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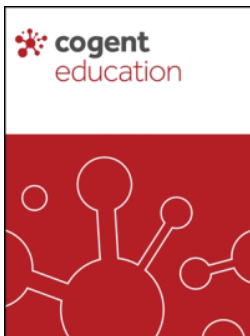


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EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reinventing identity in transition from principal to professor: a collaborative autoethnography

Forrest Kaiser^{1*} and Jennifer Bailey²

Abstract: School leadership is a fast-paced job where stakeholder feedback is frequent, and decision-making requires quick thinking and strong organization. When school leaders transition from practitioner to scholar, they face a dramatic change in pace and responsibility. Unlike their peers who come from academia, practitioner-scholars experience a unique context and career shift that requires navigating unfamiliar organizational structures and translating existing skills into new contexts. This collaborative autoethnography explores the lived experiences of two junior faculty who recently transitioned from the campus principalship to the tenure track professoriate during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a process of individual writing, group reflection, and shared analysis, common themes emerged from the data, including expectations, relationships, and identity. The research discusses processing unfamiliar experiences in academia, negotiating the re-identification of self, and developing new attachments during the shift from doing the work to supporting and advancing the field.

Subjects: Educational Research; Study of Higher Education; School Effectiveness & Improvement; School Leaders & Managers

Keywords: autoethnography; educational leadership; identity; principal; professoriate; junior faculty; transition

1. Introduction

School leadership is a fast-paced, intense, and consuming position that requires quick decision-making, strong organization, clear communication, dynamic relationships across a wide range of stakeholders, and a laser-sharp focus on student outcomes. With this experience in hand, terminally degreed school leaders may transition into higher education to prepare future educational leaders, and in doing so, make a dramatic shift from the rapid pace of leadership to a role focused primarily on research and teaching. These individuals begin a distinctive journey in learning a new role within the unique frame that is academia. Here, the former practitioner and now scholar must quickly acclimate and shift from the work of doing to the work of supporting and advancing the field.

With an increasing need for responsive and well-prepared leaders to promote school change, junior faculty transitioning from the field are in prime position to advance practice and conduct meaningful improvement research in the school context. Levine (2005) highlighted the need for

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these individuals in his ground-breaking study, finding that school leadership preparation programs were overwhelmingly reliant on adjunct professors for practitioner experience, with only six percent of full-time faculty having served as principals. While some institutions have seen improvement in this area (Tolman et al., 2019), identifying a clear path of socialization in the transition from leader to scholar remains ambiguous.

1.1. AIM of study

This collaborative autoethnography explores the lived experiences of two junior faculty who recently transitioned from the campus principalship to the tenure track professoriate. Situated within the construct of Kolb's Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984), this study seeks to explore the impact of experiential learning on identity and organizational attachment of educational leaders. The research questions guiding this study are:

- (1) What are the experiences of new tenure-track faculty as they transition careers from public school leadership into higher education?
- (2) How do participants frame or establish new learning experiences to navigate and reconceptualize identity as an educational leader?
- (3) How do participants frame or establish new learning experiences to navigate and reconceptualize organizational attachment as an educational leader?

1.2. Theoretical framework

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (KELT) has been widely used in educational arenas and influenced adult learning practices (Bergsteiner et al., 2010). Published in 1984 and since refined, Kolb's theory revolves around a synergistic, four-stage cycle of learning and four learning styles housed in the learner's cognitive processes. This study extracts the cycle of learning as the focus to situate, contextualize, and provide sensemaking of the participants' lived experiences and simultaneous learning in moving from the principalship to the professoriate. As such, the cycle is categorized through: Concrete Experience; Reflective Observation; abstract Conceptualization; and Active Experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Bergsteiner et al. (2010) explain that "Kolb's theory posits that learning is a cognitive process involving constant adaptation to, and engagement with, one's environment. Individuals create knowledge from experience rather than just from received instruction" (p. 30). Therefore, in relation to this study, it can be argued that much like the principalship, there is no playbook nor manual for success in the professoriate, yet the former principal and now scholar must harness new experiences while shifting from doing to supporting and advancing the field. However, we must look beyond the singular aspect of experiential learning and its demand on cognitive processes (Kolb, 1984) and examine the synergistic influence and impact on affective and social processes, like role identity and organizational attachment.

