

Chapter 4

Situation Selection: How Principals Engage in Strategic Thinking to Influence Their Own Emotions and Those of Others

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ABSTRACT

The ability to effectively manage one's emotions has become a fundamental work demand for leaders in a variety of professions, including principals and other school leaders. Framed by Gross's Process Model of Emotional Regulation, this study explores how secondary school principals engage in strategic leadership by utilizing strategies related to the situation selection family of emotional regulation. While prior research associated strategic leadership in schools with efficiencies that can be gained when engaging in management-based tasks, such as allocating resources, recruiting staff, and practicing instructional leadership, the findings of this study suggest that principals have had to learn to be strategic in other aspects of their work, especially in terms of how they manage themselves, their time, and their emotions. Several implications for policy and practice arose from this study, including the need to expand the academic definition of strategic leadership so it is better aligned with the realities of contemporary schooling.

INTRODUCTION

Managing emotions – both their own and others, has become a fundamental work demand for principals and other school leaders (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Brennan & Mac Ruairc, 2011; Crawford, 2007; Cliffe, 2011; Gronn & Lacey, 2004; Niesche & Haase, 2012; Pratt-Adams & Maguire, 2009; Poirel & Yvon, 2014; Rhodes & Greenway, 2010; Roffey, 2007; Ryan & Tuters, 2015; Schermuly, Schermuly & Meyer, 2011). In addition to managing emotions, the work of contemporary principals also demands strategic thinking (Cheng, 2010; Davies & Davies, 2004; 2006; Eacott, 2008; Glanz, 2010; O'Connor, 2017; 2018). Scholars have noted the increasingly complex nature of principals' work since the dawn of the 21st Century (Begley, 2008; Leithwood & Day, 2007; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999; Metlife, 2013). Further, principals' work involves managing competing demands from several stakeholders, heavily relies on verbal communication, and is often composed of a series of brief, fragmented tasks that occur at a fast pace (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2012; 2014; Bezzina, 1998; Horng, Klasik, & Loeb, 2010; Leithwood & Azah, 2014; Tulowitzki, 2013).

Principals also have to contend with a growing workload that is constantly evolving in response to societal shifts and contextual changes in the educational terrain (Cheng, 2010; Kafka, 2009; Miller, 2016; Pollock, 2016). Some of those societal shifts influencing principals' work include an increased awareness of mental health and wellness (Iachini, Pitner, Morgan, & Rhodes, 2015; Poirel, Lapointe, & Yvon, 2012) and the reliance on text messaging, e-mail, social media and other forms of digital communication (Author & Colleagues, 2018; Cho & Jimerson, 2017). The climate surrounding the educational sector is also shifting as principals are tasked with managing multiple accountabilities to several different stakeholders (Armstrong, 2014; Pollock & Winton, 2016) and schools are increasingly being asked to respond to diverse student needs (Ryan, 2010; 2016; Shields, 2010). The cumulative impact of these shifts and changes has heightened the need for principals to both effectively manage their emotions and engage in strategic leadership. This research explores how principals engage in strategic decision-making to manage their own emotions, and actively (and intentionally) manipulate their perceived emotional state to influence their behaviour of others.

FRAMEWORK

Taken together, the notion of strategic leadership and Gross' (1998, 2001, 2002, 2010, 2013, 2014) process model of emotional regulation provide the framework for this study. Each piece of the framework is discussed throughout the remainder of this section.

Strategic Leadership. Despite Eacott's (2008) call for unity regarding several competing definitions of strategic leadership, there is tension regarding the vague and elusive nature of the concept (Carter & Greer, 2013; Cheng, 2010; Eacott, 2010a). Understandings of strategic leadership in the education sector may be "incomplete and muddled because research and writing in the field have approached strategy from a narrow and conceptual-flawed position" (Eacott, 2008, pg. 367). For example, Eacott (2010a) found that academic definitions of strategic leadership are not aligned with practitioner perceptions or rooted in the realities of contemporary schooling. He notes that, "the scholarship of the topic describes a role that is different to the one the principals believe they are enacting" (Eacott, 2010a, pg. 438).

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