



**Novice School Principals' Sense of *Ultimate* Responsibility:  
Problems of Practice in Transitioning to the Principal's Office**

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## Abstract

This working paper investigates the problems of practice experienced by novice school principals as they transition into their new occupation, focusing in particular on the first three months on the job—a critical transition period according to the literature. The researchers use a theory-building, mixed-method, longitudinal study to examine a random sample of novice principals from one cohort of new Chicago Public School principals. Using interviews at two time points, they systematically examine the “reality shocks” novices encounter as they experience their new occupation firsthand. Their findings show that a major “reality shock” for novice principals as they transitioned into their new occupation was a sense of ultimate responsibility. This sense of ultimate responsibility contributed to three core problems of practice—task volume, diversity, and unpredictability. While almost all novices experienced the responsibility shock as well as one or more of the practice problems, the conditions of novices’ transitions to the principalship either eased or exacerbated the level of practice problems they encountered. This paper demonstrates how the volume, diversity, and unpredictability of tasks emerge early and intensify over new principals’ first three months on the job, largely due to new principals’ sense of ultimate responsibility. The researchers conclude by entertaining various ways in which these problems of practice might be eased for novices as they transition into their new position.

## Introduction

Philanthropic, professional, and government agencies are turning their attention increasingly to school principals, investing considerable effort and resources in their recruitment, eligibility screening, preparation, and professional learning. There is good reason for this; empirical evidence amassed over several decades across various lines of inquiry suggests that principals make a difference in the school improvement process, whether improvement efforts are orchestrated from within or outside the school organization (Augustine et al., 2009; Berman & McLaughlin, 1977; Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982; Coburn, 2005; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Purkey & Smith, 1985; Rosenholtz, 1989; Louis & Kruse, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Syntheses and meta-analysis of these literatures suggest that school principals have a significant if indirect effect on student outcomes (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood et al., 2007; Robinson, 2008).

A literature spanning several decades offers insights into the work of the school principal, identifying key challenges or problems of practice that principals face. Principals' roles are diverse: They span activities across managerial, instructional, and political realms (Cuban, 1988), and these varied realms all compete for the principals' time and attention (Copland, 2001; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Goldring, Huff, May, & Camburn, 2008; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Horng, Klasik, & Loeb, 2010). Principal work also tends to be fragmented, fast-paced, and varied; it involves long hours and a relentless workload, along with demands from multiple, diverse stakeholders (Duke, 1988; Kmetz & Willower, 1982; Lortie, 2009; MacBeath et al., 2009; Martin & Willower,

1981; Peterson, 1977, 1982; Portin, Shen, & Williams, 1998; Wolcott, 1973). Together, these conditions contribute to high levels of stress (Allison, 1997; Gmelch, 1983; Lindle, 2004; Savery & Detiuk, 1986) and burnout (Friedman, 2002; Whitaker, 1996) among principals.

Research on novice school principals and their on-the-job socialization is relatively sparse. Existing work across several countries, however, has shown that novice principals in a variety of settings experience similar key challenges (see Hobson, Brown, Ashby, Keys, Sharp, and Benefield, 2003 for a review of the literature). New principals often struggle with feelings of professional isolation and loneliness as they transition into a role that carries ultimate responsibility and decision-making powers. Often times, beginning principals also have difficulty dealing with the legacy, practice, and style of the previous principal. Members of the school community not only compare the new principal to the previous one but also often resist changes to the routines and culture to which they have become accustomed. And resonant with the literature on principal practice, new principals frequently have difficulty managing and prioritizing the multiple tasks expected of them. Ineffective and resistant staff members also pose significant challenges for beginning principals. The new principal often finds that supporting, reprimanding, and counseling out these individuals is difficult and stressful. Other, more technical challenges—such as managing the budget and maintaining the school building—also loom large for novice principals, as well as difficulties related to implementing new government initiatives.

Still, most research on novice principals pre-dates the policy shift to standards and test-based high-stakes accountability that has occurred over the past few decades—policy

changes that target low performing urban school systems in particular. Several scholars argue that, with the emergence of a high-stakes accountability policy environment in the U.S., the demands on school principals have changed, altering the expectations that newcomers bring to the role and encounter from others (Crow, 2006; Lortie, 2009; Tucker & Coddling, 2002; Usdan, McCloud, & Podmostko, 2000). In particular, those who become principals in large, urban districts in this era of accountability likely face an especially daunting transition. Poverty and racial dynamics, along with expectations for instructional leadership and accountability for school performance, greatly complexify the experience of the novice urban school principal (Anyon, 1997; Chou & Tozer, 2008; Cuban, 2001; Noguera, 1996). With such large numbers of low-performing students and the high turnover in leadership in these environments, understanding the novice principals' experience in these contexts is especially critical for retaining and better supporting them.

In this paper, we investigate the experiences of novice school principals as they transition into their new occupation, focusing in particular on the first three months—a critical period of “entry and encounter” for them (Weindling & Dimmock, 2006; Weindling & Earley, 1987). Using data from a mixed-method, longitudinal study of one cohort of novice principals in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), we systematically examine the “reality shocks” novices encounter as they experience their new occupation firsthand. Specifically, we focus on the problems of practice that novices experience, the sources of these problems, and the social conditions of novices' transition to their new occupation that exacerbate or mitigate them.

We begin by anchoring our theory-building study in the literature on novice principals and sketching the analytical framework that guides our work. Next, we describe our mixed-methods, longitudinal study. We then turn to our findings arguing, based on our analysis of the data, that ultimate responsibility features prominently in novice principals' experiences, even prior to the start of their first academic year on the job. Novices' senses of responsibility, a major "reality shock" as they transition into their new occupation, contribute to three problems of practice—high levels of task volume, task diversity, and task unpredictability. We conclude by discussing our findings.

### Anchoring the Work

Most principals enter the occupation from the teaching profession, transitioning from the classroom to the principal's office typically by spending time in another school administrative position (Gates, Guarino, Santibanez, Brown, Ghosh-Dastidar, & Chung, 2004; Papa, Lankford, & Wyckoff, 2002; Ringel, Gates, Ghosh-Dastidar, Brown, & Chung, 2004). Thus, most new principals come to the occupation having up-close exposure to it, to re-appropriate Dan Lortie's term, having had an "apprenticeship of observation" to the principal's job (Cuban, 1976; Duke, 1987; Lortie, 1975). Still, crossing over into the principal's office represents a sizable shift for most newcomers (Crow & Glascock, 1995; Lortie, 1975; Wolcott, 1973).

