

## Leadership Identities, Attributes and Roles of Primary School Principals: A South African Case Study

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**ABSTRACT** This study explores how primary school principals describe their leadership identities, their best attributes and their perceived key roles and responsibilities. Although there is a great deal of literature regarding what is expected of school principals, little is known about how they perceive their roles and responsibilities. The participants in the study included fifteen primary school principals from Limpopo and Mpumalanga Provinces in South Africa. Semi-structured interviews were used to generate data. The findings from this study indicate that the best personal attributes of the principals have an influence on their self-perception as leaders and on how they describe their relationships with other stakeholders. The principals in this study identified curriculum implementation as their key responsibility even though they do not see themselves as instructional leaders.

### INTRODUCTION

Educational reform in many countries has resulted in changes in the roles of principals from those of traditional management and administrative responsibilities to curriculum and instructional leadership. School reform in the twenty-first century has brought about many transformational changes, including inclusion reforms that call for strong and effective leadership by school principals (Cohen 2015). In most education systems the roles and responsibilities of school principals involve their ability to manage by objectives, undertake strategic planning and make data driven decisions (Provost et al. 2010). Principals are expected to create a school atmosphere that is conducive to effective teaching and learning with the aim to improve learner achievement (Dös and Savas 2015). School principals are responsible for coordinating and managing changes to the school system in general (Kotirde et al. 2014). It is further believed that school principals play a key role in implementing curriculum changes, such as the use of technology in teaching and learning (Kotirde et al. 2014).

In the changing South African schools context and in a culturally diverse society, school principals as leaders, need to be motivated by their own beliefs and personal values to have an influence on school communities (Botha 2013). Mpungose (2010) suggests that the value sys-

tems of principals may influence their identities as leaders, their leadership styles and their social interaction behaviour. The mutual social interaction between leaders and their followers could lead to the co-construction of the identities of the leaders (DeRue and Asford 2010). Self-identity of leaders is described by Lord and Hall (2005) as a source of motivation, internal strength and a driving force that explains the leaders' actions in terms of their roles and responsibilities.

Several studies, including those by Leithwood et al. (2008) and Stringer and Hourani (2016), have identified the roles and responsibilities of school principals, while certain studies, such as that of Goldring et al. (2007), have more specifically explored how principals prioritise and allocate time in performing their different responsibilities in terms of their leadership identity attributes, contextual factors and differences in their working environments. According to Dös and Savas (2015), the teachers and learners in their study maintained that the principal was also expected to motivate all the school stakeholders and establish positive school-community relationships. Scribner and Crow (2012) are of the opinion that interpersonal relationships between principals, teachers and learners - if based on trust and shared interest in teaching and learning - result in the building of collaborative school cultures. Despite the roles and responsibilities of principals that are identified in the literature, little has been written about how

South African school principals construct their leadership identities and describe their leadership attributes and responsibilities. This study is based on the work of Goldring et al. (2007) and explored how principals in Limpopo and Mpumalanga Provinces in South Africa see themselves as leaders and how they describe their leadership attributes, roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, the study attempted to explain the relationship between the principals' self-perception of their leadership identities, their attributes and how they prioritise their responsibilities.

### **Identity Construction**

Scribner et al. (2011) maintain that establishing how school principals construct their identities is useful in understanding the influence of identity on leadership styles. What is expected of school principals as professionals also influences their identity construction (Crow et al. 2016). Some researchers argue that a professional identity develops over a period of time but once it is internalised it becomes a static and enduring feature of the person (DeRue et al. 2009). Crow et al. (2016) believe that the construction of identities by school principals is based on their backgrounds, their school contexts and relationships established through their interaction with stakeholders.

In a school situation, acquiring a leadership identity is a transformation process that teachers undergo in becoming principals (Moorosi 2013). The career transformation from teacher to principal is not a smooth process; some teachers struggle with their self-perception during the career changing process when they move from teaching and learning to an administrative and leadership identity and find that they need to adapt to their new roles (Browne-Ferrigno 2013). While some teachers acquire a new identity through formal training, others learn on the job. Moorosi (2013) reports that at the end of a development programme for principals in South Africa the participants in that study were able to reflect on the improvement in their self-confidence and self-control which suggests that identity construction may occur by reflecting on the professional development process.

