

A Qualitative Study of A Middle School Principal's Experience

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Abstract

This study suggests that the relationship between the personal and professional identity of a school principal is impacted by how she perceives herself and her school. The researchers use a grounded theory approach to analyze data presented in the form of a blog posted by an urban, middle school principal. The participant's experiences were objectively interpreted by the researchers who had to bracket their own experiences as school administrators. The data was deconstructed through rigorous coding and a theory developed through intercoder reliability and close analysis. The conclusion confirms the need for further research as to how principals' professional and personal identity interact.

Keywords: grounded theory, professional identity, middle school, school principal

A Qualitative Study of A Middle School Principal's Experience

How does a principal view the principal's job and role in a school? What are the constructs through principals interprets events? This study was conducted to learn about how one middle school principal views herself and her work. Our qualitative analysis suggests that a principal's professional identity relates strongly to the principal's personal identity and influences how school building leaders view their work and their relationships within their school organizations.

Method

This descriptive study employed a qualitative, grounded theory approach in the Starusian tradition (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) in order to develop an understanding of how a principal views her work and herself.

Participant and Data Source.

The data from our study comes from a principal's autobiographical blog. The blog resides on MiddleWeb, an organization devoted to middle school education. The author of the web, from urban Champaign, Illinois was selected by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform to write the blog because her school was selected as a "School to Watch" by the organization. She was subsequently chosen "Middle School Principal of the Year." Telling the story of her experiences as principal of a middle school, Carol's bi-weekly entries begin at the start of the school year and each successive entry recounts events and reflections from the previous one. Since she is not writing frequently enough to detail the progress of her experiences as they unfold, each of the entries follow a contained story line, and relate anecdotes and observations from her school and life.

Procedures.

We used an approach to data analysis consistent with grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). That is, we examined the data by coding it through open and axial coding, in order to develop a focus from which to derive categories of meaning. Those categories were further submitted to selective coding to identify relations and develop a mid-range, grounded theory.

The blog transcripts were analyzed for recurrent themes by two researchers (one an elementary school principal and the other a central office administrator) and, through a process of individual analysis, comparison of results and dialogue, a coding structure was developed and then refined. With repeated coding, saturation of the data was achieved. Having a single data source, and faced with the inability to ask questions, our methodology involved a recursive process as we tested the logic of our initial constructs against the data on successive re-readings of the blog postings.

We bracketed out our own experiences as administrators while coding and during the analysis of the selectively coded data. As we sought to draw conclusions from it, asked ourselves whether we had achieved the level of theoretical explanation (Creswell, 2007, pp. 160-161). We evaluated our categorization of the data for validity and potential generalizability. This required us to utilize our own experiences.

Findings

Carol's experience of school life, as narrated in the blogs, is highly impacted by the rhythms of the school calendar. Her entries are timed around breaks in the school week and school year, with upcoming vacations and weekends becoming framing events for her autobiographical narrative. "No sooner am I waving to our kids driving away on their school

buses and wishing them a great summer,” she relates in her first entry, “than I’m meeting them again as they come through the August registration line!” Weekends and holidays serve as references for her narration about school life: “I keep hoping for one more Indian summer weekend,” “Thanksgiving is around the corner,” and “as we approach winter break.” Only once does she use the school calendar as a guidepost, referring to the middle of the first 10-week marking period as having its “highs and lows.”

The school day itself provides additional structure for her conceptualization of her life as a principal. She reports on the long days she works, arriving at school at 6 a.m. in the morning, the same time as the head custodian. Weekends are filled with school activities. She relates how in order to find solace from her busy schedule, she happened into a church one Sunday, where the service was conducted in Spanish, a language she did not understand. Figure 1 illustrates the concept of “Time” and its constituent properties, as reflected in Carol’s narrative.

[Insert Figure 1 about here.]

