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Implications of a shadowing/ mentoring programme for aspiring principals

Mentoring
programme
for aspiring
principals

253

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of a shadowing/mentoring component of a post-graduate programme designed to prepare deputy and assistant principals for the principalship.

Design/methodology/approach – The research design is a qualitative evaluation of the shadowing/mentoring component of a principal preparation programme. The experiences of 13 individual aspiring principals who had taken part in the programme were explored using semi-structured interviews.

Findings – The shadowing/mentoring component of this programme allowed the aspiring principals to gain an understanding of the complexity of a principal's role by shadowing and being mentored by experienced principals in a range of New Zealand schools. In addition to providing them with a network of effective principals, the experience led the aspiring principals to reflect on their leadership development.

Research limitations/implications – The study drew on a small sample of 27 students enrolled in the programme, 13 of whom were included in the data collection process.

Originality/value – This study presents the views of aspiring principals who valued the opportunity to relate theory to practice as part of a post-graduate programme.

Keywords Leadership development, Mentoring, Educational leadership, Deputy/assistant principals, Shadowing

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Effective school leadership is widely acknowledged as making a significant difference to student learning (Bryk and Schneider, 2003; Dinham, 2007; Fullan, 2007; Murphy *et al.*, 2007; Robinson *et al.*, 2009). It is therefore crucial to inquire into how school leaders are prepared for the role (Moorosi and Bush, 2011). The impact of globalisation, developing technologies and diverse student populations has resulted in schooling in the twenty-first century becoming increasingly complex. Schools are under intense pressure to change and school principals are expected to act as enablers of change (OECD, 2009). To prepare school leaders to cope with such unprecedented challenges requires the development of specialist skills which cannot be left to an organic process

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(Bush, 2008; Dalgic and Bakioğlu, 2014). Instead, principal development requires a systematic and deliberate process of development (Bush, 2008; Macpherson, 2009; Parsons, 2012). The recent high turnover of principals and the resultant worldwide leadership gap has created urgency in this area (Bynoe, 2015; OECD, 2009).

Parsons (2012) refers to principals in New Zealand as “the endangered species” (p. 28). His justification for this expression is that, while there are 2,559 principals currently practising in New Zealand, 10-15 per cent of those principals leave their position annually. This figure is growing with the majority of current principals being in the 55-60 plus age group and 60 being the common retirement age. In addition, from 2007-2012 there have been an average of 62 schools in New Zealand under “statutory management”[1] (Parsons, 2012), suggesting that many current principals are struggling with their role. The projected numbers of principals leaving the profession, together with a worrying shortage of talented applicants for the position (Morris, 2014), signals an urgent need to develop principal candidates with the necessary qualities and capabilities. There is concern that little has been done to address this potential shortage through the provision of effective leadership development programmes. International research suggests that the acceleration of senior leaders to principals’ positions is not matched by appropriate learning, leaving them poorly prepared (Bush, 2008; Macpherson, 2009; Morris, 2014; Parsons, 2012) and possibly leading, in time, to “serial incompetence” (Macpherson, 2009, p. 44). While the deputy principalship is commonly viewed as a bridge to the principalship, it is not always an effective preparation for the role (Bolman and Deal, 2002; Petrides *et al.*, 2014). In interviews of experienced principals, Parsons (2012, p. 3) found they “freely admitted that the step they took from senior management to principalship was a ‘bridge too far’ and that all acknowledged that the skill set for the Principal is so vastly different from that required as a Deputy Principal”.

As well as school integrated strategies (such as developing deputy principals as instructional leaders and involving them in decision making), graduate programmes which provide opportunities to apply new knowledge to practice through field-based experiences are needed to prepare aspiring leaders for the principalship (Browne-Ferrigno, 2004; Weller and Weller, 2002). Programmes that have been found to be effective provide a combination of theory and practice and involve both academics and practitioners (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2010). In order to nurture aspiring principals’ competencies and prepare them for the principalship, effective programmes include vicarious, simulated and real-world administrative experiences such as shadowing, mentoring and coaching (Kool-Lyon, 2010; Mullen and Cairns, 2001).

Context for the study

The Master of Secondary School Leadership (MSSL) programme offered by Victoria University of Wellington was a response to concerns expressed by experienced principals in the secondary sector and reflects current literature that suggests senior leaders are not being adequately prepared for principals’ positions (Macpherson, 2009; Moorosi and Bush, 2011; Morris, 2014; Piggot-Irvine and Youngs, 2011). It is designed to specifically prepare senior leaders in secondary schools for the role of principal. Applicants for the programme are interviewed by academic staff and experienced principals to gauge their readiness for a principal’s position. Successful applicants are those who are perceived as being ready for the role within three to five years.

