

STUDIES IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP 4

Denise E. Armstrong

Administrative Passages

Navigating the Transition from
Teacher to Assistant Principal

Foreword by W.D. Greenfield

 Springer

ADMINISTRATIVE PASSAGES

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VOLUME 4

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ADMINISTRATIVE PASSAGES

Navigating the Transition from Teacher to Assistant Principal

by

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*This book is dedicated to my parents Cynthia
and Joseph Forde and my in-laws Paula and Bill
Armstrong.*

Foreword

This book makes a much needed contribution to what we know about the role and work of the assistant principal. It offers terrific insights into the different challenges one faces after being appointed assistant principal, and it provides readers with a rich array of data regarding the mental, emotional, social, and physical adjustments accompanying one's transition to this new role.

The author refreshingly moves beyond mere description of what assistant principals do as they make their transition to that role, and actually helps us gain a sense of *the lived experience of becoming and being an assistant principal*. The book gives a realistic picture of the cognitive, social, and emotional conflicts and confusions, the daily ups and downs, the fears, frustrations, and highs that are experienced by the men and women undertaking the passage from teaching to administration.

This book is distinctive for a number of reasons. It is an empirical study of the role of the assistant principal. There are comparatively few helpful studies, and Professor Armstrong's research adds a solid and much needed addition to that body of work. It focuses on the transition from being a teacher to being an assistant principal, and it reveals much about how the assistant principal's role transition differs markedly from that of the school principal. In focusing on the adjustments and adaptations a newcomer to the assistant principal position must make, it provides the reader with valuable data regarding the psychological and socio-emotional as well as cognitive effects of the transition experience on the assistant principal. The viewpoint reflected is that of the assistant principal undergoing this change in roles. Finally, it offers a clear and well-conceptualized theoretical framework for describing and understanding the key variables and significant interactions that shape the transition from one's work and responsibilities as a teacher to the new challenges and generally unfamiliar terrain of the assistant principal's world.

Through interviews with eight assistant principals in a large school district, the researcher vividly captures a sense of the lived experience of becoming and being a new assistant principal. The author's descriptions of the emotional, social, and cognitive challenges, frustrations, and adjustments these men and women experience provide rich understandings of what assistant principals actually feel and think as they strive to understand and adapt to their new set of responsibilities. While most studies of administrator socialization focus on the externals, the behaviors of the individual, this study focuses on the internals, the emotional and psychological dynamics being experienced by the individual undergoing the transition.

In describing the process of identity development accompanying the transition from teaching to the assistant principalship, Professor Armstrong richly describes the impact of this journey on those undertaking this passage, identifying as well the major sources of role strain and the impact of those pressures on the novice assistant principal. These assistant principals' stories allow us to get inside their heads and hearts and to learn what they value and how they make decisions and adjust to their situations. As noted earlier, this attention to the assistant principal's internal thoughts and feelings, a neglected research arena, is a central feature of this work and is one of its most important contributions.

Beyond offering readers a reality-based glimpse into the emotional world of the person making the transition to this role, the author's research also pinpoints and describes key aspects of the terrain of the assistant principalship, helping us understand the pressures and frustrations many new assistant principals must cope with and adjust to as they strive to be successful in the role. While we already know a little about these features of the landscape from earlier studies, the book's major contribution is in helping us understand the nature of the cognitive, psychological, and socio-emotional impacts on the assistant principal of the stresses and strains experienced by the person undergoing this transition. Listed below are some of the aspects of the situations in which these novice assistant principals find themselves, and to which they must adjust:

- Leaving membership in the teacher group, yet not fully being embraced by or identifying psychologically as a member of the administrator group – feeling like they don't belong anywhere;
- Feeling caught in the middle of different pressures from all sides, being expected by all parties to solve all presented problems, and to have a working grasp of all the systems in place – and not having the formal or local knowledge to do so;
- Dealing with a much more complex and extensive array of stakeholders and roles – other than was the case in one's role as a teacher;
- Needing to gain the trust and establish effective social relations with teachers, particularly veteran teachers – all the while being viewed with suspicion by the teaching staff;
- Experiencing unanticipated feelings of loss and isolation – and feeling bullied and intimidated by parents and veteran teachers;
- Being undermined by superiors' overturning of their decisions – and feeling powerless; and
- Concurrently deconstructing one's previous notions of the assistant principalship role, relinquishing one's former teacher identity, and forging a new sense of oneself as an assistant principal.