### Empirical Research: Transition Challenges

Entering the principal occupation marks a distinct and often abrupt change in perspective, expectations, and work tasks for novices (Crow & Glascock, 1995; Lortie,

1975). Whereas teachers primarily teach students, principals assume a multifaceted job that spans instructional, managerial, and political realms (Cuban, 1988). Given colleagues' tendencies to no longer view principals as teachers, moving into the principal's office also brings about shifts in existing social relationships (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Loder & Spillane, 2005; Lortie et al., 1983; Strong, Barrett, & Bloom, 2003).

Our review of the literature on novice school principals identifies several core empirical insights into how principals transition into their new occupation and the challenges they experience. To begin with, new principals experience a sense of professional isolation and loneliness, a major contrast with their previous administrative positions (Bolam, Dunning, & Karstanje, 2000; Daresh & Male, 2000; Draper & McMichael, 2000; Earley et al., 2011; Weindling & Earley, 1987). Beginning principals are often struck by how taking on the official title immediately results in staff members being more cautious and distant with them. One large-scale study of beginning secondary school principals in the UK links this sense of professional isolation and loneliness to the ultimate responsibility of the role (Weindling & Earley, 1987). As one principal in their study explained, "It is the loneliness of being the final arbiter upon whose word all sinks or swims. It is this power that isolates and daunts" (p. 122-123). Some research also investigates efforts to mitigate this sense of loneliness among novices through meetings and support groups with principals from other schools (Daresh & Male, 2000; Earley et al., 2011; Parkay & Currie, 1992; Weindling & Earley, 1987). Nevertheless, the fact that principals must ultimately go back to their own schools where their situations are unique means that some degree of isolation and loneliness remains inherent to the job.

A second challenge identified in previous work concerns managing the legacy, practice, and style of the principal that they are replacing (Bolam, McMahon, Pocklington, & Weindling, 1993; Draper & McMichael, 2000; Dunning, 2000; Parkay & Hall, 1992; Webster, 1989; Weindling & Earley, 1987). In particular, novices often find themselves compared to the previous principal. Whether the previous principal was “a hero to be lived up to” or a “bad act to follow” presents different challenges for the incoming principal—with those in the former case having big shoes to fill (the “Rebecca Myth”) and those in the latter case being expected to save the school (the “Messiah Myth”) (Gordon & Rosen, 1981; Gouldner, 1954; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Weindling & Earley, 1987).<sup>1</sup> More difficult for beginning principals is coming into a place where the staff, students, and community members have become accustomed to the existing culture and routines developed under the previous administration. Changes brought in by the new principal are thus often resisted because school members feel that their way of life is being challenged.

A third challenge documented in the literature concerns the difficulties novices experience with regard to the multi-faceted nature of the tasks they are expected to perform (Bolam et al. 2000; Cuban, 1988; Daresh & Male, 2000; Draper & McMichael, 1998; Dunning, 1996; Nelson, de la Colina, & Boone, 2008; Parkay & Hall, 1992; Walker, Anderson, Sackney, & Woolf, 2003; Webster, 1989; Earley et al., 2011). With the large number of disconnected tasks that accompany the role, novice principals struggle to manage their time and priorities. In particular, beginning principals are often frustrated by the large volume of administrative tasks, which limits their ability to get

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<sup>1</sup> The Rebecca Myth is in reference to a book by Daphne DuMaurier. In the book, a woman marries a widower but finds it difficult to live up to the memory of his first wife, Rebecca. Rebecca’s virtues are widely extolled, more so than when she was alive.

inside classrooms and perform the duties that are expected of them as “instructional leaders.”

A fourth prominent challenge involves dealing with ineffective and resistant staff (Alvy & Coladarci, 1985; Bolam et al., 2000; Dunning, 1996; Earley et al., 2011; Nelson et al., 2008; Weindling & Earley, 1987). Novice principals often find that when personnel issues arise, they take up an inordinate amount of both time and emotional energy. Interacting with “difficult” personalities can not only be stressful but remediating and/or removing them is often a drawn-out process that requires significant time and paperwork. Furthermore, novice principals often do not feel well-prepared or well-supported in managing these personnel issues.

A few other challenges also feature in the early experiences of novice principals. Managing the school budget is a challenge for many, as novice principals are not often exposed to this task in their previous roles as teachers and assistant principals (Bolam et al., 2000; Dunning, 1996; Male, 2001; Nelson et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2003). Furthermore, principals are often frustrated by issues related to building maintenance, as they not only take time away from what they consider to be their primary tasks but are also often time-consuming, urgent, and require knowledge that principals do not usually possess (e.g., fixing the furnace) (Daresh & Male, 2000; Walker et al., 2003). Both managing the budget and facility issues are particularly prominent in areas where site based management exists. Lastly, being expected to implement new government initiatives—particularly those related to curricular changes—often presents a challenge to novice principals (Bolam et al., 2000; Dunning, 1996; Male, 2001; Weindling & Dimmock, 2006). These mandates may require new knowledge or, due to their external

source, can limit principal's autonomy and place them in a more "middle-manager" role.

Taken together, this literature suggests that new principals, despite their extended apprenticeship of observation to the occupation, are not immunized to the tensions that accompany a shift to a new occupation and the process of on-the-job socialization (Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961; Hughes, 1958).

### Analytical Framing: A Sense-making Perspective on Occupational Socialization

We use a sense-making framework to examine school principals' on-the-job socialization as they work to make sense of their new environments and the changes, contrasts, and surprises therein (Louis, 1980). Sense-making is fundamentally about meaning making, not just interpreting cues in our environment but also noticing and bracketing them. Thus, "sense-making is about authoring as well as interpretation, creation as well as discovery" (Weick, 1995, p. 8). Sense-making is triggered when ongoing flows of experience are interrupted and/or automatic processing fails because existing scripts or schemas no longer work (Mandler, 1984; Louis, 1980; Louis & Sutton, 1991). Situations of change, contrast, surprise, discrepancy, ambiguity, and uncertainty prompt people to extract puzzling clues from their environment in an effort to reconstruct their understanding of their situation.