Aspiring principals in New Zealand can choose to study a post-graduate leadership programme offered by a range of universities, or to apply for the National Aspiring Principals Programme (NAPP) funded by the Ministry of Education. A unique feature of the MSSSL programme, when compared with those options, is the mandatory shadowing/mentoring component. Over four trimesters, while concurrently studying theory, the students spend a week at different schools where they shadow and are mentored by an experienced principal. Prospective principals often identify other school leaders as a critical influence in their learning and readiness for the role of principal (Mullen and Cairns, 2001). The shadowing/mentoring component provides an opportunity for valuable onsite interpersonal shadowing and mentoring with four experienced leaders. As a clinical practice, it is, therefore, an opportunity for the socialisation and professional development of aspiring principals.

The MSSSL programme is unique in New Zealand being delivered jointly by the Faculty of Education and Business School at Victoria University of Wellington. Students are introduced to the theory of both leadership and management of schools. This is especially important in New Zealand where state schools have been self-managing since the introduction of the “Tomorrow’s Schools” legislation in 1989. This means that principals in New Zealand have greater autonomy than principals in many other countries of the world, being responsible for the “day to day management of everything that happens in their schools” (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 7) as well as being instructional leaders. Principalship in the New Zealand context includes: ensuring the quality of teaching and learning; overseeing administration; maintaining good relations with the school’s board of trustees; and being fully involved in property, finances and HR matters (Morris, 2014). As mentioned earlier, other forms of professional development available to prospective principals in New Zealand include a year-long programme for aspiring principals of both primary and secondary schools (NAPP) and a number of generic post-graduate qualifications. However, none of these focus on principalship in secondary schools or include a business as well as an education focus. While other New Zealand educational leadership programmes focus on the principal’s role of leading learning (Moorosi and Bush, 2011; Piggot-Irvine and Youngs, 2011), New Zealand secondary school principals are in addition often leading a school similar to a sizable corporation. As Morris (2014, p. 1) explains:

Many principals run multimillion dollar businesses, deal with a highly educated workforce and strong and assertive unions, and are accountable for the quality of teaching and learning – an ongoing tension between the breadth of the principal’s role and its desirable focus on pedagogical leadership that is not easily overcome.

Having been exposed to the theory of leadership and management as part of their coursework, the purpose of the shadowing/mentoring component is for the MSSSL students to observe experienced principals applying theory to practice and to engage in mentoring conversations which support reflection and discussion.

Shadowing and mentoring for professional development

As stated earlier, the MSSSL initiative involved both shadowing and mentoring. In this section shadowing and mentoring are discussed separately. This discussion is followed by an explanation of the way in which they were combined for the MSSSL programme.

Shadowing

Shadowing is defined as a peer-related professional development activity in which an aspirant principal is placed with a host practising principal for a period of time

(O'Mahony and Matthews, 2003). Shadowing is an on-the-job learning, career development and leadership development intervention. It involves the learner staying close and unobtrusive (like a shadow), over a period of time to find out about the job. It also provides an opportunity for the observer to reflect and when appropriate ask questions that explore what has been observed, and can also clarify for the observer the nature of the job and the skills and knowledge needed to do it (O'Mahony and Matthews, 2003). As such, shadowing can generate powerful learning (West-Burnham and O'Sullivan, 1998).

Shadowing provides a vehicle for cognitive apprenticeship described by Dennen and Burner (2007, p. 426) as "a process by which learners learn from an experienced person by way of cognitive and metacognitive skills and processes". These authors suggest that is how learning actually happens and that learners can transfer the strategies observed into their own contexts. Through cognitive apprenticeship, tacit processes are made visible to the learners. In this model, the experienced leader models and demonstrates the thinking processes, coaches or mentors the learner, the learner reflects and assesses, articulates his/her reflection and explores the outcome (Dennen and Burner, 2007).

While work-shadowing is an accepted practice in business environments, increasingly used as part of the hiring, internship and on-boarding processes (Heinze, 2011), it has received relatively little attention in educational literature (Ferguson, 2016). There are, however, studies which have found it to be an effective component of leadership preparation programmes. In Hogan's (2015) exploration of principal preparation in Victoria, Australia, participants found shadowing to be the most effective approach to prepare them for the role. Mentoring was the next most valued strategy. Simkins *et al.* (2009), in their discussion of a pilot programme in which prospective principals shadowed an experienced principal, found "an important outcome of the process was the opportunity that provides for shadowers to 'think themselves' into the headship role" (p. 248). Shadowing provides an opportunity to gain a first-hand picture about how principals go about their work. "Coupled with reflective interviewing, it helps to demonstrate new practices, reduce social isolation, allows participants to see a variety of leadership roles" (O'Mahony and Matthews, 2003, p. 55). It also leads to professional development, improved communication skills and problem-solving ability (Barnett *et al.*, 2009; Hudson, 2013).