It is possible that several factors contribute to the continuous re-construction of the professional identities of school principals. Crow et al. (2016) assert that school principals have multi-

ple identities embedded in personal professional perceptions and their school situations. Factors, such as school rituals, ceremonies and interpersonal relationships, shape the formation of the identities of school principals (Crow et al. 2016). DeRue and Ashford (2010) maintain that the construction of leadership identity involves three elements, namely: individual internalization, relational recognition and collective endorsement. They further believe that individual internalisation is the self-realisation of personal leadership attributes which are shaped by social interaction and the context in which the leaders work. Relational recognition concerns the roles that leaders need to adapt to in carrying out their responsibilities and collective endorsement is the sense of belonging to a particular social group in a particular social context. According to DeRue and Ashford (2010), the relationships established between leaders and followers influence the construction of leadership identities. Changes in education policies; the expectations of the stakeholders; and the inspiration and encouragement that they receive from their role models shaped the way that the principals in the study by Mpungose (2010) defined themselves and their roles as leaders. Moorosi (2013) suggests that mentors in a development programme for principals are instrumental in helping participants to acquire leadership skills and to nurture their leadership identity development. The study also indicates that contextual factors, such as location, socio-economic status, type of school, race, gender, class and educational background may influence and shape leadership identity construction. Saarukka (2014) is of the opinion that the identities of school principals are shaped by social interaction and their personal abilities and traits as well as organizational factors.

### **Leadership Attributes**

Certain studies associate successful school leadership with the personal attributes of the principals. Saarukka (2014) identifies personal traits, such as listening skills, empathy, trust, patience and the ability to deal with stress - amongst others - to have an impact on the leadership identities of school principals. The attributes of a successful school principal, according to Crow et al. (2016), include accountability, emotional intelligence and commitment. In a

study by Dös and Savas (2015), the participants identified a good sense of humour, hard work, the ability to motivate others, objectivity in decision-making and tolerance as good leadership characteristics. Moorosi (2013) differentiates leadership attributes in terms of gender: female principals' strengths in the study were identified as approachability, openness, the ability to work in a team and being open to consultation; the male principals' attributes, on the other hand, were identified as leading by example, having a clear vision and being more assertive – amongst others. Although certain female and male attributes have been associated with successful leadership, Goldring et al. (2007) suggest that personal attributes do not seem to have a significant influence on the work of the principal and they recommend further research to examine the influence of personal attributes on the work of principals. In their study contextual factors have more influence on the time the principals allocated to the different responsibilities when compared to their personal attributes.

### **Roles and Responsibilities of School Principals**

The literature describes the role of principals as multi-dimensional, dynamic and complex. Scribner and Crow (2012) found that principals cited multiple abilities, such as being a “teacher at heart” a “sergeant” and a “father” - depending on the circumstances, when communicating with teachers and learners. These descriptions show the multiple and diverse roles played by school principals. Leithwood et al. (2008) identify four roles of principals: building a vision and setting direction; understanding and developing people; redesigning the organisation; and managing teaching and learning. Performing the multiple roles would seem challenging and even appear conflicting in terms of the limited time that principals have to carry out their responsibilities. Balyer's study (2014) on how principals prioritise their roles in Turkey reveals that the principals who participated in the study considered administrative duties and guiding the daily school routine as their primary roles. The other roles that were mentioned by the principals, but not given much attention due to time constraints, were shaping the future of their schools using their schools' vision; the professional development of teachers and other staff members; and

improving relationships between their schools and the community.

In the South African education system school principals are held accountable for high learner achievement and the effective functioning of their schools (Marishane 2011). The roles of the principals involve developing the future vision of their schools; nurturing and developing their schools' cultures; and managing stakeholders and curriculum changes. The participants in the study by Provost et al. (2010) respected principals who were able to management by objectives; plan strategically; and make data driven decision. This implies that principals are expected to perform multiple roles which are time-consuming and need to be prioritised as they include traditional management tasks, instructional leadership and curriculum implementation - among others (Marishane 2011). Balyer (2014) suggests that administrative tasks appear to be more important to principals than teaching and learning and recommends that there should be a balance between principals' administrative and managerial roles. Since principals are expected to perform multiple roles and they bear a heavy responsibility - as suggested in literature, this study has explored how the principals' perceptions of their identities as leaders determine how they prioritise and perform their expected roles.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The main project, on which this paper is based, is on-going collaborative research between the University of Pretoria (UP) and the North East Normal University (NENU) in China on the roles and functions of principals. This paper reports on the qualitative data extracted from interviews with fifteen primary school principals - seven from Limpopo Province and eight from Mpumalanga Province in South Africa. The semi-structured interviews were used to generate data on the principals' self-perceptions of their leadership identities, their attributes and their roles and responsibilities. It focused on the following three questions only:

1. How do school principals describe themselves as leaders?
2. What do school principals describe as their best attributes?
3. How do principals perceive their roles and responsibilities?

The sample for the original study was seven male principals and eight female principals from selected primary schools in Limpopo and Mpumalanga Provinces in South Africa. Purposive and convenient sampling was used to select the principals who were from public schools within a 100km radius of Pretoria. They were also the principals who were recommended by the circuit manager - based on their experience which ranged from 3 to 25 years. Their names and email addresses were obtained from the relevant circuit offices of the Limpopo and Mpumalanga Departments of Education. Permission to do the research was obtained from the relevant departments, circuits and schools. The University of Pretoria Ethics Committee provided ethical clearance to conduct the study. The principals from the Limpopo schools are referred to in this paper as LA to LG and the principals from the Mpumalanga schools are MA to MH.

In preparing for the interviews, the researcher gave the participants the list of pre-prepared questions one day in advance of each interview to help them recall memories of specific events in their lives (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015). At the start of the interviews the researcher explained the aim of the study as well as ethical issues, such as confidentiality, anonymity and the voluntary participation, to the participants. The researcher then distributed consent forms to the participants to sign, giving their permission to participate in the research. During the interview process the researcher took notes in the form of research memos which included non-verbal information. After completing the interviews, the participants were given an opportunity to ask questions, make comments and add any information that was not discussed during the interviews. The researcher then transcribed and analysed the interview responses (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015). In order to increase the accuracy, credibility and rigor of the study, the researcher involved other project members in peer reviews during the data analysis and interpretation processes to further increase credibility and to limit possible bias.

## RESULTS

The findings related to the three research questions, cited above, are given in terms of the participants' responses to the questions.

### Principals' Self-perception of their Leadership Identities

When the principals were asked to describe how they see themselves as leaders some of them referred to their different approaches to leadership. The majority of the principals perceived their leadership identities as democratic, autocratic and participative; some described themselves as innovative, happy, passionate, visionary and dedicated leaders - as reflected in the following quotations:

*I do see myself as a democratic leader who is passionate about children and that is why I do believe in balance. I want to be involved in everything - whether it is decision-making, picking up paper, cleaning the toilets, sports - I want to participate in everything (Principal LC).*

*I know myself. The following are the characters making me a leader: I am autocratic when implementing decisions taken unanimously. I don't compromise principles. I am equally democratic; people will make inputs and give directives. I always respect and expect to be respected (Principal LD).*

*I would describe myself as having a vision to take this school further. Eh, with my vision, I want to see this school operating like a Model C school because it has been proven to be the best (Principal MA).*

The diverse way in which the principals describe their leadership identities implies a lack of standardised training and development of leadership identity. The principals seem to have different bases for how they perceive their leadership identities; leadership identities were described in terms of how they responded to different situations and how they related to learners and teachers in their schools. They personalize their leadership identities which were unique in all the schools involved in the study. Some described themselves as leaders, based on the nature of the relationship that they had with their teachers and the learners:

*You cannot just say that I am going to operate democratically even if you see that democracy is taking the school down. I use to say that if you want to get good music you play both black and white notes but if you say that you will play the quarter notes alone your music will not be balanced (Principal LA).*

*Everything, and anything, if you came in and ask me about the shoe donation, I will tell*



you: "Mam, it is for the children." The opposite is that not everyone has the same mind set so it is for the children when it suits them but for me it is always for the children (Principal LC).

The findings of this study show that while some relationships appears to be assertive and the exercise of the legitimate position power of principals was evident in other relationships, there was a caring approach towards the learners which influenced the principals' behaviour. The type of relationships established was based on the personalities of the individual principals in the absence of standardized guidelines and training.