Sense-making is triggered and influenced in part by individual's habits, past experiences, predispositions and purposes, and beliefs about what is and what ought to be in a particular situation—such as in an occupation and/or particular organization (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). New principals bring skills, knowledge, beliefs, experiences, and values from their experiences as administrators and classroom teachers

to their new position. At the same time, sense-making is also influenced by situations—not only the cues extracted from these situations but also the *sense that others give* via their expectations and local interpretations (Louis, 1980). New principals might have their job expectations dashed, fall short of their own expectations for themselves in their new position, encounter for the first time unanticipated aspects of the job, or find that their assumptions from prior experience do not match their new occupational and/or organizational experience. Further, others in the new work situation have particular expectations for the school principal that may or may not align with the new principal's expectations for the role.

### Research Approach

#### **Overview**

Data for this study comes from the Principal Policy and Practice Study (P<sup>3</sup> Study), a project based at Northwestern University's School of Education and Social Policy and funded by the Spencer Foundation. The primary goal of the P<sup>3</sup> Study is to examine the transition and on-the-job socialization of new principals. Using a longitudinal, mixed-methods design, we followed two cohorts of new principals in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) for the first two years of their principalship. Cohort 1 began their principalships in the fall of 2009, and cohort 2 began in the fall of 2010. Extensive data was gathered through a combination of principal questionnaires, semi-structured interviews with a subsample of each cohort at several time points, case studies of three schools, CPS data on the principal eligibility process, and data from the Consortium on Chicago School Research's biennial surveys.

### **Data collection**

This particular study utilizes the data from our interviews of 17 elementary school principals from cohort 2. This group is a random sample of the novice elementary school principals in the district for that year (36% of the 47 new principals). Findings from our study, therefore, are generalizable to the population of novice CPS elementary principals for 2010-11 school year. During their first year, these principals were interviewed in-depth immediately before starting the school year (time 1), three months into the school year (time 2), and at the end of the school year (time 3). Each interview lasted between 45 to 90 minutes. We developed interview protocols to ensure comparable data were collected across school principals in our study. Time 1 interview protocols were organized around the following seven topics – views on what a good principal is, the transition into the principalship, goals for the first year, expected challenges, role in developing others, the expectations of different stakeholders, and the interviewee’s path into education and administration. Time 2 protocols were organized around seven topics including how things are going, what has gone as expected, what has been surprising, challenges, goals, role in developing others, and staff’s response to interviewee’s leadership. To focus on the new principals’ transition into their principalships, this article uses data from the first two rounds of interviews (time 1 and 2) covering their first three months on the job (Weindling & Dimmock, 2006; Weindling & Earley, 1987).

### **Data analysis**

All interviews were first transcribed and then coded in NVivo 8. In the first round of analysis, all excerpts in which the principal described experiencing challenges were identified and coded as “challenges.” With an eye towards challenges related to principal practice in particular, these excerpts were examined and salient themes identified. The excerpts were then grouped into several sub-codes that represented the prominent problems of practice that emerged: task volume, task diversity, and task unpredictability. During the process of identifying salient themes, responsibility and transition situations emerged as factors that shape principals’ problems of practice. Therefore, transcripts were also coded for excerpts related to responsibility (more and ultimate responsibility) and transition situations (insider-outsider status and the transition’s degree of plannedness).

To evaluate the differences in the level of task volume, diversity, and unpredictability between principals and between time points, we created rubrics for rating the principals on these items. Based on the excerpts coded, each principal was given a score of between 0 and 3 for each item at each time point—with 0 indicating no mention of that particular problem of practice and 3 indicating prevalent and intense levels of it. A similar process was used for scoring each principal’s sense of responsibility. As for transition situations, principals were categorized into insider or outsider and also rated on how planned their transition was. Our rubric for rating the transition’s degree of plannedness ranged from -2 to +2, with -2 indicating that the succession occurred quickly and with little planning and +2 indicating that the new principal was specifically groomed to succeed the previous principal.

## Findings

We argue, based on our analysis of the data, that a major “reality shock” for novice principals as they transitioned into their new occupation was a sense of ultimate responsibility. Further, we argue that this sense of ultimate responsibility contributed to three core problems of practice—task volume, diversity, and unpredictability. While all novices experienced the responsibility shock as well as one or more of the practice problems, all novices did not experience them in the same way or with the same intensity. Specifically, we explore how the social conditions of novices’ transitions either eased or exacerbated their problems of practice.

### **The Ultimate Responsibility Shock**

A consistent theme in new principals’ accounts, even prior to the start of their first academic year on the job, was the shock of responsibility that came with entering the principal occupation. Indeed, all but two of our novice principals mentioned this jump in responsibility. Their accounts not only stressed the shock of more or greater responsibility that accompanied their transition into the principal’s office but also a sense of being *ultimately* responsible for their school.

#### *The Responsibility Shock*

Contrasting his new occupation with the sense of responsibility he felt as a classroom teacher, George, a young white principal of a low-performing school, noted that responsibility is “magnified and compounded” in his new job. He explained, “I’m responsible for the whole building of students and I’m ultimately—for most purposes—

the end all, be all accountability person. Everything falls on me ... no matter what”

(*George, time 1*). George underscores the increased responsibility that he has assumed by virtue of becoming a principal. Still, it is not simply that he has more responsibility and responsibility for the whole building but also that he is “the end all, be all accountability person”; the buck now stops with him. He elaborated, noting, “One thing that really was smacking me in the gut Sunday night was the responsibility part. It’s like the ultimate responsibility ... all the people who work in this building—their employment and welfare or their well-being as far as financially and in other ways is dependent upon my successful leadership of this organization... there’s a lot of responsibility there” (*George, time 1*). For George, the shock that came with the transition into his new occupation was not just more responsibility; it was also the sense of ultimate responsibility for the welfare of other people.

