October, 2014

Challenges for Novice Principals: Facing 21st-Century Issues in School Administration

Russell L. Claxton, *Liberty University*
Samuel J. Smith, *Liberty University*

Challenges for Novice Principals:

Facing 21st-Century Issues in School Administration

Andrea P. Beam, Russell L. Claxton, and Samuel J. Smith

Author Note

Andrea P. Beam (abeam@liberty.edu), Liberty University. Russell L. Claxton

(rlclaxton@liberty.edu), Liberty University. Samuel J. Smith (sjsmith@liberty.edu),

School of Education, Liberty University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Samuel J. Smith,

School of Education, Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, USA 24502. Email:

sjsmith3@liberty.edu. PHONE: 434-592-4342. FAX: 434-582-2468.

Date of submission to *Kappa Delta Pi*: June 26, 2014

- **STRAND**: Leadership
- **TYPE**: Research
- **TITLE:** Challenges for Novice Principals: Facing 21st-Century Issues in School Administration
- **RESEARCH STATEMENT/ISSUE:** (1) to increase understanding of role challenges and expectations of novice principals and (2) to compare whether the realities or the perceptions of those realities changed over time with longevity.
- **CONTEXT:** Online surveys of 159 school leaders and a focus group of 8 participants.
- **RESEARCH METHOD & TYPE OF DATA:** This was a mixed-method study. Quantitative data included a Likert-scale online survey of 159 school leaders. Qualitative data were collected from two sources: (1) an open-ended question on the online survey and (2) a focus-group interview involving 8 participants who shared their stories, experiences, and interpretations of those experiences.
- **MAIN FINDINGS/IMPLICATIONS:** Findings noted differences between those who were presently in the throes of their induction phase and those who had gained at least three years' experience. The prevailing thread throughout, however, was the need for support.

PRESENTATION PREFERENCE: Workshop

PROPOSAL ABSTRACT: Challenges for novice school leaders evolve as information is managed differently and as societal and regulatory expectations change. This study addresses unique challenges faced by practicing principals (n=159) during their first three years of the principalship. It focuses on their perceptions, how perceptions of present novices compare to those of experienced school leaders, and how pre-service programs can better prepare them for these challenges. Findings revealed that two themes shared relatively the same prominence among experienced leaders as they did with novices: navigating politics and gaining a sense of credibility. Experienced leaders expounded more on specific political hurdles with school boards, other teachers, and parents, and—regarding these same populations—experienced leaders voiced that they wished they had been more successful in their earlier years in developing credibility more quickly with stakeholders. A theme not occurring at all among present novices but noted by five experienced leaders was that of adjusting to the culture of a new school as its leader. This phenomenon may be explained by the value more seasoned leaders have developed for factors inherent in a campus culture. As they look back on their novice years, seasoned leaders may realize how more effective they could have been and how much credibility they could have earned had they become more proficient in understanding the culture of the school environment they were charged to lead. Further comparison of novices to experienced leaders demonstrates the following differences. When approaching the open-ended questions, present novices and experienced leaders alike identified time management and balance as the most challenging.

FEEDBACK & DIALOGUE DURING SESSION: Session attendees will be provided opportunities to interact with each other and with presenters as they respond to the findings. They will discuss their own perceptions verbally and also in a PollEverywhere.com activity, texting their responses to be projected for everyone to see and to consider for discussion.

PRESENTATION REQUESTS: Projections for PowerPoint and (if possible) Internet access so that a PollEverywhere.com activity may be conducted with participants.

Challenges for Novice School Leaders:

Facing 21st-Century Issues in School Administration

The transition from instructing in the classroom to leading from the principal's office is becoming a more difficult one as accountability measures demand increasingly more from school leaders (Brown, 2006). Current novice administrators face challenges that they may not have anticipated in their pre-service preparation programs. Additionally, the challenges current novice administrators face may be quite different from those faced by their predecessors who may have been novices several years or decades prior. Understanding challenges during school leaders' induction phase may serve to inform the structure and curriculum of principal preparation programs.

Therefore, this study examined perceptions of both new and experienced school leaders regarding the challenges faced during their first three years in leadership positions. The dual purposes of this investigation were (1) to increase understanding of role challenges and expectations of novice principals and (2) to compare whether the realities or the perceptions of those realities changed over time with longevity.