She relates how there is no time to reflect, and that special effort has to be made to do so. “One of the things I believe is most important for anyone in the education field is to find time to reenergize and focus.” In Carol’s telling, this pressure impacts teachers as well, as she wants to “acknowledge the tremendous pressures and commitments our teachers . . . face at work.” Much of her narrative is about the things that drain the energy out of her. She indicates a longing to find a “proper balance” in her life, though from her blog entries, it appears that the demands of her work at school appear to win out.

There always appear to be pressures on her time. Whether it is the pressure of events at the start of school, “we only had a week and a half to prepare for Open House,” or discussing

how she spends her evenings, “for all principals, no matter what the level, finding a weekday evening without school activities and obligation become a necessity.” Even planning professional development requires creative thinking about the “jam-packed week.”

[Insert Figure 2 about here.]

A second theme that emerged from Carol’s blog related to how she is always taking on new tasks. These “initiatives” involve collecting data on discipline referrals and analyzing them for patterns using disaggregated state testing data to improve student test performance. She chooses to turn faculty meeting time into an opportunity to have small focus groups of teachers working together, and she chooses to run the seventh grade group herself. She relates how she is always “devouring” research and information to improve programs. All of this in the context of “leaving no stone unturned” to be a better school. All of it placing demands on her energy and time.

Her hard work is a property of how she sees herself as a good principal. She drove the completed Blue Ribbon application to the State Education Department office herself, organizes a visitation by representatives of a middle grades reform group, and attends a weekend recognition ceremony to receive the Award of Merit from the Illinois State Board of Education. Winning these awards and receiving external recognition for her school and work is another property of being a good principal.

[Insert Figure 3 about here.]

Carol’s sense of identity has both a public and private dimension to it. The values she expresses in the blog, such as concern for others, a desire to succeed, and a commitment to her work, all derive from her role as principal. The expressed stressors in her life, around constraints

on her time and the desire to be viewed as successful at her work, are related to her role as a principal. In turn, her construct of what makes a good educator impacts her view of her teaching staff. She values teachers who give of their “own time,” by attending professional development outside of the school day for no compensation. She also values her administrative team for getting an early start each school day. The school’s dean is at his desk by 6:30 a.m., and the assistant principal is home making substitute teacher phone calls at the same time. She feels energized “when we see each other up and ready together to meet the day’s challenges as a unified front.”

Discussion

If the only evidence we had about the experience of a principal came from these blogs, we would have to conclude that a principal’s personal identity is dominated by a concern for professional identity. We cannot make that generalization from this single sample. However, the results of our analysis suggest that professional identity is an important component of who principals believe they are. In particular, Carol’s self-worth, what she values about herself, (i.e., what she believes makes a good principal) impacts how she constructs her view of her work and her role in the school. This is a dimension that we could study with additional subjects and follow-up with interviews with her, if we had that opportunity.

We were surprised by the absence of tension or conflict in Carol’s narrative of her principalship. In the combined 55+ years of educational experience between us, neither of us had experienced a semester that was conflict and tension free, as it was for Carol as she reported in her blogs. From our professional experiences, we are aware that as school leaders push for change, the discomfort created in some of the staff leads to tension and conflict. If we had the opportunity to question Carol, we would ask questions about the types of interactions she has

with students, parents, staff and other administrators. We would probe for both positive and negative interactions and how she felt about them. This level of discussion is absent from the blog data, thus leaving our understanding of a large component of her view of herself and of her principalship incomplete.

Conclusion

Administrators need to be aware of the way professional identity can impact personal identity. Administrators who want to be reflective, should be able to differentiate between their own professional and personal lives, and be aware of how the two intersect. Our research into the experience of one principal suggests that additional research on this theme would be productive. We would want to compare our findings with the research literature on principal identity and to develop a more refined set of research questions. Additional theoretical sampling might include other middle school principals from a range of geographically and/or demographically diverse schools, and possibly principals from other levels. Alternatively, a larger sample from schools similar to the one from this study could be used to determine how much variability in the categories is due to the individual characteristics of the principal's sampled.