1.2.1. Role identity

The concept of role or identity is often ambiguous and broad, traditionally housed in a person's sense of purpose in life. Role has been discussed within frames of cultural prescription (Linton, 1936) to social interactions with defined rules (Mead, 1934; Pollard, 1985). However, Marion and Gonzales (2014) argue that "we interpret, we act on our interpretations, we interpret our acts, and from this we define who we are. We constantly present ourselves to others, interpret our presentations, and try to change ourselves accordingly" (p. 218). Moreover, "the identities we develop affect how we respond to situations, how we interpret what we experience, and how we lead and follow with our organization" (Marion & Gonzales, 2014, p. 218).

1.2.2. Organizational attachment

In navigating the construction or conceptualization of role identity through learning experiences, examining Adult Attachment Theory may also explain the social connections individuals form in the workplace and how they function as resources to meet job demands. According to Yip et al. (2017), adult attachment behaviors are a response to seeking individual security. Organizations

may also serve as attachment figures; changes in job position may elicit attachment behaviors similar to those found in individual relationships. Because of this, attachment styles may impact an individual's ability to adapt to new career options, which, in this study, is the transition from the field as a practitioner to higher education as a scholar.

1.3. Review of the literature

Practitioners turned scholars gain a different set of experiences than their peers who come to the position through academia. According to Rosser (2004), the concept of organizational socialization into higher education happens in two phases, with anticipatory socialization taking place prior to being hired and organizational socialization initiated during onboarding continuing throughout a career. In academia, "graduate students observe, participate, and interact with faculty members [to] learn roles and behaviors necessary to succeed as faculty members" (Rosser, 2004, p. 388). However, it can be argued that the practitioners instead maintain engagement in the field throughout their graduate work, resulting in a natural inequity to access of "phase one" through lack of exposure. This lack of exposure could suggest that practitioners discover further challenges navigating "phase two" due to unclear tenure processes, higher education organizational structures, faculty autonomy, institutional and supervisor expectations, and the pressure for scholarly productivity (Ponjuan et al., 2011).

1.4. Identity evolvment within the organization

With the heightened awareness of school improvement efforts since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), there have been extensive studies emphasizing the impact of the school leader within the educational system (Hackmann & McCarthy, 2011). School principals play a significant role in promoting positive student outcomes, second only to highly effective classroom teachers (Branch et al., 2013; Mendels & Mitgang, 2013). According to Leithwood et al. (2004), school leadership contributes up to one-fourth of the overall impact of a total school's student learning.

1.4.1. Identity development

While research has focused attention toward the principal as an educational leader, the principal's self is not often highlighted in educational leadership studies' (Robertson, 2017). Herein, it could be argued that understanding how self translates to identity and positionality is imperative when transitioning into a second career, like the professoriate.

Robertson's (2017) qualitative study examines the principal's transformative process of professional identity through four aspects of self: "thinking, feeling, acting, and believing." As such, she argues that the identity of the principal is situated within a continuum, moving "between perceived identity as a principal, and an ideal perception of what it means to be a principal" (Robertson, 2017, p. 784). As such, the findings revealed identity came from clearly articulated values and beliefs, engagement in reflective practice, and the influence of role models.

Further, Robertson's (2017) findings reveal pertinent considerations in relation to the impact of the "phase two" (Rosser, 2004) confines as the former school leader socializes into academia. First, how does the potential absence of anticipatory socialization impact the development of values and beliefs within the construct of teaching, research, scholarship, and service? Moreover, to what extent does this same absence of exposure to higher education's organizational structure, practices, and expectations impact reflective practice? To this point, resonating with the tenets of Kolb's (1984) learning cycle, Guskey and Yoon (2009) argued that adults must experience success to solidify learning, bringing forth and positioning Robertson's (2017) influence of role models.

