

TRANSFORMING EDUCATION THROUGH
CRITICAL LEADERSHIP, POLICY AND PRACTICE



The Emotional Life of School-Level Leaders



CAMERON HAUSEMAN

The Emotional Life of School-Level Leaders

Transforming Education Through Critical Leadership, Policy and Practice

Series editors: Stephanie Chitpin, Sharon Kruse and Howard Stevenson

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The Emotional Life of School-Level Leaders

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For Stephanie, Davy and Harrison

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Chapter 1

Introduction: The Emotional Aspects of School-Level Leadership

Abstract

Emotions are everywhere and, as multiple scholars have argued, can be considered a fundamental part of the human experience. Individuals are expected to behave in socially appropriate ways in a variety of public and private social situations, which often involve managing one's emotions. The management and regulation of emotions are also key components of effective school leadership. This chapter unpacks the emotional aspects of school leadership by exploring how the management of emotions is fundamental to the success of headmasters, principals, vice-principals, and other school-level leaders. I also provide the rationale for using the term 'school-level leaders' and call for emotional authenticity in educational leadership. Then I outline several benefits an increased scholarly and practical focus on the emotional aspects of school-level leadership offers for teachers and other school staff, school-level leaders themselves, and the students they serve on a daily basis. I also provide a short description of the methodology used for the participant quotes used to add richness and contextualize key themes explored in Chapters 4 and 5. The chapter concludes with an outline of how the rest of this book is organized and offers additional insight into the topics explored in the forthcoming chapters.

Introduction

Have you ever wondered how to better manage your emotions? Individuals are expected to behave in socially appropriate ways in a variety of public and private social situations. This often involves managing emotions. Like other professions that involve working with people, the management and regulation of emotions is a key component of contemporary school-level leadership (Beatty, 2000, 2007; Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Blackmore, 2004; Blase & Blase, 2002; Carr, 1994; Crawford, 2007a, 2009; Leithwood & Beatty, 2008; Milley, 2009; Schmidt, 2010; Wallace, 2010). Despite being immersed in highly emotionally charged work

environments, school-level leaders are compelled to suppress their own emotions and portray socially acceptable emotions to staff, students and other members of the school community to maintain a sense professionalism (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Hauseman, 2021; To & Yin, 2021). It must be difficult for any school-level leader to build and maintain a positive school climate if they have a reputation for losing control of their emotions when facing challenging situations. Further, it is not a stretch to suggest that principals, vice-principals, headmasters and other school-level leaders with a propensity for screaming at students or otherwise ‘losing their cool’, will not be in their position long. It is an unfortunate paradox that suppressing emotions both supports positive organizational outcomes and causes school-level leaders to suffer from emotional exhaustion and other negative side effects (Goody et al., 2010). In many ways, school-level leaders set the emotional tone for the school, so if they are struggling, the school may not be on solid footing.

While the work school-level leaders engage in has likely always involved emotions and some emotional labour, the emotional terrain surrounding school leadership is changing. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic (Hauseman et al., 2020; Pollock, 2020; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021; Weiner et al., 2021), increased levels of student diversity and more nuanced understandings of difference (Pollock & Briscoe, 2019; Shields, 2007) and the heavy reliance on email for workplace communications (Haughey, 2006; Pollock, 2016; Pollock & Hauseman, 2019a) are societal shifts that have fundamentally altered the work and expectations placed on contemporary school-level leaders. Further, several neoliberal changes in the K-12 educational context, including work intensification (Hauseman, 2020a; Lim & Pollock, 2019; Pollock, 2016; Swapp, 2020; Wang, 2021; Wang et al., 2018, 2021), an amplified customer service focus (Hauseman, 2021), increasingly sophisticated forms of accountability and surveillance (Wang, 2022; Winton & Pollock, 2013), as well as working within disorienting policy contexts have heightened the emotional aspects of school-level leadership. Despite being tasked with supporting the well-being and emotional health of staff, students and other members of the school community, little attention has been paid to developing the same qualities in school-level leaders.

Most of the existing academic research surrounding school-level leadership focuses on what practices and strategies leaders can engage in to promote positive student outcomes (e.g. Grissom et al., 2013; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Leithwood, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2020). I aim to provide a unique perspective by offering insight into who school-level leaders are on an emotional level, and what they need to thrive both personally and professionally. In an era characterized by high levels of attrition, burnout and stress, this book contributes to a more holistic understanding of the challenges school-level leaders face managing their emotions and promoting their own well-being.

