

" A LOOK BACK: Beginning Principals' Reflections on the First Year"
by

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"Schools principals live in the midst of varied and inconsistent demands. They are expected to placate parents and the general public, support the staff, provide the workforce, implement currently fashionable schemes of teaching and protect persons and property from the children, and at the same time to educate while making certain that nothing is mentioned whereby anybody outside the school could be affected".

(Mackie 1977 p vii)

The opening quotation provides a glimpse into the complexity of the daily work life of the school principal. The role of principal is diverse, complex and involves the 'wearing of many hats' - administrator, collaborator, innovator, councillor, supervisor, negotiator, delegater, installer, leader. These roles are intertwined and controlled by questions involving what to do, when to do it, how to organise it and who will do it.

The Victorian Ministry of Education (Education Gazette, 12 July 1988, p.p. 326 - 327) outlined the roles and responsibilities of a school principal. These include : supervision of staff; collaboration with and guidance of school council; provision of information to and dissemination of information from Ministry; liaison with parents and the community; and administrative and operational responsibility for the management of the school. These roles empower the principal to exercise authority, whilst at the same time constraints are imposed by the expectations and demands of the central authority - the Ministry of Education. Thus, the principal is at the centre of a communication network, charged with the responsibility of establishing a two way flow of information between the school and the Ministry. It is the principal who must maintain and control the ebb and flow of the constantly changing patterns of interaction that are part of the daily life of the school.

In order to fulfil the multifaceted roles that are part of the job, the principal must prioritise his/her workload. When do beginning principals gain the experience and knowledge to cope with the demands placed upon them? Some relevant skills are gained throughout their teaching careers - in the process of gaining promotions towards a principalship they have demonstrated their teaching skills, obtained the appropriate qualifications, attended staff development courses and served as deputy principals or co-ordinators. What are the expectations, concerns and

challenges that confront the beginning principal?

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The purpose of this paper is to report on some of the preliminary findings from survey data collected for the Beginning Principals Study (hereafter referred to B.P.S.), a longitudinal study being conducted in Victoria, Australia. Three groups of beginning principals have been surveyed; January appointments 1989, mid-year appointments 1989 and January appointments 1990. The paper examines findings related to the reasons for the respondents applying for a principal's position, the perceived keys to success on entry, the main issues/problems confronting them on arrival - internal issues, external issues, personal issues - the major tasks to be undertaken and the sources of help and assistance.

The role of the principal is of crucial importance in the school and the community. Despite this there has been scant research into the nature and the impact of the role on the principals themselves, and on the educational communities they serve. In Australia research literature focusing on the beginning principal is limited. Willis (1980) and Clark (1986) report on the nature of the principal's work life but do not focus on the beginning principal specifically. From interviews with 87 "arriving principals" in three capital cities Thomas and Muscio (1984) offered insights into beginning principals and their immediate concerns and challenges, especially with regard to change strategies. Harvey (1988) conducted a valuable study in Western Australia, the findings from which will provide a sound research basis for identifying professional development needs of newly appointed principals. These Australian studies have contributed to the understanding of the complexity of the worklife and the structures needed to support these teachers as they transfer to the new role of principal.

In the United Kingdom Weindling and Earley (1987) investigated the worklife of secondary school beginning principals and a similar study by Parkay and Hall (1992) followed in the United States. These two extensive studies influenced the research design of the B.P.S. It is necessary to provide an outline of the B.P.S. before examining the selected findings from the three surveys.

BEGINNING PRINCIPALS' STUDY

The B.P.S was commenced towards the end of 1988 by a team of researchers from Victoria College, Melbourne, Australia. It is a longitudinal study aimed at developing a picture of the worklife of the beginning principal in order to identify expectations, concerns, challenges and success. The study is planned to continue for five years and as time passes the specific foci of the research questions have shifted to align with the perceived needs and the stage(s) of development of the principals involved. During

the first phase of the study the questions addressed included:

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- What are the keys to successful entry to the role of the principal?
- How do principals handle the crises of integrity that confront them during the first year?
- What are the common concerns confronting beginning principals?
- How does the handling of these events affect their longer term role and potential to influence the directions the school takes?
- Who and what are the most useful supports?

An anticipated outcome from the findings of the study will be a sound basis for the development of induction and training activities designed to match the needs and the stages of development of future beginning principals.

