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Leadership of Newly Appointed Principals: A Theoretical Perspective

Research Scholar – Pinkal K. Patel
Faculty of Education
Swaminarayan University,Kalol
Guide- Dr. Ranchodbhai K. Prajapati
Faculty of Education
Swaminarayan University,Kalol

Abstract

Newly appointed principals must learn the role while performing it, and the leadership habits they form in the first years often shape their schools for a long time. Yet the literature on leadership theory and the literature on principal induction are seldom brought together. This paper offers a theoretical perspective on the leadership of newly appointed principals, with particular reference to government primary schools in India. It reviews the concept of the new principal, the theories of role transition and professional socialisation, and the major leadership models (transformational, instructional, distributed and servant leadership), and it draws on self-efficacy theory and adult learning theory to explain how new principals develop. On this basis the paper proposes an integrated conceptual framework in which leadership development moves through phases of entry, learning and consolidation, shaped by personal, organisational and policy conditions. The paper discusses the particular challenges of the Indian government school context in the light of the National Education Policy 2020, derives implications for induction, mentoring and policy, and suggests directions for empirical research.

Keywords: school leadership, newly appointed principals, leadership theories, role transition, professional development, government primary schools

1. Introduction

The principal is widely regarded as a central figure in school improvement. Reviews of research conclude that school leadership is second only to classroom teaching among school-related factors that influence student learning, and that its influence operates mainly indirectly, through the

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motivation and capacity of teachers and the conditions of the school (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). Meta-analytic evidence further suggests that leadership has its greatest effect when it is focused on teaching and learning (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008).

The first years in the principal's office are a distinct period. A newly appointed principal moves from the familiar role of teacher or senior teacher to a role with different responsibilities, relationships and expectations. The new principal must win the trust of staff who may have been colleagues, understand the school's history and culture, master administrative routines, and begin to exercise educational leadership, often with little formal preparation. The way this transition is managed affects the principal's confidence, the staff's response and eventually the school's direction.

In the Indian government school system, these challenges are intensified. Principals and head teachers of primary schools are usually appointed from within the teaching cadre, often by seniority, and they take charge of schools that may be small, under-resourced and subject to heavy administrative reporting. Structured induction has been limited. At the same time, the National Education Policy 2020 places strong emphasis on school leadership and on the continuous professional development of school heads (Ministry of Education, 2020). A theoretical understanding of how new principals lead and learn is therefore of practical importance.

This paper aims to (a) clarify the concept of the newly appointed principal and of leadership, (b) examine the theories that explain role transition and leadership practice, (c) propose an integrated conceptual framework, and (d) derive implications for induction, policy and research.

2. Conceptual Clarification

2.1 The Newly Appointed Principal

A newly appointed principal is generally understood as a person in the first few years, commonly up to three, of holding the post of principal or head of a school. The category is defined by tenure rather than by age or prior experience, and it includes both teachers promoted within the same school and those transferred to a new school. This distinction matters, because the principal who

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succeeds a colleague within the same school faces different expectations and relationships than one who arrives as an outsider (Hart, 1993).

2.2 Leadership

Leadership is commonly defined as a process of influence by which a person guides others toward shared goals. In schools, it is exercised through setting direction, developing people and redesigning the organisation (Leithwood et al., 2008). It must be distinguished from management, although the two overlap. Management concerns the maintenance of systems, records, resources and rules; leadership concerns purpose, change and the improvement of learning. New principals frequently find that the demands of management crowd out leadership, which is a recurring theme in this paper.

3. Theories of Role Transition and Socialisation

The literature on principal succession shows that the arrival of a new principal is an organisational event as well as a personal one. Hart (1993) argued that principal succession involves mutual adjustment between the newcomer and the school, in which the principal is socialised into the school's culture while also attempting to shape it. The process is influenced by the circumstances of succession, the school's history with previous leaders, and the expectations that staff bring.

Professional socialisation theory describes how individuals take on the values, norms and knowledge of a role. In a longitudinal study of first-time principals, Parkay, Currie and Rhodes (1992) described a sequence of stages through which new principals pass: survival, control, stability, educational leadership and professional actualisation. The model suggests that new principals first struggle to cope with the immediate demands of the job, then seek to establish control over routines, and only later, if conditions allow, turn their attention to educational leadership. Although the stages are not fixed or universal, they offer a useful lens for understanding why many new principals concentrate on administration. Where support is weak, principals may remain at the earlier stages for years.

