

SUPERINTENDENTS/PRINCIPALS IN SMALL RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF DUAL ROLES*

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1 Introduction

Rural education has been the backbone of American education since the mid-1700s. As late as 1913, one-half of the school children in the United States were enrolled in the country's 212,000 one-room schools. Today, 43% of the nation's public schools are in rural communities, and nearly one-third of America's school-aged children attend public schools in these communities (United States Department of Education, 2003). As such, these percentages reflect that "one of every six school-age child or youth attends a rural school" (Arnold, 2004, p. 4). In Texas, 53% of the 1,044 school districts have less than a thousand students enrolled (Texas Association of School Boards, 2004). Thus, rural school districts in Texas continue to be a significant part of the educational landscape and play an important role in the education of Texas children.

Effective leadership of rural school districts can be very complex and challenging (Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, & Slate, 2008). In fact, Arnold (2004) argued that "Rural school districts face a different set of

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challenges in recruiting administrators than do their urban and suburban counterparts (p. 8). Rural administrators must develop, execute, and supervise the total school program. Because administrators must do whatever is necessary to operate the program and support staff is frequently not available, administrative roles and responsibilities are many and varied. Under steady pressure from state departments of education, small schools' boards of education find themselves forced to find ways to become more effective and efficient (Arnold, 2000). A common problem facing many small school districts is the lack of financial resources (Arnold, 2004). One common method of cutting costs in small districts is to combine the functions of administrators (Woll, 1988), with the most common combination being the superintendent/principal position. In many small school districts, the superintendent may be the sole administrator in the district. School boards are also inclined to favor the high degree of accountability that is handed down to the single administrator. When the superintendent is also the principal, layers of administration which sometimes shield poor performance or hinder communication are eliminated. Superintendent/principals also do not have to worry about dissension within the administrative staff. What the superintendent decides is communicated exactly as he or she imagines. It cannot be questioned by the elementary school principal, for example, because the superintendent and the principal are one (Woll, 1988).

An obvious benefit of combining administrative positions comes in the form of financial savings. Combining the superintendent and principal positions can save a district as much as 30,000 to 50,000 dollars per year (Woll, 1988). These savings can be very attractive to school boards, but the negative effects on the educational program can sometimes outweigh the financial gains.

Administrators in small rural school districts face particularly challenging jobs (Canales et al., 2008). Where job descriptions exist, they are frequently impossible to fulfill and at the same time, sufficiently ambiguous to allow for a variety of actions by those who control their positions. Small school administrators confront the responsibility of the customary task of running a school, including staffing, scheduling, conducting faculty meetings, drawing up a budget, and leading curriculum development. One of the primary differences between small school administrators and large school administrators is that the latter can delegate some tasks, whereas the former is often responsible for not only seeing that tasks are accomplished, but for actually performing the tasks (Wylie & Clark, 1991).

Superintendent/principal positions would be very beneficial to small schools if there were no negative consequences on the educational system. Unfortunately, small school superintendent/principals are not superhuman. "They are not able to do twice the work of their counterparts in large schools" (Woll, 1988, p.40). They are forced to prioritize their responsibilities (Canales et al., 2008), thus leaving many important duties undone. Curriculum development is a primary example. Debating against the need for comprehensive review and curriculum development is difficult. However, with having to manage the daily crises and routines, including discipline, communications with parents, and board members, it is easy to see how curriculum development can get neglected (Woll, 1988).

The dual administrative position also places a large amount of wear and tear on administrators and consequently, contributes to a high degree of stress and job turnover (Canales et al., 2008). Few administrators take this type of positions with the goal of staying there for the remainder of their careers. These dual positions are usually seen as stepping stones to higher single administrative positions, thus contributing to a high rate of turnover in the small school superintendency (Nachtigal, 1987).

An additional problem faced by the superintendent/principal is the lack of vertical insulation within the organization to protect the superintendent from every problem, issue, or concern that happens on a daily basis in a school district. In schools with full-time principals, many of these time consuming, relatively unimportant problems are addressed before they reach the superintendent's desk, which allows more time to work on other issues such as curriculum development (Woll, 1988).

