

THE LIFE IN A DAY: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY
OF THE FIRST YEAR PRINCIPAL

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CHAPTER I

Introduction to the Study

Theoretical Foundation

As the pressures of public education continue to mount, a better understanding of these pressures must be examined. A look at the day-to-day life of a principal in a rural east Texas intermediate school will give greater insight into these pressures.

Pressures come from various sources. Obviously, a principal must create positive situations out of negative circumstances with conditions between diverse groups of people (i.e. parents, students, teachers, central office personnel). One form of pressure is the mandates given by federal and state lawmakers to supervise education and create a more “equitable” system. In the state of Texas, this includes Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) and the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) tests. Federally, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is just one of the more recent policies given to schools.

By reflecting on the daily decisions an administrator makes, aspiring administrators may better understand the mindset and decision-making process of the principal in regard to all that a principal deals with on a daily basis. This research project will analyze and interpret the actions and thoughts of an administrator on a daily basis for one school year. The intent of this project is to bring greater insight to the pressures and

working conditions of a public school administrator as well as an interpretation of the sustained change that takes place within the administrator.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study is that principal preparation programs lack the time and depth to fully prepare principals for the task at hand. Drazdowski (1995) writes, “It was only the first twenty minutes of my first day in my first job as a principal, and already I had found that there was much my professors forgot to teach me in graduate school” (p. 42). As educators are given more responsibility and accountability, it is important that principals understand the demands and pressures placed on them. Although the principal in this study has a graduate degree and several years of assistant principal experience, there is still so much that has to be learned and unlearned throughout this next school year in order to become an effective campus leader. Ironically, this study will examine the role of a first-year principal whose background has predominantly been on secondary campuses. Now, this administrator faces the reality of change by being placed at an intermediate (4th and 5th grade) campus.

Purpose Statement/Research Questions

The purpose of this research is two-fold. First, this study will to determine the affect of a first-year principal to the culture of a rural east Texas intermediate school; however, this study will also examine the affect of the culture of a rural east Texas intermediate school on the principal as part of an autoethnographic study. Second, this study will also examine the emergence of the principal’s identity through the first-year principalship and the transformation that takes place through this process.

Furthermore, this study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What is the affect of the role as principal in the development of the principal's "self" within the school culture?
- 2) What is the affect of the school culture on the development of the principal's "self"?

Assumptions

There are two main assumptions in this study. First, the researcher will accurately account the details of an ethnographic study of the east Texas intermediate school culture. Although, the researcher has "gone native" (Adler, 1987), the researcher will present an "objective" and "rational" view of the intermediate school culture (Creswell, 1998). This is to prevent bias in self reporting techniques commonly used by school administrators in ethnographic studies (Wolcott, 1984).

Yet, this project is also an autoethnography. Therefore, the second assumption is that the researcher will reflect honestly and openly to the events of each day and later build a platform of themes based on these reflections. These reflections will obviously be realistic which helps build credibility (Banks, 2000; Reed-Danahay, 2000).

Limitations

Since this ethnography and autoethnography are based in a rural east Texas intermediate school setting, the researcher will only be able to experience events related to this setting. Educators recognize that the more diverse the population (i.e. 5A high schools as compared to 1A, more economically disadvantaged students as compared to less), the more diverse the situations and experiences will be also. Since the campus that

will be studied is a 4th and 5th grade campus, experiences will relate to issues related to this age group rather than issues related to a middle or high school.

Delimitations

The first delimitation is in regard to timeline. The researcher will begin the project on the first day of school with students, August 27, 2007, and conclude the last day of school with students, May 29, 2008.

Although the timeline of the project is roughly 187 contract days with the school district, the autoethnographic portion of the study is not limited to the experiences and events that occur within that 187 day period. The researcher will have the ability to write about events and experiences from the past as well predict future outcomes or base conclusions surrounding the school district, campus, or researcher's life. For example, the researcher will write a reflective section based on the first two months "on the job" prior to the start-date for students on August 27, 2007. The researcher will also write a summary section which will include experiences which occur between May 29, 2008, and the final day of contract sometime around June 30, 2008.

Furthermore, the researcher will not only record events observed in first-person while on campus or at a school-sponsored event, but will also be able to create connections and associations to these events at school to other aspects of the researcher's life (i.e. church, college, family). The ethnographic portion of the study will be limited to the 187 day timeframe and only reflect information about the campus and its culture.