While we might expect this responsibility shock for individuals moving from the classroom to the principal’s office, it was also a prominent theme for novice principals who had held other school administrative positions before becoming principal. Charles, a young African-American principal who was formerly an assistant principal (AP), captured the responsibility shock when he noted, “It’s more responsibility and it’s a bigger commitment. I think as an AP, I knew at the end of the day if something went wrong, I wasn’t gonna be the one getting the phone call (laughs)” (*Charles, time 1*). For Charles, a major difference between being an assistant principal and principal is the greater responsibility and the greater commitment that came with that responsibility. But in Charles’s account, as in George’s account, there is also the shock of being ultimately

responsible for all that happens in his school. Contrasting her work as an assistant principal, Janice, a young white principal at a predominately Hispanic school remarked,

Even though I was doing the technical things of principals and I knew how to do the budget, I knew how to do positions ... there was always somebody else who was ultimately responsible for it. So it wasn't me. I might have done it, but I wasn't responsible for the outcome (laughs)... Yeah I had to think about [becoming principal] because like, 'Oh my God! What if I like totally run this school into the ground?!' (*Janice, time 1*).

Janice points out that while she was “doing the technical” work of a principal in her previous position as an assistant principal, she was not “ultimately responsible” and that was one of the big surprises in transitioning into her new occupation.

Manuel, a Hispanic principal of a racially diverse school, underscores this sense of ultimate responsibility while also capturing its solo nature when he noted, “the biggest transition I think is just sitting in this chair and realizing that now it's all up to me. ... One of the biggest misconceptions about principals is that people think that we have all the answers and we don't” (*Manuel, time 1*). Manuel also locates this sense of ultimate responsibility in the expectations that others have for the principal—having “all the answers.” It is not simply that multiple stakeholders place demands on principals, but they also expect principals to know everything.

Alejandro, a Hispanic principal of a middle-performing school, also spoke about the increased and ultimate responsibility that came with his transition to the principalship. Contrasting his prior position as an assistant principal with his new occupation, he noted:

As an assistant principal, I was always providing suggestions and I always wanted to do more and be assertive. But the principal would always just kinda like, “Hold on a minute. It’s not that simple.” Because I didn’t think about the personal relationships and that ultimate, “Ok well you’re the one that has to tell that person we’re gonna change your grade.” Whereas the AP you could just make that suggestion ...but, when you’re actually sitting in front of a person and you have to tell someone that, and that person doesn’t wanna change grade and they’re like sad face ...that’s probably been the hardest part in terms of... the transition. That’s the hardest part. And it’s just something that you don’t learn or they can’t teach you in a workshop.

*(Alejandro, time 1)*

In Alejandro’s view, the “hardest part” of his transition from being an assistant principal to principal was taking on responsibility for all aspects of the school, the personal and the professional. While as an assistant principal he could come up with suggestions, he now had to consider the entailments and implications of these ideas for the people in the organization. Joyce, a young African-American principal of a “turnaround” school, makes a similar comparison noting that “I feel like I have to know and understand what’s going on because ultimately if something goes wrong, I’m the one who has to answer to or explain why something isn’t right” (*Joyce, time 1*).<sup>2</sup>

Overall, the responsibility theme was more prominent in new principals’ accounts prior to the start of the school year than three months in, suggesting that this shock may have to do with the surprises that come with occupational transitions. For most of the principals (59%), the intensity with which they described responsibility diminished after

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<sup>2</sup> In a turnaround situation, the district attempts to “turn around” an academically underperforming school by replacing all or most of the school staff. Students, however, are allowed to remain in the school.

three months on the job, with six of those not mentioning responsibility at all in their second interview. For three principals (18%) the intensity of responsibility increased after three months on the job. And two of the principals (12%) seemed to experience a similar level of intensity at both time points. It appears, therefore, that most of the principals in our study internalized the sense of ultimate responsibility after their first three months on the job.

*Ultimate Responsibility: Stress, Solitariness, & Loneliness*

According to the principals in our study, with their sense of ultimate responsibility came increased stress, a constant alertness to what might go wrong, and an inability to leave the job behind even on weekends. This stress was manifest in novices' reports of things such as sleep loss, physical exhaustion, frustration, nervousness, and constant worrying. Indeed, all 17 principals in our study mentioned the stress that came with their new occupation. After talking about more and ultimate responsibility, for instance, Charles goes on to note:

But now as a principal ... it's pressure ... You're always thinking about what can go wrong. And I seem to be in that frame of mind now—still focusing on the positives and still praising my staff for the good things that I've seen thus far, but in the back of my mind ... I'm still wondering what can go wrong, because if something goes wrong, it's all under me. (*Charles, time 1*)

In this excerpt, Charles underscores the mental pressure that came with crossing over to the principal's office, noting that he's always thinking about, anticipating, what might go

wrong. In his view, his new occupation came with “a frame of mind” where he is constantly scanning the environment in an effort to anticipate problems.

Principals talked about waking up worrying about decisions they have to make or trying to figure out how to solve perplexing issues. Damien, a former high school assistant principal and new principal at a low-performing school remarked, “I knew it was going to be a lot of pressure. ... You find yourself waking up in the middle of the night on like a Sunday, waking up and thinking about something. You know it’s just like, it really gets into you” (*Damien, time 2*). Damien captures how he internalized this sense of ultimate responsibility and how this pressure manifests itself in affecting basic functions such as sleep. Similarly, Sally an African-American principal of a low-performing school, describes how her sleep is constantly interrupted by thoughts and tasks involving her school. When asked what being a principal is like, she says, “[There’s] no time and you don’t sleep, and even when you sleep you’re thinking of stuff. (laughter). You wake up while you’re sleeping, go write in your book ... truthfully I go to sleep, my laptop is on my side and this book is on my side because I’m reviewing whatever I did that day before I go to bed, and then I’m checking my email because we get things on email all night” (*Sally, time 1*). Like Damien, thoughts about Sally’s school weigh on her mind even when she sleeps. For her, being a principal is a 24/7 job; even at night, she is either doing work-related tasks or thinking about them.

Our account also suggests that, despite the high demand for their time and the constant interaction with others, some novice principals (47%) experienced early on the solitary and lonely nature of their new occupation. This solitariness and loneliness came not from the absence of others in their daily work. Indeed, almost all the new principals

in our study had assistant principals and other formally designated leaders that assisted them. And many of our novice principals talked explicitly about distributing or delegating responsibility to other administrators or to teachers. Rather, the solitariness and loneliness stemmed from novice principals' sense that they were ultimately and solely responsible for critical school decisions. Lori, a white principal of a large high-performing school, describes this solitariness when making a difficult decision about a teacher. "It is a very lonely job ... and nobody can understand that unless they've sat in this chair. And so I can't explain to my AP. I mean I can say it over and over and she can listen. But at the end of the day, she gets to sleep. I didn't get to sleep for weeks" (*Lori, time 2*). Despite being able to discuss the matter with her AP, the fact that the livelihoods of the teacher and the students were ultimately in her hands meant that the burden was hers, and hers alone, to bear.

