I raise with them in order to challenge their thinking both in terms of the work that they do and how they do the work that they do.

Knowing that leadership is ultimately about power is a question for these vice-principals to determine how they wish to lead and the environment they wish to create as a result of their actions. It is for this reason that they need to address the range of leadership perspectives that are available to them (Ryan, 2005).

Policy and Politics:

In the life of a newly-appointed vice-principal the issues of policy and politics surface regularly but perhaps less in a theoretical way and more in a very practical and school-specific way. In the vice-principal networks the case studies provide many

instances of how newly-appointed school leaders understand policy and politics and how they respond to them. Without doubt, first-time vice-principals find themselves in circumstances where they work with increasing expectations, greater diversity, and under great political pressure (Young & Levin, 2002).

In terms of policy, the most frequent experience is when staff members or parents – rarely students – ask what the school’s policy is on a particular topic. The majority of the vice-principals have some – but generally limited - knowledge of board policy. Fortunately they usually know that they can access board policy information quite quickly in order to respond. However, it is the ‘school policy’ issue that is often most challenging. Many staff and parents routinely use the term ‘policy’ for any behaviour or event which they believe might have some processes, rules, or guidelines. Vice-principals are often asked what the school’s policy is on certain inappropriate behaviours, field trips, or homework, as examples. Staff members may ask about ‘policies’ concerning the amount of supervision time they need to take part in, ‘covering’ classes if they wish to leave the school early or arrive late, or even if they can take an extra day or two of holidays, “off the record”, at break times in December or March. Few, if any schools, would have policies on these topics. Routine practice, which some may consider policy, is what usually guides the administration of the school.

For many vice-principals this is challenging. They often wish to build positive relationships with the staff and parents and so will often want to provide responses that please them. The challenge comes in knowing what the longer-term impacts of their decisions might be. For first-time vice-principals, ‘policy’ is often considered as something of a rulebook which they can use to guide their decisions in granting approval

or not. Policy is also seen as a way to ensure certain behaviours take place. Occasionally, it is also seen as a shield behind which to hide when informing a parent or staff member that they cannot do something they wish or that what they wish for will not happen. And it is here where 'policy' meets 'politics' for first-time vice-principals.

In my career thus far I have not met a vice-principal who thought that they were entering a political role when they accepted their promotion to the role of school administrator. The vast majority believed that they were entering a new career stage where they could support the running of a school in the best interests of the children who attend it. The problem is that they run into the adults along the way. First-time vice-principals enter politics with both staff members and with parents. With staff members it is often a case of dealing with 'office' or 'micropolitics' (Young & Levin, 2002) and the nature of human relations in an organization. Or it could be managing the politics of a union steward during a year when bargaining for a new collective agreement is taking place.

But it is the parents with whom first-time vice-principals encounter the most experiences with politics. As is well-known, every school in Ontario has a school council. In some cases, school councils are small groups of parents who like to hold small fund-raising projects to buy special things for the school. However, in many schools, there are large, active, political school councils. Beginning vice-principals in their desire to build positive relationships with parents and the community can find themselves being pulled in different directions by various factions on a school council. Or the vice-principal, finds herself struggling with understanding the role of the school council relative to the role of the trustee because their overall understanding of school

governance is sketchy, at best. The political nature of schools is something few vice-principals have faced as teachers and the challenge can be very difficult for them because they have not previously needed to navigate political waters as a classroom teacher. The vice-principal network, a safe space in which to discuss such issues, often becomes a haven for articulating these concerns and determining what they need to learn in order to manage in this new world.

First-time vice-principals find themselves in a context where the provincial government passes legislation, creates educational regulations, or issues a policy statement through the Ministry of Education that can thrust them into facing policy and the resultant politics at any moment in time. Joshee and Johnson's (2005) concept of a policy web carries a specific meaning but for beginning vice-principals they may feel at times as if the policies and politics of their role have thrown them into another type of web – one from which they can find it difficult to extricate themselves. It is very possible that the vice-principals can see policy as a web with the spaces intended by Joshee and Johnson (2005) but as these vice-principals express in the safe haven of their network, they often feel caught up in something they do not yet feel ready to handle.

Without doubt they would admire Jim Laughton's work at Richmond Road School and his ability to inclusively create school-level policies and practices (Corson, 1998) and then to navigate whatever politics arose from them. However, based on their comments and questions, they do not yet feel knowledgeable, skilled, or empowered enough to do so. Thus the benefit of the vice-principal network as it presents a forum for the discussions that are so necessary to the building of their knowledge and confidence.

In working with these vice-principals and the case studies they bring forward, it is of great value to examine the policy perspectives and political potentialities through the political analysis framework offered by Young & Levin (2005). They propose the following five general aspects for the political analysis of any particular issue:

1. What is the issue and how is it being defined? (Issues)
2. Who is involved in making the decision? (Actors)
3. Through what decision-making process will a decision be made? (Processes)
4. What factors might influence the decision? (Influences)
5. What are the outcomes of a political process? (Results)

Change:

For newly-appointed vice-principals the only constant in their lives is ‘change’. Everything is change and everything is changing for them. There is a change in role. There is a change in employment status - to management. There is a change into a role of supervising other adults. There is a change from the loss of union membership. There is a change in how they are perceived by the staff because they have ‘gone to the dark side of administration’. There is usually a change of school as teachers are rarely appointed as vice-principals in the schools where they taught. There is a change in the day-to-day work they do. There is only change. But for most of the vice-principals with whom I have worked, the biggest change is assuming the role of leading the instructional change in the school to bring about improved student learning.