References

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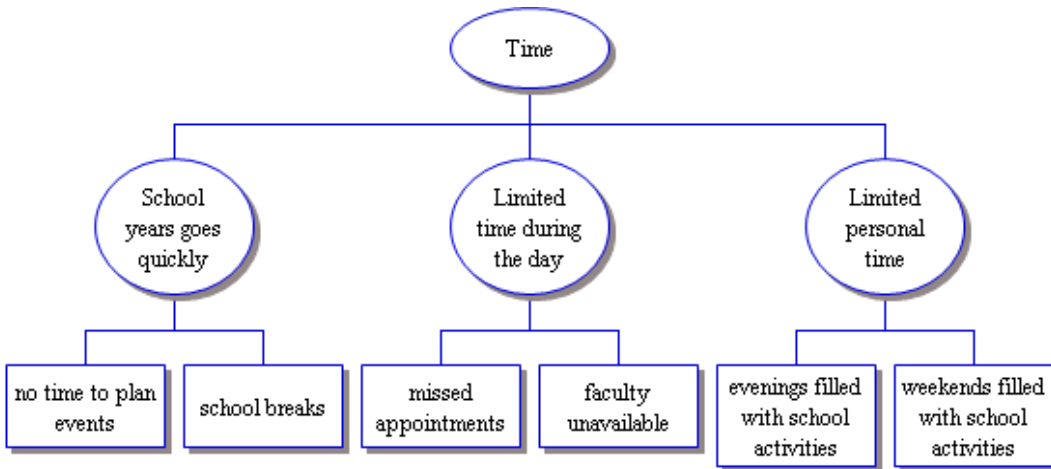


Figure 1. Properties of the Concept of Time

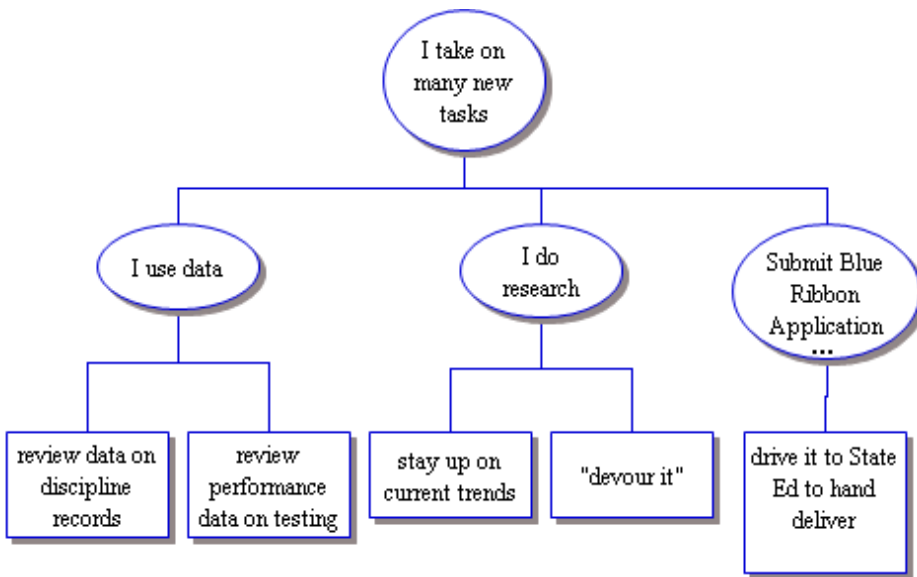


Figure 2. Properties of the Concept of “Taking on New Tasks”