Further, because principals are responsible for their schools, they sometimes have to make decisions that they feel are best for their organization overall but that might not make individual teachers, students, and parents happy. As a result, these principals make some people unhappy or displeased with them. To use Alejandro's words, principals create "sad faces" that contribute to being isolated socially. As Kara, a principal at a small low-performing school explained, "this is a very isolating job and you have to be comfortable with making decisions that you're not gonna make everyone happy all of the time. Maybe a little bit of the time (laughs)" (*Kara, time 1*). For Kara, who is attempting change amongst a veteran staff that is set in their ways, a defining characteristic of being principal entails making decisions that are necessary for moving her school forward but that might upset some teachers and result in her isolation.

Indeed, some principals purposefully isolate themselves socially, so that decisions they make will be more readily accepted. For instance, Lori describes how distancing herself is necessary so that her decisions will be perceived as fair:

It's just a very lonely job. (laughs) ... I mean you can be friendly and supportive of your teachers, but they're not people that you can hang out with on the weekends. ... You can't be perceived as being someone's best friend. ... because then there's always that doubt in other people's mind about, well did they get this because they are friends? ... Since I came here, I always said I wasn't here to make friends with people; I'm here to do a job. ... I can be friendly and cordial ... But I don't fraternize with employees outside of work. (*Lori, time 2*).

Lori reports intentionally keeping her distance socially from employees and avoids fraternizing with them outside of work because she does not want suspicions of favoritism to affect the legitimacy of her decisions. During his first three months, Damien also reported intentionally distancing himself from his staff in order to convey that he is serious about turning around the school. He compares his approach to a strategy he used as a new teacher:

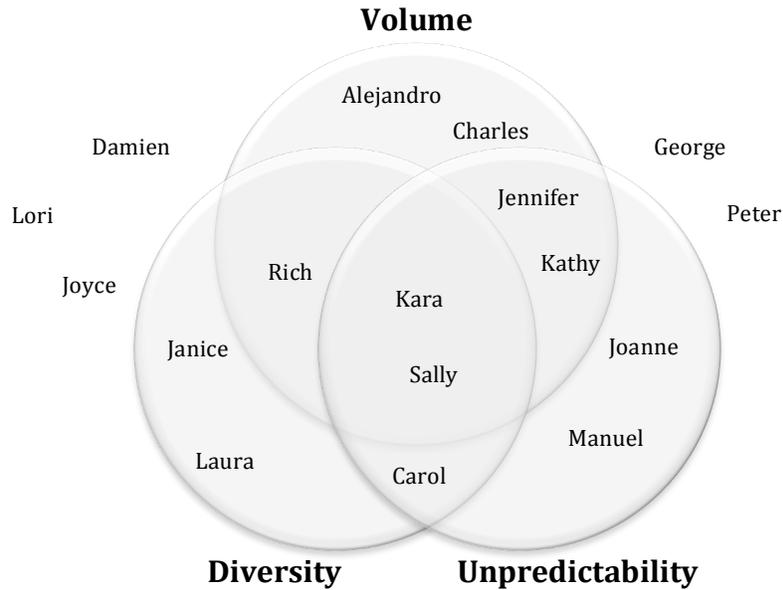
And it's almost like teaching. ... They used to tell us when we were beginning teachers, "Don't smile until Christmas." ... That's the approach I took when I was a beginning teacher. ... I came in, you know, "I'm not playing." ... And then later in the year, you can come down a little bit, but you can't start off 'Hi, hi,' and then take it up. Once you lose it, then you can't ratchet it up... Because I mean you don't have enough time in this accountability era to wait for things to happen. (*Damien, time 2*)

Damien intentionally chooses not to “smile until Christmas” so that his staff members will respect his authority as principal and take him seriously; he hopes that, as a result, he’ll be able to quickly turn around the school. In both cases, a strategy of social isolation was chosen in an effort to facilitate the acceptance of decisions the principal must make on behalf of the school.

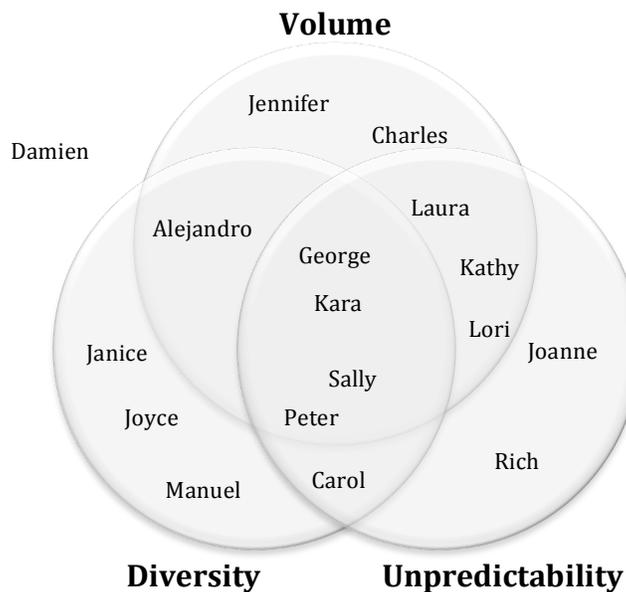
### **Problems of Practice: Volume, Diversity, & Unpredictability**

Novice principals’ sense of more and ultimate responsibility contributed to three problems of practice—high levels of task volume, diversity, and unpredictability. Ninety-four percent (16) of our principals described at least one of these problems of practice in one of their interviews, with a large majority of those (81%, 13 principals) describing more than one problem of practice (See Figure 1). Moreover, volume, diversity, and unpredictability interacted with one another, magnifying the difficulties for novices.