Design of the study:

Data collected for the study is derived from-

- i) Interviews with selected principals
- ii) Surveys of all beginning principals appointed in Victoria.

INTERVIEW DATA

At the beginning of 1989 eight principals were selected at random with provisions to ensure that the small sample was broadly representative of the variety of beginning principals and schools in the state public system. This involved making certain that there was a reasonable geographic and socio-economic spread of schools, and, given that the majority of principals were males, that there was at least one female amongst the primary and secondary school beginning principals selected.

The selection process was:

(i) The primary and secondary school beginning principal samples were selected separately from lists of newly appointed principals supplied by the Ministry of Education. Four secondary school beginning principals were selected from a total of thirteen and four primary school beginning principals were selected from a total of forty-six.

(ii) Each group was checked in order to eliminate any appointees with

significant experience as an acting principal.

In 1990 four further beginning principals were added to the study - criteria for selection of this group was the same as for 1989. All principals selected in 1989 and 1990 selected agreed to participate in the study.

Each principal was assigned to one of the four researchers and the researchers maintain regular contact. In the first year three site visits - beginning , middle and the end of year - were made. In addition, telephone

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interviews were conducted every 3-4 weeks. Interview guides were used for both telephone and site interviews, and written reports were completed following every interview. Most interviews are structured using open-ended questions designed to cover a range of aspects of the principal's role, while at the same time allowing scope for adapting to the varying contexts in which principals worked. At each interview the researchers also follow up issues raised at previous interviews in order to develop consistency within the data collected. The research team meet regularly to discuss progress, check data and ensure that the approach to the interviews remains consistent.

Thus for the twelve principals forming the nucleus of the study, interview data are collected and processed through several phases -

- i) written records of each interview
- ii) regular summaries of data collected from each site
- iii) analysis of data by each researcher using a qualitative approach
- iv) independent analysis of data by a research assistant using a coding system constructed by the research term
- v) collation of findings from all sites.

Data in 1989 and 1990 have focused on the concerns of beginning principals (Beeson and Mathews, 1990, , Mathews, Beeson and Baker, 1990 and Beeson and Mathews 1991). The focus of data collected in 1991 has shifted from early professional concerns to power and leadership issues.

SURVEY DATA

Survey data of all beginning principals employed since the beginning of 1989 have been collected in addition to the intensive study of the twelve beginning principals. Data collected have again focused on the principals' perception of their roles, the sources of support and their concerns. To

collect this data a 9-page questionnaire, comprising a combination of open-ended questions and scale items, was sent to principals late in the school year - for example, for January appointments the survey was distributed in October of the year of appointment. The response rate to each of these surveys has been approximately 80%.

PROFILE

The survey was sent out to all beginning principals who had taken up their positions in state primary schools and secondary colleges. The response rate for each survey provided a sound basis for analysis. Details of the three surveys are depicted in Table 1.

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TABLE 1

Details of State surveys - Beginning Principal's Study

		Start 1989 (Survey A)		Mid 1989 (Survey B)		Start 1990 (Survey C)
		No	%	No	%	No
%	No sent	53		62	44	
	No returned	45	85	48	77	38
76	Male	41	91	39	81	29
	Female	4	9	9	11	9
29	Primary	33	73	34	71	27
	Secondary	12	27	14	29	11

- Selection:

All the respondents were appointed as a result of local selection and the majority gained the school of their first choice:

Survey A - 67%,

Survey B - 85%,

Survey C - 68%

- Age:

This remained consistent over the three surveys.

The average was:

Survey A - 44 Years, Survey B - 45 Years, Survey C - 68 Years

- Length of Service:

Again a clear pattern emerged:

Survey A 10-33 Yrs, Survey B 12-34 Yrs, Survey C 10-32 Yrs

- Previous administrative experience:

The questions, relating to previous administrative experience, were divided into two areas: firstly administrative experience as acting principal, deputy principal or head teacher in the same school to which they were appointed; and, secondly, another school (the majority of the respondents had had previous administrative experience in another school.)

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Survey A - 29%, Survey B - 46%, Survey C - 50%

However, there was wide variation to the question concerning previous administrative experience in the school to which they were appointed-

Survey A - 20%, Survey B - 42%, Survey C - 5%

The higher percentage for the mid-year appointees reflect the difference in the time of appointment. The school year in Australia parallels the calendar year and, in Victoria, the majority of new appointments for all positions align with the calendar year. Vacancies arising during the year are usually filled temporarily until the beginning of the following school year.

