

Bedard, G. J. & Mombourquette, C. A. (2016). *Enacting Alberta School Leaders' Professional Practice Competencies: A Toolkit*. Victoria, British Columbia: Friesen Press. Pages: 316. ISBN: 978-1-4602-7671-6

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Enacting Alberta School Leaders' Professional Practice Competencies offers an interesting and enticing perspective into the experiences of school principals who are attempting to improve and understand their leadership practices. The book presents findings of a multi-case study of ten Alberta school principals' "lived experiences" in implementing a seven-dimension set of leadership competencies. Based on their contention that the practices of school leaders comprise the second highest impact on student learning (teaching practices being the first) and that effective leadership behaviors can be defined, observed, and quantified, the University of Lethbridge professors have authored an extensive narrative of interviews that constitute a compendium of stories and experiences.

Bedard and Mombourquette write at a time when Alberta's educators are anticipating a fully legislated Ministerial Order that will mandate implementation of a Framework similar to that described in the book. Across North America, comparable models have been considered and reexamined, mostly notably the recently-revised ten competency Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). This, however, is Alberta's first foray into identifying and directing distinct behavioral criteria for school principals; accordingly, the book offers a glimpse into the seven-year voluntary implementation phase (2009-2016) of the Principal Quality Practice Guidelines (Alberta Education, 2009), along with a commentary of the ways in which select school principals enacted the standards in a variety of educational contexts. It also provides a glimpse into possibilities for action over the next 24 months, when the province's school leaders will be held accountable for demonstrating those competencies contained in a revised 5-dimension set of standards.

As professors of leadership in Alberta and as consulting contributors to the 2009 Alberta school leader standards document, Bedard and Mombourquette are well positioned to offer insights into educational leadership. Accordingly, they have embarked upon an ambitious task of translating a regional initiative and its associated nuances into a set of observations and findings that might inform other ministries or school authorities attempting large-scale school leadership reform.

The book begins with a comprehensive description of each of seven dimensions that comprise the Alberta Principal Quality Practice Guideline (Alberta Education, 2009), including fostering effective relationships, embodying visionary leadership, leading a learning community, providing instructional leadership, developing and facilitating leadership, managing school operations and resources, and understanding and responding to the larger societal context. Accompanying each dimension is an expansive set of relevant literature sources that is helpful in providing a sense of scope for Bedard and Mombourquette's assumptions about school leadership, namely that principal preparation can be more effectively supported through purposeful and sustained mentorship programming and that "good" leadership can be distilled into seven broad categories. The reference section is broad and inclusive, citing leadership concepts proposed over several decades by Dewey (1959), through prolific authors in North

American educational leadership, to recent important contributions by international scholars. Leadership constructs are thoroughly and clearly described; one exception might be the notions of *distributed leadership* or *transformational leadership*, which could have benefitted from a deeper historical or seminal examination. Included in this early section, chapter two identifies the study's ethnographic methodology, with some acknowledgment of issues associated with sampling. In addition, this chapter offers a succinct and helpful description of the study's participant profiles.

The bulk of the book, chapters four through thirteen, contains 181 pages of distilled interview transcripts with those ten principals representing a wide range of school configurations that were selected for participation in the study. It is throughout this section that the question and answer narrative style becomes more demanding. Throughout the interview transcription chapters, the authors use bold-type questions and references to specific leadership competencies, and each narrative contains very detailed explanations of situations that are often highly contextual and that require numerous footnotes and glossary references to decipher abbreviations unique to the jurisdictional or provincial context. Though the tone of these chapters is conversational, some may argue that further edits may have compressed this section of the book to a more manageable length. Doing so, however, might result in the loss of the rich description of leaders' realities that is congruent with the ethnographic approach chosen by Bedard and Mombourquette. Each participant speaks in an authentic way about real-life school situations and, accordingly, practitioners may "hear themselves" in many of the comments and conundrums presented by participating principals.

The gem of the book's midsection can be found in chapter fourteen, in which Bedard and Mombourquette analyze findings that resulted from interviews with principals. It is in this "Making Sense" chapter that the theory and practice of competency-based school leadership is presented in an integrated and meaningful way to offer many valuable suggestions for theoreticians, as well as for jurisdictional, system, and government leaders wishing to garner an understanding of the ways in which Alberta principals are attempting to enact the seven-dimension framework. This chapter extracts further exemplary and illustrative quotations that offer a valuable synthesis of the interview transcripts. Throughout this and the concluding chapter, Bedard and Mombourquette identify many pragmatic suggestions, gleaned from study participants, about the "how" and "how to" of enacting Alberta's Professional Practice Competencies. It is also in this final chapter that the literature supporting leadership mentoring is revisited and emphasized as a primary strategy to promote school leader effectiveness.

While somewhat idiosyncratic, the book's writing style is generally accessible and conversational, and is of an appropriate tone in capturing participating principals' voices about the challenges and rewards of school leadership. Readers not familiar with the regional educational context unique to Alberta may find that the acronyms and explanatory footnotes disrupt the flow of writing; however, such references are necessary and defensible in situating the study and its subsequent recommendations.

Bedard and Mombourquette's *Enacting Alberta School Leaders' Professional Practice Competencies* holds value to those interested in comparing or contrasting a regional competency-based leadership program with others across North America and internationally. As a result, segments of the book can effectively contribute to a larger conversation about the specific criteria and behaviors that constitute educational leadership. The book also has potential value to graduate students of leadership or other leadership practitioners who are seeking a well-sourced literature resource that also offers a reasoned synthesis of perspectives from school principals. The scope of ten chapters of the book may distract from its overall effectiveness as a "Toolkit" as branded in the subtitle, and perhaps limits the book's potential to offer scalable

and extrapolatable implementation practices. The reader, however, is justifiably left to interpret how the generative themes from this investigation may be relevant and applicable. In this sense, the book provides an excellent and important reminder that school principals interpret and live out a competency-based framework (as well as other aspects of their leadership responsibilities) in unique ways that can be demonstrated and analyzed; indeed, the enactment of effective educational leadership—while prescriptive in some ways—is often as distinct as the permutations of myriad variables in which it exists.

References

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