Review of the Literature

To identify specific challenges faced by novice principals has been the aim of a variety of previous studies. Barnett, Shoho, and Oleszewski (2012), for example, noted that the most commonly named challenges were workload and task management, conflicts with adults and students, and curriculum and instruction issues. Hertting's (2008) study resulted in a quite different list of demanding issues: diversity, reform initiatives, accountability measures, scarce resources, and inadequate support from

supervisors. Focusing strictly on urban settings, Tredway (2003) found student discipline to be the primary challenge for new administrators. A Turkish study (Sincar, 2013) asked beginning principals to identify their major challenges, to which they responded as follows: bureaucracy, insufficient resources, resistance to innovation, lack of in-service training, and issues related to student poverty. A similar study conducted in Namibia (Mushaandja, 2013) resulted in the following: chronic stress, overloaded schedule, simultaneous assimilation both to a new school environment and to a new leadership position, adjustment from teachers being peers to being subordinates, and the sense of isolation from supervisors. The Namibian study went further to explore frustrations of new administrators as they attempted to apply theoretical textbook principles from their preparation programs to the practical realities of the principalship.

It is interesting to note comparisons among various settings and between novice and veteran administrators. Jagt, Shen, and Hsieh (2001), for instance, found that there was no association between the rank order of perceived challenges between novice principals in elementary schools and those in secondary schools. There was, however, a marked difference in how participants perceived the severity of those challenges. Secondary principals perceived their challenges as being much more severe than did elementary principals. Additionally, the same study found challenges to be perceived as more severe in urban and rural settings than in suburban settings, and more severe in large schools than in medium-sized or small schools.

A comparison made in the Barnett, Shoho, and Oleszewski (2012), study is strongly related to the second purpose of the present study, which is to compare perceptions of present novice principals with those of experienced principals. Their

study found no significant difference between perceptions of the two groups. The present

study, however, found otherwise.

The Present Study

Method

   Sample and setting. The population consisted of candidates enrolled in a

blended online-residential graduate program at a private religiously-affiliated university

in Virginia. Though candidates were enrolled through an online program, as part of the

degree requirement, they were required to attend at least three residential courses. Prior

to arriving on campus for residential courses, candidates received an email link to an

online version of the survey. Participants (n=159) in the quantitative aspect of the study

were those who responded. The qualitative aspect involved a focus group of 8 members,

a subgroup of those who had already taken the online survey, volunteered to participate

in the one-hour focus group.

   Quantitative instrument. In order to develop quantitative survey questions,

researchers started with a review of the current literature on challenges faced by

administrators during the first few years in a school leadership position. Once a list of

the primary challenges was developed, these items were grouped into more general

categories in order to develop a manageable number of survey questions. For example,

online reports were considered part of the category of "paperwork," and teacher

evaluations were listed under "working with teachers." After combining similar terms,

the following list of challenges was identified to use in development of the survey:

- *Paperwork:* "desk work" conducted by school leaders, including reports,

  documentation, forms, and any other electronic or paper records.

- *Special education:* management and supervision of all special services, including learning disorders, behavior disorders, gifted education, and facilities requirements; also paperwork and meetings specific to special education.

- *Parent relations:* parent group and individual meetings, phone calls, electronic and paper communication, parent support organizations, afterschool parent activities, and conflict resolution.

- *Teacher relations:* day-to-day interaction with teachers, including classroom observations, formal evaluations, teacher meetings, e-mail and paper communication, professional development, and general supervision.

- *Student discipline:* proactive and reactive measures regarding student conduct, behavior management, teacher classroom support, assignment of consequences, and communication with parents and students.

- *Curriculum and instruction:* scheduling, course management, textbook and material management, data analysis, and testing.

Participants were asked to complete the survey of multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended questions, reporting their perceptions about administrative challenges faced during the first three years in the position. The items were constructed so that higher ratings would express a higher level of challenge and a stronger negative perception by the participant. Other survey questions were descriptive in nature. Survey questions were as follows:

1. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

    a. Bachelor's Degree

    b.   Master's Degree

    c.   Ph.D. or Ed.D. Degree

    d.   Other (please specify)

2. What is your current position?

    a.   Assistant Principal

    b.   Principal

    c.   Other School Level Administrator (please specify)

3. How many years have you served as a school administrator?

    a.   1 year

    b.   2 years

    c.   3 years

    d.   More than 3 years

4. How would you describe your current school placement?

    a.   Public school

    b.   Private school

    c.   Online school

    d.   Other (please specify)