1989 was the first year for mid-year appointments of the principal's position and the large percentage of internal appointments appears to be a reflection on schools adjusting to a change of pattern. A disruption to the environment such as the arrival of a new principal mid-year could be unsettling, especially where an unsuccessful internal applicant is still working in the school.

An interesting trend with regard to male / female appointees is noted in Table 1. Over the time the three surveys were conducted a steady increased in the percentage of women appointed to the principal's position has occurred.

Survey A - 9%,

Survey B - 11%,

Survey C - 24%

Data just collected from the 1991 January appointments should verify whether or not this is a genuine trend.

ACCEPTANCE OF POSITION

This question of the survey contained a selection of items and responses were recorded on a 5 point scale included as Table 2.

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TABLE 2

Acceptance of Position

Indicate the importance of the following factors in your decision of accept the position of principal at this school:

	Very			Not	
Important				Important	
	3	4	5	1	2
a. Job description					
b. Characteristics of the community					
c. Programs offered at the school					
d. Staff at the school					
e. Reputation of the school					
f. Possibilities offered for professional/personal development					
g. The challenge of the position					

- h. Location of the school
- i. Promotion opportunity offered
- j. Other (please specify)

The top response of all three surveys was "The challenge of the position". The most important factors from these presented on Table 2 are indicated in Table 3.

TABLE 3

Main Factors Influencing Acceptance

respondents (Columns 4+5) SURVEY	C	% of	
		A	B
•	Characteristics of the community	53.3%	60.9%
65.1%			
•	Possibilities offered for professional and personal development	59.9%	57.1%
73.6%			
•	The challenge of the position	77.8%	85.4%
•	Promotion opportunity offered	68.8%	60.5%
			65.8%

Weindling and Earley (1987) found that those who apply for principal's positions have spent considerable time as deputies and many feel they are ready to take up a new challenge. This finding is supported by responses on the three B.P.S surveys. The high rating for "characteristics of the community" also aligns with other studies. Weinding and Earley (1987) noted that applicants were selective in their choice of schools and the type of

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school, plus proximity to domicile, were important factors. Maclean (1991) in a survey of promoted teachers in Tasmania, Australia found that a school perceived by the applicants as a good school was a priority as was proximity of the school to the applicant's home.

KEYS TO SUCCESS - ENTRY

This was an open-ended question:

"What were the three key steps / events/ actions that made a difference in the success you had in entering and beginning this principalship?"

Responses to this question varied greatly from personality to performance factors. However there were commonalities in Surveys A and C. However

this question elicited different responses in Survey C. The main responses are indicated on Table 4.

TABLE 4

Keys to Success - Entry

		% of
respondents (columns 4+5)		
SURVEY		A
B	C	
•	Previous experience as an acting principal or deputy principal or in other administrative positions	55.6%
•	Support received from others (staff, other principals, school community).	33.3%
•	Support from staff	27.1%
•	Knowledge of the school	23%

The different pattern of responses reported by the mid-year respondents (survey B) reflect the 42% of these principals who were appointed internally. Other factors mentioned by this group were related to their knowledge of the school - experience in the school, recognition of the key people and experience as acting principal in the school.

THE IMPACT OF PRE-EXISTING CONDITIONS

To determine what pre-existing conditions caused problems for the beginning principals, a variety of issues were presented, with responses to be recorded on a five-point scale ranging from "not a problem" to "a major problem." The variables surveyed are depicted in Table 5 and the main findings are indicated at Table 6.

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TABLE 5

Pre-existing Conditions

To what extent did you find that pre-existing conditions at the school (e.g. a school with problems related to the socio-economic status of

students) presented problems for you as Principal?

a	Major				Not
	Problem	Problem	Problem	Problem	
	2	3	4	5	1
a.	Socio economic status of students				
b.	Financial situation of the school				
c.	Community's view of the school				
d.	Position of principal filled previously by an "acting" principal not now at the school				
e.	Position of principal filled previously by an "acting" principal who is still on the staff of the school				
f.	Staff discontent resulting from:				
	i) the principal selection procedures				
	ii) support for an unsuccessful application				
g.	School organisation:				
	i) an actual amalgamation				
	ii) threat of amalgamation				
	iii) rapid increase in enrolments				
	iv) rapid decrease in enrolments				
h.	Other conditions (please specify)				

