
THAT FEELING OF BEING ON THE EDGE: SIX CASE STUDIES OF STRESS IN CATHOLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

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Educational administration is a stressful profession. As reform agendas and student populations become more challenging, little is changing in schools to counter this long-standing truth. Educational leaders of the 21st century are facing more pressures, changes, and challenges as the pace of their professional lives increases. This study develops notions around novice and veteran administrators' identification of and responses to stressful incidents in their professional practice.

It has long been acknowledged that educational administration is a stressful profession. As reform agendas and student populations become more demanding, little is changing in schools to counter this long-standing truth. Educational leaders of the 21st century face more pressures, changes, and challenges as the pace of their professional lives increases. Stress is found in all aspects of principals' lives, at all levels, from all directions, and in increasingly unpredictable ways (Allison, 1997; Carr, 1994; Gmelch, 1988; Lam, 1988; Milstein & Farkas, 1988; Sarros, 1988; Yerkes & Guaglianone, 1998). As Selye (1974) discovered, stress is cumulative and a series of stresses can be dangerous to productivity and overall job performance; stress is harmful to the health of principals. This study sought to develop notions around both novice and veteran administrators' identification of and responses to stressful incidents in their professional practice.

LITERATURE

Three complementary literatures inform the study. The stress literature is explored for research on professional consequences of continued pressure on the school principal. Literature on Catholic school administrators provides a context for the subjects of the studies, while the literature on administrator career development is presented to provide support for a framework by which the reflection and growth of administrators in response to critical incidents might be examined.

STRESS

Selye (1974) and Lazarus and Folkman (1984) contribute two well-known definitions of stress. Selye (1974) asserts stress is the nonspecific response of the body to any demands made upon it. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define stress as "a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (p. 19). Even more critical than principals' ability to define stress is their ability to manage it. Managing stress effectively is suggested to benefit those in the immediate environment by affording them with increased ability to direct personal energy toward improving personal and professional relationships and decisions (Carr, 1994; Gmelch, 1988; Gmelch & Chan, 1994; Sarros, 1988; Whan & Thomas, 1996). Work-related stress is a growing concern, especially when it affects one's physical health and the productivity of an organization (Martin, 1989). An elementary school principal as the primary influence on school reform in this social and technological age of change experiences more conflict, pressure, and a higher degree of stress than ever before (Kochan, Spencer, & Mathews, 1999; Lam, 1988).

While Yerkes and Guaglianone (1998) attribute the lack of applications for positions in school administration to increased job stress, others (Allison, 1997; Whan & Thomas, 1996) suggest that stress can be mitigated through a series of attentive processes. Such processes include attention to stresses as they relate to the role of the school administrator and the tasks in which administrators engage. While issues of role and task may be considered similar conceptually, in practice they differ. Role refers to the activities in which the principal engages, such as attendance at school events at which the principal may have few actual responsibilities but which require the principal to be present long after the official school day has ended. Task refers to more substantive areas of the principal's work life, such as evaluating teachers, planning schedules, and managing the budget. Together stress from role and task forms a powerful duo often overloading the principal with conflicting priorities beyond what can easily be managed in a day.

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS AND ADMINISTRATORS

This study is informed by and seeks to develop the research base on the Catholic school administrator (Benson & McMillen, 1991; Bryk, Holland, Lee, & Carriedo, 1984; Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Chubb & Moe, 1988; Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982; Greeley, 1989). It is commonly believed that in an era of "selective admissions" Catholic school principals experience fewer and less disruptive incidents in their daily lives (Greeley, 1989). However, as administrative practitioners will attest, the Catholic school has become as challenging a work environment as any public or private setting. The Catholic setting does, however, offer the administrator some distinct advantages. Bryk et al. (1993) suggest that the community of the Catholic school provides an extensive support for the creation of shared norms and values to support the school principal. Moreover, research suggests that strong levels of professional community also lead to increased organizational learning as a result of strong professional ties between organizational membership and greater accountability for student performance (Louis & Kruse, 1995). While such communal supports do distinguish Catholic school principals from their public school counterparts, community alone cannot mitigate administrator stress (Nugent, 1998; Veto, 1998).

ADMINISTRATOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT

The administrator career development literature is marked by a variety of foci among which is a current interest in mentoring and administrator self-efficacy. Mentoring has been described as the sharing of knowledge and experiences by an accomplished professional with a novice for the purpose of enhancing the latter's professional development, career success, and satisfaction (Ashby, 1991; Daresh 1990; Pavan, 1987). Daresh and Playko (1990) assert that mentoring programs have been proven to work for both administrators and teachers, but one must understand that the features of administration are unique and that the mentoring must be directed accordingly. Features that enhance mentoring include one-on-one dialogue, opportunity for reflection on job task and responsibilities, access to expertise, and openness to improvement and socialization.

The literature suggests that well-mentored principals have a greater probability of becoming self-efficacious leaders (Bryk et. al, 1993; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Newmann & Associates, 1996). Self-efficacy has been described as one's belief in his or her capability to organize and execute the activities required to achieve a certain level of performance (Bandura, 1986). It is posited that self-efficacy derives from four primary sources: performance accomplishments (Dimmock & Hattie, 1996; Hillman, 1986), vicarious experiences (DeMoulin, 1992; Lyons & Murphy, 1994), verbal persuasions (Bandura, 1977), and psychological states (Hillman, 1986; Lyons &

Murphy, 1994). Each of these sources of efficacious behavior also provides possible avenues for the practitioner to control stressful incidents and professional responses to incidents as they present themselves to the school principal.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As one possible intersection between the literatures discussed above, this study sought to develop notions around novice and veteran administrators' identification of and responses to stressful incidents in their professional practice by focusing on two objectives:

1. Identification of incidents considered stressful by principals.
2. Identification of internal and external supports for school administrators and their perceived influence on administrator stress response.

METHOD AND DATA SOURCES

This paper is informed by the work of two concurrent studies. The first study examined stress in entry-level Catholic elementary school principals and the effects of mentoring experiences upon their reactions to school-based incidents, and the second examined stress in veteran Catholic elementary school principals and their sense of perceived self-efficacy following critical school-based incidents. Both studies followed identical methodology. Three primary data sources were used for the studies: Administrative Stress Index (ASI), incident observations, and interviews with administrators.

ADMINISTRATIVE STRESS INDEX

Gmelch's (1988) Administrative Stress Index was administered to the 141 elementary Catholic-school principals in the diocese of the region. The index served to identify the sample population for the following case studies. Purposeful sampling was used to select three principals for each of the two concurrent studies (total $n=6$). Principals who reported low stress levels on the ASI were selected for further study. It was hypothesized that administrators who reported low stress levels might well be more efficacious in their responses to stressful incidents, thus providing fruitful resources for the study.

INCIDENT OBSERVATIONS

The study was designed to include a component in which principals could inform the researchers of events which they felt might be stressful. Researchers would then arrive at the school site to observe and record the

incident for analysis. At each incident extensive field notes were taken, artifacts collected, and informal interviews conducted after the incident concluded.

INTERVIEWS

The studies used a range of predetermined questions, which were informed by the theoretical framework developed for the studies. However, following Miles and Huberman's (1994) methodology, questions were applied flexibly, changed over time, and modified to reflect the particular circumstances of the incident. The questions served as a guide to a conversation about administrators' work in the school rather than as a formal orally administered survey. Most interviews occurred in school offices and lasted from 50 minutes to 3 hours. In many cases, interviews occurred after the administrator had experienced an event that he or she identified as stressful.

DATA ANALYSIS

During data collection there were several currents of activity. These processes took place at both the individual researcher and the collaborative levels. At the level of an individual researcher, the process of data reduction occurred continuously, through the development of interview and field notes, and comprehensive case studies written to a common outline that became the primary data sources (Merriam, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 1994). A second form of preliminary data analysis involved collaborative meetings, in which discussion focused on data collection activities and emerging conceptual frames and themes. The meetings served as forums of collegial challenge where critical review and questioning of interpretation of both data and theory were possible. Finally, a comparative study of the cases was undertaken.

The reader may be unfamiliar with the approach we have taken to the discussion and presentation of our findings. We have chosen to provide a detailed presentation of case findings and weave through those findings analytic commentary. We base this presentation on the current sociological work of narrative theory scholars (Bloom, 1998; Chase, 1995; Josselson & Lieblich, 1995; Riessman, 1993; Tierney & Lincoln, 1997; Witherell & Noddings, 1991).