A Focus on School-Level Leaders

‘School-level leaders’ is a term I use throughout this book to refer to principals, vice-principals, headmasters, deputy headmasters and any other individuals

engaged in K-12 school administration. I chose this term for two reasons. First, it excludes senior school leaders working at the district level. While superintendents, assistant superintendents and other senior level leaders also have highly stressful and emotionally charged positions, they engage in work that is very different from principals and other administrators that work directly in K-12 schools (Faubert et al., 2019). Since superintendents and other district-level leaders, as well as principals and vice-principals, can all be classified as 'school leaders', I felt it necessary to use a different term to narrow the focus. The second reason why the term 'school-level leaders' appears throughout this book is because it is inclusive of all the different terms used to identify K-12 school administrators working in different contexts. In this way, principals, vice-principals, headmasters, deputy headmasters and any other terms or titles used to describe individuals charged with the day-to-day leadership of K-12 schools can be captured by the term, 'school-level leaders'.

It is also important to briefly discuss how I became interested in this topic and share some of my own views surrounding effective school-level leadership. My interest in the emotional aspects of school-level leadership began in early 2013. At the time, I was working as a research assistant for Dr Katina Pollock at Western University's Faculty of Education. The main research project I was working on in that position involved observing principals engage in their work for three consecutive workdays. When I began observing these principals, I was struck by how much of their work either involves managing their own emotions, or the emotions of others. Working alongside principals and literally walking in their shoes gave me insight into how their emotions, and the strategies they use to manage their emotions influence the climate and culture of the school (Beatty & Brew, 2004). I found it remarkable how a principal choosing to model optimism and positivity would stimulate those same feelings in staff, students, and members of the school community. However, I also witnessed aspects of the contemporary principalship that were not as positive. I saw these school-level leaders engaging in emotional labour by attempting to simultaneously suppress one emotion while portraying another. I heard them venting with colleagues about emotionally draining situations. I could feel how heavy workloads and high levels of emotional labour whittled away at their well-being because it started happening to me. After every observation day I left the school feeling physically, mentally and emotionally exhausted just from shadowing principals while they engaged in their work. These feelings of exhaustion were so pronounced that Dr Pollock and I discussed them at length in a book chapter we collaborated on outlining the strengths and weaknesses of studying principals' time use using that methodological approach (Pollock & Hauseman, 2017). I was so tired after shadowing these principals that it became difficult to maintain a pleasant and upbeat demeanour, which made me start to wonder how they managed the physical and emotional toll associated with their work. This topic, and its connections to school-level leaders' sense of subjective well-being, has been the focus of my research ever since. While I was initially shocked by the highly emotional nature of contemporary school-level leadership, these positions have only become more emotionally charged over the past decade.

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In terms of my own perspective(s) regarding effective school-level leadership, I would rather not get drawn into the tired and nauseating debates drawing misguided distinctions between leadership and management. Too many scholars and theorists have already experienced long and productive careers playing that game (see Bass, 2010; Bennis, 1989; Kotter, 1990; Leithwood, 2012). Conversely, my understanding of the literature on both organizational and school leadership is that effective leadership involves sound management (Fullan, 2014). Effective school-level leaders can appreciate creativity and promote well-being while having their pulse on the fiscal bottom line and attending to other administrative or bureaucratic activities traditionally associated with management (e.g. Cuban, 1988).

Emotional Authenticity in School-Level Leadership

There is a place for emotional authenticity in contemporary school-level leadership. It is important that every school-level leader has the capacity to manage their emotions in effective ways. However, far too often in my work as a professor I encounter individuals teeming with leadership potential who avoid pursuing roles in school-level leadership because they are concerned their emotions will prevent them from being effective leaders. For example, at the end of a course I taught as part of Manitoba's Certificate in School Leadership qualification programme, a student reached out to ask for advice on how to better manage their emotions. They stated:

You mentioned your research topic throughout the course a bit, regarding emotions and leadership, and it is very interesting to me. I feel that one huge factor holding me back from potentially pursuing a career in administration are my strong emotions. I worry that they will make me an ineffective leader. If you have any journal articles or books that you could recommend that I could read on this topic, I'd really appreciate it.

My response to the student included the following paragraph:

Having strong emotions is definitely something that should not disqualify you from pursuing a career in administration. Some of the most effective administrators that I have known also have strong emotions, but they are able to use (or manage) those emotions to inspire and influence others, rather than letting their emotions overwhelm them. The key is ensuring that you are able to manage those emotions effectively – and the strategies that work for you may be different from the strategies that work for others, so there really is no “one size fits all” approach. Further, something that should be reassuring and encouraging for you is that the principals I have done research with indicate that school

leadership is an emotional endeavour because they are invested in the children and their success. Based on your work in this course, it seems like you fit that description!