TABLE 6

Pre existing conditions found to be a problem

respondents (columns 4+5) SURVEY	C	% of	
		A	B
• Socio economic status of studies 21.1%		26.7%	18.8%
• Financial situation of the school 27.1%		26.7%	16.7%
• Community's view of the school 26.7%		33.3%	27.1%
• Position filled previously by an "acting principal". 34.2%		28.9%	31.3%

The issue concerning the acting principal tended to be exacerbated when this person was still on staff for in many instances the acting principal was an unsuccessful applicant for the position. This issue was also highlighted as a problem for several of the twelve principals participating in the B.P.S. interviews. The other three issues causing problems reflect the devolution process that has gained Victorian public schools a large measure of autonomy. There is an increasing community interest in education and a 'blame it on the school' syndrome prevails (Duignan 1987). A beginning principal, wanting to start of "on the right foot", is justifiably concerned with issues impacting on the community's perception of the school.

PRIORITIES OF BEGINNING PRINCIPALS

This section of the survey used selected items from Weindling and Earley (1987) survey and the US B.P.S. survey. It sought to ascertain the degree of concern principals attached to a variety of internal, external, and personal issues.

- Internal issues

Internal issues that were included for consideration are depicted on Table 7.

TABLE 7

Internal Issues

To what extent have the following presented a problem for you at some stage during your first year as principal?

a	Major				Not
	Problem	Problem	Problem	Problem	
	2	3	4	5	1
A. Internal Issues					
a.	Establishing priorities				
b.	Coping with a wide range of tasks				
c.	Dealing with a large number of decision				
d.	Finding out about the daily routine of the school				
e.	Curriculum Development				
f.	Establishing a discipline policy				
g.	Dealing with student problems				
h.	Establishing/improving consultation procedures within the school				
i.	Establishing/improving channels of communication within the school				
j.	Managing ancillary staff				
k.	Working with school finance				
l.	Maintaining adequate staffing establishment				
m.	Difficulties caused by the practice and style				

- n. of the previous principal
- n. Negotiations with unions
- o. Working with problems related to the school buildings
- p. Managing the mail/information flow

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Internal issues which presented problems to respondents during their first years were wide ranging. However five issues were common concerns across all three surveys.

TABLE 8

Internal issues perceived as problems

SURVEY	C	% of respondents (Columns 4+5)		
		A	B	
•	Coping with a wide range of tasks	40%		35.4%
39.5%				
•	Curriculum development	42.2%	40%	50%
•	Establishing/improving consultative	40%		20.8%
36.8%	procedures within the school			
•	Working with problems relating to school buildings	46.7%	29.2%	36.8%
•	Managing the mail/information flow	40%		29.2%
31.6%				

Curriculum development was the major issue of concern on all surveys. This highlights the change that occurred in Victorian Schools in the late 1980's where all State Governments Schools were involved in School Based Curriculum Development. Curriculum development was noted as a problem irrespective of the time of the year that the principals took up their positions. The other four problems identified in Table 8 were less intense on Survey B, with the mid-year start principal, once again reflecting the 42% of internal appointments.

External Issues

The external issues presented on the survey are illustrated on Table 9.

TABLE 9

Survey A - 46.7%, Survey B - 35.4%, Survey C - 39.5%

TASKS TO BE UNDERTAKEN

An open-ended question on the survey was designed to provide insight into what tasks beginning principals anticipated having to deal with in their first year of the principalship. The question:

"As you took up the position of principal, what did you see as the major tasks that lay ahead for you as a principal in (current year)?"

Table 11
 Tasks to be undertaken

SURVEY	% of		
	A	B	C
●Curriculum Development	57.8%	39.6%	34.2%
●Policy Documentation	24%		14.6%
31.6%			

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The responses reflect the devolution process. With the decentralization of power, schools are responsible for setting goals, devising policies, planning programs and preparing program budgets (Caldwell and Spinks, 1987). Beginning principals are aware of this and most see the starting points for developing a model of effective self management as beginning with a review of existing curriculum and developing whole school policies. Responses in this section of the survey link to the question on perceived internal problems (Table 7). Curriculum development was the major issue beginning principals expected would present problems for them.