Narratives developed are about how the educators tell these stories as well as what stories they tell. In recent years some social scientists have begun to study the process of how interviewees construct their stories by attending to cultural, linguistic and interactional contexts and processes of storytelling (Josselson & Lieblich, 1995; Riessman, 1993; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). Throughout the project, listening closely to how educators narrate their experience of stress is necessary if we are to understand how stress shapes their experiences, as well as its power in their lives.

Narrative analysis takes as its object of investigation the story or interview itself. The methodological approach examines the stories told and analyzes how the stories are put together, the linguistic and cultural resources upon which the stories draw, and how they persuade the listener of their authenticity. Analysis in narrative studies opens up the forms of telling about experience, not simply the language to which the content refers. Instead, narrative analysis attends to the way a story is told and asks why it was told in that particular form. Narrative study seeks the long answer, the life story, and then uses these tellings to develop how an interviewee's ideas are constructed, authored, owned, and interpreted by themselves (Bloom, 1998; Chase, 1995; Czarniawska, 1997, 1998; Riessman, 1993). Attention is paid to how stories are constructed and represented. Narrative analysis assumes that the language a person chooses to tell his or her story is the connection between experience and understanding. By the use of these elements, narratives are analyzed for similarities in the story line and the intent of the author. The narrative stories are then read and reread for meanings and coherence within the text. The features of a story are then linked to the research question, the theoretical position of the investigator, and the personal biography of the interviewee. It is, in part, circular, as the long tradition of interpretative inquiry would suggest. Close analysis of narrative work derives its legitimization for the interpretive tradition and extends it in new ways.

THE CASES

The schools in the study shared similar demographic profiles. All were parish schools in middle- or upper-middle-class neighborhoods with solid academic reputations. Each was well known in the community for excellence in education; a quality faculty; and caring, engaged leadership. All had similar levels of minority student population (average 11%) and numbers of students attending (average 375) and were located near a large urban center. The veteran principals had an average of 11.6 years in the position. The novice principals averaged 1.5 years. Findings and conclusions based on cross-case analysis of the six cases are presented. Case data in the form of single quotes and vignettes are used to illustrate important themes as well as to provide a sense of the stressful events experienced by the study principals.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

A number of themes of stress emerged across the principals' academic settings. All the study principals suggested that the principalship was a lonely profession through their characterization of the themes of stress as "enduring dilemmas." Despite internal or external support structures, the principals still had moments in which they and only they were responsible for the success or

failure of a particular happening. Such perceptions lead to consistent feelings of stress. While any number of supports could be built into the principal's coping repertoire, and these principals actively created and sought out structural and social and human resource supports, the effectiveness of even the most carefully orchestrated support structures often failed to provide adequate assistance during the most stressful incidents. As one principal stated, "In the end it still comes down to me and I'm alone with my decision. I know I'll be supported, but I'm the one who's out front taking the attacks."

Furthermore, the principalship can be experienced as a series of seemingly random events. Particularly for new administrators, the daily variety of ever-changing unpredictable events leads to regular feelings of stress. As administrators are pulled in a variety of competing directions—curricular concerns, public relations efforts, recruitment and retention of students, discipline and management, proficiency and other accountability agendas, and fundraising to name a few—the ability to filter out priority items for attention and problem solving challenges even a seasoned veteran. As a new principal stated,

I try to organize my day but I cannot seem to make sense of where my time goes. I deal with kids, parents, teachers, [and] committees. I come in with good intentions, but the next time I get a chance to think about what I'm doing it's 5 o'clock. I know I'm not as productive as I should be; I just don't know how to do it all.

Furthermore, the principalship results in administrative contacts with a variety of publics (parents, religious councils, media, parish personnel) who expect different responses to stimuli. Across all principals studied, administrators reported ever-shifting expectations upon them for situational responses as a factor resulting in considerable stress for them. As the following vignette illustrates, it is often difficult for a principal to know whom to support or even which response is the most beneficial for the school.

JOAN SMYTH: SEEKING SUPPORT

An unexpected crisis arose for Joan Smyth, a veteran principal, when the school was required to help subsidize its parish, that is, donate its entire fundraising efforts (\$25,000-\$35,000 per year) to the parish operating budget. Smyth had to express her concerns. "I have very, very mixed feelings. Sitting on the finance council and being the principal of the school at the same time puts me in a unique position." Her first concern raged to the loss of profits for the school's educational programs. She had been guaranteed that the money would directly benefit the teachers and students. She was worried about the reactions of the staff and wondered how the parents would respond. Most of the parents supported school fundraisers because the profits enhanced the

school and directly benefited the quality of their children's education. Smyth worried about how the "rerouting of funds" would affect parent attitudes, expectations, and involvement in support of the school.