1.4.2. Connection to the organization

Tierney and Bensimon (1996) suggested that junior faculty are socialized into the institution through their interactions with peers and senior faculty. Researchers suggest that professional relationships impact work satisfaction (August & Waltman, 2004; Settles et al., 2006; Xu, 2008); attrition (Ambrose

et al., 2005; Callister, 2006); and success in the tenure and the promotion process (Bilimoria et al., 2008; Williams & Williams, 2006). In context, Hackmann and McCarthy's (2011) study revealed that while a majority of the professors surveyed indicated they consulted with colleagues in their departments, this was less likely for faculty of color, research faculty, and faculty without administrative experience. Instead, these four groups indicated "higher instances of consulting with colleagues at other universities" (Hackmann & McCarthy, 2011, p. 151). However, in relation to Levine's (2005) findings of faculty without school leadership experience, Hackmann and McCarthy (2011) suggested that "novice faculty in 2008 seemed more oriented toward teaching [and] were more likely to have been school administrators and to be hired in clinical roles" (p. 246).

Hackmann and McCarthy's (2011) study brought forth considerable insight to the shift in the educational leadership professoriate, extending the impact of Levine's (2005) implications for the field. As such, the pendulum swung from criticism regarding too much emphasis on research and theory throughout the 1980's and 90's driven by disciplinary specialists to suggested overcompensation in hiring experienced school administrators focused on teaching but lacking in research to advance the field. It could be argued that Levine's (2005) findings jolted the educational leadership community, as the numbers demonstrate a 100% increase from the mid-1990's to 2008 in the number of faculty reporting school leadership experience. However, in relation to the concerns of advancing the field beyond teaching, Hackmann and McCarthy (2011) found that "faculty who had been school administrators were more than twice as likely as faculty without such experience to report that they had devoted no time to research" (p. 272).

1.5. Moving from practitioner to scholar

A number of scholars have investigated the evolution of the educational leadership professoriate and programmatic responses to the growing need to prepare school leaders (Immegart, 1990; Murphy & Vriesenga, 2006; Schneider, 2003). The landscape has shifted to include more practitioners, become more diverse with an increase in women and minorities, and increase programmatic instruction from clinical faculty in lieu of the tenure-track. However, several areas of uncertainty have been exposed, especially within the context of the practitioner-scholar and the implications for research advancement in the field and for P-12 student success (Hackmann & McCarthy, 2011).

As such, there is an absence in the literature and a subsequent need to further examine the transition of the practitioner-scholar within the declining representation of the tenure-track line. Highlighting their considerations, this study extends Hackmann and McCarthy's (2011) characteristics of the educational leadership professoriate through situating intentional reflection of the professoriate through the lens of Kolb's experiential learning theory and the synergistic influence on affective and social processes, like role identity and organizational attachment. With the numbers on the rise in response to needs within educational leadership preparation, this insight could provide implications toward the social, emotional, and cognitive supports for junior faculty to guide institutional and organizations considerations.

2. Method

This study applied collaborative autoethnography to explore the lived experiences of former campus leaders as they transitioned into a second career as tenure-track faculty. The selection of this approach allowed a reflective journey through identity, attachment, and contextual learning. The auto in autoethnography encourages participants to describe past memories and discoveries while the ethno shifts the participant role to that of researcher seeking to gain a fuller understanding of the phenomena through a cultural analysis (Adams et al., 2017). Autoethnography situates participant-researchers as insider experts that move beyond storytelling to use personal experience as context for the analysis of cultural values, norms, and practices (Anderson, 2006; Ellis et al., 2011). When done collaboratively, researchers invite a wider view into the experience and share a mutual accountability in purpose, process, and outcome (Chang et al., 2013).

Writing is a tool that is both creative and analytical, allowing for inquiry, data collection, and the exploration of meaning within complex situations or phenomena (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). As a research approach, autoethnography opens the self to examination, eliminating the anonymity foundational to other methods (Ellis, 2007; Lapadat, 2017). This visibility is essential to providing an articulate and trustworthy narrative that is able to speak beyond the research into the lives of others who share the experience (Anderson, 2006). With the participant-researcher looking both inward into the experience and outward toward greater social and cultural connections, there is a need for intentional systems for analysis to prevent the work from simply becoming an autobiography (Winkler, 2018). For this endeavor, initial narrative data were shared, reviewed, and examined in context with the literature prompting further reflection and inquiry. The process was iterative; continually moving between an exploration of self to the findings of prior researchers on career transitions, identify framing, and organizational attachment.