Safety concerns must also be dealt with when a superintendent doubles as the principal. For example, who is in charge when the dual administrator is absent or attending a meeting off campus? Generally, the district must depend on the cooperation of a teacher or business manager to take charge of the building – usually a person who is not a certified administrator. In small school districts where one administrator has the dual role of superintendent/principal, completing all the tasks in all operational areas becomes very burdensome due to the multiplicity of roles and limited personnel available for assistance. The small school

administrator has to carry out a variety of functions not required by large district superintendents. Support personnel, curriculum specialists, and the administrative staff required by the ever-expanding state and federal programs are usually not affordable (Angney, 1986).

2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to identify occupational stressors and role ambiguity that superintendent/principals encounter in the dual responsibility position along with the coping strategies they utilize. We believe that this research study is important because “rural schools are at a disadvantage because relatively little high-quality research has been conducted about rural education issues” (Arnold, 2000, p.1).

3 Research Questions

1. What dual job responsibilities and effective leadership behaviors performed by superintendent/principals are considered priorities?
2. What occupational stressors related to the dual job responsibilities and effective leadership behaviors are considered most prevalent?
3. What stress coping strategies are utilized by the dual job superintendent/principal?

4 Method

4.1 Participants

The sample consisted of 10 superintendent/principals selected through purposive sampling. Gay and Airasian (2000) described purposive sampling as “judgment sampling” in which a sample is selected based on prior knowledge of the group or participants to be sampled. Superintendent/principals selected for this study represented various Education Service Center regions across the state. Two superintendent/principals were from Region 16, two superintendent/principals represented Region 12, and one additional superintendent/principal each represented Regions 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, and 18. Nine superintendent/principals were Anglo, and one was Hispanic. Four superintendent/principals were female and the remaining six were male. In addition, their years in the position of superintendent/principal ranged from two to nine years.

4.2 Instrumentation

Interview questions were used to gather information to answer the qualitative research questions. Ten practicing superintendent/principals were interviewed on three separate occasions through semi-structured and unstructured interviews to establish credibility of the procedures and findings. The open-ended interview questions were developed from an extensive review of literature and researchers’ observations. Dual job responsibilities, role ambiguity, occupational stressors, and stress coping strategies were the focus of the interview questions. Interview responses were analyzed using trust building strategies such as peer debriefing, triangulation, member checks, and constant comparison allowing for objectivity and trustworthiness.

4.3 Procedures

Ten purposively selected superintendent/principals were contacted via telephone to ask for their consent to participate in three separate in-depth semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Interviews were conducted through personal contact, telephone calls, electronic mail, and/or online chat sessions. Interviews spanned a time frame of approximately two months to allow for adequate completion of the interview process.

At the start of the interview process, the senior researcher allowed for informal and unstructured interviews to establish a rapport with each of the participants. Once participants agreed to take part in the study, each respondent was met with either through personal contact, phone, and/or email on three separate occasions. During the first interview, the senior researcher dialogued with each participant and recorded

responses and experiences associated with the dual job of superintendent/principal. The initial goal was to pose questions that would lead to the responses required to answer the research questions previously stated. Data analysis began with the field notes taken after the first interview. Data were reviewed immediately, and notes were written in the margins concerning potential themes and categories. Follow-up questions were then prepared for the next interview to clarify or to complete an idea. Second and third interviews allowed for additional discussion with participants in an effort to gather as much information as possible and provide an opportunity for peer debriefing and member checks.

All participants were guaranteed confidentiality and assured that their names would not be used in the study. Identification of dual job responsibilities, occupational stressors, and stress coping mechanisms used in the open-ended interview questions were developed through the review of literature and informal questioning prior to the actual implementation. Data were collected by note-taking and were transcribed by the senior researcher and a journal was kept to record the dates and times of all interviews performed. Records were kept describing how transcripts were organized and analyzed. In an effort to promote internal validity and trustworthiness, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks were utilized throughout the data collection process.