5. As a new administrator or other school leader, please rate the degree to which each of the following tasks was a challenge for you within the first three years of your leadership:

1 = No challenge   2 = A minor challenge   3 = Somewhat of a challenge

4 = A definite challenge   5 = A great challenge

- Paperwork

- Observations/Evaluations

- Time Management

- Special Education

- Faculty Relations

- Staff Relations

- Parent Relations

- Student Discipline

- Master Schedule

- School Finance

6. When you were a new administrator in your first three years, what other challenges impacted you? (open-ended question)

Qualitative instrument. The qualitative element of the study served both to validate and enrich the quantitative results with stories of personal life experiences. Focus group interviews were in-depth and minimally structured. Certain questions were emphasized with some participants more so than with others, and additional probing questions were interjected as needed. The interviewer recorded responses in field notes and conducted a content analysis to identify prominent themes. The following questions served as the interviewer's guide:

- When you were a new administrator in your first three years, what obstacles/challenges impacted you?

- In which of the following categories did you find the greatest obstacles/challenges in your first three years of leadership: reports/documentation, special education, parent relations, student relations, teacher relations, or curriculum/instruction?

- Do these categories accurately represent the major challenges of novice school leaders?

- How did these obstacles manifest themselves?

- How did you overcome these obstacles?

- What would you recommend for preparation programs that might help future administrators prepare for such obstacles?

Procedure. A mixed method was implemented to gather and analyze data. Surveys were delivered online in spring 2014 via SurveyMonkey to all graduate students who were enrolled for spring residential courses. After students arrived on campus, 8 volunteers met in a focus group.

Results

Survey. There were three types of data collected from the online surveys: demographic, Likert-scale, and open-ended.

Demographics. Of the 159 participants, 78% held a graduate degree or higher (i.e., master's, educational specialist, or doctoral degree), while the remaining 22% held bachelor's degrees. Current assistant principals made up 21%, while 15% were principals, and the remaining 64% were identified as "Other School Level Administrator," representing current superintendents, deans, directors, specialists, and professors who formerly served as school leaders. A full one-third (53 of the 159

participants) were presently novice principals in their first three years of service while the

remaining were beyond three years of service.

  Likert-scale results. Novice participants rated student discipline as the most

challenging category, with paperwork and time management tying as a close second. The

category of parent relations was rated as third most challenging. (See Figure 1.) After

filtering out of the data collection the novice school leaders who had three or fewer years'

experience, the remaining data were analyzed for leaders with more than three years'

experience. The intent was to determine the degree to which perceptions of those

challenges may change over time. Results revealed that experienced leaders (18% of

them) rated evaluations/observations and school finance as their most challenging duties.

Time management was a challenge to 16% of participants while special education proved

difficult for 11%. Data showed that three of the ten categories were equally challenging

for 8% of the experienced leaders: paperwork, parent relations, and student discipline.

(See Figure 2.)

  Open-ended results. The final online survey question was open-ended with the

intent being to collect rich narrative data and to gain additional perspectives on areas not

identified in the survey: "As a new administrator, what other challenges impacted you

within the first three years of your leadership?"

  Novice leaders. Again, results were disaggregated into two sets: present novice

leaders and those who had already gained three or more years' experience. For present

novice administrators, responses varied with prevailing themes relating to balance of
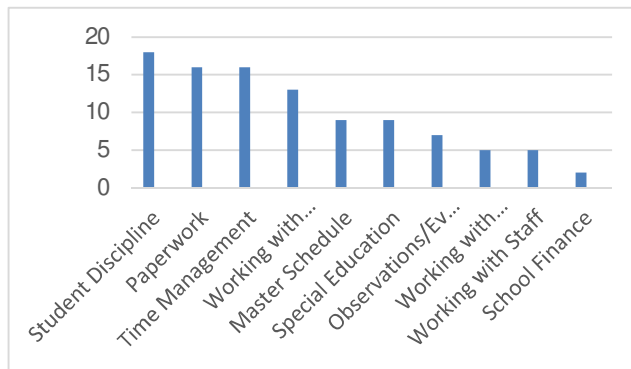
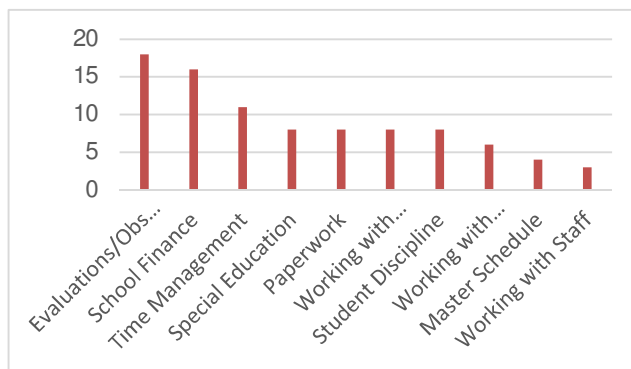*Figure 1*. Perceived Challenges of Present Novice School Leaders