**Figure 1A. The problems of practice experienced by novice principals at the beginning of the school year (August 2010).**



**Figure 1B. The problems of practice experienced by novice principals three months into the school year (November-December 2010).**



*Work Volume: “Can I have two minutes?”*

The *volume* of demands was a salient theme for 41% (7) of our principals before the start of the school year and 59% (10) at the end of their first semester on the job. Moreover, the challenge of volume intensified over the first three months for eight of our principals (47%), and seven of those eight principals indicated that the workload had become almost overwhelming. Additionally, two principals (12%) expressed high levels of task volume at both time points. (Task volume seemed to be less pronounced after three months for only one principal (6%), and six principals (35%) did not express that task volume was a challenge at either time point.)

Kara captured the volume of demands on her when she noted, “Well it seemed like once that official title took place, the doors opened (laughs) and everything came pouring down ... not in a bad way but just like ok, here, here and here” (*Kara, time 2*). For Kara, once she got the position as principal, the demands on her “came pouring down.” Other principals identified the sources of these demands. Kathy, a white principal at a high-performing school, remarked after three months on the job, “The other thing that continues to shock me is the amount of people that want my attention ... I never thought I’d close my door and sometimes I have to close my door ... Parents, teachers, students, my AP ... everybody [wants my attention].” (*Kathy, time 2*). Kathy reports “shock” at the demands on her time from multiple stakeholders and having to abandon her open door policy in an effort to protect her time from different stakeholders seeking her attention. As evident in Kathy’s remarks, the volume of demand experienced by new

principals is in great part a function of internal and external stakeholders' expectations for the principal.

Jennifer, an African-American principal of a predominately Hispanic school, also captures the volume of demands when she says:

Every teacher wanted to come and one teacher asked, "Well can I move my room assignment? I want you to know about me. I want you to know about the history [of this school]. I want you to do something about these parents who are harassing all the time. Will you stand up for us?" So everybody put their bid in as to what they expected from me. And I was very nervous because I was thinking to myself, "What do you think I'm going to do?" And the clerk, I will never forget, she said "You know, we've all been really waiting for someone like you, and we hope that you will give us the change that we so desperately need." And I'm thinking, I'm not Obama! (*Jennifer, time 1*)

Jennifer's account captures how what others (teachers and the school clerk) "expected from" her contributed to the volume of demands. In this way, the expectations of others play an important role in socialization into a new occupation, a prevalent theme in the occupational socialization literature (Duke, Isaacson, Sagor, & Schmuck, 1984; Hart, 1993; Hughes, 1958; Louis, 1980).

Similarly, Lori describes how surprised she is by the sharp jump in demands she is confronted with when she transitions from being the assistant principal at her school to becoming the principal:

I am surprised by the amount of, just the sheer volume of email and phone calls and two minutes, "Can I have two minutes, can I get two minutes of your time? Do you

have a second?” And it’s all day long ... What has surprised me is how much I need to manage my time better because I can’t plan for anything. ... I’m surprised by how much I’m in demand ... and how little time I have to get tasks done ... It consumes you. ... You can delegate some of that to your AP, which I do and she picks it up and takes it, and then some of it you have to do yourself ... (*Lori, time 2*)

Lori’s account captures her surprise on becoming a principal and the sheer volume of demand on her time, even though she had considerable experience as an assistant principal. While she can delegate some of the work to her assistant principal, “some of it” she has to do herself—linking work volume to her sense of ultimate responsibility. Further, Lori underscores how the volume of demand undermines her ability to get work done.

*Work Diversity: “I wear too many hats”*

It is not simply the sheer number of demands that principals found taxing, but that these demands involve diverse and sometimes contrary pulls on their time and attention. Task diversity was a salient theme for 35% (6) of our principals before the start of the school year and 53% (9) at the end of their first semester. Moreover, for seven of the principals (41%), work diversity intensified over the first three months of the school year. (Three principals (18%) experienced less task diversity after three months, while six (35%) did not express that task diversity was a challenge at either time point.)

Peter, a Latino and the new principal at a middle-performing school, highlights this task diversity when he remarks, “I didn’t know how many different directions you could be pulled into. I knew there was gonna be a lot of work ...” (*Peter, time 2*). For

Peter and other principals in our study, being pulled in so many different directions was a shock that added tremendously to the challenge of work volume. Rich, a young white principal of a turnaround school, remarked that “being a principal is like being pulled in about 100 very important but not always complementary directions” (*Rich, time 1*). Rich underscores how numerous demands create tension not just because of their volume but also because these demands pull him in different “very important” directions that are not always “complementary.”

Janice expands on the diversity problem noting, “You’re everything: instructional leader, engineer, counselor, you got to listen to people’s parents—they come to you with all sorts of problems that have nothing to do with school—let’s see, a lunch room manager” (*Janice, time 1*). For Janice, and other novices, the diversity of demands comes from the multiple roles they have to play as principal—from lunchroom manager to engineer to instructional leader. Indeed, three months into her first academic year on the job, Janice compared being a principal to:

Being a jack of all trades ... I feel more like [that] this time because ... you are the instructional leader and that’s the main thing but also a social worker when someone needs some shoulder to cry on or some help ... I am an engineer ... If parents come in with issues that they have going on at home and they want to know if they should call the police, and so now I’m a lawyer. ... You’re expected to be everything to everybody. (*Janice, time 2*)

For Janice, a core problem of practice in her new occupation comes from the expectations of diverse stakeholders who place different demands on her; as a result, she is under pressure to be “everything to everybody.” Similarly, Sally noted:

It's like a lot of different things. It's like being the president. It's like being the go-to. It's like being the fall guy (laughs). You know, it's like being everything to a lot of different people. You're a task manager, you are a businessperson, you're a counselor, you're a doctor, you're a nurse. You're all these different things but at the end of the day, it's a public servant ... with a stipend (laughs). (*Sally, time 2*)

In Sally's view, the diversity of demands is a function of the very different roles that "different" stakeholders expect her to perform as principal—"it's like being everything," and you have to do this for "different" people.

Work diversity, furthermore, appears to be tied to novices' sense of ultimate responsibility. As Manuel explained,

It's tough to put it in one word. You wear too many hats when you're a principal. ... A good example of this ... we had a technology coordinator who is amazing with what she does. ... I asked her to please build, to recreate the [school] website. ... And she told me "Sure, I'll take care of it." November came around, nothing happened. I asked her again and "Sure, I'll do it during the winter break." Then I started thinking, if I let this to continue, the summer will come around ... So one day I started looking and I said, you know what, I should learn how to do the website. ... I did the website myself. So being a principal is, is taking that next step and if people don't do it, you have to do it; it's still your responsibility. (*Manuel, time 2*)

Manuel's account captures the diversity of the principals' work—"too many hats"—and he connects this diversity to having ultimate responsibility—"if people don't do it ... it's still your responsibility." Principals have to pick up the slack when others don't deliver.