These unanticipated stresses and strains have emotional and psychological consequences for new assistant principals as they seek to adjust and adapt themselves to their new circumstances as an administrator. Assistant principals' role passages are further complicated not just by the shift in identity from teacher reference group to administrator reference group, but in these times in particular there are many additional stressors in the context of contemporary schools and

communities – increasing rules and regulations, increasing pressures for efficiency, and increasingly changing community and student demographics, in suburban as well as in urban school districts.

Contributing substantially to our empirical understanding of this transition process, its critical features, and the impact on the person undertaking this passage, Professor Armstrong offers an empirically grounded theoretical framework that identifies the key concepts and their interrelationships that powerfully capture and enable one to understand the various cycles of this role passage, the manner in which these cycles interact one with another, and their meaning for the assistant principal undergoing this role transition.

Drawing on socialization and identity development theory and research from various fields, Professor Armstrong constructs a role transition/identity development model. It includes four cycles of development that interact and build one upon another. She identifies four epicycles of transition. These include Entry-Exit, Immersion-Emersion, Disintegration-Reintegration, and Transformation-Restabilization. The model is solidly grounded in her charting of the personal, professional, and organizational paths traveled by novice assistant principals as they move from teaching into unfamiliar administrative terrain. It further clarifies for us the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes the assistant principals experience, and the adaptations and adjustments they find they must make as they strive to succeed in the role.

In addition to its usefulness for prospective assistant principals, university preparation program faculty, researchers studying school administration, senior school district administrators, and school principals also will find a great deal of the information helpful in facilitating and supporting a successful role transition for the assistant principal. Ironically, the experiences of the assistant principals reported and analyzed here, although not intended to do so, are in many ways a reflection of the inadequacy of current policies and practices in preparing and supporting assistant principals for their roles and responsibilities. There is much that can be done prior to role entry to facilitate the assistant principal's transition, and there is as well much that can be done to support a successful transition once it is undertaken.

While it is impossible to offer any single recipe about how to navigate the pathways along which newly appointed assistant principal's travel, the observations and insights captured by Professor Armstrong will provide newly appointed assistant principals, or teachers thinking of undertaking this leadership pathway, with many helpful ideas about the personal and professional challenges they will face, and about the critical adaptations and changes in perspective that accompany this role passage. Her research adds substantially to our understanding of the experience of the novice assistant principal, and I am confident that readers will find these pages engaging and useful, as well as mentally stimulating!

William D. Greenfield, Jr.
Professor Emeritus
Portland State University

Preface

Our careers play a central role in the ebb and flow of individual and organizational lives. They define who we are, how we live, where we work, who we interact with, and how we interpret our world and our place in it. Within the educational landscape becoming an administrator is generally configured as a logical career pathway and a rewarding experience. Every year, thousands of teachers sign up for administrator preparation programs and apply for administrative positions. Indeed, it is not unusual for new teacher candidates to declare that they would like to become administrators, even before they are in the classroom. Yet, how much do we really know about the challenges that educators experience and the social and emotional strains they encounter as they negotiate the passage from teaching to administration?

Administrative transitions are subjective and objective events which provoke personal and professional changes. In spite of its deceptive smoothness, the move from teacher to administrator is often accompanied by feelings of loss, conflict, and confusion, as novices adapt to external role demands and a different professional culture. In the current educational climate where accountability, quick turnarounds, and measurable results are the prevailing currencies, new administrators are pressured to deliver immediate results and instantaneous adaptation to new and emerging circumstances is expected. Often obscured by the rush of external demands, their leadership transitions are treated as one-time events and newcomers are typically left to navigate their administrative passages on their own.

Although new administrators are socialized to project an image of competence and calmness, these experiences resonate deeply at the social and emotional levels. They also impact newcomers' leadership pathways and practices in imperceptible ways and they carry important implications for individual and organizational success. Understanding how new administrators navigate these internal and external shifts is important for new and aspiring leaders who want to make a positive difference. This knowledge is also critical to leadership preparation programs and school districts that are committed to leadership development that matters.