The data also indicated that the relationship between the principals and their teachers appears to be grounded in values, such as openness; doing the right thing; being fair, firm and strict; mutual respect; having a positive attitude; being passionate about the learners; and working hard:

*As a leader you must be simple and do the right thing. I tell people that even if the situation warrants that you must duck and dive, do not duck and dive. My policy is being the person you are, whether it rains or not whether people are happy or not happy you must do the right thing (Principal LA).*

*Me, as a leader, how am I? I'm tough, getting what I want using the directives; I insist on working relationships; I respect other people (Principal MA).*

Relationships grounded in commonly shared values and the awareness of the right thing to do further suggest a lack of a unified structure in terms of relationships that should be promoted in schools for effective teaching and learning to take place. Some of the principals included their strength and weaknesses as they described their leadership abilities:

*I'm thinking my strength is that I am a hard worker. I finally do the work which is not supposed to be done by the principal. The only weakness I have is that this thing of being a hard worker ends up making me think that other people are reluctant to do their work (Principal MD).*

*When I want things to be done, I want it to be done immediately – I don't want to waste time waiting for things to be done. I think I make myself clear when I delegate task and my expectations are very high (Principal ME).*

It seems that not all principals believe in delegating responsibility. It appears that there is lack of trust and confidence in the teachers to perform their delegated tasks as expected by the principals. The above quotations suggest the possibility that principals are overworked due to their lack of confidence to delegate responsibilities.

### Principals' Best Attributes/Qualities

The principals in the study described their personal traits and values that underpinned their relationships with other stakeholders as their best attributes. Some of the personal traits mentioned were: being good listeners; commitment to their work; and being innovative, punctual, empathetic and reasonable:

*My best quality is that I am a good listener and I have good communication skills. My approach is democratic whereby I allow all role players to express their opinions during meetings. In terms of meetings, I send out a circular with the proposed agenda for other educators to add their inputs (Principal LB).*

*I am really understanding and easy to relate to. Some teachers say that they are afraid to come to me but I am a person who listens and is very accommodating and I am really empathetic (Principal LF).*

Most of the discussion concerning the best attributes of the principals was related to values that governed their relationships with others, such as good communication skills and being enthusiastic, approachable, trustworthy, accommodating and accountable. Personal characteristics based on values appear to work well in establishing and promoting good interpersonal relationships. Some principals also spoke about motivating, empowering and encouraging teachers. One principal explained his best attribute as an approach that focuses on the human spirit:

*That is the human spirit and you need to continuously focus on the human spirit, start to find out what makes people tick? You try to find, what are their weak points and what are their strong points? Then you focus on their strong points (Principal LA).*

Another principal cited assertiveness in getting teachers to perform their duty:

*I need to decrease my empathy, feeling pity for educators and make sure that I make time to act. I sometimes feel that people should be given an opportunity to change. This is not easy for*

teachers who do not do things promptly (Principal LE).

Yet another principal spoke of non-negotiable things and of being strict or even harsh - depending on the circumstances:

*I am an open-minded person. I am a little bit strict in sticking to policy - especially the non-negotiable ones, like the teacher must be in school and in the classroom and not abuse learners. The same applies to learners, they must be in class in time and learning and they must respect their teachers and do their homework (Principal LB).*

Principal LC referred to learner-centred leadership that is driven by compassion and a care for teaching and learning:

*My main concern is to care for the children and my staff should help me in caring for the children. My work is to ensure that the learners get their 7 hours. Instead of giving the learners 7 hours I spend most of my time in the office dealing with grievances. This makes me unhappy (Principal LC).*

The findings of this study show how leadership in schools is diverse, based on what principals believe are their best attributes and how these attributes influence their emotions and the roles they play as school principals. A lack of leadership training programmes may contribute to the different types of attributes that the principals rely on as sources of reference with regard to how they perform their roles and responsibilities.