The use of collaborative autoethnography to explore experiences interacting within the culture, relationships, and dynamics present in higher education is not new or novel (Guillaume et al., 2020; Hernández et al., 2010; Kniess et al., 2017; Potvin et al., 2021). While shared data collection and analysis is a common feature, collaborative ethnography can take many forms (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). For this study, the participant-researchers chose a concurrent model where work moved between individual writing and sense-making to group sharing and exploration (Hernandez et al., 2015). As a form of qualitative inquiry, autoethnography requires a different lens when considering trustworthiness (Holt, 2003). Le Roux (2017) suggests that rigor is increased when an autoethnography is centered on a credible and resonant narrative presented with subjectivity and self-reflexivity. This study used thick descriptions within the narratives, member-checking between researchers, and multiple data sources through journaling, focus group interviews, re-storying, and secondary focus group interviews to support trustworthiness.

Initial data was gathered through individual journaling using reflective questions and journaling prompts derived from the literature and guided by the research questions. Following journaling, the participant-researchers engaged in re-storying before reviewing shared the narratives together to identify common connections to the literature and develop further prompts for re-storying and collaborative review through a tiered focus group. This process was repeated to prompt further exploration of the described experiences and engage in clarifying discourse. Data analysis followed a similar path, with an initial independent analysis of the text and recordings prior to a collaborative thematic analysis where emergent themes connected the underlying narrative language to the literature. To provide a rich picture of the participant's experiences, all data sources including initial narratives, re-stories, and focus group transcripts were analyzed when conducting the thematic analysis.

2.1. Participants

Interest in this study was initiated by Jennifer Bailey, who as a new tenure-track faculty desired exploring the transitional pathways of others who also moved from positions in campus leadership. A snowballing technique was used with professional colleagues at other institutions to identify others with a similar situation and interest. Jennifer was connected with Forrest Kaiser, who had recently started a second career in higher education. Initial conversations on the topic led to further discussions about common experiences shared between participants as they navigated the transition into a new work culture. The pair was interested in continuing the exploration of how prior work identities and socialization as campus leaders framed the development of new identities as junior faculty.

2.1.1. Forrest Kaiser

Shortly after completing his doctoral work in the Spring of 2020, Forrest joined the faculty of a R2 doctoral research university as an assistant professor of educational leadership. He had worked in public schools for 22 years, nine of which involved serving as principal in four different schools on the elementary and secondary levels. His career in education started by teaching English at a large

Texas high school. At the encouragement of colleagues, Forrest transitioned into administration in 2007 after earning his M.Ed. and principal certification. During his career as an administrator, Forrest served as principal of a fine arts magnet school, a campus under required improvement, and was the founding principal of a newly created middle school campus. Although the job involved significant pressure to perform, Forrest enjoyed the work and built a personal sense of work identity through campus leadership. Initially planning to move into central administration, the decision to enter higher education was a challenging one. Again, the support and encouragement of colleagues and former mentors prompted Forrest to apply. In some ways, the interview process was an inquiry in itself, allowing Forrest to process a new role through the lens of those who are currently in it. Interested in the possibility to develop future leaders and engage in further research, Forrest opted to take the position once it was offered.

2.1.2. Jennifer Bailey

Jennifer completed her doctoral work in the Spring of 2013. While she knew she ultimately wanted to move into higher education at some point, Jennifer's passion for the school improvement process led her to stay in the public-school system for seven more years, moving from a central office director role to elementary principal for two turnaround campuses. Her career in education started by teaching English and ESL at a mid-size Texas high school, where she was encouraged by administration to grow into leadership roles with instructional coaching and coordinator for co-curricular programs. Instead of her anticipated pathway to the principalship, Jennifer's journey took her to an administrative role at a regional comprehensive university. Here, she worked in an USDOE funded partnership between the university and 25 campuses focused on improving English learner instruction through professional development and instructional coaching for principals and teachers. This position then led to the opportunity to serve as the bilingual director and build a dual language program, but with the varied experiences, Jennifer knew she still wanted to serve as a campus principal and utilize the skills she had developed in promoting organizational change. That move came with an elementary campus that was historically failing and under improvement required status, which Jennifer stayed at for three years before moving to another troubled campus for the next two years. During this time, Jennifer also served as an adjunct professor for a principal preparation program and was looking for the right time and place to move into higher education. That opportunity came in 2020, and she accepted a position with a R1 institution.