4.4 Data Analysis

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) articulated, Qualitative data analysis is the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials that you accumulate to increase your own understanding of them and to enable you to present what you have discovered to others. (p. 153)

The researchers followed the trustworthiness criteria essential to all qualitative research. Data analysis included triangulation, the process of using multiple data collection methods, data sources, or theories to check case study findings (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 2002). Member checks, the process of having participants review statements in the researchers' report for accuracy and completeness, were also utilized in data analysis (Gall et al., 2002). Peer debriefing and theme identification were also used to analyze the data. Qualitative data are reported in narrative form, maintaining participant anonymity.

5 Results

5.1 Dual Job Responsibilities and Effective Leadership Behaviors

In the first research question, participants were asked to identify the job responsibilities and effective leadership skills that they considered priorities for the position of superintendent/principal. Each participant had succinct responses to the question of job responsibilities and leadership skills. All the superintendent/principals cited job responsibilities typical to both positions. Some of the major responsibilities ranged from budget preparation, curriculum planning, staff development, facilities management, and to student discipline. A common thread recorded by the researcher during the interviews with each participant was the large number of job responsibilities inherent in the dual position. All participants commented on the incredible number of tasks and the various "hats" they wore on a daily basis. They discussed how one minute they were on the phone with the Texas Education Agency dealing with a funding issue and the next minute they were dealing with a plumbing problem in the boys' restrooms. The issue of being the sole administrator in the district and being the only "go to person" was also repeatedly mentioned by the participants. Consequently, themes and categories emerged from the responses of the 10 participants. Every participant had a different opinion as to which job responsibility was the most important. One superintendent/principal stated:

5.1.1

It is hard to prioritize the job responsibilities when there are so many. I would have to say superintendent/board duties. They are the people you work for. It's their school, kids, and money. You are their consultant. (Participant 1)

Some superintendent/principals stated finances as their top job responsibility.

5.1.2

I think the financial side is the most important because you have to have money to run the school, stated Participant 2.

Another superintendent/principal, Participant 7, expressed the same thoughts,

5.1.3

Budget because it simply must be done if the school is to survive and if I am to keep my job.

One superintendent/principal responded:

5.1.4

TAKS! This is the name of the game. With high stakes testing in grade three and next in grade five, everyone must do whatever it takes to have students prepared so that they will be successful. (Participant 6)

In discussing effective leadership behaviors, several participants stated that being organized, managing time, and developing interpersonal relationship skills topped their list of most important. Participant 9 stated,

5.1.5

I don't start the day without my 'to do list'. It keeps me focused and helps me to manage my chaotic day. With as many hats as I wear in one day, good time management becomes a must.

Another superintendent/principal, Participant 10, responded:

5.1.6

I believe that being available to my staff and parents is the most important thing. Their needs range from personal problems, to scheduling issues, to special education concerns, to individual student needs, to conflict resolution between staff. My ability to interact with them effectively is crucial to my effectiveness as a leader.

Participant 9, with 30 total years of experience in education, identified “people skills” as making the difference between effective and ineffective leaders.

5.1.7

Students, teachers, parents, board members and community relationships are the most fragile commodity to consider. The people and the trust that is placed in me is my highest goal to nurture.

5.2 Occupational Stressors

For the second research question two, occupational stressors related to the superintendent/principal position were addressed. Several themes emerged from discussions with the participants on job stressors inherent in their dual roles. Of the participants interviewed, 60% ($n = 6$), identified the lack of time to complete all the daily tasks required of the position as the most common stressor they experience. Time management, no matter how efficient, seemed to be a problem for most of the participants. One superintendent/principal stated,

5.2.1

I never have enough time to do each task thoroughly. I always feel rushed. (Participant 7)

Additional comments made by participants referencing the lack of time to complete the dual job responsibilities included:

5.2.2

Knowing that you can't always do your best work because of your time limitations. (Participant 2)

Lack of time to do all that needs to be done in an excellent manner. (Participant 7)

Lack of time to do it all, bothers me a lot, as I often feel I am not doing anything well, and feel that everything I do is not up to my own expectations. (Participant 10)

Superintendent/principals interviewed also found the “sense of responsibility” to be a great source of job stress. One superintendent/ principal stated,

5.2.3

Being everything. Having all responsibilities. Not having a sounding board. Being responsible for everything that happens...the buck stops with you! (Participant 4)

Another superintendent/principal, Participant 3, with nine years in the position responded,

5.2.4

Being all things to all people at all times!" Being on call 24 hours a day.