Mentoring

Mentoring has been described as a relationship that involves supporting, motivating, shaping, guiding and encouraging; and that helps a mentee reach his or her potential (Varney, 2012). Mentoring is considered an effective leadership development strategy (Burley and Pomphrey, 2011; Rhodes and Fletcher, 2013; Solansky, 2010; Thornton, 2015). Previous research has specifically signalled its importance in preparing new principals, in response to a concern regarding the shrinking pool of aspiring principals. Malone (2002) recommended the employment of onsite interpersonal mentoring, maintaining that "never before has the need for effective mentoring processes for principals been more urgent" (p. 1).

While traditionally mentoring has referred to a more experienced person passing on their skills and knowledge to a less experienced person (Craft, 2000), the mentoring approach in the MSSL programme was more collaborative and less hierarchical. It involved a reciprocal relationship characterised by "learning conversations that stress the importance of all parties and participants being acknowledged, sustained,

and voiced” (Orland-Barak, 2010, p. 18). This collaborative approach is underpinned by a sociocultural/constructivist theory of learning, suggesting that: learners come with a range of prior knowledge and experiences that influence how they respond to new information; that new knowledge is socially constructed; that learning is an active, intellectual process of constructing knowledge gradually over a period of time, not the passive assimilation of knowledge (Bereiter, 2002; Dewey, 1929; Vygotsky, 1978).

Shadowing combined with mentoring has the potential to support the development of professional socialisation for aspiring principals (Matthews and Crow, 2003). Socialisation is defined as “the process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organisational role” (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979, p. 211). Through their exposure to the role of principal as deputies, the mentees in a leadership programme could be expected to have developed (to varying degrees of accuracy) the work-related values and interests referred to as professional anticipatory socialisation (Kramer, 2010). While the mentoring/shadowing experience cannot fully socialise aspiring principals into their as yet unknown new position, it can support their readiness for it by providing an understanding of the theory and practice of the role (Bengtson, 2014). It is therefore expected that a mentoring and shadowing experience will be an effective way to support the development of effective leaders and also be a part of socialisation to leadership roles (Daresh, 2014). In the following sections, the MSSL programme is explained, and this is followed by the methodology employed for the research, the findings and finally the implications rising from the study.

The MSSL programme. The MSSL programme used a combined shadowing and mentoring approach. Recognising experienced principals as a valuable resource, the MSSL Advisory Board provided the names of acknowledged effective principals who could be approached to host students in the programme. The following criteria were used to identify the principals: being an effective school principal (respected by their peers, innovative in their leadership, etc.); being in a mentoring relationship with at least one staff member in his/her school; and willingness to mentor and to be shadowed by an aspiring leader. This approach is supported by literature which highlights the importance of effective principal practice (Daresh and Playko, 1991; Gordon, 2004), and a high level of mentoring skills in the selection of the mentor principals (Crow and Matthews, 1998; Painter, 2001). Over the first two years of the programme, 45 principals took part, expressing their willingness to contribute to the development of new leaders.

The shadowing and mentoring placements represent a significant commitment by the students and their schools. Therefore, applicants for the programme were required to gain written consent from their principals to be absent from their current role for four weeks over the two years of their study. In each case, principals expressed their willingness to release the applicants on full pay.

Students were asked to indicate their preference of shadowing placements: the type of school (single sex, decile level[2], state or integrated) and the geographical location. Using that information, students were matched with principals. Both the host principals and the students were given information to guide the placement and suggested strategies for each placement (see suggested strategies for an example). For students, the focus of the experience was to apply the theory from their university programme to the observed practices. For example, if the current course they were studying was based on strategic planning they were encouraged to explore this in their host school.

Example of information given to the aspiring principals before a placement. The focus areas for this placement are strategic planning and management systems. Consider beforehand what you wish to find out and share with the principal at the beginning of the placement.

Suggested strategies:

- Clarify with the principal when it suits him or her for you to shadow.
- Arrange a time to spend with the person responsible for finances.
- Look at the leadership and decision making in action ... how does this principal work?
- Record meaningful events without inferences or judgements.
- Look for coherence in aspects of the work.
- Take note of the process as well as the task.
- Note the informal roles and interactions.
- Look for situations that surprise you or challenge your thinking. The most valuable parts of the learning experience are ones where you are in unfamiliar territory.
- You will learn most by observing, listening, recording and then reflecting with your host at a later time.
- Relate what you have seen to the relevant frameworks, such as the MSSL programme objectives and outcomes.
- Arrange to debrief daily at a time that suits the principal.