2.2. Data collection

In order to capture the lived experiences of the participant-researchers and explore the relationships, culture, and practices operating within the transition to higher education faculty, data were collected through reflective journals, focus groups, and a re-storying exercise (Adams et al., 2017). The systematic and reflective process of telling and retelling allowed the collection of focused narratives describing the individual and collective experience of reforming personal concepts of role and place within a new context.

Initial data collection began with the development of individual journals guided by a set of reflective prompts to elicit thoughts, remembrances, and epiphanies about both the principal and faculty roles. The questions were open-ended and provided a safe starting point to begin the conversation about feelings of accomplishment, loss, uncertainty, and personal growth. Journal texts were shared prior to a 90-minute focus group session where the participant-researchers provided an overview of the writing while responding to probing questions to further explore and clarify the text. This session was recorded and transcribed as a supplement to the journals as written. The first focus group session brought out additional experiences, relationships, and emotions within the role transition and provided the foundation for a second journaling exercise in the form of a re-storying. Both participant-researchers reframed their narratives bound by the time their tenure clock began to focus the data specifically on role expectations, social interactions, and sense-making in a new context. Re-storied journals were then shared in a second 90-minute focus group session which was recorded and transcribed.

2.3. Analysis

Data analysis began as an individual activity where the participant-researchers conducted a constant comparison analysis to review journals, transcripts, and recordings first holistically and then as distinct artifacts (Chang, 2016). Data were chunked into meaningful collections of statements and provided a descriptive code. Emergent codes were developed inductively, allowing both participant-researchers the opportunity to explore and organize the data independently while identifying exceptional occurrences, epiphanies, and relationships within the text. A secondary review was conducted collaboratively through a classical content analysis using the previously established codes to identify recurring themes and patterns (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Codes connected to similar language from the text were consolidated and then categorized (Saldaña, 2016). Categories were then organized into major themes framed through the literature within the model of Kolb's experiential learning, role identity, and attachment theory.

3. Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of two junior faculty in their transition from campus principalship to the tenure track professoriate. The research questions guided data collection and examined participant experiences during the transition, learning experiences that framed or established identity, and learning experiences that framed or established organizational attachment. Through a process of individual writing, group reflection, and shared analysis, the following three primary themes emerged from the data: (a) Expectations, (b) Relationships, and (c) Identity.

3.1. Expectations

Higher education has an overarching culture and contextual framework that outlines organizational expectations and relationships. The participants in this study sought to gain clarity through ambiguity and came to embrace the unknown as a part of a path toward greater learning. While there are written policies in place, expectations were best illustrated through practice. Embracing this ambiguity meant becoming intentional with organizing time, internalizing efficacy, and navigating tenure as an ongoing process. Each new experience increased contextual understanding and yet brought about a new set of questions for what lay ahead.

Moving from the role of principal where days operate on schedules and school years have distinct seasons, organizing and managing time as a faculty member required a different perspective on individual accountability. Neither role has a high level of day-to-day oversight or supervision, but public-school administrators are responsible for providing timely data reports and giving routine presentations on campus goals and student progress. Both participants felt they now had greater control over their schedules than was ever possible on campus. The freedom was initially daunting. As Jennifer shared:

I had all this time. I didn't really know what to do with it because I also moved from being very task oriented as a principal. Here's a list of things I need to get done, this is what needs to be checked on, this is what I need to follow through on.

There were no longer tight schedules and constant interruptions throughout the day that hindered productivity. Instead, interruptions were replaced with large blocks of time for writing, course development, or interacting with students. Both participants were surprised by the need to put structures in place and schedule times for different tasks to ensure they got done. As a principal, it was important to work within the small slices of time before the next teacher, parent, or student came through the door.