At the next faculty meeting Smyth explained the decision of the finance council. She presented the framework, background, and details. The teachers became visibly upset, murmuring and making comments aloud. Comments such as, "I don't like this decision," or "I don't see why we have to be the ones to support the parish" were understandable. "Without those funds we would not be in the position we are currently in today." It was difficult to bridge the emotional feelings of the staff with the fiscal needs of the parish. The teachers were connected in a very intense way with raising revenues to support their programs. The previous year, the school had won national recognition for its outstanding resources and programs. All of the teachers, from the very beginning, were understandably protective of the money.

Smyth agonized over the potential deflation of the morale of the staff. Intellectually she could rationalize the decision of the council, but as a member of the finance council, would her faculty think she sold them out? She wouldn't be honest if she said they had no right to be angry. She couldn't openly agree with them either that the parish had let them down.

LUCILLE CHISHOLM: ISSUES OF FAITH AND HEART

The data suggest that Catholic school principals experience stressful events comparable to those described in the public school literature and experienced by their public school counterparts. As the following vignettes illustrate, the ability to respond to often contentious situations demands that Catholic principals confront issues close to their hearts and faith. Such events which challenge a principal's own closely held beliefs contribute to internal stress and are perhaps the most troubling.

It was about 40 minutes before dismissal when four female students from seventh- and eighth-grade classes appeared at principal Lucille Chisholm's office door, whimpering and frightened. Chisholm recalls, "We sat at a round table and began to discuss something difficult. I remember it was very difficult for all of us."

The students told the principal that on several occasions after school, students had gathered at a student's home where parents were not present to supervise. A number of intimate incidents occurred during these gatherings, most of which were consensual. One of the two main speakers for the group explained how upset she was because her boyfriend had had intercourse with one of the other girls sitting at that table. She was very distressed that her boyfriend had become intimate with this girl, her close friend, while she had held to her decision not to go that far. Chisholm was quite taken aback when the other student, Susie, stammered to tell her what had happened. Chisholm

found herself in shock: "You don't normally talk about sexual intercourse with 12-year-olds. I almost went right under the table on this. My heart palpitated. I kept thinking, 'My God, these kids are hurt.'"

In this fleeting moment, Chisholm was thinking of what kind of team she could assemble:

When a crisis of this magnitude happens, many times you don't have any time on your side, you have about 20 minutes left and you are thinking that the dismissal bell is going to ring. The students are going to jump on a bus and that's going to be the end of your investigation.

The boys involved were summoned and instructed to wait in the clinic. Chisholm called the school psychologist and the school nurse, each of whom joined Chisholm and the group for a repeat telling of the incident. No students were asked to tell their story in front of another child. She eventually found that there were six different students involved in this intimate crisis. Parents, diocesan lawyers, police, and the pastor were contacted.

As the police investigation continued into the alleged rape, at least four staff members were monitoring the children at all times. "They were definitely under strict surveillance. Their parents had to pick them up every day from school." The father of the girl did file rape charges. A lie detector test was administered. The boy was found guilty of sexual imposition and given a sentence of community service. Perhaps most upsetting to the principal was the boy's parents' response to the situation. Instead of concern about his sexual activity at such a young age, they focused their public comments on his choice of partner, stating, "Why did you do it with [Susie]? Your girlfriend is such a nice girl."

As Chisholm explored her options in working with the events, she was forced to confront her own values and beliefs regarding premarital and underage sexuality. Exploration of such deeply held personal beliefs as well as the suggestion that at least a small percentage of her student population and their parents were not in agreement with Church doctrine on these matters shook Chisholm. The discontinuity between her ideals and the practice in which these students chose to engage created considerable internal stress for Chisholm, forcing her to examine the role of faith in her students' lives. The internal dilemma created by such an event is a form of lasting stress for the principal.