Book Overview

This book examines two areas which are core to effective leadership, but are often ignored in theory and practice – assistant principals and their administrative

passages. Assistant principals are vital to school success. As frontline administrators, they represent the face of school administration, and they comprise a large (often the largest) group of administrators in many school districts. Assistant principals fulfil a complex range of leadership and managerial roles in their daily work. They are also the people who community members are most likely to appeal to when in need of help, resources, and advice.

While research on the principalship and leadership preparation has increased over the past two decades, there is a dearth of studies regarding the socio-emotional nature of leadership transitions and how new assistant principals become effective leaders. For the most part, studies have concentrated on established leaders and external behaviors and outcomes, i.e., what leaders do, rather than the internal leadership landscape – how leaders think and feel (Ackerman & Maislin-Ostrowski, Armstrong, 2005). Furthermore, because this research traditionally has focused on principals and superintendents, assistant principals and their critical management and leadership roles have seldom been studied (Armstrong, 2004b; Calebrese, Kwan & Walker, 2008). Assistant principals are rarely (if ever) mentioned in leadership preparation curricula or policy documents. There are also few textbooks which focus on the social and emotional realities of this particular role transition, the changes that accompany it, and how they can be facilitated. As a result, new assistant principals and their school districts are seldom prepared for the depth and breadth of this administrative passage and its challenges for those in the process of transition. School districts as well are affected directly, because it is frequently their assistant principals upon whom they depend for maintaining organizational stability and effective relations with students, parents, and teachers.

As the base of the organizational pyramid and a key entry and socialization checkpoint for upper management careers, the assistant principalship is often the place where new administrators develop the attitudes, skills, and behaviors that shape the future direction of district leadership practices. In their role as intermediaries among students, staff, and communities, assistant principals are often asked to make difficult choices on a daily basis (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). How newcomers resolve transitional challenges has significant long-term consequences for individual careers, students' lives, and a school's organizational success. As administrative pools diminish and accountability demands increase, there is a pressing need to learn more about this administrative passage and the ways in which individuals and organizations can make this transition successful for all concerned.

Book Focus and Content

This book describes the passage from teaching to administration through the eyes of newly appointed secondary school assistant principals. While specific differences exist in the experience of assistant principals in elementary and secondary settings, much of the research, stories, and passages shared in this book will resonate with, and be of value to understanding the experiences of new assistant principals in gen-

eral. The metaphor of “passages” is used to mark the progression from teaching to administration over time and space. “Passages” is also used to describe the stories that new assistant principals tell as they navigate uncharted administrative territory and create new meanings for themselves. Each assistant principal provides a vivid and unique account of his/her personal trajectory. These narratives are aggregated and contextualized to reflect the existing literature on change, transition, and administrator socialization. A visual metaphor of cycles within cycles (epicycles) is used to describe the iterative and nonlinear nature of this trajectory and the significant tensions, dilemmas, and milestones that characterize each phase of the administrative passage.

Readers will find this book engaging for a number of reasons. The assistant principals’ narratives bring a personal perspective to educational administration and the process of becoming an assistant principal. The assistant principals come to administration from different walks of life, at different ages, and from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, and their stories capture the rich diversity and humanness of new administrators’ lived experiences. Their narratives open up a new window on the inner and outer world of school organizations, as these men and women bridge the worlds of teaching and administration.

The assistant principals’ stories uncover a hidden landscape of paradoxes and emotions which shape administrators’ work lives. At the same time, these descriptions reveal a corresponding sociopolitical landscape of boundaries, rites, and rituals which operate beneath an external veneer of order, control, and stability. They also illustrate the ways in which new administrators negotiate pitfalls and politics within a shifting organizational context. As the new assistant principals describe their hopes, disappointments, and accomplishments they connect us to the complexities of change and transition and the moral imperatives of schooling.

