Chapter 6

Observational Research on the Work of School Principals: To Time or Not to Time

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ABSTRACT

This chapter, like the others in this book, is designed as a resource for instructors and students studying education research methods. It provides an example of how one research team worked through social, political, economic, and research issues to problematize and eventually utilize observations as a data collection method to study principals’ work. The contribution of this chapter lies in the area of research method, specifically the use of and the structuring of observation, rather than in the area of research paradigms. Nevertheless, given the charter of the book, the opportunity is taken to reflect on the research paradigm that applies and its implications. The chapter is about the study of principals’ work and compares two different observation approaches.

STUDIES OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS’ WORK

While many researchers have studied principals’ work, it appears that much of what principals do has been studied in relation to policy, education issue, or event. For example, in terms of policy, Flessa (2012) explored how a policy decision regarding reducing the size of primary school classes influenced the work principals do on a daily basis. Succession planning is an educational issue that has been utilized as a lens to study what principals do since at least the turn of the century (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; Meyer, MacMillan, & Northfield, 2011; Pollock & Hauseman, 2015; Reynolds, White, Brayman, & Moore, 2008; The Learning Partnership, 2008). Principals’ work has also been studied in relation to events that occur at the school site; for example, with an emergent line of inquiry exploring the work principals do in the aftermath of school shootings (Chrusciel, Wolfe, Hansen, Rojek, & Kaminski, 2008).
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2015; Fein & Issacson, 2009). Limited empirical research has focused solely on all the work of school principals (see, for example, Cattonar et al., 2007; Horng, Klasik, & Loeb, 2010; Spillane, Camburn, & Pareja, 2007). We wanted to conduct a study about principals’ work: what they do on a daily basis and why they engage in this work. This endeavor can be seen to sit in the neo-positivist research paradigm, being a contribution to understanding the reality of the work of principals. Specifically, this meant investigating more than the principal’s role: it meant considering what work it is that they do. Historically the dominant line of inquiry about what principals do centers around “time-on-task” studies where the type of principals’ tasks are categorized, the frequency recorded and length of time on task is logged (Bezzina, 1998; Gaziel, 1995; Horng et al., 2010; Kmetz & Willower, 1982; Martin & Willower, 1981; Martinko & Gardner, 1984, 1990; Tulowitzki, 2013). But understanding what principals do is complicated and as we had a sample of principals who had agreed to be observed (see Table 1), we needed the most appropriate research method.

Who Was Actually Observed?

Five principals from five different school sites located in five different publicly funded Ontario District School Boards agreed to participate in this study. Each site was visited for three days of observation, for a total 15 observational days. During each of these 15 days, two researchers visited the school to conduct observations. A diverse sample of principals participated in the observations.

Three of the principals observed for this study were male, while two were female. Four of the principals worked in elementary schools and one was employed at a secondary school. The number of students at the schools where the observations took place ranged from 254 at the smallest elementary school to 1200 at the secondary school included in the sample. Three of the principals worked at schools located in urban centers and two participating principals were employed in rural schools. All principals involved in the observations were classified as experienced as they all had more than four years of experience in the role. However, one of the principals had 25 years of experience, two were in their sixth year as a principal, one had been a principal for five years and the final participant had spent four years in the role. These participants were observed using two different observational approaches that were eventually selected after reviewing previous attempts to capture principals’ work.

The Decision to Observe

Deciding on the most appropriate method for this inquiry posed a challenge for a number of reasons. Most of what we know about principals comes from self-reporting through diaries or journaling, and

<table>
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<th>Gender</th>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Geographic Location</th>
<th>Level of Experience</th>
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<td>Urban</td>
<td>Six years</td>
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<td>Urban</td>
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<td>Elementary</td>
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<td>Rural</td>
<td>25 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Elementary</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Six years</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Elementary</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Four years</td>
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