SAM COLETTA: HOLDING GROUND

Lucille Chisholm was not the only principal confronted with such a dilemma. Sam Coletta, a new principal, was asked to respond to a similarly difficult situation. In the basement of St. Raphael School, the seventh- and eighth-grade students gathered midday for lunch. One day, the mother lunchroom monitor

overheard several of the boys from one table make some extremely rude and sexually inappropriate comments followed by boisterous laughter and snickers. In response, a seventh-grade girl became hysterically upset and started sobbing. The monitor immediately sent the girl to the school clinic and then proceeded to the principal's office to report the boys' behavior. Upon hearing of the incident, several key thoughts ran through Coletta's mind:

One thing that I absolutely know I need to do is to send a very clear message to not only the seven boys who have culpability, but to all of the St. Raphael students. Harassment such as this will most assuredly not be tolerated.

With these thoughts at the front of his mind, Coletta called each of the students involved to the office and listened to their perspectives of the incident. After hearing the individual versions, he decided there were varying degrees of involvement and felt that various consequences should be meted out.

The three prime offenders all admitted to saying things regarding the seventh-grade girl's breasts and legs and what they would do with her. Coletta gave all three boys a five-day out-of-school suspension. Two other boys, who spoke about the girl but not in sexually explicit terms, were suspended for three days. The last two boys, who did not participate but were present in the group, were suspended for one day. Coletta sent the boys home with a letter informing their parents of the incident and the punishment that their son received. No parent objected. The furor receded quickly.

While the incidents reported share a similar theme, they all resulted in considerable internal stress for the principals involved. However, as we have stated, such internal stress is not limited to situations that challenge a principal's core belief about morality. Internally located stress can also be triggered by events rooted in issues of professional practice and behavior. The next vignette offers new principal Anne Johnson's response to such a professional challenge.

ANNE JOHNSON: CHALLENGES TO EXCELLENCE

Tom Hamilton was in his fifth year of teaching at Holy Cross School. He had an eighth-grade homeroom and taught math and science to the sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students. He was a single father raising three children, all of whom attended Holy Cross School.

During the previous school year, principal Anne Johnson began to have serious doubts about Hamilton's teaching ability, as well as his handling of disciplinary matters. She shared:

There were so many times that he just seemed oblivious to what his students were doing. For example, students seemed to continually come and go from his classroom, and often he had no idea that this was even happening. Also, the eighth grade students did very poorly on both the math and science sections of the statewide proficiency test. Many times I asked to see sets of papers that he had graded and all but one or two of the students would receive an "F" grade. To me this signals a lack of good teaching, not the students' inability to learn.

Toward the end of the year, Johnson began to keep a log of her concerns regarding Hamilton, documenting all unprofessional activity. She resolved to state clear expectations for him for the next school year. An aggressive growth plan needed to be implemented to ensure a successful learning experience for the students. In addition, Johnson enlisted the help of the area field director in developing this action plan for improvement. This served two purposes: first, to get input into the plan, and second, to share concerns and background information with the supervisor in case additional problems occurred.

The school year began and Johnson closely monitored Hamilton's teaching and classroom management. An intervention plan was developed to increase the eighth-grade students' proficiency test scores.

Despite a comprehensive action plan in place, problems continued to surface. Parents questioned Hamilton's management skills, and several conflicts occurred between the parents and Hamilton. Many of these concerns came to the principal's attention, and she found herself in a mediating position to resolve these conflicts. Furthermore, the proficiency plan was not being consistently implemented, and the students continued to receive failing grades.

Shortly before Christmas, two rather serious incidents occurred almost simultaneously. The first incident happened at the school Christmas concert. As Johnson related,

There was a complaint from the parents of one of the eighth-grade boys that Mr. Hamilton had grabbed their son by the back of his neck and yanked him upward out of his seat. The boy admitted he was talking to some of the other students around him. I noticed that Mr. Hamilton's behavior at Christmas time was very shaky. He seemed to be experiencing some personal problems at the time. He admitted that he grabbed the boy but that he felt justified with the way he had handled the incident.

At the same time of the reported physical abuse of the student, Hamilton made another extremely poor decision. Frustrated by some of the students not putting their books where they belonged, he took some of the girls' books and placed them in the boys' restroom.

"Obviously," reported Johnson, "This did not sit well with the parents, students, the field director, or me."

While the field director and the principal looked into both of these incidents, the teacher was suspended for 10 days with pay. They felt it would be easier to talk with all those involved if Hamilton were not present.

Shortly before Hamilton was due back, they wrote an addendum to his contract, specifying exactly what was expected of the teacher for the remainder of the year. This included a weekly conference with the principal as well as provision for her to review all student papers and test grades.