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The theory carries an important implication: instructional leadership should not be treated as an automatic outcome of experience. It must be actively supported if new principals are to move beyond administrative survival.

4. Theories of Leadership Relevant to New Principals

4.1 Transformational Leadership

Burns (1978) distinguished transactional leadership, based on exchanges, from transforming leadership, which raises the motivation and aspirations of both leader and follower. Bass (1985) developed the idea into the model of transformational leadership, characterised by idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration. In schools, transformational leadership is concerned with vision, shared goals and the building of staff commitment and capacity (Hallinger, 2003). For new principals the model is relevant because early credibility depends heavily on the principal's ability to articulate a believable direction and to treat staff with respect. Kouzes and Posner (2002) similarly describe exemplary leadership through practices such as modelling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act and encouraging the heart.

4.2 Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership focuses directly on teaching and learning. Hallinger and Murphy (1985) conceptualised it as defining the school's mission, managing the instructional programme and promoting a positive school learning climate. Robinson et al. (2008) found that leadership focused on promoting and participating in teacher learning had the strongest association with student outcomes. Hallinger (2011), reviewing four decades of empirical work, concluded that leadership affects learning mainly through indirect pathways such as school goals, teaching quality and school culture. For new principals, instructional leadership is both the most valuable and the most difficult dimension, because it requires pedagogical knowledge, observation skills and the willingness to give feedback to colleagues.

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4.3 Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership views leadership as a practice stretched over multiple actors and situations, rather than as the property of one individual (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). It highlights the contribution of senior teachers, subject coordinators and committees, and it encourages the principal to build leadership capacity in others (Harris, 2008). This perspective is especially pertinent to new principals in small primary schools, who often feel that they must do everything personally. Sharing responsibility can reduce overload, draw on the experience of long-serving teachers and build the collegial relationships on which later improvement depends.

4.4 Servant and Situational Perspectives

Greenleaf (1977) proposed servant leadership, in which the leader's first concern is to serve and develop others. The idea resonates with ethical and community-oriented traditions of school leadership and with the expectation that principals support teachers and children. Contingency theories such as Fiedler's (1967) remind us that effective leadership depends on the fit between the leader's style and the situation. New principals who inherit a school in difficulty, one in good order or one divided by conflict will need different approaches, and the capacity to diagnose the situation is itself a leadership skill. Bolman and Deal (2017) add that leaders should be able to interpret situations through structural, human resource, political and symbolic frames, a flexibility that new principals acquire gradually.

4.5 Summary of Theoretical Contributions

Table 1 summarises what each perspective offers for understanding new principals.

Table 1. Theoretical perspectives and their relevance to newly appointed principals

Perspective	Central idea	Relevance to new principals
Principal succession (Hart, 1993)	Arrival of a leader is mutual adjustment between principal and school	Explains the importance of school history, culture and context of entry
Professional socialisation (Parkay et al., 1992)	New principals pass through stages from survival to educational leadership	Explains early focus on administration and the need for support to progress

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Perspective	Central idea	Relevance to new principals
Transformational leadership (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985)	Leaders inspire commitment through vision and individual consideration	Builds early credibility and staff trust
Instructional leadership (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985)	Leaders guide teaching, curriculum and learning climate	Highest impact on learning, but hardest for new principals
Distributed leadership (Spillane et al., 2004)	Leadership is shared across people and situations	Reduces overload and builds school capacity
Servant and situational views (Greenleaf, 1977; Fiedler, 1967)	Leadership serves others and fits the situation	Encourages ethical, context-sensitive practice

5. Psychological and Learning Foundations

5.1 Self-efficacy

Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as belief in one's capability to organise and execute the actions required to produce given results. Self-efficacy is built through mastery experiences, observation of models, social persuasion and the management of stress. For a new principal, early successes, observation of effective senior principals and encouragement from supervisors can strengthen confidence, whereas early failure without support can erode it. Principals with a strong sense of efficacy are more likely to attempt demanding tasks such as classroom observation and difficult conversations with staff, which are the very tasks on which instructional leadership depends.

5.2 Adult Learning and Experiential Learning

Knowles (1980) argued that adult learners are self-directed, draw on accumulated experience, learn best when the content is relevant to real problems, and are motivated by the need to perform their roles. Kolb (1984) described learning as a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. These theories imply that principal development should be job-embedded and problem-centred: new principals learn most from reflecting on real situations in their own schools, supported by mentors and peers, rather than from

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lectures alone. Programmes that merely transmit rules and circulars are unlikely to change leadership practice.