Principals were also made aware of the students' focus for the shadowing by being sent a copy of the information provided to aspiring principals. In addition, it was made clear to both parties that the shadowing occasions were at the discretion of the principal, acknowledging that some aspects of a principal's work are confidential.

The pattern of the placement was a daily shadowing of the principal followed by a meeting to reflect on the observations of the day. Combined, the shadowing and the meeting fulfilled the mentoring functions proposed by Portner (1988) of relating or building relationships based on mutual trust, respect, and professionalism and guiding, encouraging independence by guiding mentees through a process of reflecting on decisions and actions for themselves and encouraging them to construct their own informed teaching and learning approaches.

Shadowing placements were for one week. Over the course of the programme, students had the experience of shadowing four different principals in different school contexts. This was important in New Zealand where the context is more varied than most OECD countries; 50 per cent of New Zealand schools are in rural or provincial areas with a diverse population and while some urban secondary schools have 2,000 pupils, others may have between 400 and 800 (Morris, 2014).

The shadowing/mentoring approach in the MSSL programme has the key characteristics of experiential learning, that learning is a continuous process grounded in experience; and ideas are formed and reformed through experience (Kolb, 1984). The several opportunities for shadowing and mentoring provide a means to continually develop and adjust ideas. It also allows students to develop the four different

kinds of abilities (Kolb, 1984) considered necessary for effective learners: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and eventually active experimentation.

Research study

This research was undertaken to assess the impact of the shadowing/mentoring intervention of this post-graduate programme designed to prepare deputy and assistant principals for principalship. The research was a qualitative evaluation study which (Patton, 2002, p. 10) maintains “can include any effort to judge human effectiveness through systematic data based inquiry”. It was important to design a study that provided an opportunity to fully explore the research questions (Brooks and Normore, 2015). Therefore, interviews were chosen as an appropriate method to obtain the aspiring principals’ “detailed insights” into the intervention (Gill *et al.*, 2008, p. 292).

The three research questions guiding this study were:

- RQ1.* What are the benefits of the mentoring/shadowing component of the MSSL programme for aspiring principals?
- RQ2.* What means and strategies help aspiring principals to learn from the experience?
- RQ3.* What are the suggestions of aspiring principals for the improvement of this component in the MSSL programme?

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Victoria University of Wellington, Human Ethics Committee.

Sampling and participants

All 27 students enrolled in the programme were sent invitations to participate in the study. Although most of the students agreed to participate in the interviews or focus group interview, only 13 were able to take part because of geographical constraints. Interviews were carried out face-to-face in four different locations around New Zealand. In consideration of the power dynamics that may occur between the interviewer and the interviewee (Brooks and Normore, 2015), all of the interviews, except for one face-to-face interview because of time and location constraints, were carried out by the third researcher who was not involved in the programme. The 13 respondents comprised eight females and five males. Eight were deputy principals, three were assistant principals, one was head of department, and one was teacher in charge. The age range of participants was between 30 and 59.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews. A focus group interview was also carried out with six aspiring principals in July 2015. The participants were given detailed information about the interview and focus group protocol beforehand. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using content analysis on NVivo 11, which is proposed by Patton (2002) as a suitable method to help understand complex social phenomena in qualitative evaluation research. Both inductive and deductive reasoning were employed in order to

condense data into categories and themes and to determine the relationships between themes (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). To ensure confirmability of the study, two of the researchers coded the data separately. Through a process of recoding, the different codings produced established a strong level of intercoder reliability. In order to ensure confidentiality, a pseudonym was given to each participant, and the information related to the schools at which they worked and were involved in shadowing was kept confidential.

Findings

During the interviews, the aspiring principals were asked about the benefits of the experience, how they learned, and what strategies they and the mentor principals employed to enhance their development. Finally, they were asked what suggestions they had to improve the shadowing/mentoring component of the programme. The findings are reported under three main research questions.

The benefits of the experience

Several of the aspiring principals explained that they were attracted to the MSSL programme because it had a shadowing component that was not offered in other programmes. That component motivated them to enrol in the programme. As Adam explained:

Having an opportunity to visit a low, mid and high decile school was fantastic. The only reason I joined the course was it had this component in it, an opportunity to shadow a principal.