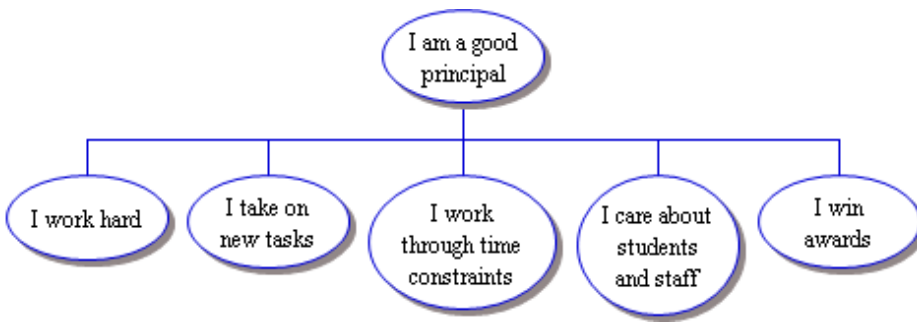


Figure 3. Emerging Core Category of a Principal’s Professional Identity

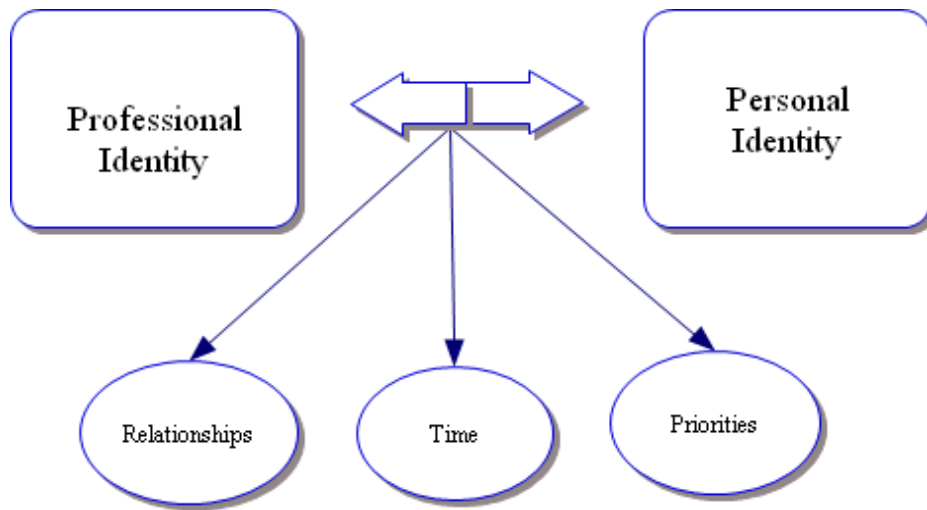


Figure 4. Emerging Theoretical Formulation of a Principal's Identity

Methodological Addendum

Prior to viewing Red Owl's coding videos on March 18 & 19, 2011, we had selected the same middle school principal's blog found at <http://middleweb.com>, as a data source. We both selected the second set of data written by Middle School Principal, Carol, of Jefferson Middle School in Champaign, Illinois. Her first entry was written one week into the start of the school year and her final entry was written soon after school ended for the summer break. The 20 entries describe and discuss her experiences, in context and through reflection, in the course of routine dealings and events at the school and within her personal life, often exposing her values.

At this time and not knowing we would be working together, over the weekend of March 18th, we both read all 20 blogs and, using a grounded theory approach, micro and in vivo coded the same set of data. During the first read through, Ivy found the entries to be very trite and had difficulty bracketing her judgments and biases. As someone who holds the same position in a school, it was evident to Ivy that the participant was holding back some or any of the unpleasant situations that take place in a school building on a regular basis. For example, there was never mention of student altercations, bullying, poor teaching, upset parents, or any situation that a principal would like to forget at the end of a day. Her picture was too rosy. The participant implied in each blog entry how hard she works. It was becoming increasingly more difficult for Ivy to remain objective. The participant annoyed her and not having the opportunity to clarify some of her thoughts and experiences became frustrating for Ivy.