In February, Johnson notified Hamilton that his contract would not be renewed for the following year. She felt it was a matter of justice to notify him as early as possible since he had a family to support and would need to take steps to find work elsewhere.

KAREN VALENTE: PARENTAL PRESSURES

Stress can come from a variety of sources distinctive to the homes and families to which students belong. In both of the following incidents principals are required to publicly grapple with difficult situations involving the adult relatives of students in their schools. In each the principals respond to the stress of the event by calling on their own internal resources and skills.

One fall morning, new principal Karen Valente's thoughts were suddenly interrupted with the ringing of the telephone. An aunt of one of the second-grade students was calling to let Valente know emphatically how livid the family was with the child's teacher. The child's mother was ill, so the aunt was asked to assume the role of parent and handle this matter. The child reportedly came home from school and said that the teacher told her she was stupid. Valente tried to break off the aunt's tirade to say that it was imperative to talk to the teacher to see what had actually transpired. The aunt wanted no part of a meeting with the teacher.

The aunt exclaimed, "No, no, no. I'm not discussing this with her because she has already done the damage and ruined my niece's self-esteem forever."

The aunt demanded to know what Valente was going to do about it. She wanted the child immediately removed from the teacher's classroom. Valente tried to assure her that she would find out what had happened and schedule a conference to discuss this incident immediately. She would talk to the teacher and see if she was available to meet the first thing the following day. The aunt was unwilling to wait until the next day.

"Something must be done about this right now," she screamed. Valente replied, "I understand you are upset over what has occurred and I will talk to the teacher right away. I will call you back in 10 minutes to let you know if the teacher is available to meet tomorrow morning."

After hanging up the phone, Valente went immediately to the teacher and explained the situation. The second-grade teacher became very emotional and concerned about the misunderstanding and agreed to the conference.

In the back of Valente's mind, she knew it was a matter of time before the aunt either showed up at school or started calling on other school authority figures and continue to demand that something be done. The aunt did both. She notified the pastor as well as the diocesan elementary education director, both of whom had called the school and left a message for Valente to call and discuss the issue further.

The next day, at the scheduled time, the teacher, the aunt, a great-aunt, and Valente began the conference in the school library. Both of the aunts attacked the teacher and accused her of ridiculing their niece over an extended period of time. They cited incidents of telling the entire class that their niece was the dumbest in the whole group and of holding the child's paper up and describing how poorly it was done. Both the principal and the teacher were unable to relate the actual events that occurred or alter either of the ladies' perceptions. After the teacher repeatedly tried to explain the situation and about 10 minutes of extreme hostility, verbal attacks, and anger from the aunts, the principal stood up and said, "I really have to end this conference."

"Why, you don't have time for us?" the one aunt questioned.

Valente replied,

No, it's not that. It's just that we are not accomplishing anything. The teacher is saying one thing, you are saying another, and all you're doing is attacking her. I just feel I cannot sit here and have you lambaste her. She has tried to say all that she has to say.

Valente added, "On Monday, your niece will be placed in the other second-grade classroom."

Difficult relatives were a recurring theme in the data. The story shared by veteran Sarah Bright illustrates that often difficult parents can have a startling effect.

SARAH BRIGHT: MANAGING MOM

One morning, while Sarah Bright was monitoring tardy students at the visitors' reception desk, a mother with her infant in her arms burst through the front door of the school yelling that she was on her way to see her daughter's teacher and nobody could stop her. The parent, Mrs. Connors, was visibly disturbed and screaming. Bright confronted her when she reached the reception desk, asking her if she had an appointment with Mrs. Sanders, the first-grade teacher. That question upset the parent even more. She shouted, "I pay tuition in this building and nobody is going to tell me I have to have an appointment to see my child's teacher."

Bright notes that she became paralyzed at that moment. The mother pushed past her and dashed around the corner. Regaining composure, the principal and her secretary began to follow her as she proceeded down the hall. Shouting repeatedly that no one was going to stop her, she was demanding to see the teacher about a paper that recently came home.

What frightened me more than anything else was the fact that the mom was charging down the hall, carrying a tiny child in her arms. I wondered if she might have a weapon. My concern was for the safety of the infant and for the first-grade teacher.