This student is correct in their assumption that being ‘too emotional’ is rarely a personality trait associated with effective leadership. However, this primarily negative view of emotions neglects the positive role that emotions can play in school-level leaders’ work, and in schools more broadly. Regulating and managing emotions is an essential component of school-level leadership (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Crawford, 2007a, 2009; Hauseman, 2020a, 2020b, 2021, 2022; Milley, 2009; Schmidt, 2010; Wallace, 2010). Effective emotional regulation is also a key component in allowing school-level leaders to maximize their potential impact on students’ academic and nonacademic outcomes (Anderson et al., 2010; Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2009; Supovitz et al., 2010). Emotions can motivate. They can inspire. Some of the most effective school-level leaders are skilled at manipulating their own emotions and those of others, to drive progress towards supporting students and the school community in meaningful ways. Put simply, school-level leaders’ emotions matter.

My repeated interactions with prospective school-level leaders that primarily view emotions as an antecedent to ineffective leadership are vestigial remnants of notions of professionalism rooted in scientific management principles promoted by Frederick Taylor (see Taylor, 1911). These now outdated and ‘old school’ visions of effective leadership that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century prioritized efficiency and standardized practices while emotions and other non-scientific aspects of leadership faded to the background for nearly 100 years (Wallace, 2010). However, the tide has turned and there is growing interest in the emotional aspects of school-level leadership (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Crawford, 2009; Milley, 2009; Schmidt, 2010; Wallace, 2010; Yamamoto et al., 2014). This renewed interest has also led some to re-evaluate the role emotions can play as part of effective school-level leadership. For example, the skill-based discourses surrounding emotions in jurisdictional frameworks intended to guide practice are problematic as they seek to standardize the ways school-level leaders express, suppress and otherwise manage their own emotions (e.g. see Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014; Galdames et al., 2018; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2013). However, it is reassuring that emotions are at least being mentioned in the same breath as evidence-based and effective leadership practices.

It is encouraging that the scholarly and practitioner perspectives regarding the nature of emotions in contemporary school-level leadership are shifting to better represent the work school-level leaders engage in on a daily basis. It is less encouraging that the legislation that defines their roles and responsibilities has not experienced a similar evolution. Emotions are conspicuously absent from the provincial legislation describing the tasks and activities expected of Canadian principals (Alberta, 2023; British Columbia, 2023; Manitoba, 2023; Ontario, 2022). This is not a phenomenon isolated to Canada as most legislative definitions of a school-level leader’s roles and responsibilities fail to adequately consider the

role emotions play in how they carry out those responsibilities. For example, the legislation documenting the roles and responsibilities of school-level leaders in Singapore (2021), the Bahamas (2001), the Republic of Kenya (2012) and Republic of Nauru (2011) also demonstrate a blatant disregard for the heavy emotionally charged nature of school-level leadership in contemporary times.

Significance

This book is written at a critical time for the field of educational leadership. For well over a decade, the evidence has supported the notion that school-level leadership can have a significant, if indirect, impact on student learning (e.g. Anderson et al., 2010; Leithwood et al., 2009; Supovitz et al., 2010). It is only within the past few years that the magnitude of that indirect impact has started to come into focus. For example, a recent large-scale study found that an effective principal elicits the same impact on student achievement as a similarly effective classroom teacher (Grissom et al., 2021). Further, students simply being enrolled in schools with an ‘average performing’ principal is equivalent to 2.9 months of extra classroom learning in mathematics and 2.7 months for literacy compared to peers attending schools with a below-average principal (Grissom et al., 2021). The same study concluded by stating, ‘Investing in the principal is likely the most efficient way to effect student achievement’ (Grissom et al., 2021, p. 40). These research findings highlight the importance of school-level leaders working in environments and contexts that allow them to flourish. Principals, headmasters and other school-level leaders who are struggling to manage their emotions will be unable to maximize their impact on students’ academic and nonacademic outcomes.

This book is also being written at a critical time for K-12 public schooling. Members of the ‘baby boom’ generation are beginning to retire from school-level leadership positions in larger numbers in many jurisdictions around the world. This phenomenon begs the question, ‘who will take the reins?’. Nearly 20 years ago, some scholars foresaw how this swath of retirements and folks leaving the profession could lead to a school-level leadership crisis (Fink & Brayman, 2004, 2006; Normore, 2004, 2006). Both the recent phenomenon of work intensification experienced by school-level leaders (e.g. Hauseman, 2020a; Lim & Pollock, 2019; Pollock, 2016; Wang, 2021; Wang et al., 2018, 2021), and the failure to engage in meaningful, long-term and strategic succession planning suggests that these concerns were largely ignored. The nature of contemporary school-level leadership suggests that these positions are no longer viewed as attractive career advancement opportunities by the educators most qualified to occupy them (Bush, 2022; Fusarelli et al., 2018). It should be incredibly concerning to everyone working in K-12 education contexts that the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) felt compelled to release a policy document urging their member countries to enact strategic policy measures to recruit and retain high quality school-level leaders (OECD, 2008). Unfortunately, the issues identified in that report that are encouraging high quality candidates to eschew