For virtually all of the vice-principals with whom I have worked over the last two years, leading change has proven to be the most demanding of their leader roles. They encounter the full gamut of teachers from enthusiastic early-adopters of any instructional

change to those who simply refuse to change practice or even attend a staff meeting to learn about instructional directions for the school. Leading change is not as simple as the books suggest – provide some direction, some pressure, some support and resources, and the staff will work through all manner of obstacles in the interests of better serving their students.

Vice-principals who use the OLS image of instructional leader to guide their actions often face significant blocks to their efforts and they have little in the way of personal resources or resiliency to deal with those staff who will not engage in the changes being advocated. It is these types of case studies that stimulate the most frustration and emotion within the networks. Everyone in the networks is familiar, to one degree or another, with the gurus of instructional change. Each vice-principal has their favourite quotations from Fullan (2008, 2006, 2005, 2001), Leithwood (2003, 1999), Elmore (2000), Marzano (2005), Harris (2002), and a host of others. But it is the work of facilitating change as a front-line, newly-appointed vice-principal that proves the greatest challenge for these first-time leaders. The wise words of instructional gurus do not provide much support when faced with real people in real schools.

Based on my experiences with the vice-principal networks, I believe I am accurate in stating that much research literature concerning change does not reflect the lived experiences of these first-time vice-principals. Without doubt, Fullan's (2006) work would be the most familiar to them as he is often referenced in this board. The issue of concern for the vice-principals though would be that his work is theoretical and they do not really see a connection between what he writes and what their work is. Certainly there would be a positive response to the concept of 'public service with a

moral purpose'. Likely most school administrators, regardless of their leadership orientation would see themselves within that phrase. As well, the vice-principals would see themselves in the 'lateral capacity-building through networks'. All of these vice-principals are in their own vice-principal network for which I am a support. But they are also part of learning networks with their supervisory officer. In addition, Fullan's concept of 'deep learning' would resonate because there is a board-wide belief that the supervisory officer learning networks are exactly that – deep learning. From my perspective as a support person for the vice-principals, the primary issue of concern is that I see the newly-appointed vice-principals seeing themselves as simply recipients of these types of change structures, not leading them or participating as co-leaders.

The critiques of Fullan's (2006) work by Stoll (2006), Datnow (2006), and Noguera (2006) – as focused and articulate as they are – are distantly removed from both the work and discussions of the vice-principals. Inasmuch as the critiques genuinely do examine Fullan's work with a critical eye and serve to extend his thinking in many ways, this literature is certainly not reflective of the thinking of beginning school administrators. From my experience in their networks, this level of examination of leading change in schools is simply too theoretical and too abstract. The vice-principals see themselves as practitioners and their concerns are practical and specific. The field of education may ultimately benefit from the fact that scholars like Fullan, Stoll, Datnow, and Noguera are raising significant questions about the work of educators in schools. However, the vice-principals with whom I work are simply not prepared to engage with this level of critical examination. At best, I would say that they are genuinely interested in ideas such as engaging the wider community (Stoll, 2006), the significance of context

(Datnow, 2006), and they would certainly respond to the concerns raised by Noguera (2006) about children living in poverty and how schools struggle to meet their needs. But it would likely end with interest. The demand from the vice-principals is still consistently about what they perceive they need to know in order to complete tasks. Shifting thinking to include a leadership perspective continues, for me, to be an on-going challenge.

The typology of leadership for change and social justice created by Cindy Rottmann (2007) is not something I feel would be appropriate to use with the vice-principals in the networks. Indeed, Rottmann herself says that her typology is intended as a frame for examining meanings of leadership in theory, not as a self-evaluation tool. However, it is exactly as a self-evaluation tool that I believe most of the vice-principals would use it for if they were presented with it. At their stage of leader learning, they are still strongly grounded in the concrete. If the typology were to be used as a self-evaluation, my fear is that the vice-principals would see themselves as actively maintaining the status quo by acting as managers within a hierarchical bureaucracy where the leading ideas are informed by rational technicism (Rottmann, 2007).

On a personal note, I would quite enjoy the opportunity to engage the vice-principals in such a discussion. My hesitations are two-fold. First, it is their group and I am a guest support person so I must respect the agenda they set. Secondly, I would be concerned with the impact this might have on their sense of selves as leaders. They are at a point where they are asking the questions that will support them in their socialization into their new role. It is quite possible that they will be more prepared to consider

theoretical perspectives once they have built increased confidence in themselves as leaders.

Conclusion:

The vice-principal networks I support are attended by newly-appointed administrators who are grappling with what their leadership is and where they fit into the leadership of their schools. They are busy and occupied with a myriad of tasks that they tend to see as managerial. Yet they also know that they are supposed to be instructional leaders as detailed in the OLS – and this is where the real challenge comes for them. The issue of seeing themselves as leaders, to know what leadership beliefs and perspectives they carry, and what they believe their leadership is intended to do, is what is most significant for them. It is thinking that is solidly grounded in the face-to-face practice of a school. For this reason it is often a challenge for them to see the leadership in the work that they do.

Does this mean that that this group of first-time vice-principals is fated to maintaining the status quo and that a more socially just agenda will not inform their practices? No. I believe not. What I believe is that the socialization into their new role – as I see it in their networks – is a stage in professional learning where they are adjusting and adapting to dramatic changes in their roles, responsibilities, and how they see themselves in their work. As the socialization period to their new role draws to a close – and that is different for each participant in the networks – there is an opportunity for them to broaden their leadership thinking and to engage with a more inclusive, equity-minded, and student-achievement way of leading. The issue for these administrators then is with

whom will they interact as leaders in the future who can expand their leadership thinking so that they understand equity, inclusion, and student achievement as fundamental to the schools that they will lead?

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