When the mom reached her daughter's homeroom, she entered the classroom, ran up to the teacher, and slapped her. Sarah remembers, "When she slammed the door, she slammed it so hard the building seemed to shake." By the time the principal and secretary arrived and opened the door, Mrs. Connors had already reached the front of the room where her daughter's teacher was standing.

The teacher stood there totally stunned. There was dead silence from the children. They were all watching, sitting there with their mouths open and eyes popping out. The mother was screaming at the top of her lungs about some paper the teacher sent home. She was just totally out of control.

Before Bright could say or do anything further, Mrs. Connors flew out the door, raced down the hallway, and ran out the front entrance of the school. "She was really almost running to get away, and I didn't want to cause any problems. She had the child in her arms." Bright's mind was now focused on the well-being of the teacher, the welfare of the first-grade student witnesses (including Mrs. Connors' own daughter), and what she would have to do next. Sarah called the woman's husband to let him know what happened. He said his wife was on vacation time from work and decided on her own not to take medication prescribed for a serious mental condition. The principal found it odd that he did not act surprised at all.

IMPLICATIONS

While the identification of stressful incidents was a primary goal of the research, the authors sought also to develop consistent themes by which administrators are able to respond to and manage the incidents, one hopes with positive results. We believe administrative responses can be categorized into five distinct themes. The first requires the principal to attend to others with care and concern, especially in stressful events involving students. Focusing on caring for the child was identified as a contributor to the creation of a sense of efficacy within the administrator. As principals were able to

attend to what was in the "best interest of the children involved" they found themselves able to "step back and view the situation as a whole." By not responding in a "reactive stance" but rather attending to what was most caring for the students involved, principals reported a feeling that, "No matter how it turns out the kids were protected and that is doing my job really well."

Second, collaborative teaming was identified as a stress reducing response in two ways. The first allowed for the development of proactive team structures and policies providing principals a sense of readiness for when events occurred. In such arenas professional learning could occur. Lessons from coursework and workshops could be applied; personal and vicarious experiences could be discussed; and, as in the case of Coletta and Johnson, the development of systems support structures could be put into motion. Collaborative teaming could also provide opportunity for principals to apply precursory learning experiences including the principal's level of faith, natural ability, and self-confidence to the experience. By allowing a principal to "test-run" a solution or rely on the expertise of others, the collaborative team helped to mitigate some feelings of loneliness and personal inadequacy.

Third, professional management and organizational skills upheld many of these principals. The ability to attend to the big picture and to hold a sense of the organization as a place of constructive conflict proved sustaining as principals attended not only to resolving the current dilemma but also to the "what can I learn from this" question. Mentoring opportunities provided novice principals the occasion to increase their sense of professionalism and self-confidence as the opportunity for dialogue with more experienced principals broadened their professional network. Formal mentoring was identified in helping new administrators to establish clear guidelines for policy and practice, requiring the new administrator to document and reflect upon practices and events and to create networks and external support structures to assist the new administrator in solving problems.

Fourth, personal faith was viewed as a positive stress reliever. By creating time and space to reflect, pray, and seek guidance the principals were able to decrease the stress they experienced and increase the sense of their ability to respond to and handle critical events. Such reflective faith activities allowed principals to refocus their energies on "why I entered the principalship in the first place" and view themselves as successful leaders in the school community.

Finally, self-efficacy is related to a principal's ability to learn at the individual level. Self-efficacious principals develop skills at identifying and learning from small successes. The concept of learning as a series of "small gains" is consistent with notions that suggest that learning can occur at points of felt difficulty as in stressful situations. When administrators are connected to problem solving discussions and use the knowledge created within those

forums to inform their practice, the potential positive results are enhanced. Furthermore, such individual learning appears to be fostered through a series of evolutionary cycles in which certain practices become more polished and principals learn to count on themselves as able to respond to a variety of situations. A resultant "bag of tricks" both lessens stress and enhances self efficacy. Such cycles of adaptation are further reinforced when thought of as parts of a theory in action for learning. External stimuli, such as stress or a critical incident, can serve as a point of reflection allowing the principal to further consider how decisions are made within the school and to examine the results of stressful events.

As evidenced by the stories presented here, the principalship in a Catholic elementary school is a stressful profession. We find it heartening that however unexpectedly or disturbingly confronted, these novices and veteran principals rose to the challenge and employed creative and intelligent responses to each situation. We believe that such a conclusion only elevates and reinforces the conception of the Catholic school principal as the leader and guide for a community devoted to learning and growth.

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