pursuing their dreams of leading K-12 schools have only become more pronounced in the past couple of decades. For example, prospective school-level leaders in many jurisdictions are provided with little financial incentive to pursue these positions as increases in pay are often far outweighed by increases in responsibilities and workload (OECD, 2008). The prospect of working long hours (Beusaert et al., 2023; Department for Education, 2014; Pollock & Wang, 2020; Wang & Pollock, 2020), managing multiple accountabilities (Pollock & Winton, 2016; Wang et al., 2021) as well as navigating increased levels of workplace conflict (Crossfield & Bourne, 2018; Vestal & Torres, 2016) and labour strife (Ryan, 2010; Winton & Pollock, 2013) hardly seems worth it for many potential school-level leaders. These considerations not only intensify the work of school-level leaders and heighten emotions they experience, but impact the desirability of these positions in meaningful, often negative, ways.

Perhaps part of the reason why the next generation of potential school-level leaders are reluctant to commit to a career in school administration is because they are unprepared for the deep emotions and heavy emotional labour associated with the role. I spend much of Chapter 6 of this book arguing for more comprehensive and nuanced coverage of the emotional aspects of school-level leadership in both professional learning opportunities and leadership development programs. It is impossible for faculties of education to ensure that prospective school-level leaders are sufficiently prepared for rigours of school administration when leadership development and professional learning opportunities lack an understanding of the emotional aspects of these positions (Bolton & English, 2010; Gmelch & Gates, 1998; Schmidt, 2010; Wallace, 2010). I am hardly the first scholar to make these ‘emotional’ pleas to the folks charged with preparing school-level leaders. For example, others have suggested that the totality of the emotional experiences school-level leaders encounter in schools should be fundamental aspects of both leadership development programs and professional learning opportunities for individuals currently in these roles (Bolton & English, 2010; Gmelch & Gates, 1998). Ensuring the school-level leaders are prepared for the emotional aspects of their work is the first step in providing them with meaningful supports and ensuring they do not reluctantly sacrifice their own health and well-being as part of their efforts to drive school success.

Effective training and preparation for prospective school-level leaders also ensure that they have a solid understanding of the expectations and realities of leading schools in contemporary times prior to pursuing a career in the profession. This line of inquiry exploring the emotional aspects of school-level leadership is designed to generate data and analyse information in ways that can assist prospective school-level leaders in making informed decisions about their current and future career prospects. Further, how can school districts identify suitable candidates and groom next generation of school-level leaders without a comprehensive understanding of the emotional experiences they encounter on a daily basis? Finally, how can faculties of education claim to teach educational leadership when they are painting an inaccurate picture of the work, workload and challenges associated with contemporary school-level leadership.

Without inquiring into the ways school-level leaders experience emotions, emotional labour, and emotional regulation, those claims are tenuous at best.

Methodology

I include quotes from current school principals to illustrate and expand on key themes that emerged from my exploration of the literature surrounding both the factors heightening the emotional aspects of school-level leaders work (Chapter 4) as well as the strategies they use to manage their emotions (Chapter 5). Before moving forward with the rest of the book, it is important to briefly describe the methodology used to collect that data, as well as the steps involved in the data analysis process. Data reported in those chapters is derived from semi-structured interviews with six principals in Manitoba, Canada. I begin by outlining the procedures used to recruit participants and generate the research sample. Then I describe the sample of elementary and secondary school principals that participated in this research before concluding this section with a detailed explanation of the data analysis processes.

Sampling Procedures

A purposeful sampling approach was utilized to recruit the principals that participated in the original research reported in this book (Robson & McCartan, 2016; Springer, 2010). Merriam (2009) indicates that, ‘purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned’ (p. 79). As such, it was important that all participating principals were willing to engage in an honest and candid conversation about the emotional aspects of their work and how they cope with the competing priorities and demands associated with being a school-level leader. I also employed two additional eligibility criteria when recruiting principals to participate in this research study. First, each participant had to be currently employed as a school principal in a Manitoba school division at the time the interview was conducted. Second, in response to evidence that suggests that it can take some time for principals to become familiar with the demands of the position (Leithwood, 2012; Shamir, 2011; Walker & Carr-Stewart, 2006; Walker et al., 2003), I determined that each participant must have at least three years of experience as a school principal prior to data collection. I also made attempts for the sample to include a gender balance to account for the ways in which gender can influence the ways individuals enact leadership and experience emotions (Beatty, 2000; Blackmore, 2004; Hochschild, 1983; Sachs & Blackmore, 1998; Schmidt, 2010). Further, it was also important to recruit a sample that accurately captures the great variety of socioeconomic, demographic and geographic contexts in which Manitoba principals work.