David organized his data as Red Owl suggested in the video – using the four column organizer (Appendix A). Ivy printed out the blog entries and micro and in vivo coded the data by hand on a hard copy (Appendix B). Because objectivity was hard for Ivy to develop, she tried to refrain from coding during the first read through but began jotting quick memos by the third

blog entry. Ivy continued to reread the blogs and code by hand. David continued to code on the four column organizer. Both David and Ivy segmented at the paragraph level.

Monday, March 21, 2011 – In class, we decided to work together since we both read and micro and in vivo coded the same set of data. David copied his data onto Ivy's data stick so the data could be merged. Ivy decided she would type her hand written codes onto David's document. Red Owl explained that since time was limited, they did not have to code the entire blog and we could code some together and some of it individually.

We agreed that a natural break in the data would be the holiday recess in December, which included the first eight blog entries. We decided to merge our data for blog entries 1 and 2 and then individually code the remaining data for purposes of this assignment. David coded entries 3, 4, and 5 and Ivy coded 6, 7, and 8. We were comfortable doing this because we had each read through and micro and in vivo coded the entire blog prior to collaborating. We briefly discussed some of the biases we had since we have both been administrators for a fairly long period of time and how it might be difficult to bracket them from this process.

Tuesday, March 22, 2011 – Ivy added her micro and in vivo coding to David's document (Appendix C) using a different font, in order to determine whether or not different patterns and themes emerged from what David had already indicated. At the micro and in vivo levels, there were many additional notes. David and Ivy coded many of the same ideas and words so those were not repeated in the merged document. Ivy also included some open and axial codes. David had already included some context-related memos and general memos in the document when it was given to Ivy. David's coding and memos began to indicate a pattern of time-related issues. The participant refers to time in different contexts. For example, she begins her entire blog by referring to a "12 month contract" within the first sentence. In the first entry she also refers to

“the start of the school year” and time associated with solving problems. Ivy interpreted these codes and context-related memos as the participant “tooting her own horn” and implying that she works hard.

Wednesday, March 23, 2011 – Ivy sent the document back to David with her micro and in vivo codes included for entries 1, 2, 6, 7, & 8. Ivy also added some open and axial codes, as well as general memos. David merged his additional open and axial codes and context-related memos with Ivy’s work and sent it back to Ivy for additional coding. We both noted how this principal makes a point of pointing out the ethnicity of a particular student she is mentoring in entry 2. We concurred that the school must have a predominantly white population and she may not be comfortable working with at-risk students, hence the need to bring attention to it.

Thursday, March 24, 2011 – Ivy noticed that David has a theme relating to time issues emerging through his coding. Ivy’s theme of how people perceive this principal is also emerging. Her blog entries discuss how hard she works over and over. When Ivy and David speak, they discuss the constant use of quotation marks and cliché language. They found it difficult at this point to keep their thoughts objective. They decided to continue to individually review the data to detect other emerging patterns and themes.

Monday, March 28, 2011 – Ivy sends the document back to David so the individual coding, at all levels, could be merged once again. David returns the merged document prior to class on Monday evening because he could not be in attendance.

During class on Monday evening, March 28th, Ivy had the opportunity to look closely at the patterns and themes that were emerging and discuss them with Red Owl. They had an honest discussion about Ivy’s difficulty bracketing her biases and remaining objective in developing a theory about the subject because of her personal experiences in the same role. The participant’s

picture emerged as if she were untainted by reality. As Red Owl helped Ivy to peel away some of the layers by reassuring her that if the data “is there, it’s there,” – Ivy was able to see her story more clearly. Red Owl furthered explained that many of Ivy and David’s questions and concerns could be addressed if this were an actual study by having opportunities to talk to and question the participant. Initially, Ivy was trying to look too deeply when it was right in front of her. That concept was further reinforced when the discussion that took place in class was shared with David the next day.

Ivy continues to code at the open and axial levels, however, now she is not afraid of the data. She can see it more clearly and is not over-thinking what she reads. Red Owl assists by helping Ivy to articulate what is in front of her and encouraging her not to be afraid of her feelings towards the participant. One or two themes begin to clearly materialize. The one that is glaring for Ivy is that the participant may have some issues with her own identity and cares too deeply how others perceive her by carefully painting a self-inflated image. Ivy adds those thoughts to the General Memos page.