The attraction of the shadowing/mentoring aspect of the programme suggests that they recognised the limitations of a theory only course and “learning on the job”. As senior leaders they worked with their own principals on a daily basis. However, their focus on their own roles dominated their time and prevented a close observation of the principal’s role:

[...] when you’re a deputy principal you have your job to fulfil, and maybe that’s looking after exams or reporting, or pastoral care so you spend your day completing your day to day tasks, and when you go to shadow a principal you discuss the decisions that the principal is making for several days, and you become exposed to a lot more issues that the principal is dealing with (Robert).

Aspiring principals emphasised the benefits of the experience under themes: principals’ roles, linking theory to action, context and culture and networking.

Principals’ roles

All the participants reported that they had the chance to observe a wide range of principals’ roles and skills during their placements. They were exposed to the intensity of the principal’s work, gained a basic understanding of the everyday school operation, and of the part the principal played in the daily events of the school. Through observation and questioning, they learned how the principal was able to manage his or her role, and which specific skills were required. Not only were they able to shadow them in their daily work, they were also invited to be present in a range of meetings. Those occasions were particularly valuable, providing an opportunity to observe the techniques employed by principals to facilitate often delicate situations. The following participant statements describe the experience:

I sat in meetings with them and, you know they were dealing with everything from, they were interviewing staff, I sat in on staff interviews and appointments, I sat in on regular staff meetings and finance meetings when they were dealing with their e-mail [...] (Robert).

Visiting classrooms, talking to students, visiting staff, head of department meetings. Saw relationships, staffing issues, student issues, conflicts. It was fantastic. I guess what you get to see is how this one person keeps abreast of everything happening within the school in his own way (Terry).

In spite of working in their own schools as members of a senior management team working closely with their school principals, the mentoring/shadowing experience was reported by the aspiring principals as an “eye opener” that gave them the opportunity to maintain a focus on the principal, his/her roles and a day in the principal’s life as a whole.

The principal roles observed and reported by the participants included:

- working with a principal to prepare for a meeting about a difficult issue with a staff member: the principal and the aspiring principal scripted the meeting together;
- facing a crisis: when there was an unexpected death in the school the aspiring principal was alerted to the need for policy to guide communication channels;
- meeting with parents for a disciplinary issue;
- observing teaching;
- establishing relationships with a range of stakeholders: board members, senior management, teachers, parents and students;
- facilitating a range of meetings: staff interviews and appointments, regular staff meetings and finance meetings;
- dealing with e-mail;
- coordinating property development;
- preparing for school reviews by the Education Review Office (ERO)[3];
- preparing for board meetings; and
- overseeing financial reporting.

These examples encompass both leadership and management roles specific to a principal beyond their current senior leadership work. Importantly, the aspiring principals were able to observe their mentors’ negotiating relationships with a range of adults, a key to effective principalship.

Linking theory to action

The debriefing meeting at the end of each day provided an opportunity to discuss and review observations, and to reflect on the principal’s actions. The host principals invited questions and also challenged the shadowees to make sense of their observations. This opportunity for reflection through debriefing was considered invaluable by shadowees. In particular, they appreciated the willingness of their mentors to explain how their actions linked to their educational philosophy, their values and their theories of leadership. The explanation for the principals’ actions also allowed the aspiring principals to understand that many seemingly minor actions were actually strategic. It clarified the intangibles. For example, Jessica observed one principal wearing a jacket only sometimes. He explained his reasoning for this action:

I am going to meet with a staff member and because of the nature of the meeting I’m putting my jacket on – formalising that meeting (Jessica).

Terry observed how one principal deliberately developed relational trust with students through extra-curricular encounters:

He was talking to students, finding how things are for their wellbeing, seeing whether they are happy or not. Talking about a game of rugby or game of football. That makes the person who is leading the school almost like a focal point in the school that people can go to very comfortably (Terry).

These observations are examples of the learning of metacognitive skills that cannot be learned in academic study but which were available to the aspiring principals within the school context.

Culture and context

Understanding the impact of culture and context is an important part of a leadership development programme. The experience of shadowing principals in a range of schools alerted the aspiring principals to the educational and sociocultural contexts that shaped the character of their mentors' work and influenced the skills they developed. As Joshua remarked:

One of them had a number of challenges compared to other principals I shadowed. They had a lower achievement of pupils. Some of their strategies for raising achievement were a little different.

However, despite the variety of styles he found similar themes emerged:

In all the schools I felt positivity, energy to do the best for students they can. It was clear in all cases that principals were very certain in what they wanted out of their school, wanted from their staff, their vision was very clear and they articulated that very well to staff [...] trying to improve their practice, trying to do things differently (Joshua).