Figure 2. Experienced School Leaders Recall Challenges of Their Novice Years

duties and time management. A common example was that of balancing family time,

graduate studies, and a new administrative position. This "balancing act" put them in a

stressful situation, in which they struggled at times to know where to begin or on what

they should focus.

Other recurring themes that were mentioned by multiple novice administrators all

involve navigating relations with other stakeholders. For example, one out of every five

expressed the belief that support was lacking from superiors. They wanted to ask for

assistance but were fearful this might be interpreted as a sign of weakness and might

jeopardize their new position. Another issue, not offered as a survey item option but

invoked by 9 participants, was that of politics.   The nature of this theme, in essence, is

related to the previous one—both involve new leaders contending with individuals and

structures that represent power and policy. While they yearn to succeed at navigating the

political arena and collaborating with those in authority, they are unsure how to initiate

the journey.

Credibility was yet another repeated theme relating to navigating relations, this

time, not only with superiors but also with faculty, parents, and students. These leaders

alleged that, because they were new or worked in the school as a former teacher, others

did not or would not provide respect for them in their new role. Therefore, they lacked

credibility in the eyes of their colleagues.

One participant, with less than a year's experience in her administrative role,

poignantly expressed the frustrations she was presently experiencing:

My position is not typical. . . . Our campus is divided among four buildings: a

pre-school, the primary ed building, and the high school is in two temporary

buildings as we build a main building. Pragmatically, I have no office staff. The

secretaries work in the primary ed building and answer to both principals, but

with only one 'on site' her work comes first (always). Therefore, in my rookie

year (two months from my 1 year mark) I have had to manage records, emails,

phone calls, budgets, announcements, appointment scheduling, . . . and then as

time permits educational leadership to the faculty. [The university where I'm

doing graduate work] does a great job in teaching the theoretical aspects in a

properly aligned and fully resourced school. However, anyone who enters a

similar situation will find they are unprepared for the fire inspections, lock-down

drills, attendance audits, and the filing of standardized tests (not to mention

ordering these items). Likewise, they will find they are unprepared for the best

courses of action to structure their time to ensure faculty are developed. Finally,

there is no module on how to construct a master schedule. Within the educational

leadership track, there needs to be panel discussions with veteran leaders who

have overcome these challenges in private schools. Finally, I have found the

greatest challenge is that new teachers are unprepared to talk with parents.

Leadership training mandates a conflict resolution course, but teaching and

learning does not . . . . Why wait so late? Most of my issues stemmed from poor

communication skills in young teachers. The conveying of planned lessons is

sufficient to great, but the unplanned talking to students or parents is from

unsatisfactory to terrible, because they cannot recognize and prevent conflict

points. There is not enough professional development days to role play,

emphasize, and solidify this needed area, when so many others aspects need

attention.

Her raw frustration can be sensed as she affirms some of the themes identified by both

the survey results and the open-ended responses of other novice leaders.

Experienced leaders. The identified themes varied somewhat for leaders with

three or more years of experience, but the prominent issue remained the same—that of

time management and balancing personal lives. Interestingly, the second most recurring

theme among novices is completely absent from the narrative of experienced leaders,

which involves lack of support from superiors. This could indicate that in years past

there may have been more support from superiors or that—as leaders gain more

experience—they look back at other issues as having been more challenging.

The subsequent two themes shared relatively the same prominence among

experienced leaders as they did with novices: navigating politics and gaining a sense of

credibility. Experienced leaders expounded more on specific political hurdles with

school boards, other teachers, and parents, and—regarding these same populations—

experienced leaders voiced that they wished they had been more successful in their

earlier years in developing credibility more quickly with stakeholders. A theme not

occurring at all among present novices but noted by five experienced leaders was that of

adjusting to the culture of a new school as its leader. This phenomenon may be explained

by the value more seasoned leaders have developed for factors inherent in a campus

culture. As they look back on their novice years, seasoned leaders may realize how more

effective they could have been and how much credibility they could have earned had they

become more proficient in understanding the culture of the school environment they were

charged to lead.