Perhaps the most significant delimitation of this study is the intentional use of a first-year full-time supervising principal who is new to the campus. In addition, this

principal is considered a “secondary educator” despite being placed on an elementary campus for the first time in the principal’s educational career. Furthermore, the principal does not consider himself to be a “career principal.” This principal believes this campus is just another stepping stone towards a superintendent position in later years. Ironically, this is the exact opposite type of administrator used by Wolcott (1984).

Another delimitation deals with the “openness” of the researcher project. Due to the many permission requests necessary for this study to be conducted, this study would be difficult to complete without openness. Just as Wolcott (1984) was open about his study to others, this researcher will too be so open. As Wolcott (1984) explains, “Anyone interested in knowing more about the project is welcome to an explanation” (p. 7).

The final delimitation of this study is in regard to confidentiality. This is a touchy subject since the researcher wants to provide the reader a realistic account. Yet, confidentiality must be maintained. Wolcott (1984) writes, “To present the material in such a way that even the people central to the study are ‘fooled’ by it is to risk removing those very aspects that make it vital, unique, believable, and at times painfully personal” (p. 4). Although this researcher can agree with Wolcott’s statement, this project will remain in strict accordance with confidentiality ethical standards while maintaining as much reality and credibility as possible.

Organization of the Study

This qualitative study will record the experiences and events throughout the 187 contract cycle of one school year for a principal on an east Texas intermediate school campus with a staff of approximately 35 and a student population of 330. The researcher

will write one journal entry each day. The journal will be ethnographic in nature and simply describe the events observed throughout the school day. The journal will also be autoethnographic in nature and reflect on the day's events from a narrative point-of-view.

Based on these journals, the data will be reviewed to discover themes on both ethnographic subjects and autoethnographic reflections. These themes will be used in subcategorizing the findings of the research project. Thus, the conclusions drawn from this study will be presented in narrative form (Neuman, 2003) which will be transferable to aspiring administrators to use in their preparation for principalship.

Significance

This research study will bridge the gap between ethnographic studies of the principalship to an autoethnographic study of the first-year principal. Although autoethnographic literature can be found, very little autoethnographic literature is used in the field of education, and no autoethnographic work has been completed specifically on the experience of the first-year principal. Although there are plenty of autobiographical works related to the first-year principalship, these readings do not constitute formal research.

Beyond the research contributions of this study, this study will create an insightful analysis of the first-year principal's role in the overall function of the campus and district. Furthermore, this study will critically examine the depth of change the principal undertakes throughout the first year of the principalship. This goes beyond the "survival tips" (Rooney, 2000), good advice, or incredible stories given by many administrators. Once complete, this study will allow future administrators a true look in the mirror of

self-actualization as to what they too will experience the first year as principal. For non-educators, they will know what it is to be a principal. They will know what that truly means, and perhaps, one day, they will show greater empathy towards a 21st century educator.

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CHAPTER III

Methodology and Design

Introduction

The purpose of this research is two-fold. First, this study will to determine the affect of a first-year principal to the culture of a rural east Texas intermediate school; however, this study will also examine the affect of the culture of a rural east Texas intermediate school on the principal as part of an autoethnographic study. Second, this study will also examine the emergence of the principal's identity through the first-year principalship and the transformation that takes place through this process.

This chapter will describe a qualitative study utilizing the ethnographic design present in Chapter two (Thompson, 2001; Wolcott, 1984) and, more specifically, the autoethnographic methods for research. This chapter will also provide an overview of the critical elements that are present when conducting research using ethnography and autoethnography as research methods as well as key additions to the autoethnographic portion of the study not required in a typical ethnographic work. This chapter will also discuss the first-year principal in a rural east Texas intermediate public school as researcher and identifies the setting and participants of the study. This design

will be aimed at providing findings that can be generalized across time and space in order to help aspiring administrators understand the challenges expected during their first year of the principalship as well as other educators and non-educators be more empathic towards public school administrators, particularly first-year principals.