*Unpredictability: “One minute you’re on the [surf] board and the next minute ...”*

A third problem of practice in principals’ accounts was the *unpredictability* of the work. Unpredictability was a salient theme for 41% (7) of our principals before the start of the school year and 59% (10) at the end of their first semester. Moreover, 47% (8) of our principals expressed an increase in the intensity of this unpredictability over the first three months. One principal (6%) expressed high levels of unpredictability at both time points. (Only three principals (18%) indicated less unpredictability after three months, while five principals (29%) did not describe unpredictability at either time point.)

Lori captures the unpredictability aspect of the job when she notes,

It’s like surfing without a surfboard on any given day. I mean one minute you’re on the board and the next minute you’re drowning ... I mean it’s something you like to do and on any given day you just absolutely love it and then the next thing you know, a wave comes and smacks you and you’re like, “What happened? How do I get back above water?” I mean things can just come out of nowhere. (*Lori, time 2*)

Acknowledging her love of the job, Lori points out how things “come out of nowhere” and throw her off the “surfboard.”

Kathy also highlights the unpredictability of the job when she remarks, “I’m usually arriving at 7:30... and you never know what’s gonna be in front of you ... So I can have my day planned out perfectly and it’s all shot (laughs)” (*Kathy, time 1*). Even in August before the start of the school year, Kathy was aware of the unpredictability and anticipated it would be a challenge. Three months on, Kathy reported that what she had anticipated with respect to unpredictability had materialized, comparing being a principal to being a “captain of a ship” and noting how “things sometimes are smooth sailing and

then in a moment, the winds can turn, and you're not sure you're gonna stay afloat ... I'm the last one out" (*Kathy, time 2*). Kathy not only underscores the unpredictability of the work but also connects this to the sense of ultimate responsibility—"I'm the last one out"—that comes with being a principal.

Similar to Kathy, George connects task unpredictability to his sense of ultimate responsibility, noting:

The work is harder than I expected, day-to-day. Like I am a very systematic thinker, think programmatically ... have a good plan and the execution is the easy part. It's so hard not to get caught up in the day-to-day putting out fires. That you got the best plan for the week or the best plan at 7:30 in the morning and by 8:30, it's out the window. Or by Monday morning, it's out the window for the whole week ... That's the biggest [challenge]. And that was different than when you're like a teacher leader or even like before [when] I was a resident principal. You know, the things didn't end at your door, so you did not have to be responsible for those and [could] stay focused on the planning and the implementation of whatever you owned. But ultimately, I own everything here and so if it doesn't get taken care of somewhere else ... it ends at me. (*George, time 2*)

George finds his work as principal more difficult than he expected because of its unpredictability or, as he puts it, the "day-to-day putting out fires," something that does not fit easily with his systematic planning style. He links this unpredictability directly to the sense of ultimate responsibility—"I own everything here"—that he experiences upon becoming a principal. As a result, he feels he cannot afford to ignore the surprises that bubble up in his workday and that distract him from his "good plan."

The novice principals experienced different combinations of the volume, diversity, and unpredictability problems of practice. Before the start of the school year, six novices (35%) reported two or more of these practice problems whereas three months into the school year, nine novices (53%) reported two or more of them (See Figure 1). Moreover, these problems of practice interacted with one another, exacerbating the difficulties experienced by novice principals as they transitioned into their new occupation. Sally captures the interactions when she remarks:

The paperwork, the time that things are due, being out of the building for meetings when you really want to be in the building; those things are challenging. Time management, trying to get everything in ... because you sit down and you're getting ready to do something and something happens—you know, the fire department shows up ... a fight breaks out ... When you come back to your office, you can't remember what you were doing and somebody brings you something else. So whatever you were doing goes on the side ... (*Sally, time 2*)

Pointing to work volume, diversity, and unpredictability, Sally notes how the unpredictability and diversity of the work constantly and unexpectedly takes her away from the task-at-hand, thereby making it difficult to keep up with the large volume of demands.

Overall, 88% (15) of our novice principals experienced an increase in one or more of the practice problems over the first three months on the job. Fifty-three percent (8) of these 15 principals experienced an increase in task volume, 47% (7) experienced an increase in task diversity, and 53% (8) experienced an increase in task unpredictability.

### The Conditions of Novice Principals' Transitions

Our account to this point captures the “responsibility shock” experienced by all but two novice principals in our study as they transitioned into their new occupation. It also details three problems of practice that accompanied this responsibility shock—volume, diversity, and unpredictability. With one exception, all principals reported experiencing one or more of these three practice problems either prior to the start of the school year or at the end of their first semester on the job, and the intensity of these practice problems tended to increase over that time period.

Still, principals in our study did not experience these problems of practice with the same intensity. Problems of practice were experienced differently in part because the social conditions of novices' transitions to the principalship differed. As much of our preceding analysis illuminates, principalship is a social practice: Novice principals figure out practice while on the job through their interactions with various internal and external stakeholders. Different transition situations meant that principals faced different social conditions when they assumed the principalship, and these varied conditions either eased or exacerbated the practice problems they encountered.

Some principals, for example, were APs in their school and were groomed to succeed their principals. Already familiar with their school and largely continuing the trajectory set forth by their predecessor usually meant that these principals had the advantages of information and staff cooperation, which tended to ease their problems of practice. Janice, for instance, explained how being promoted internally from AP to principal made her first few months on the job easier: “I knew the climate and the culture of the school...I knew the people, I knew what the school's vision was, what we were

working towards, what people were dedicated to accomplishing. So I think that went a long way because I was already part of that, so I didn't have to learn it and take the time to kind of figure out the culture of the school" (*Janice, time 1*). The extensive knowledge that Janice had about her staff and school facilitated her work as a new principal. Already knowing the contours of her school and the capabilities of her staff was a resource that allowed her to bypass the lengthy process of familiarizing herself to a new environment and to focus instead on developing an effective strategy for improving instruction.