Participants explained that the shadowing/mentoring experience reconstructed their understanding of principalship. Having observed a range of leadership styles and approaches they now believed they could aspire to principalship without compromising their true selves. One declared this as "the most striking thing". It helped her decide about her future career. Based on her perception of her current principal's style and her own school contexts, she had been hesitant about becoming a principal. During placements, she realised that there were other approaches to leadership that she could adopt. The insight built her confidence about applying for the principalship of another school. Another, Anneka explained:

Principals' jobs can be structured differently. And you need to construct that job in a conscious way [...]. That is very affirming because I do not think I am like my current principal. But it does not mean that I cannot be a principal. Realizing that a principal's job can be constructed differently in a conscious way (Anneka).

This study sought to understand how the shadowing/mentoring component differentiated from other modes of learning and contributed to leadership development. The participants describe learning that could not be effectively understood by academic study alone. Terry summed up the value of this: "You listen to theory, learn it, but in practice it is very different". In addition, by observing leadership approaches that varied but were effective, the participants felt empowered to seek principalship feeling confident they could be their authentic selves.

Networking

The participants appreciated making connections with a range of principals who could support their further development and help them in their careers. The shadowing/mentoring experience allowed them to establish a relationship that could potentially introduce them to principals' networks:

You learn how they share professionally. They will look at us to see if we would fit. I can talk to other colleagues and say this principal mentored me – principals give birth to other principals (Jessica).

I know I can get back to that person and ask any questions if I want to or if I was applying for a job I can get their views/feedback about my CV, the job I am applying to, what they think the school would be like (Maria).

Participants learned about the mentor principals' sources of consultancy and guidance. Each principal spoke of other principals they could turn to for advice and support. In some cases, these relationships were informal. For example, they could approach a former colleague or someone they saw as a mentor. More formal arrangements included principals associations and professional learning groups. In Clive's case it seems that his mentor had already introduced him to a network of principals:

We had a debrief and he said oh well look I got just the person for you and then he invited me to one of the experienced principal professional development meetings (Clive).

The shadowing/mentoring experience was therefore considered to be a tool to expand their leadership network and to build relationships that could support their career goals.

How they learned

The participants believed that the learning process of observing and self-reflection followed by guided reflection helped them give meaning to what they observed, shape their philosophy of education and understand the reality of the principal's role. As discussed earlier, the aspiring principals valued the reflective conversations that took place at the end of each day's shadowing. They could take note of what they saw during observations; however, they maintained that it was the reflection in the debriefing meetings that promoted deeper learning. During the meetings, they could ask the mentors to explain the thinking behind their actions. Understanding the "why" enabled them to link theory to the action. While some actions may have appeared spontaneous, participants were made aware that there were processes principals followed. In turn, the questions asked of them challenged their thinking and forced them to consider their own beliefs and theories:

He challenged me thinking on why I do the way I do. And how it relates to better learning of your kids. Not making you feel inadequate (Adam).

One asked me what I thought about some specific acts he did. Why I thought he did this – that made me think about the theory behind the action (Simone).

Having to consider educational philosophy and beliefs in the reflection meetings demanded deep thinking. As Clive explained: "Being effectively mentored is hard work with good listening and questions. It made me more realistic". It shifted their understanding from an academic exercise to one based in reality.

While shadowing, the aspiring leaders took notes and reflected on what they had learned. This was followed by deeper reflection stimulated by their mentors'

explanations and questioning. Engaging in reflective conversations seemed to be a powerful tool to enable aspiring principals to maximise their learning from their mentoring/shadowing experience.

Suggestions to strengthen the mentoring/shadowing component

An effective mentoring relationship is based on trust. One participant did not feel she had formed mentoring relationships with every principal she shadowed. In one shadowing experience she found it challenging to relate to a principal she had never met before:

The first person I shadowed we did not have a mentoring relationship. I never had met him before. The second person I shadowed was someone I already knew and I can describe that person as a mentor and we still keep in touch (Maria).

Her relatively short experience in a senior leadership role may have affected her confidence. Other participants, for example, considered that having been deputy principals for an extended time was an advantage. They believed that they were confident relating to principals and were able to build on their prior knowledge. Joshua commented:

My background set me up to participate positively in the course. I think what we gained from the experience could well be different from less experienced managers. I am relatively close to the hierarchy at the top, having conversations with principals all the time. For a more junior member of the staff, talking to the leadership team, senior management team would be something completely new (Joshua).