Cautiously navigating tenure requirements and learning to internalize a personal sense of accomplishment helped slowly give shape to the grey outlines of expectation. Coming from a role where both felt responsibilities were more clearly defined and observable, understanding the faculty role was more individual. As Jennifer reflected, "I think you also go through an organic

process to discover what you need through the faculty role, but that was a hard thing for me to digest coming out of something very tangible and black and white.” The annual review process came early for both but allowed the opportunity to visit with department chairs about markers for progress and success. This was an important step in gaining clarity as Forrest shared: “We all have a job description, we all received an offer letter with our responsibilities, but there’s no manual that really states what those expectations are or what they like in actual practice.” Hearing supervisors describe the many paths toward tenure helped make it seem more tangible.

A secondary effect of the review process was a reassessment of professional efficacy. The participants left positions where they felt successful and competent. Their new roles moved them from experts to neophytes. As Forrest mentioned: “Moving into this new role felt like being a new teacher again. I didn’t know what I didn’t know.” While frustrating, a desire to grow and excel also served as a motivation. Jennifer remembers receiving initial feedback on her progress as a faculty member:

You have to start somewhere and you’re learning, but this was a really hard learning curve for me. I came from being really successful into something that I wasn’t [producing publications]. It was just a really big slap in the face for me, but it also gave me a kick in the rear end to go.

The learning curves discussed relate to Hackmann and McCarthy’s (2011) findings in previous school administrators reporting little time devoted to research. Here, the new demands of teaching and scholarship for both participants suggest influence on identity evolution within the organizational structure. Rather than depend on outside sources for feedback on performance as previously experienced within the school community interactions and accountability systems, the participants found the faculty role centered more on finding personal satisfaction within the job. Common aspects included working with students or appreciating the value of a productive writing session.

3.2. Relationships

Relationships were a continual theme that tied together many of the other statements shared during initial coding and analysis. Relational descriptions branched between mentoring connections structured for learning and social connections dependent on positioning the self within a larger workplace community. Learning relationships centered on self-advocacy, finding expert mentors, and learning by doing. Community relationships described the process of building connections with others while working through initial feelings of isolation.

Because of how principals promote in the education field from the classroom to administration, mentoring relationships are often woven into the job either informally through working relationships or more formally through professional organizations and cohorts. As Jennifer shared, “I had so many mentors I could call and ask, a former superintendent, former deputy superintendent, people I made very good relationships with. I could call them on the drop of a hat.” For practitioners turned faculty, the move to higher education takes place differently. The job is more independent and as such requires less daily professional interaction. Even with this independence, connections with others proved essential in building context. As Forrest shared, “Much of what I have learned about the role so far has been through observing and interacting with others.” Whether direct or indirect, peer connections played a significant part in shaping Jennifer and Forrest’s perceptions on the faculty position.

Both participants spoke to working through feelings of inferiority and fear of initially asking too much of others. This was not in response to peer experiences but rather due to an internal desire for competency. When speaking with his former colleagues in P-12 education, Forrest recalled sharing, “Staff would ask how I was doing, and I would say, I am good, but don’t love it yet. What I really meant was: I am not sure I did the right thing here.” Early on, formal mentors were

assigned by the university to assist with the transition into higher education. While these relationships helped reduce anxiety and increase a sense of belonging, understanding context remained an issue. As Forrest recalled, “Everyone was really friendly and willing to share, but I really didn’t know what to ask when I had the opportunity. Even after working over 20 years in education, I felt like a new teacher again.” Fortunately, department chairs offered additional support and understanding through the process. As Jennifer recalled about her chair, “she checks in with me, but doesn’t push and so I’m able to share freely with what I need and then also fill in my own gaps as I need to as well.”

While peers were open to giving counsel when available, constraints on time and in-person access due to the COVID pandemic added additional constraints to developing meaningful social relationships within the workplace community. This was difficult coming from a more socially active job of the principalship. As Jennifer shared, “I think the pandemic has exacerbated this aspect, but the isolation is deafening some days. Being a principal is a lonely job ... but the professoriate is isolating. It’s a solo job that is mainly you and the computer.” Because of the pandemic and social distancing, opportunities for collaboration had been infrequent and difficult to come by. Informal discussions to foster social connections were limited as meetings and professional conferences were held online. Wanting more, the participants found it important to be intentional in seeking out relationships outside the university. Connections with other new faculty at different institutions based on common research interests provided an empathetic outlet to share concerns, ideas, and support. These connections also created accountability for scholarship productivity by forming writing groups and research teams related to school leadership in addition to connections for resources and mentors within specific areas each may need, like writing feedback, sponsorship, or access to service or scholarship opportunities.