Further comparison of novices to experienced leaders demonstrates the following

differences. When approaching the open-ended questions, present novices and

experienced leaders alike identified time management and balance as the most

challenging. The remaining areas of focus for new leaders and experienced leaders were

quite similar in nature, with the items only varying by a few participants. Both viewed

politics and credibility as major concerns. The remaining items of conflict for novice

leaders were more task-oriented items, such as cultivating a cohesive school climate,

being micromanaged, and managing parental involvement. For experienced leaders,

however, the tasks appeared to consist of more daunting duties, such as accreditation,

management of budget and staff, and professional development opportunities.

Focus group results. Qualitative data were collected by two means—written

responses from the 159 online survey participants and verbal responses from a focus

group interview of 8 volunteers. An analysis of the focus group responses revealed the

following clusters of results:

Themes. The focus group facilitator asked, "When you were a new administrator

in your first three years, what obstacles/challenges impacted you?" Below are themes

and clustered examples that the group centered on in their responses:

- *Personal style:* attempts to gain self-confidence, search for personal leadership

  style, prioritizing "battles to fight"

- *Faculty relations:* teacher buy-in, problem/negative teachers, unrealistic faculty

  expectations of new administration, identification of key players

- *Policy and legal issues:* overwhelming myriad of rules and regulations, school and community politics, liability, IEPs/special education, employment law

- *Application of theory to practice:* difficulties of applying pre-service training (e.g., content and theoretical knowledge) to the realities of organizational management and leadership, no practical leadership experience, insufficient hands-on training

- *Time and task management:* e-mail management, budget process, prioritization of responsibilities

- *Need for support:* lack of a mentor, insufficient induction program, unclear expectations without proper support

Participants were then asked, "In which of the previously identified categories did you find the greatest obstacles/challenges in your first three years of leadership?" Paperwork was by far the most agreed-upon category as participants spoke of documentation and report writing as their greatest challenges. Furthermore, several mentioned that electronic reports, communication, and documentation had actually made their jobs even more stressful as information was required to be managed more quickly. Interestingly, a comparison of the focus group responses to Likert-scale data reveals that present novice administrators rate paperwork among the top most challenging duties, but experienced administrators did not recall paperwork being such a challenge in their early administrative careers. This may be due to the growing prevalence and increasing demand that digital information places on novice administrators or that—looking back—

experienced administrators recall other issues as having impacted them as stronger

challenges.

Other primary challenges included special education and parent relations. Special

education reporting was perceived as especially time-consuming—a task for which

novice administrators felt inadequate and unprepared. Regarding parent relations,

participants described the process of adjusting to and dealing with the amount of parent

complaints and negative comments.

Surprisingly and contrary to findings in the literature, there were some challenges

that the focus group participants did not rate as being among their most pressing obstacles

in the first three years of the principalship. Student discipline was one of those.

Although most agreed that it consumed a substantial portion of their time, student

discipline was one of the rare duties for which they had a clearer expectation, especially

having been on the faculty side of collaborating with administration on student discipline

in the past. Most participants felt comfortable addressing discipline because they sensed

that it had been an area of strength for them as a teacher. Another issue the focus group

unexpectedly deemphasized was faculty relations. Indeed, dealing with problem teachers

was noted as a difficult aspect of their new job, but specifically, it was conducting

observations and evaluations that they perceived as more difficult because of the amount

of time required, the difficulty to schedule, and the post-observation conferences with

teachers who had not performed satisfactorily.

The facilitator asked the group how the realization manifested itself that a

particular challenge was daunting and how they attempted to overcome those challenges.

"I knew it was a particular challenge," one participant said, "when the stress just became such that I didn't think I could tolerate it if it got much worse."

"I could tell that the learning curve," another stated, "was going much slower in some areas than in others."

Yet another participant transparently shared, "It was obvious I was struggling with a particular duty when I felt this desperate need to cry, 'help!' I began to look for help anywhere I could find it: friends, other principals, books, conferences. You name it!"

Common responses explained, if not assigned a mentor, how they sought one out. They spoke of learning over time how to prioritize better and how some challenges simply diminished as they gained more experience. Trial-and-error became their teacher, and they learned to accept what they knew and did not know and what they could and could not do well.