The feeling of being responsible for everything that goes on in the district and the stress that it produces was very evident in the discussions with the participants.

5.3 Stress Coping Strategies

For the final research question, superintendent/principals were queried regarding techniques or strategies they used in dealing with the stress they encountered in the dual role position. The data gathered revealed themes common to several of the participants' responses. One stress coping strategy utilized by five ($n = 5$) of the superintendent/principals was their strong faith. Focusing on their religion was a strategy that seems to be effective for many of the participants. One superintendent/principal stated:

5.3.1

Each morning in my office I receive K-Love's Encouraging Word with a Bible verse that sets my mood and tone for the day. Through prayer to start my day and ask for guidance, I find that the day is much easier and seldom is there any stress. (Participant 6)

Still another participant simply stated,

5.3.2

Prayer.

One superintendent/ principal with 22 years of experience, six in the dual position, responded,

5.3.3

Faith is the ultimate stress reliever. (Participant 1)

In discussing stress coping strategies, superintendent/principals also identified supportive relationships, such as families and activities outside the school, as a genuine source of relieving occupational stress.

A superintendent/ principal offered this response:

5.3.4

I have a great wife to talk with. We also have friends outside the school. The board president and I have an excellent relationship and friendship; therefore we hide nothing from each other. This is extremely important for any superintendent to have these types of relationships. (Participant 1)

One female superintendent/principal, Participant 3, responded,

5.3.5

I try to get away – go out of town, read books, garden.

More than half of the superintendent/principals stated that learning to leave work at work and not bring it home with you was another effective coping strategy. Setting priorities as a part of coping with stress was also stated by Participant 7,

5.3.6

I work hard at keeping my priorities in order: God, family, work. Many times the spiritual part of my life keeps the other areas operating properly.

In contrast, a couple of superintendent/principals did not find occupational stress to be an issue of great concern. One superintendent/principal, Participant 5, stated,

5.3.7

I am a professional therefore, I never let the stress of the job affect my performance at school.

Another superintendent/principal, Participant 8, responded,

5.3.8

Generally speaking, I do not have stress. We all have a job to do, let's just do it; plus we are getting paid to do our job.

Participant 5 stated,

5.3.9

I have a very loving and understanding wife who knows to let me vent when I have had my bucket running over for a few days. I play golf as a relief and remodel houses.

5.4 Role Ambiguity

An emergent theme that clearly surfaced during the interview process and data collection was that of role ambiguity. The dual position of superintendent/principal can often blur the job descriptions leaving the administrator to question their true role. One superintendent/principal with five years experience in the position stated:

5.4.1

An example of role ambiguity to me is that I am in charge of the budgeting for the school district as the superintendent. And as the principal I need to make sure that we have enough money for any programs that we may want to integrate into our curriculum. I may want a certain program but my superintendent role may not allow me to adopt the program because of budgetary constraints. (Participant 2)

Another participant shared her recent experience with role ambiguity through the following statement:

5.4.2

Recently, we had a parent complaint and the parent did not agree with “principal’s” decision. It makes it difficult, when there is no level two (a superintendent who is a different person) for the complaint to go to next, and so it must go directly to the board. In a normal setting, a complaint could possibly be resolved at a lower level rather than have to go to the school board. (Participant 10)

Additional responses to the effect of role ambiguity on the dual role of the superintendent/principal included:

5.4.3

Ambiguity does play a role in my position, sometimes I think that I don't know what my job is. (Participant 5)

Short grievance process. It's hard to separate superintendent duties from principal duties, hard to separate the titles. (Participant 3)

Teachers also have different perspectives of principals and superintendents, but when you are one in the same, I think it confuses them, watering down the role of the superintendent. (Participant 10)

Not all superintendent/principals, ($n = 3$), found role ambiguity to be a problem. Participant 8, with 26 total years experience in education, two as a superintendent/principal, stated,

5.4.4

I do not see a role. I see a job that needs to get done. When I applied for this job I knew that I would be doing everything, so I have accepted the role.