3.3. Identity

As campus leaders, both participants felt holding the principal position contributed significantly to a professional sense of identity and influence. Playing a central role in the operation of a school building supported the development of personal attachments to both position and workplace that were perceived as lost by moving into a more autonomous faculty role. The exploration of identity within transition promoted a shift where prior skills and experiences were translated into new contexts. Rather than completely reform self into a new role, participants found they were able to build a bridge where prior experiences formed a foundation into a new way to impact the field. In this way, the search for identity and place within the field of academia worked to establish purpose and objectives beyond the school building.

The need to reshape prior skills came early in the learning process. Coming from positions where participants felt competent and equipped to meet daily job challenges, new expectations, and responsibilities compelled a reframing of experience. As Jennifer shared, “The expert was once the beginner, and I know a lot of my unease is strictly personal with not feeling successful at what I am doing ... I literally felt I went from juggling all the balls to having no balls and not knowing what to do.” As prior structures and processes translated into the faculty position, time management and organizational skills provided the earliest benefit. While school administration is highly task oriented, results-driven, and bracketed by time, the schedule and pace in higher education has a larger scope and lengthier timeframe that requires daily attention to keep on track. As Forrest mentioned, “Campus principals are on call almost all the time, which can be a little stressful and tiring. Professors are not really on call at all.” Reframing experience helped provide focus to the learning process. As Forrest added:

I realize I am not learning new skills as much as I am translating my current skill set into a new context. Just like tools that can be used for multiple purposes, I am finding the skills I learned as an administrator are helping me in my new role.

While still a work in progress, the translation of skills worked to provide a foothold on other aspects of the position.

An important aspect of identity involved reorganizing purpose in terms of school improvement and positioning self within academia. The pace of school administration often promotes a more reactive approach to decision-making. As faculty, the participants found they had greater time to reflect on how their work could support the work of practitioners in the field. As Forrest shared, “I really appreciate the ability to have time to explore and reflect. While school administration has an aspect of planning, there is very little time set aside to do so.” The desire to stay relevant was also an important factor in identity. Jennifer noted, “I struggle with the fear of being irrelevant ... I know the frustration I had as a principal in reading research and recommendations for improvement that were so disconnected due to the researcher’s own perspective and lack of experience.” Networking with former colleagues in P-12 education and reflecting on prior issues as a practitioner has helped retain a baseline level of connectivity to the field.

As comfort and context in the new faculty role continued to increase, both participants were able to see how their work may provide a benefit to practitioners. Moving beyond a single school, there was a new sense of personal value established in proactively providing resources for others doing the work. As Forrest shared, “Unlike administration where you are solving problems created by others, I felt that research was proactively seeking and investigating issues that could potentially impact actual practice.” This concept of identity within academia helped shape participants’ sense of identity and influence. This concept of identity within academia helped reaffirm participants’ sense of value from prior experience, as they were able to use their practitioner knowledge to advocate best practices, support current practitioners, and develop new leaders. As Jennifer noted, “While it is not a replacement nor will ever be the same as the principalship, I am slowly learning how to reframe and shift my lens on the impact I can have as a professor.” This was assisted by finding an area of interest within current research to act as a guidepost for future work. The participants found the faculty role allows an opportunity for greater influence through improving structures and practices within the entire field. This change in perspective has offered a significant breakthrough in how the participants view the impact of their future work in education as scholar-practitioners.

4. Discussion

There is no road map in the transition from practitioner to scholar. Navigating unfamiliar organizational structures and translating existing skills into new contexts can provide a difficult path. Understanding the factors and influences at play may help practitioners make the transition into academia where their prior skills and experiences could prove valuable for future students in school leadership.

School leadership candidates benefit from quality preparation programs (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). The results of this study further explore prior research by Levine (2005) who noted how programmatic effectiveness increases when faculty possess tangible experience to support learning. Understanding the issues faced by practitioner-scholars could assist higher education institutions in recruiting and retaining faculty with significant experience in the field (Hackmann & McCarthy, 2011). Although the ratio of practitioner-scholars has increased in the years following Levine’s work (Tolman et al., 2019), transitioning individuals from principal into tenure-track faculty remains an area where additional support could increase the desirability of such a significant role change. Support may include more formalized mentoring programs, clarified defined and observable expectations, and frequent feedback on progress within the first year. As former school leaders seek to continue a sense of professional efficacy, support structures that emphasize the role of experience and assist in understanding potential impact beyond the school building could have value.