### **Key Roles and Responsibilities of Principals**

One of the aims of this study was to explore what principals perceive as their key roles and responsibilities. All the principals, who participated in the study, gave priority to leadership in teaching and learning in terms of their core responsibilities. They cited their commitment to curriculum implementation and explained how they made class visits and worked closely with school management teams and heads of department in managing teaching and learning. They are also involved in managing teaching and learning resources, staff development and in motivating teachers and learners. One principal said:

*I am in charge of curriculum implementation. I make sure that all teachers attend workshops to capacitate themselves with CAPS and*

*also curriculum so that they must be up to date. I have meetings with the SMT to discuss the curriculum matters. Where there is a shortage of textbooks. During the meetings we, the SMT, discuss where there are some challenges in a particular subject after the subject meetings (Principal MF).*

Another principal commented:

*It's about general administration and management of the school as a teaching and learning institution. I am supposed to make sure that day-to-day activities that are contained into the school plan are adhered to and fulfilled at the end of each day. (Principal LD).*

The principals maintained that they were accountable for learner achievement. One of them said:

*So the department wants things to be done. No matter how much you have. They are always talking about the curriculum that must be managed and that the principal must know what is going on in class. You have to do class visits. You have to moderate. I have to come up with teachers and do some improvement strategies (Principal MH).*

The principals spoke of their management roles and responsibilities and gave examples of what they do, such as managing time and school finances and attending to their administrative duties. A further important management task discussed was managing teachers in terms of monitoring, supervising, coaching and supporting them. Apart from the teachers, some of the principals were passionate about motivating learners and encouraging parental involvement in school activities. Other management responsibilities involved liaising with the community and the Department of Education. The principals also serve on the School Feeding Programme Committee and the School Governing Body. The following are some comments that reflect the perspectives of the principals:

*My managerial responsibilities involve managing resources, managing buildings, managing learners, managing educators and even parents who come to see to it that the school takes a direction where it will develop and give good results (Principal LA).*

*The feeding programme is the work of the principal. If a child gets sick it is the problem of the principals to investigate how the food was stored and prepared; did the cooks use gloves;*

*did thy wear masks and so on. The principal's time is taken away* (Principal LC).

*I am managing the school as a whole giving advice to some of the teachers; and as well as an ex-officio in the SGB where we deal much with school issues. My key responsibility is management, the overall management of the school and curriculum management; the human resource management, those are the key* (Principal MC).

One principal asserted that her work was driven by policy and that it was her responsibility to ensure that relevant school policies were developed and implemented:

*As a principal guided by various policies, such as SASA, EEA and SACE, the constitution being the supreme law and other laws and policies such as finance policies. I make sure that all the policies are implemented* (Principal LB).

A different perspective, reflected in the following quotations, was that the Department of Education does not work according to policy:

*If the Department of Education was following the prescripts as per the Employment of Educators Act it would be easy. Unfortunately, the environment makes it difficult as the principal because you would be required to do part of the job which is not within your job description* (Principal MB).

*The school has become a social welfare business. When the ministers want to lodge something they ask the principals to do it. For example, when it came to circumcision of boys or immunization it was the responsibility of the schools to manage it. My core business is teaching and welfare officers must do their job* (Principal LC).

In this theme there is evidence that reflects the confidence principals have in how they manage their schools. Although they are aware that they are accountable for the teaching and learning that takes place in their schools, they expect more support from the Department of Education and social services. There are also some aspects of what principals are expected to do, such as provide social support for learners, which are outside the roles and responsibilities of school principals.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that some of the factors that influence and shape how prin-

cipals construct their leadership identities include their knowledge of, and belief in, different leadership styles. Some principals associate their leadership identities with democratic, autocratic, situational or participative leadership styles (Gonos and Gallo 2013). Murakami et al. (2016) maintain that some principals describe their leadership identities as democratic. According to Mendez-Morse et al. (2016), the backgrounds of the principals seemed to influence their leadership identities when they reflected on their own school experience as coloured students. Therefore, the principals' interpersonal relationships with their teachers and learners which influenced their leadership styles appear to be based on their personal values and past experiences. Self-awareness and self-knowledge of the principals is an important factor in the leadership identities and the professional work of principals (Saarukka 2014). Murakami et al. (2016) suggest that the positive and negative background schooling experiences of the principals in their study influenced how they constructed their identities as leaders. This means that principal preparation programmes should take into account individual differences in the background experiences of the principals. The findings of the current study also suggest that values, such as mutual respect, empathy and shared responsibility, not only determine the relationship between the principals and other stakeholders but appear to be linked to how the principals describe their leadership identities. The leadership identities of principals, constructed from their personal experiences and values, seem to have an influence on their roles and responsibilities. This finding is consistent with that of Mpungose (2010) who suggests that the professional identity of school principals influences their abilities and capabilities.