These comments are a reminder that the learning is a complex subjective process influenced by prior knowledge and experience (West-Burnham, 2003). It is also a reminder that the mentor relationship can be hindered by real or perceived power dynamics (Hanson, 2010). Maria's degree of discomfit with her designated principal prevented a mentoring relationship from developing. As such it may have limited her learning (Beech and Brockbank, 1999). Maria was new in a senior management role and therefore could have felt intimidated by a principal she did not know. A more confident mentee such as Joshua was less likely to feel a power differential (Beech and Brockbank, 1999). Ideally, there should be careful matching of mentors and mentees (Daresh, 2014). This appears to have occurred in Clive's case where the quality of the relationship may have been enhanced by a match of gender, age and a shared sporting interest. The subsequent invitation to join a principal professional learning group introduced Clive to an influential network which could be advantageous for his career. While other matching may not always be possible in this programme there is clearly a need to try to do so and to provide appropriate support for individuals.

Other suggestions to strengthen the shadowing mentoring component of the MSSL programme proposed by the students were structural. The following issues were raised by the participants:

- provide a timetable arranged before the visit to ensure key people are available;
- provide more detailed protocols for mentor principals and for aspiring principals – ensure both parties are clear about expectations;
- encourage aspiring principals to ask their mentors about life/work balance, what nurtures them as an individual, well-being and how they deal with criticism; and

- include an examination of the senior management team portfolios and enquire how these are compiled.

These suggestions have been incorporated into the current programme to inform future shadowing/mentoring experiences.

Discussion

This paper has described the shadowing/mentoring component of a leadership development programme for aspiring principals and explored how and what the participants learned from it. All found it to be a valuable learning experience. Academic study alone could not prepare them for the reality of a principal's role. The shadowing/mentoring component of the MSSL programme appeared to provide the ideal learning environment by providing "a bridge between the academic learning and the work situation" (Bush, 2010, p. 128). By observation and reflective conversations, the aspiring principals were able to relate their previous experience and their knowledge gained from the university courses to their experience in the schools. As Terry expressed it: "You listen to theory, learn it, but in practice it is very different".

The process described by the participants of observation, self and mentor reflection aligns with Kolb's (1984, p. 21) assertion that learning is facilitated best by:

An integrated process that begins with here-and-now experience followed by collection of data and observations about that experience. The data are then analysed and the conclusions of this analysis are fed back to the actors in the experience for their use in the modification of their behaviour and choice of new experiences.

Knowledge without experience is shallow (West-Burnham, 2003). Thanks to the generosity, honesty and the reflexivity practices of the mentor principals, the participants in this study were able to experience profound learning.

As described in the findings, the aspiring principals were able to observe and learn about many principal functions and practices beyond what is able to be taught in academic study. Examples of those reported included staffing issues, dealing with a crisis, student disciplinary issues and preparing for a board of trustees meeting. The academic study provided theory, whereas the experience in the schools in relationships with experienced principals provided credibility and relevance. Aspiring principals described how principals explained why they were acting in certain ways. Through this "reflection in action" (Schön, 1983), principals shared the thinking that underpinned their tacit knowledge and critical judgement. Their willingness to do so provided a seamless link between theory and practice (Kool-Lyon, 2010). During debrief sessions at the end of the day, the mentor principals also challenged the aspiring principals' thinking with challenging questions reflecting on their actions. These questions prompted critical reflection – a powerful basis for profound learning (West-Burnham, 2003). Each aspiring principal/principal relationship was unique, defining what Samier (2000) maintained is the task of a mentor: to fulfil a need unmet by any other relationship.

While those who were second-in-command in schools could be expected to be in an ideal position to learn the role of the principal, the participants in this study stated that their focus on their own roles prevented this from happening. Even if they were guided in their leadership development by their current principal, this provided exposure to just one model of principalship. Their professional anticipatory socialisation was therefore shaped by that experience (Kramer, 2010). The different schools visited in the

MSSL programme allowed the students to observe a range of styles. The time in the schools supported their mental transition from their current role to that of a principal (Browne-Ferrigno and Muth, 2004). As participants explained, through exposure to different approaches to leadership, they felt they had permission to maintain their authentic selves as principals. Through the experience they examined and further developed the personal and professional values they would bring to the role (Daresh, 2014)

The range of schools also alerted the aspiring principals to the complexity of different contexts. They made the most of the opportunity to choose schools in different cities, schools much larger than their own, coeducational/Catholic/single sex, or those with a principal of a different gender. This had the advantage of exposing the aspiring principals to the contextual nature of leadership. Relationships are complex and there are many variables that can affect how a principal can influence his or her staff (Slowley, 2013; Southworth, 2005; Walker and Riordan, 2010). While the aspiring leaders are unlikely to know the culture of the school they will eventually lead, the experience alerted them to situational leadership (Marzano, 2005) and further developed their professional socialisation. The breadth of experience also allowed them to consider the type of environment in which they would prefer to seek principalship. Having the opportunity of shadowing a number of principals gave the aspiring leaders the chance to discover patterns of effective principalship within given settings. While there was a variety of approaches, there were also commonalities such as maintaining a focus on the vision and developing relational trust (Robinson *et al.*, 2009). The participants could see that these components were key to effective principalship in any context. Their learning was a continuous process grounded in a range of experiences through which their ideas could be formed and reformed (Kolb, 1984).