4.1. Career transition experiences

Individuals create knowledge of self through navigating social and environmental experiences (Bergsteiner et al., 2010; Kolb, 1984). The participants in this study shared paths of reflective

learning drawn from expectations and relational contexts notably different from their prior roles. Transitioning to tenure-track faculty from the field emphasizes the fundamental structural differences between academia and school operations. Lacking the anticipatory socialization experienced by peers coming from academia (Rosser, 2004), practitioner-scholars instead work through organizational socialization while simultaneously encountering the nuances of organization itself.

School leadership is independent yet socially centered. Constant stakeholder interaction offers feedback loops that encourage reflectivity in practice and accelerate the process of learning role and context (Kolb, 1984). In contrast, the more isolated role of faculty member holds a reduced opportunity for feedback that may impact the opportunity for organizational attachment and learning. In addition, diminished perceptions of proficiency may mute the desire to self-advocate when opportunities arise. The temporary professional regression felt by practitioner-scholars highlights a need for more deliberate support structures in terms of peer relationships and mentoring in the initial stages of transition.

4.2. Role identity

Research has established that successful experience supports learning (Guskey & Yoon, 2009); however, there are considerations beyond basic attainment and how these experiences impact identity. Grounding Robertson's (2017) transformative process in the development of self through "thinking, feeling, acting, and believing," the participants in this study shared how isolated and compounded experiences influenced their evolving identity. Through an extension of the transitional lens, the practitioner-scholar moves through a reframing of their identity not only through a new role and title, but also through a newfound re-establishment of self-efficacy. As suggested by the thematic elements of both participants' voices, moving from a role where one felt confident as leader to navigating new organizational structures, guidelines, and expectations may lead to an unanticipated disconnect of the self (Robertson, 2017). Here, implications for intentional support in exploring new practitioner-scholar's socio-emotional needs while engaging in the socialization process and gaining insight to the organizational expectations may mitigate the concerns of insufficient research and productivity beyond teaching highlighted by Hackmann and McCarthy (2011).

4.3. Organizational attachment and learning

Leithwood et al. (2004) suggest the principal's role as having a significant impact on learning, while Yip et al. (2017) discuss adult attachment behavior as a response for seeking security. Both are relevant to examine in the context of transition from school leader to scholar. The participants' experiences indicate gateways that impact the developing scholar identity and subsequent attachment to the organization of their new environment in higher education. The role of mentoring supersedes the traditional lanes of research, service, and teaching. For moments of vulnerability, the affective filter (Krashen, 1985) strengthens relational connections and promotes growth in a supportive environment.

While natural connections are made within departments and colleges, the shared examples provide considerations in intentional opportunities for senior faculty to socialize junior faculty outside of the standard tenure and promotion process. Connecting Guskey and Yoon's (2009) point that success solidifies learning and Robertson's (2017) influence of role models, the intentional focus may situate the new scholar within a frame of socio-emotional learning experiences (Kolb, 1984) that synergistically impact identity development and organizational attachment.

5. Conclusions

The educational leadership professoriate has evolved significantly over the past two decades, with responsive measures in response to research (Hackmann & McCarthy, 2011; Levine, 2005) to improve practices; however, the aim of this study was to bring the junior faculty voice forward and provide an example within context to the transition for those scholars coming from the field.

While this study is only two voices and cannot be generalized, the insight could provide implications toward the social, emotional, and cognitive support for junior faculty to guide individual, institutional or organizational considerations.

Healthy or not, the role of principal contributes highly to a professional sense of identity. Practitioner-scholars lack exposure to the systems and structures of higher education and as such may experience greater challenges when entering academia. Future research could further explore this phenomenon to develop and solidify intentional pathways for this transition. Although there is no playbook we may conveniently turn to, faculty can lean into and learn from one another to support, encourage, and navigate new territory and experiences together.

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