This book offers a perspective on administrative practice which is not normally discussed in traditional textbooks. It will be of interest to practitioners, policy makers, and theoreticians alike. Professors of educational leadership and administration will find it to be a helpful resource as a primary or supplemental course text because of its theoretical and field-based relevance. Aspiring and practicing administrators can use the assistant principals’ stories as a tool for reflection and discussion, and as a point of reference in mentoring prospective candidates. District and university pre- and in-service professional development programs will find the recommendations useful in enhancing their preparation, mentoring, and induction programs. Practicing administrators will see their experiences reflected in the assistant principals’ stories, while administrative candidates can use this information to identify and clarify their goals as well as the types and levels of support they will need as they undertake this leadership passage.

Book Structure and Organization

This book is organized into three sections. While it is recommended that the book be read in its entirety, readers may choose the areas that best meet their profes-

sional needs. Part I (Chapters 1 and 2) provides the rationale for studying assistant principals' transitions, the background of the study on which this book is based, and its theoretical underpinnings. Chapter 1 provides a general overview of issues related to assistant principals, their career transitions, and the research study questions that guided this study. Chapter 2 reviews key psychological and sociological conceptions of passages, transitions, and socialization from the fields of career development and educational administration that inform our theoretical and empirical understanding of administrative passages and transitions. Common socialization stages, tactics, and outcomes are discussed with reference to new assistant principals' role construction, and questions are raised regarding the impact of organizational socialization on newcomers' development of leadership praxis. This chapter also highlights the importance of a person-centric approach to research that honors assistant principals' experiences and views organizations through subjective, as well as objective, lenses. It concludes with a description of the conceptual framework that emerged out of this body of research and my ongoing research on the assistant principalship.

Part II (Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8) introduces new learning to the field by first sharing the individual and collective experiences of eight recently appointed secondary school assistant principals, the factors and processes that bring coherence and meaning to their journey, and providing a new model for understanding these experiences. This section of the book describes the reasons these individuals became assistant principals, their pre-role preparation and learning, and the early strategies they use to navigate the social and emotional terrain of school administration. Chapter 3 profiles the individual assistant principals' stories. The assistant principals describe their reasons for choosing this route, their preparation for the journey, their challenges, and their future vision. Chapter 4 explores the assistant principals' trajectories in further depth, and it charts the psychological and social dimensions of the administrative passage from the assistant principals' perspective. A metaphor of epicycles (cycles within cycles) is introduced to illustrate the iterative nature or the assistant principals' internal and external trajectories.

Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 describe the peculiar challenges and dilemmas that the assistant principals encounter at each cycle of the passage, and the strategies they use to resolve them. Chapter 5 focuses on the *Entry-Exit* epicycle when the novice assistant principals first come to the personal, professional, and organizational crossroads between teaching and administration. Chapter 6 explores the second epicycle of *Immersion-Emersion*, where assistant principals come face to face with school and district socialization impacts. This period of shocks, surprises, and "absurd contrasts" is exacerbated by the assistant principals' ambiguous location at the center of their school community. It details their efforts to make sense of the paradoxes of leadership and management and to come to terms with these role tensions. Chapter 7 explores the challenges inherent in the third epicycle of *Disintegration-Reintegration*. The assistant principals describe how they let go of, hold onto and reframe aspects of their former teacher identities and relationships, and develop perspectives that are more consistent with their new organizational role.

Chapter 8 focuses on the final epicycle, *Transformation-Restabilization*, where the assistant principals are fully incorporated into the administrative and school culture. The assistant principals discuss how they build the cognitive and emotional capacity to deal with the ongoing challenges of leadership and management and how they negotiate their administrative identity. Using images and metaphors derived from the assistant principals' narratives, this chapter discusses their overall assessment of the transition, their accomplishments, and their future career objectives.

Part III (Chapter 9) draws the book to conclusion. It calls for sustainable structures and practices which can scaffold novice administrators' developmental needs. This chapter also discusses the importance of reconceptualizing the roles of assistant principals and leadership transitions. It calls for a deeper understanding of the personal, professional, and organizational aspects of this leadership passage, and it recommends ways in which preparation and regulatory bodies can support equitable and democratic leadership practices. Finally, suggestions are provided for aspiring and new assistant principals regarding how they can support themselves and each other during this transition.

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