Research Design

Autoethnography

The purpose of this study coincides with the intent of ethnographic and autoethnographic writings. The purpose of the ethnographic portion of this study is three fold: to study people in their natural (educational) setting, to study people through direct interaction, and to gain a better understanding of the social (educational) world to make theoretical statement about the members' perspectives (Neuman, 2003, p. 366). The purpose of the autoethnographic portion of this research is to articulate to the reader all of the emotions, struggles, challenges, and rewards of being a first-year principal. The principal will invoke the emotions (Banks, 2000) of the readers of this project so they will better understand and relate to the first-year principal experience (Sparkes, 2000). By describing the challenges, successes, and failures of a first-year principal, others can learn from the decision-making processes and the campus-life experiences of a first-year administrator on an intermediate school campus.

Descriptive Design

This study will operate under the primary objective of description (Marshall, 1999, p. 33). The principal will describe the situations and circumstances from a day-to-day perspective in the life of a first-year principal. More specifically, the principal will

describe the changes in the principal's educational philosophy as well as the changes in the campus' philosophy on educational matters throughout the timeframe of the study.

Data Collection

The principal will begin data collection on the first day of school on August 27, 2007. Data collection will conclude on the final day of the school year on May 29, 2008. Data collection will include daily journal entries, teacher interviews, and artifacts such as principal meeting minutes, student events, parent nights, campus and classroom observations, team meeting minutes, and other campus and district documents which will assist the principal in triangulating the data (Blaikie, 2000, p. 262). The journal entries will include ethnographic entries utilizing the *realist tale* structure. This structure is described as scientific, objective, and impersonal (Creswell, 1998, p. 182). Journal entries will also be autoethnographic in nature and will utilize both the *confessional* and *impressionistic* structures interchangeably. These structures are described as focusing "more on the [principal's] fieldwork experiences than on the culture . . . [and] is a personalized account of 'fieldwork case in dramatic form'" (Creswell, 1998, p. 182). The journal entries will answer specific questions daily (see appendix F and G).

Interviews will also be conducted with teachers in a one-on-one setting. Questions will relate to principal performance and campus climate regarding changes in both since the inception of the first-year principal. Interviews will follow the guidelines outlined by Creswell (1998, p. 124) and Marshall (1999, p. 108). Interviews will be conducted at the end of each semester. Artifacts will also be used to ensure that the behaviors, actions, and language used on campus correlate into one translation (Creswell, 1998, p. 58).

Ethnographic Design

As previously mentioned, Neuman (2003) describes the ten-step process in field research. Step one is to prepare oneself and defocus. The principal in this study will begin to read related literature to the principalship as well as literature related to the “intermediate” or “middle” school concept. Step two includes site selection and access. The campus was selected based on the recent promotion of the researcher to the title of “principal.” As principal, the researcher will have total access to the campus’ infrastructure.

Step three will begin once the principal begins work on the campus to establish a network by building relationships with staff and later with students once school begins on August 27, 2007. The principal will begin to form a “social role” as the leader of the campus as well as learn the ins and outs of the campus. The principal will begin observing, listening, and collecting data which is step five.

Step six, seven, and eight will occur throughout the school year. Once each six weeks, the principal will begin to reflect on the journal entries, interviews, and the other triangulating data to begin formulation of hypotheses and theoretical sampling. Most of the data analysis will occur once the principal’s contract is over on or near June 30, 2007.

Step nine will most likely be difficult for the principal since the principal will most likely not be able to “disengage and physically leave” the campus or staff. However, an attempt will be made to remove the principal for at least a brief period of time (three to five days) from the campus. Step ten will be completed following the end of the contract. The research report will be completed the remainder of summer 2008 and early fall 2008 to be defended in November, 2008.

Participants and Setting

The main participant in this study is the first-year principal recently promoted to an intermediate campus. However, any one associated with the campus (i.e. teachers, other campus staff, parents, students, community members, central office personnel) will be subject to analysis in the autoethnographic and ethnographic writings of the principal. All participants will be willing contributors to the project. The principal will contact the superintendent of schools for the district in which the campus resides for permission prior to collecting data (see appendix A). The principal will also receive permission by all willing to participate including teachers (see appendix B).

The campus selected for this study is the campus in which the researcher has just been promoted to principal. This campus is considered an intermediate school (4th and 5th grade students only) and resides in a rural east Texas school district with approximately 2000 students. There are approximately 330 students and 35 staff members including 25 teachers on campus. The campus has been named “Recognized” the past two years. The campus is approximately 25 percent minority and 65 percent economically disadvantaged.