Focus group summary. Throughout the focus group conversations, the group seemed to be in agreement in regard to most of the topics. There was very little disagreement about the challenges, although there were varying degrees of difficulty based on individual experience. Most of the participants expressed some level of frustration with the challenges they faced as novice administrators and most of them expressed some success in learning to deal with those challenges. Most of the participants mentioned that they did not feel adequate or well prepared when they entered their leadership roles. Although there were some suggestions on how leadership programs might better prepare future leaders, they also seemed resigned to the idea that

on-the-job training is the most effective way to gain leadership experience. There did

seem to be a very strong sentiment that mentors were a key ingredient in the support of

new school leaders.

Another apparent theme through focus group conversations was the importance of

clear communication and expectations from the community and school district. Several

participants mentioned the challenge of learning the political side of school leadership

and determining what was expected by their supervisors. Several of the participants

mentioned the shift from confidence in their subject matter to a lack of confidence in

managing areas outside of their content background.

One other interesting theme that seemed to arouse emotions in all of the

participants was the use of technology school leadership. It was mentioned that many of

the resources made available to administrators to help them perform their duties and

responsibilities in a more efficient manner have actually hindered and complicated their

leadership abilities. For example, the availability of e-mail has made quick

communication with stakeholders much easier but has made their overall jobs as school

leaders more difficult. Participants mentioned that the rapidly increasing number of e-

mails they receive have made communication more difficult and less personal.

Furthermore, because of the convenience of using e-mail for communication, e-mails are

sent more often and are often unnecessary.

Another perceived benefit of technology that was mentioned is the immediate

nature of information. Because information, such as reports and forms, can now be

completed and sent electronically, entities requesting this information often expect it

much more quickly than when it was completed via hard copy. Cell phones have also

complicated the life of the school leader as many of them felt that they were "on call" at all times. Constant availability of school leaders through e-mail, cell phone, and text has added overall stress to school leaders' lives.

Discussion

The results of this study provide a description of the challenges facing novice school leaders. It noted differences between those who were presently in the throes of their induction phase and those who had gained at least three years' experience. It also compared responses from a focus group to those from a written Likert-scale survey that included an open-ended question. Overall, there were differences in the ratings given to various challenges and in the emphasis placed on those challenges. The prevailing thread throughout, however, was the need for support. It was specifically indicated that support was desired from supervisors of novice principals. However, as focus group members voiced their strategies for overcoming the challenges, the support they eventually realized seemed to be more organic. It came more from informal sources of support than formal and from the resolution of personal reflective processes than prescriptive procedures.

What then are the implications for the curriculum of graduate educational leadership programs to prepare future principals for the realities of their jobs—especially if the answer is organic support as mentioned earlier? It may be that this support is what Joanne Rooney (2008) suggested for pre-service, induction/orientation programs, and continued in-service. Her recommendations align with the results of this present study both from present novice principals and from experienced principals reflecting on their induction years. It would be wise if—long before candidates for educational leadership were hired for a position—that they were coached to build supportive relationships that

will prove beneficial in those induction years, particularly with a role model and mentor.

"Perhaps," declared Rooney, "successful principals realize that power, control, and

information do not flow from the top down, but move through the more horizontal and

complex connections that exist in any human community" (p. 85). These complex

connections may just provide the support novice leaders need, more so even than a

topically-oriented systematic induction program.

References

Barnett, B. G., Shoho, A. R., & Oleszewski, A. M. (2012). The job realities of beginning and experienced assistant principals. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 11*(1), 92-128. doi: 10.1080/15700763.2011.611924

Brown, P. F. (2006). Preparing principals for today's demands. *Phi Delta Kappan, 87*(2), 525-526.

Hertting, M. (2008). Are we supporting new principals? *American School Board Journal, 195*(6), 36-37.

Jagt, D. V., Shen, J., & Hsieh, C. (2001). Elementary and secondary public school principals' perceptions of school problems. *Education Research Quarterly, 25*(2), 39-51.

Mushaandja, J. (2013). Major problems facing beginning principals in Namibia and how to overcome them. *International Studies in Educational Administration, 40*(3), 45-55.

Rooney, J. (2008). What new (young) principals need to know. *Educational Leadership, 66*(1), 84-85.

Sincar, M. (2013). Challenges school principals facing in the context of technology leadership. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice, 13*(2), 1273-1284.

Tredway, L., Brill, F. O Hernandez, J. (2003). Taking off the cape: The stories of novice urban leadership. *Theory into Practice, 46*(3), 212-221.