Effective mentoring involves a trusting relationship built on mutual respect (Portner, 1988). In the shadowing/mentoring relationships described in this study, while the quality of the relationships varied, there was mutual respect and trust evidenced by the principal inviting the aspiring principals to most meetings and disclosing the challenges they faced. Maria, who did not feel sufficiently at ease to consider one principal a mentor, was still able to participate fully in the shadowing aspect. For their part, all participants kept notes of their learning from each of the principals without revealing their identity and maintained confidentiality about issues in the school. These are the characteristics of an effective mentoring relationship: the mentor trusted that the aspiring principals held high standards, warranting the special opportunities provided, and could be trusted with personal and organisational disclosures. The aspiring principals had faith in their mentors' competence and trusted their reflections and evaluation (Samier, 2000). Throughout the process, both parties demonstrated key determinants of relational trust: interpersonal respect, personal regard for others and personal integrity (Robinson *et al.*, 2009).

Limitations and implications for further research

This was a small-scale study with potential participants restricted to 13 out of 27 students enrolled in the MSSL programme. The study is also limited by the sole data source being participant interviews (Brooks and Normore, 2015). The participants did, however, have four shadowing/mentoring experiences to draw on for the interviews. The host principals were also interviewed about the benefits of participating in this partnership and this is the focus of another publication.

Despite the limitations, the study contributes to our understanding of the impact of a shadowing/mentoring component in a principal preparation programme. Future research could involve following up these aspiring principals to investigate the changes in their careers. The findings could provide insights both for aspiring principals planning their careers and for those involved in principal development programmes.

The purpose of the MSSL programme is to prepare aspiring principals to become effective principals. The first participants in this study will graduate in mid-2016. There are indications that they feel competent and confident to apply for principalship: three have already been successful in winning principal positions and two others are currently involved in an application process. Their responses to the combination of academic study and shadowing/mentoring components suggest that this was an intervention that fulfilled their need to see a range of other leadership approaches in action and learn from experienced mentors. All participants stated that they had a more realistic understanding of a principal's role. Through this experience their professional anticipatory socialisation has continued to develop. Knowing about the challenges and the level of skill required encouraged them to feel more prepared to embark upon principalship.

The key role of the debriefing and reflection meeting was evident in this study. During the meetings the principals revealed the reasons for their actions, which may not have been apparent through simply shadowing. Through the reflection process aspiring principals were able to link theory to action. It was this aspect that led to profound learning for the aspiring principals. Therefore, to maximise the learning for the shadowees, debriefing and reflection needs to be included in any shadowing/mentoring intervention.

Other recommendations for the intervention include the need to fully prepare the aspiring and host principals for their respective roles. Every attempt should also be made to match mentors and mentees to maximise the development of a fully trusting relationship. Finally, while the aspiring principals in this study had the support of their schools which allowed them to be absent with no personal financial cost, this may not always be possible. This suggests that organisers of similar programmes may need to consider seeking funding from a source such as a ministry of education.

This study has provided insights into how aspiring principals learn through shadowing experienced principals as part of a post-graduate leadership programme, particularly through gaining a greater understanding of the complexity of a principal's role. It suggests that the inclusion of a similar intervention could enhance other principal preparation programmes in New Zealand and internationally. Given the worldwide call to address the urgent need to develop principal candidates with the necessary qualities and capabilities, a programme with a mentoring/shadowing component provides a promising way of offering systematic and deliberate leadership development.

Notes

1. Where the Ministry of Education perceives that there is a risk to the operation of an individual school, or to the welfare or educational performance of its students, it may apply a statutory management intervention.
2. Deciles are a way in which the New Zealand Ministry of Education allocates funding to schools. A school's decile rating reflects the socioeconomic background of the school's local community. There are ten deciles and around 10 per cent of schools are in each decile. Decile 1

schools have the highest proportion of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, whereas decile 10 schools have the highest proportion of students from high socioeconomic backgrounds. The lower a school's decile rating, the more funding it gets (Ministry of Education, 2011).

3. ERO is a government agency that reviews schools and early childhood education services, and publishes national reports on current education practice.

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