Analysis of Data

According to Neuman (2003), “data analysis means a search for patterns in data—recurrent behaviors, objects, or a body of knowledge” (p. 447). With this in mind, the principal will take the various types of data (journals, interviews, and related documents) to look for patterns or themes in each grouping described as *open coding* (Neuman, 2003). Later, these groups of data are analyzed for themes or patterns described as *selective coding* (Neuman, 2003). Then, the principal will present the information in the

narrative style as described by Neuman (2003, pp. 448-449). This is congruent with the *realist tale* style of the ethnographic journaling (Creswell, 1998) as this form of writing is also described as *realist tale approach* (Neuman, 2003, p. 448). With this style of writing, “the researcher using a narrative ‘analyzes’ or ‘explains’ data by using the terminology and concepts of the people being studies, and does not import new ones” (Neuman, 2003, p. 449). This too is congruent with the educational jargon utilized in a single-campus study such as this as well as the *active reflexivity* (Blaikie, 200, p. 55) style utilized in an autoethnographic study.

Pilot Study

Questions for teacher interviews will be given a pilot study to ensure validity and save time (Seidman, 1991). Teachers will be asked the interview questions to improve clarity and avoid confusion. Interview questions for teachers will be pre-examined by non-interviewed teachers. The focus group and interview questions will be semi-structured and open-ended using the probing method to add clarity (Neuman, 2003). The *Principles of Good Question Writing* will be used (Neuman, 2003, pp. 268-272).

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, the principal will serve as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 1998). Throughout this study, the principal will collect data through interviews, journals, and other campus or district documents.

The principal will act under the rules and responsibilities of a complete-member-researcher (CMR) (Adler, 1987). This is justified since the principal is the highest campus-level authority for the campus. The principal will be held accountable for all areas (personnel, instruction, discipline, budget) under the principal’s supervision.

The principal will keep journal entries daily and will tape all interviews.

Interviews will use a semi-structured format with probing questions for added clarity and understanding as needed. All participation will be voluntary and interviews will be convenient to all parties.

Provisions of Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that the researcher provide readers with information that supports the trustworthiness of a research study. In this study, the principal will allow *member checks* (Creswell, 1998) on the one-on-one interviews since the teacher will be allowed to view and interpret interview results for added clarity and interpretation. The teacher will also be allowed to offer suggestions, clarification, and critical reflection regarding the interview transcript.

Marshall (1999) suggests that researchers use thick, rich descriptions in the journaling process for the purpose of transferability. This will aide in the purpose of this study for readers to be able to transfer the challenges and successes illustrated in this study to their future endeavors and experiences (Creswell, 1998).

Wolcott (1984) writes, "I was conscious that 'friendship' could present another nagging problem in projecting some possible methodological problems which I might confront in the study" (p. 6). If Wolcott (1984) was worried about becoming too close of friends with the principal he studied for two years, should this researcher be concerned that the researcher and principal are one in the same? Certainly, this is a rhetorical question at best. Yet, it is important for readers to understand that the researcher is acknowledging this dilemma and will attempt to destabilize it as much as possible.

Similarly, Wolcott (1984) writes, “I cannot imagine that my presence did not produce some changes in [the principal’s] behavior, although I am at a loss to give specific evidence of such change” (p. 13). Just as Wolcott (1984) feared that he impacted Bell’s behavior, this researcher fears the affect of himself on the principal in this study. For example, will the principal do more (be more active) this year knowing that he is “self-observing” himself? Does this increase bias to the study? Again, this is a rhetorical question for the researcher so as the reader you are aware of these concerns. However, the focus of this study is to present realistic, credible evidence of the first-year principal experience.

Another concern is related to the researcher and principal being one-in-the-same. Wolcott (1984) writes, “[The principal’s] commitment was to resolve and thus to eliminate problems and, when possible, to prevent them from ever happening; mine was to search them out and to keep them constantly in mind in an effort to describe and to understand how principals behave” (p. 317). As an ethnographer and autoethnographer simultaneously, this will prove a difficult task.

Conclusion

Although this study is singular in time and place, the information in this chapter could be used to replicate the study. However, the data collected in this research project could never be identically duplicated. Yet, the purpose of this study will be to transfer knowledge from the experiences of the first-year principalship to aspiring first-year principals as well as non-educators who wish to be more empathic to the cause of education.

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