Factors Influencing Assistant Principal Motivation to Pursue a Principal Position in an Era of Accountability

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Statement of the Problem:
The assistant principal position is a stepping stone to the principalship in many school systems. The position is underutilized, as many assistant principals are relegated to managing routine administrative functions and student discipline (Schmidt-Davis and Bottoms, 2011, p. 24). Research has reported that experience as an assistant principal in the principal’s current school is associated with higher performance (Rebelen, 2009), and previous experience as an assistant principal in any school is associated with longer tenure as principal (Young and Fuller, 2011). These findings beg the question “If these findings are true, why do assistant principals preclude themselves from candidacy for a promotion?”

Research Question 1
How does Self Directed Motivation Theory (intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation) influence the decision of an assistant principal to pursue a principalship?

Findings
The assistant principals in the study demonstrated intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy based on the nature of their roles as well as the graduate study that it took to attain them. Additionally, they appreciate and accept professional challenge. These elements of the hypothesis are
accepted. However, the assistant principals in the study do not feel prepared to assume a principal position, thus rejecting this element of the hypothesis.

Career assistant principals felt comfortable as assistant principals, not as future principals. The role that assistant principals function under offers much exposure to the structural needs and leadership of the organization. However, that exposure does not entail academic leadership, which is a requirement of the principal position.

Research Question 2
How does high-stakes accountability (No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, Achieve NJ) influence an assistant principal’s decision to pursue a principalship?

Finding
Accountability was a factor in the decision-making process when assistant principals with five or more years of experience made a decision to pursue a promotion to a principal position. However, the measures of accountability, specifically as it was promulgated in the regulations for the most recent Achieve NJ legislation, lend oversight to all administrative positions, not just that of the principal.

Assistant principals reported professional accountability to be a factor in the decision-making process. Additionally, they considered the comfort of an assistant principal position to be advantageous regarding the evaluation of their performance as compared to the principal position. The assistant principals in this study neglected the logic that the principal drives instructional leadership, student outcomes, and the accountability rating for their performance. Assistant principals did consider the ability to drive student outcomes and their own performance ratings as reasons to pursue a principal position.

Research Question 3
What other factors would influence an assistant principal’s decision to pursue a principalship?

Finding
Family Construct
Family responsibilities and dynamics have a strong influence on assistant principals. Study participants reported the needs of young children and spouses to be greater than the desire to pursue a principal position.
The understanding of the time commitment that is required to satisfactorily serve as a principal was a strong influence on career assistant principals.

**Work-Role Satisfaction**

Assistant principals in the study reported enjoying their role. There was a significant lack of desire to pursue a principal position among the majority of study participants. This can be attributed to satisfaction in the role being currently served coupled with the feeling of unpreparedness for the skills required to be a successful principal due to the responsibilities that have been delegated to them by their current principals. The current experiences allow for role stabilization but do not increase preparedness.

**Court of Public Opinion and Political Influences**

Assistant principals were not prepared to navigate negative public opinion or local political influences. Their strong preference was to work in isolation apart from political influences. Further, they appreciate the level of buffering that takes place from the principal as well as the district administration that allows them to focus on structural management.

**Personal Perception of Principal Position**

Assistant principals in the study perceived the principal position as a professional pitfall and see the merging of academics and politics coupled with a decrease in teacher and student contact to be unappealing. Assistant principals perceived the principal position as unattractive and one that lacked flexibility, in large part because of the responsibilities connected with the position as the result of Achieve NJ and No Child Left Behind. Ultimately, there was little that was perceived to be advantageous to being a principal.

**Compensation**

Personal compensation factors in the form of annual salary do not influence assistant principal motivation to pursue a principal position. Not only do the assistant principals in the study consider their pay to be appropriate based on the role that they serve, they also consider the principals in the districts they serve to be undercompensated for the responsibilities connected with the position.

**Recommendations for Practice**

School principals need to place their assistant principals in the position to be successful as it pertains to both the assistant principal position and the principal position. The role of the assistant principal needs to be reflective of what would be required and expected of the principal. The current format of focusing assistant principals on the management and structure of the organization needs to be examined. Rather, the role needs to be one that offers less breadth of responsibilities and more depth of documented leadership responsibilities, coupled with demonstrated instances of growth and improvement of teaching and learning.

The intent for the assistant principal position should be to develop those who have the ability and skill set to be future principals. Assistant principals have to engage in tasks that are academically inclined and focused on outcomes of teaching and learning. As the position is constituted, the assistant principal is charged with doing any task that a principal deems necessary, oftentimes without connection to the overall mission of the organization. Adhering to student outcomes as it relates to the role of assistant principal is critical to improving the skill set of this important position.

**References**


**About the Author**

Dr. Brian B. Brotschul is the Principal of Linwood Middle School in North Brunswick, NJ. Additionally, he has served as a High School Principal, Director of Academic Support and Enrichment and Assistant Principal in North Brunswick Township. He has earned a Doctorate Degree from the Seton Hall University Executive Doctoral Program in K-12 School Administration.