HELP AND ASSISTANCE

Interview data collected from the principals involved in the B.P.S study indicate that beginning principals often feel alone professionally. Often they were unsure where to turn for support. The U.S B.P.S. study researched the area of support for the beginning principal and found that principals had a strong need for support. Parkay and Currie (1992) suggested a "tripod of support" in the areas of "training", "networking" and "coaching". The surveys sent to Victorian Beginning Principals had three questions relating to this area. The first related to profession support, the second to professional preparation prior to becoming a principal and the third to induction activities. These three questions were posed using five-point scales as depicted in tables 12,13 and 14.

TABLE 12
 Professional Support

To what extent did you find the following helpful during your first year as principal?

	Extremely			Not at all	
	Helpful			Helpful	
	3	4	5	1	2
a. Principal's Association					
b. Regional Office					
c. School Support Centre					
d. Central Ministry					
e. District Principals' Meeting					
f. Union(s)					
g. Other (please specify)					

The major source of support consistent across the three surveys was the District Principals' Meeting:

Survey A - 71.1%, Survey B - 47.9%, Survey C - 52.6%
 (Combination of Tables 4 + 5)

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Parkay and Currie (1992) found that the most frequently mentioned formal source of support was the Principal's Academy. This group is similar to the District Principal's Meeting in the Victorian setting. The District Principals' Meeting enabled the beginning principals to begin forming networks and gave them an opportunity to share their experiences.

TABLE 13
 Professional Preparation

	Extremely			Not at all	
	Helpful			Helpful	
	3	4	5	1	2
a. My professional experience(s).					
b. My formal qualifications/studies.					
c. My professional development					

activities experienced in the past.

The three variables listed in Table 13 were all regarded as important to professional preparation however "my professional experience(s)" was rated the most highly.

Survey A - 82.2% Survey B - 75% Survey C - 92.1%
 (Combination of columns 4 and 5)

TABLE 14

Induction Activities

If you attended any of the following induction activities, indicate the extent to which you found them helpful in preparing you for your role as principal.

	Extremely Helpful			Not at all Helpful
	3	4	5	1 2
a.	Principal induction activities organised by the Regional Office			
b.	Principal induction activities organised by the Central Ministry			
c.	Principal induction activities organised by a teacher union			
d.	Activities conducted in preparation for selection process			

Of the variables listed in Table 14 one was regarded as extremely helpful by a significant percentage of the principal's - "Principal induction activities organised by the Regional Office".

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Survey A - 24.5%, Survey B - 27.1%, Survey C -
 50% (Combination columns 4 + 5)

This response parallels the response to the question on support (Table 12) and highlights the importance of ensuring adequate support for principal's is available at the local level. Induction activities at the regional level gave beginning principals another opportunity to establish networks and support structures with schools.

SUMMARY

This paper has provided a preliminary examination of some of the survey data collected by the B.P.S in Victoria. Data collected from 131 beginning principals provided an opportunity to begin to compose a portrait of the beginning principal in Victoria - Why did they apply to become principals? What problems confronted them? What were the major tasks to be undertaken on commencement? Where did they get professional support?

Responses to aspects of these questions have shown some trends emerging. Firstly, a "typical" Victorian principal is a male of 44 years and he has had some time as a deputy principal. This finding aligns with the profile of a "typical" beginning high school principal in the United States (Parkay et al, 1992). The main reason for becoming a principal is the challenge of the position and the key to a successful entry lays in their time spend in previous administrative positions.

On entry the pre-existing condition of significant concern is the community's view of the school and the first year curriculum development, creating a better public image for the school and managing time are the main problems to confront. The beginning principal feels isolated in the new role and needs professional support from peers. In the process of becoming a principal the peer group changed and according to the survey, the principal has had to look outside the school for relevant peer support - District Principal's Meetings and regionally based induction activities. The role of the principal is a complex one and the demands placed on the beginning principal can be cumbersome. The beginning principal must be prepared to implement a diverse range of skills and in the process of developing these they need help and assistance from a varied range of sources.

The "look back" by these beginning principals has provided the B.P.S. research team with a glimpse at some of the frustrations, concerns, problems, challenges and successes confronted during the first year in a new role. Data collected may help others to devise meaningful strategies to assist the beginning principal to acquire the skills needed for the role of principal.

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