On the other extreme, other principals found themselves thrown last minute into the principalship at a new school, usually because the former principal was removed due to poor performance. As outsiders with little information about the school and no support from the previous administration, these principals faced conditions that tended to exacerbate the problems of practice they experienced during their first few months on the job. For example, limited information not only hampered Laura's ability to complete critical technical tasks (e.g., assigning teachers to positions and establishing the payroll system), it also meant she was ignorant of the social-political dynamics of her staff. She told us, "Just a lot of politics I don't know about yet. I really don't know who has an agenda, who's really just here to be a thoughtful teacher, and who's here to sabotage others...So that's gonna be a challenge, knowing what to believe, how it's gonna affect student learning, and does it need to be dealt with now" (*Laura, time 1*). Unlike Janice, Laura does not have the advantages of information and staff buy-in. As a result, she does not have those resources to draw on as she transitions into the principalship and, instead, expends significant time and energy trying to discover the contours of her school and

staff. Indeed, due to this lack of information, Laura ends up unwittingly igniting staff conflicts rather than uniting them during her first year on the job.

Overall, novices who took over the principalship in schools where they had previously worked (Janice, Lori, Kathy, Joyce) tended to express lower levels of practice problems before the start of the school year compared with those novices who hastily assumed the principalship in a school with which they were unfamiliar (Sally, Laura, Kara, Carol). Whereas the former group expressed low to medium levels (0 to 2) of practice problems before the start of the school year, the latter group expressed medium to high levels (2 to 3). While the intensity of these problems of practice increased for both groups by the end of their first three months, it remained higher for those novices who started their careers in an unplanned manner at a new school.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Our account suggests that one reason the first three months are critical is that novice school principals encounter a “responsibility shock” upon entering their new occupation. While most novices reported experiencing more responsibilities, the “responsibility shock” had more to do with a sense of *ultimate responsibility*. Associated with this sense of ultimate responsibility, novices identified three problems of practice—volume, diversity, and unpredictability—and the intensity of these three problems of practice tended to increase over the first three months of the school year. Though these problems were experienced by all, the conditions of novices’ transition to their new occupation either eased or exacerbated the intensity of these practice problems. Our findings with respect to novice principals’ sense of ultimate responsibility and the

practice problems of volume, unpredictability, and diversity are consistent with prior work (Hobson et al., 2003; Parkay, Currie, & Rhodes, 1992; Weindling & Dimmock, 2006; Weindling & Earley, 1987). We extend this prior work by relating novices' sense of ultimate responsibility to practice problems and also by showing how the conditions of new principals' transition can ease or exacerbate these problems.

We might expect that as novices transition into the principal occupation, they will experience an increase in their volume of work, especially when compared with their prior administrative positions. As our analysis shows, however, the problems of practice experienced by novice principals are not simply about volume but also about the nature of the work—in particular, the diversity and unpredictability of the work. Prior research on the school principal's work (not just novice principals) speaks to both of these characteristics, capturing the “putting out fires” and “jack of all trades” aspects of the job. Our account shows that these problems of practice emerge early for novice principals and intensify over the first three months on the job.

A key issue then concerns whether and how these problems of practice might be eased for novices. We suspect there are no easy answers. Still, acknowledging the challenge is likely an important first step in helping novices manage it during their transition into the principal occupation. We can imagine that school systems might do several things to help novices navigate this transition. First, simply making novices aware that a sense of ultimate responsibility is likely to be one of the main “reality shocks” of their occupational socialization is likely to help in the transition; novices can then expect it and be more prepared for it. School district mentoring and induction programs for new principals should also directly address these problems of practice so that novices can

anticipate and learn ways to manage them. That said, awareness is likely to get one only so far. Additional steps will be necessary to help novice principals navigate their transition into the principalship:

One of these might be for school systems—state and local government policymakers—to consider how their policies and programs (e.g., school accountability policies, principal evaluation systems) contribute to new principals’ sense of ultimate responsibility. District and state high-stakes accountability policies that hold the school principal accountable for school performance as measured in terms of student achievement on standardized tests likely contribute to novices’ sense of ultimate responsibility. While we want new principals to take responsibility for their schools and student learning, at the same time, we want them to cultivate a sense of this responsibility as being shared with other administrators (district and school) and school staff more broadly. Policies that hold school leadership teams responsible—rather than just the school principal—might help ease novices’ sense of ultimate and sole responsibility and, in the process, reduce the problems of practice that often overwhelm novice principals.

A related consideration that might ease novices’ sense of ultimate responsibility would be to promote “collective responsibility” in schools. Prior research shows a strong and positive relationship between teachers’ sense of collective responsibility and valued school outcomes (Bryk, A. S. & Driscoll, M. E., 1988; Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Lee & Smith, 1996). While research has not examined relations between a school staff’s sense of “collective responsibility” and a principal’s sense of “ultimate responsibility,” it is plausible that collective responsibility may moderate school principal’s sense of ultimate responsibility. If this was found to be the

case, then principal preparation programs could help participants learn how to develop collective responsibility in their schools. Further, district policymakers could work to ensure that their policies and programs promote rather than undermine a sense of collective responsibility among school staff.

Another strategy might be to consider the appointment of “business managers” with responsibility for building operations. Such positions might ease the volume, diversity, and unpredictability of tasks confronting novices. In our study, tasks involving physical plant issues, the school budget, and administrative paperwork often accounted for a substantial amount of the volume, diversity, and unpredictability of principals’ work yet were considered the most frustrating because principals viewed these tasks as taking time away from their central responsibilities of instructional leadership. Therefore, business managers should be charged primarily with these types of tasks. In this way, business managers can not only ease principals’ practice problems, they can do so in a manner that promotes principals’ focus on instruction and learning.

Our analysis also suggests that when novices enter the principal occupation in schools that they know relatively little about and the transition is unexpected, the problems of practice tend to be exacerbated. In contrast, when novices take up the principalship in schools that they know a considerable amount about and that are transitioned in planned ways, the problems of practice tend to be eased. Local school systems might help ease novice principals’ transition into the principal’s office by attempting to minimize the abrupt departures of existing principals and planning transitions so that incoming novices have adequate opportunities to learn about their new school. It is not always possible or desirable to promote someone from within a school to

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the principal position. Still, the problems of practice associated with transitioning into the principal occupation, especially for individuals from outside the school, might be eased by providing adequate time and access to information about the school.

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