In the study on which this paper is based, the participants attributed their successes to the ways in which they performed their roles and responsibilities. Mpungose (2010) reports that participant principals described their best personal attributes as the ability to accommodate, and work with, their teachers. DeRue and Ashford (2010) are of the opinion that the self-realisation of the personal leadership attributes of school principals shape their social interaction and the context in which they work as leaders. Studying the construction of the leadership identities of the principals is important because it provides an understanding of the behaviour of

school principals. Factors that influence the construction of effective leadership identities of school principals should be part of training programmes and policies that define the roles and responsibilities of school principals.

With regard to key roles and responsibilities, the principals in this study identified curriculum implementation and ensuring the quality of teaching and learning as their main tasks. The findings also suggest that there is increased pressure from the Department of Education for curriculum implementation that places more emphasis on the instructional leadership role of the principal. Marishane (2011) notes the importance of instructional leadership in promoting teaching and learning and the pressure on schools to be accountable for learner achievement. Despite the focus on teaching and learning, some principals still regard their key responsibilities as management, administration and liaising with the community. Some of the principals added that they were involved in doing work that was not part of their job description and which increased their workload.

The findings of this study suggest a possible link between some of the principals' self-perceptions of their leadership identities, their best attributes and their roles and responsibilities. For example, Principal LA described his leadership identity as a situational one with a moral aspect to do the right thing; his best attributes are: being open, flexible, firm, straight forward and focusing on doing the right thing. His key responsibilities are in management, followed by teaching and learning. A second example is Principal LB who described herself as a democratic leader whose actions and decisions are driven by the mission and vision of her school and by policy guidelines. Her best attributes are good communication skills, team work, being task oriented and sticking to policy. She described her key responsibilities as policy implementation, monitoring the implementation of the school plan and following protocol in ensuring the smooth running of her school. This suggests that her leadership approach is more task-oriented and less relationship-based. The third example is Principal LC who sees himself as a democratic leader whose leadership approach is child-centred. His best attributes are compassion for learners and promoting the human spirit of the teachers. The key responsibilities of this principal are teaching and learning as

well as learner achievement which suggests that his leadership is based on an ethic of care for the learners. The fourth principal, Principal MF, described himself as a visionary leader whose best attribute is establishing sound interpersonal relationships and whose key roles and responsibilities are curriculum implementation and improving learner performance. His leadership approach is based on good interpersonal relationships aimed at achieving a vision. The fifth principal, Principal LD, perceives his leadership identity as autocratic; his best attribute is the ability to accommodate his disappointment in teachers and his main responsibility is adhering to the principals' job description - as stipulated in the Educator Employment Act (EEA) and the Personal Administrative Measure (PAM). The other key responsibilities of this principal are seen as general administration and the management of the school, followed by teaching and learning. This particular principal's approach to leadership and policy is task driven.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has explored how primary school principals described their leadership identities, their best attributes and their perceived key roles and responsibilities. The findings of this study suggest that the best personal attributes of principals have some influence on their self-perception as leaders and how they see their relationships with other stakeholders when performing key roles and responsibilities. Even though most of the principals seemed to prioritise curriculum implementation as their key responsibility, they do not see themselves as instructional leaders. The role they play as instructional leaders appears to be superficial; it is not internalised or used as part of the description of who they are as leaders. The principals appear to carry out their responsibility of curriculum implementation to adhere to the policy stipulation of the Department of Education while they place their leadership identities within other leadership frameworks, such as democratic, autocratic, participatory, ethics of care and task or people-oriented leadership.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the majority of the principals regard curriculum implementation as their key re-



sponsibility, they are unable to perform this role effectively due to managerial and administrative demands. It is recommended that

- the Department of Education should consider employing administrative clerks to assist school principals.
- for principals to perform this responsibility effectively they should acquire knowledge and skills for their instructional leadership roles.
- for principals to be effective instructional leaders, they should internalise the attributes which enhance instructional leadership.
- because instructional leadership is time consuming, the Department of Education and other departments should consider alternative means of promoting their projects in the schools to avoid overburdening principals with work which is outside their job descriptions.

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