Another superintendent/ principal, Participant 6, with three years in the dual position, responded:

5.4.5

I do not believe there is any role ambiguity. My role is very simple; do whatever it takes to make the school safe, friendly, clean, pleasing and educational for everyone in attendance. If a child "throws up" and the custodian/maintenance/transportation individual is unavailable, then someone needs to clean it up, even if that someone is me! I probably do not see any ambiguity because I have spent the last 16 years in small districts where there are always a lot of multi-roles.

Dual role of superintendent/principal makes the position both unique and challenging. Discussions with the 10 practicing superintendent/principals allowed the senior researcher to record and share the thoughts, issues, concerns, and even the rewards of being the sole administrator with dual responsibilities. As one superintendent/principal stated,

5.4.6

I try to create times during my busy day to interact and of course give and get hugs from kids to remind me they are the ones I work so hard for! (Participant 10)

Rural school districts in Texas typically operate with one district administrator. Superintendent/principals are often the only administrative position in these small rural districts. These superintendent/ principals need to learn how to effectively lead with the dual responsibilities that are inherent to both positions. The relationship between leadership behaviors and successful leadership has long been a question for research.

As cited in Hersey et al. (2001), Kirkpatrick and Locke in the *Academy of Management Executive* reinforced the views of Bennis, Yukl, and others:

5.4.7

Recent research, using a variety of methods, has made it clear that successful leaders are not like other people. The evidence indicates that there are certain core traits which contribute to business leaders' success... Leaders do not have to be great men or women by being intellectual geniuses or omniscient prophets to succeed, but they do need to have the "right stuff" and this stuff is not equally present in all people. (p.91)

Across the state of Texas, public schools are being asked to do more with less, including fewer administrators. As administrators in public schools are asked to take on more responsibilities, the need to identify effective leadership behaviors becomes even more important. Consequently, the study was intended to identify leadership behaviors of superintendent/principals to assist current and future administrators who find themselves with multiple roles and responsibilities.

6 Discussion

Superintendent/principals all agreed that the list of job responsibilities inherent in the dual position were too long and numerous to list. Dual administrators are forced to prioritize their responsibilities (Canales et al., 2008), often at the expense of other duties (Woll, 1988). Participant prioritization of job responsibilities ranged from school finance to parental concerns. Most superintendents, however, agreed that budget and board relations were a top concern with curriculum development often left on the back burner. Effective leadership behaviors identified as being most important were interpersonal skills. Several of the superintendents stated that personal communication, being a good listener, and displaying empathy were essential to effective leadership.

Responses from the 10 superintendent/principals on the question of occupational stress ranged from no stress to significant amounts of daily stress. Time management appeared to be the most common stressor experienced by the majority of participants. The lack of time to “get it all done” left many superintendent/principals feeling ineffective. An additional stressor shared by several participants was the “sense of responsibility” that comes with being the sole administrator and the accountability inherent in the dual position. Role ambiguity, “wearing multiple hats”, was also another source of occupational stress for many of the superintendent/principals. Unclear job descriptions and conflicting demands add to an already stressful situation. Beard (1999) reported that role ambiguity is a cause of many negative or detrimental consequences for the individual and the organization, including stress, job dissatisfaction, and the likelihood to leave the position.

Superintendent/principals agreed on the importance of coping with job stress. Present in the literature are statements that stress is a part of life, but the physical and mental anguishes of stress are manageable (Brock & Grady, 2002). Results of the study align with the literature. Strong spiritual faith emerged as a common stress coping strategy for the majority of superintendent/principals interviewed. Focusing on their religion appeared to help many of the participants cope with the daily stress they encounter in the dual role. Learning to take time for themselves and “leave work at work” was also a coping strategy used by several participants.

Given the sparse nature of the empirical research into rural schools (Arnold, 2000) and particularly the leadership of rural schools (Canales et al., 2008), we believe our findings are important. Further research is clearly needed into the coping strategy mentioned by our superintendents/principals, that of spirituality. To what extent is this coping strategy common among educational leaders working in rural communities? More research is also needed into understanding effective educational leaders in rural communities and effective schools. Such knowledge could improve the lives of the “one of every six school-age child or youth” who attends a rural school (Arnold, 2004, p. 4).

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