
Book Review

Griffiths, D., & Lowrey, S. (Eds.). (2017). *The Principal Reader: Narratives of Experience*. Burlington, ON: Word & Deed Publishing

Reviewed by: Donald Scott

Principals are still at the forefront of educational reform (Dudar, Scott, & Scott, 2017). Whenever there are concerns or problems in society, there is a call for this issue to be addressed by teachers in schools or for it to be encompassed into an already overstuffed curriculum. Principals are always the ones charged with making it happen. If the school falls behind in national testing regimes, the principal must remedy the situation. If a teacher is not meeting instructional expectations, principals have to mediate and resolve the situation. We know principals are expected to hold many roles and carry out a multitude of responsibilities. Principals are expected to be administrators, instructional leaders, transformational change agents, entrepreneurs, negotiators, mediators, counsellors, marketers, accountants, fundraisers, liaisons, professional developers, to name a few of the many and complex dimensions of the principalship (Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Mulford, 2008; Sergiovanni & Green, 2014; Webber, Scott, Aitken, Lupart, & Scott, 2013). Thus, assuming the principalship can be a daunting and demanding role, not for the faint-hearted there is a clear need for guidance and mentorship for those brave souls who are reaching out for this immense responsibility.

In many cases, principals frequently feel the burdens of leadership and look for solutions and advice in order to resolve the problems they encounter on a day-to-day basis. Many publications point to the advantage of having mentors to provide experientially tested guidance in such situations. Even though mentorship can be invaluable they can also have drawbacks. If there are personality conflicts mentoring relationships can become dark; occasionally there may be issues of conflicting interests when collegial mentors are drawn from within the same district (Bloom, Castagna, & Warren, 2003; Scott, 2010; Weingartner, 2008), hence, too close to the situation to offer sage advice. *The principal reader: Narratives of experience* can serve as an “external to the situation” mentor.

Edited by Darrin Griffiths and Scott Lowrey, this book represents their compilation of brief narratives from leaders and scholars which tell the stories of principals’ lives and work. This book offers insights from 57 scholars and principal practitioner-scholars in Canada and the United States and explores a range of leadership issues and expectations, and describes the authors’ experiences, ideas, approaches, and strategies in leading their school community. They advance real-life examples and solutions to contemporary problems. For example, Lori Pritchard discussed the transformational work that was occurring in schools encompassing the need for “truth and reconciliation” with Canada’s First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) peoples. She described how principals can establish, nurture, and strengthen positive community relationships with the school as the centre of this movement to ensure constructive and optimally educative environments for our FNMI students, and indeed all students (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012). She offered her insights, experiences, and strategies which can serve as useful lessons learned for other principals.

The authors of this edited text span many different contexts. For example, although most are leaders or scholars in the US and Canada there are also other national contexts represented, such as, Christopher Allen who relates his Vietnamese leadership experiences even though he is now situated in the Congo. Additionally, there is representation from professors, principal practitioners, and superintendents. The full demographic variation in school context is also represented, for example, there are narratives based within elementary (primary), secondary, and senior high schools, as well as, small, large, rural, and urban schools, which enables readers to identify with many of the situations, ideologies, and organizational cultures. The rich experiential and strong theoretical backgrounds of the authors with roughly half of them situated as current principals and the complement as professors, doctoral candidates, or master's graduates. The quality of the authors is also highlighted with many having achieved various honours and awards for excellence in teaching and/or leadership. Hence, the accounts resonate with authenticity, academic rigour, and with many providing amusing, awesome, and relatable lived experiences.

There is a balance of theory and practice to make the book applicable to almost any situation within the principalship. It offers novice and experienced principals and leader-aspirants stories that can be used in many situations principals may find themselves. Even though many of the problems described in these narratives may be common or increasingly prevalent, the solutions and advice these authors offer are frequently novel, interesting, and constructive. They acknowledge the realities and complexities of the principalship, and rather than downplaying these, they share the strategies that worked for them, not with the view that there is a one-size-fits-all approach, but with the perspective of initiating ideas and vicariously brainstorming other ways of knowing and doing. In effect, this text provides a "pocket mentoring orientation" to novice and aspiring leaders and those facing new challenges.

The evidence that serves as the basis of these narratives varies from leaders' personal lived experience to the graduate research of scholar-practitioners, to professors' research studies within the field. The pragmatic nature of these stories will resonate with leaders and scholars alike and will provide useful knowledge to the leadership discipline; yet it is not designed to address every issue principals might face nor it is focused on expounding the entire knowledge base that every principal must acquire in order to be effective but it does provide triggers for critical and creative thinking accompanied by an action orientation.

The book features 56 leadership narratives from practising school leaders from the United States and Canada. The book is divided into eight sections allowing the reader to hone in on an area that is particularly pertinent, for example:

1. *Leadership theories in practice* – this section explores "numerous leadership models" and highlights how "theory informs practice and practice informs theory" (p. 1);
2. *Confronting the status quo* – focuses on the dimensions of change related to "domination, marginalization and oppression" which may be features of organizational culture and with which leaders must engage (p. 28);
3. *Leading the instructional practice* – recognizes the importance of instructional leadership while acknowledging the paradox of leaders' responsibility for student outcomes and yet not necessarily directly influencing students' learning. This section explores learning teams and distributed leadership necessary in support of instructional enhancement;
4. *Leadership and adversity* – examines the dramatic nature of leadership in schools all with a social justice and moral dimension;
5. *It's all about the people* – as may be expected this is about "relationships, relationships, relationships" and examines the soft skills principals need develop to be effective leaders. To encapsulate the sentiments this section articulates, it is "the deep commitment to the process of learning; an ongoing, daily, individual, reciprocal and collaborative practice in the service of others" (p. 155);

6. *The challenge of change* – we know change agency is expected and is ubiquitous. Indeed, change is “a highly, non-linear, iterative process with numerous feedback loops. Successful principals operationalize change through a process of influence” (p. 199);
7. *Reflections on educational leadership* – “principal learn from both the youngest students and the wisest Elders” (p. 253). Indeed, without self-reflection a principal cannot achieve greatness and this section explores the learning that principals undertaken as part of their role;
8. *In the principal's office* – this section explores what “goes on” in the principal’s office. We know that leadership entails transactional leadership, transformational leadership, and transformative leadership but it is also crucial for leaders to establish “a work-life balance heavily predicated on humour” (p. 189).

Much of this text is founded upon strong scholarly foundations and, in many chapters, demonstrates the nexus between theory and pragmatic practice. An important feature of this book worthy of note for time-poor professional practitioners is that each chapter is short and easy to read which facilitates the ease of reference, succinct and pithy stories, but with embedded nuggets of practical wisdom.

Given that change is ubiquitous and principals are the change agents charged with ensuring fast-paced and productive change, Wightham’s (2017) friend Dan mused that principals must have CHARACTER (p. 298). He reported this as an acronym to denote the pivotal qualities of any principal:

Committed
 Honest
 Accountable
 Respectful
 Accepting
 Care
 Trustworthy
 Empathetic
 Responsible

Considering that leading schools is about caring for students and building capacity and positive relationships with teachers and the community, Wightham’s character assessment of principals strikes at the heart of the people- and relationship-oriented nature of school leadership. The stories in *The principal reader: Narratives of experience* resonates with CHARACTER.

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