6. The Indian Government School Context

Several features of the Indian context shape the leadership of new principals. First, appointment is commonly by seniority or by promotion within the teaching cadre, so principals bring teaching experience but not necessarily leadership preparation. Second, government primary school principals bear substantial administrative responsibilities, including records, scholarships, mid-day meal arrangements, enrolment drives and reporting to higher authorities, which can consume much of their time. Third, schools may be small, with few teachers, limited resources and, at times, multigrade teaching, which restricts delegation. Fourth, formal induction has been limited, leaving many principals to learn through trial and error. Finally, principals work within hierarchical systems in which accountability is often directed upward to the administration rather than outward to the community.

The National Education Policy 2020 recognises these needs. It stresses the development of school leaders, continuous professional development and the strengthening of school complexes and community participation (Ministry of Education, 2020). The policy context therefore offers an opportunity to design induction programmes that address the leadership needs of new principals directly. The theoretical perspectives reviewed above explain why such programmes should emphasise instructional leadership, distributed leadership and reflective practice, not only administrative training.

7. An Integrated Conceptual Framework

Drawing on the theories above, the paper proposes a framework with three elements.

Phases of development. New principals are expected to move through three broad phases. In the entry phase they learn the school, its people and its routines, and they establish basic credibility. In the learning phase they build competence in management and begin to experiment with leadership practices, supported by feedback and mentoring. In the consolidation phase they develop a stable leadership approach, share leadership with others and focus increasingly on

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teaching and learning. This sequence is consistent with the stages described by Parkay et al. (1992) and with Hart's (1993) view of succession as gradual mutual adjustment. The phases are not strictly sequential, and a principal may move back and forth in response to events.

Dimensions of leadership practice. Leadership practice in each phase can be described along five dimensions drawn from the models reviewed: vision and goal setting (transformational leadership), instructional leadership, staff motivation and collaboration (transformational and distributed leadership), administrative management, and community engagement (servant and situational perspectives).

Influencing conditions. The movement through phases and the quality of practice are shaped by personal factors (prior experience, self-efficacy, disposition), organisational factors (school size, staff culture, resources, circumstances of succession) and system factors (induction programmes, mentoring, supervision, policy expectations and workload). These conditions explain why principals in similar roles develop differently.

The framework yields several propositions. First, principals with stronger self-efficacy and better support will move more quickly from administrative survival to educational leadership. Second, schools in which leadership is shared will show smoother transitions. Third, induction that is job-embedded and reflective will have more effect on practice than one that is information-based. These propositions can be tested empirically.

8. Implications

Induction and mentoring. Systematic induction should be provided in the first year, combining orientation to administrative duties with guided development of instructional leadership. Mentoring by experienced principals, school visits and cluster-level peer networks can provide the observation, feedback and encouragement that strengthen efficacy and learning.

Professional development design. Programmes should follow adult learning principles: they should be problem-centred, use real school cases, include reflection, and allow practice, for example through supervised classroom observation and feedback conversations with teachers.

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Distributed leadership. New principals should be encouraged and trained to delegate and to build the leadership capacity of senior teachers and committees, which lightens overload and strengthens the school.

Policy and selection. Appointment and promotion systems should consider leadership potential and not only seniority. Administrative workloads could be streamlined so that principals have time for academic leadership, in keeping with the aims of the National Education Policy 2020.

9. Directions for Future Research

The framework invites empirical work. Studies could examine the leadership practices of newly appointed principals in different districts and states, compare principals at different stages of tenure, and investigate relationships between leadership practices and variables such as self-efficacy, school size, gender and training. Longitudinal designs would be especially valuable in tracing how principals move through the phases of development. Mixed-methods studies combining scale-based surveys with interviews and observation would clarify how leadership is actually exercised. Intervention studies could test whether structured induction and mentoring improve instructional leadership and, ultimately, student outcomes.

10. Conclusion

The leadership of newly appointed principals is best understood through a combination of perspectives. Succession and socialisation theories explain the process of transition and why administration dominates early practice; leadership theories identify the kinds of practice that matter, with instructional leadership especially important for learning; and self-efficacy and adult learning theories explain how principals grow into the role. The integrated framework proposed here brings these strands together and points to practical measures: structured induction, mentoring, job-embedded learning and shared leadership. In government primary schools, where principals carry heavy administrative loads and limited preparation, such support is essential if new principals are to move beyond survival and become leaders of learning.

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