Tuesday, March 29, 2011 – Ivy’s thoughts from the previous night’s class and the coding document are sent to David.

Thursday, March 31, 2011 – David and Ivy discuss the notes, Red Owl’s conversation with Ivy about the data and biases, and emerging themes from the discussion. David agrees that we were both looking too deeply for things that were not there. We agree to not over-think the data because we may be missing what is obvious. We also agree to look deeper at the process of qualitative data analysis in order for a theory to emerge.

April 2, 2011 – Ivy starts to put the combined thinking and process thus far to paper, beginning what will eventually be the methodological addendum.

April 4, 2011 - After class Ivy and David meet to discuss a plan for putting the paper together. Ivy feels strongly about the emerging theme of the participant's identity and how important it is to the participant how she is perceived by others. David is not convinced and wants to sift through the coding for evidence of this emerging theme. Ivy reminds David that she wrote memos supporting her thinking, however, bracketing her biases was difficult and, therefore, it is probably a good thing that David is not convinced. David emphasizes the need for them to create maps in order to diagram their thinking and sort out their coding and memoing.

We do agree there is a certain superficiality to the data but we need to compare and discuss our axial coding more deeply. We agree to start thinking about our coding and to talk later in the week about the best way to do this.

April 6, 2011 - We discuss what we think should be included in the paper, but are unsure of how to demonstrate all of it. The inclusion of references other than our textbooks is also a bit confusing. We agree to call Red Owl to have our uncertainties clarified. Ivy, David, and Red Owl agree to speak via GoToMeeting.com on Thursday, April 7th at 11:00 a.m.

April 7, 2011 - Ivy, David and Red Owl connect on the computer a little after 11:00 a.m. (Ivy had some difficulties connecting to GoToMeeting.com on her work computer). Red Owl explains the elements of the scholarly portion of the assignment using the metaphor of a court case. He also clarified that no additional references were needed because we were not including a Literature Review in our paper. Red Owl, David, and Ivy also agree that because the participant was writing for a public audience, she was not writing candidly. David felt she was writing as if she were on a job interview – emphasizing all of her wonderful leadership qualities. We also talk through some of the repeating patterns we are starting to see and differentiate between concepts and categories. Red Owl reminds us that we might begin by identifying a

single broad core category and that it is okay to speculate about the absence of things the participant discusses. David and Ivy find that the participant is not self-critical in any way. We are free to share what is not in the data in the Discussion section of the paper. In the Discussion section we can weave her story using informed speculation and interpretation.

At the end of our discussion with Red Owl, we are feeling more confident regarding the way we approach our data in order to develop a mid-range theory based only on what we have access to. David and Ivy agree to get together Saturday morning to create concept maps to further organize our thinking.

April 9, 2011 – David and Ivy meet at Ivy's house to review our coding and Red Owl's notes. We both feel as if our most important work together took place during this meeting. We began by identifying patterns within the open and axial coding. We first looked at the repeating ideas of "time" and how she used different concepts, properties and dimensions of time in different ways throughout the data. For example, we referred to time as a dimension when referring to the in vivo codes, "school calendar year" and "no time for reflection." We also interpreted the micro code, limited time in the school day, as a dimension of time. After further analyzing the data we realized that the concept of time fit into a broader conceptual category that we labeled, "I work hard." Within this broader conceptual category, we could tie in other concepts that were appropriate within this bigger framework. For example, open coding in this conceptual category included, "assess initiatives," run meetings, "track data," and review records. Once we agreed upon the concepts and the broader category it fell into, it was easier to map the properties and dimensions that related to the concept.

While identifying other repeating patterns of concepts such as good with kids, visibility, good relations with staff, professional involvement, etc., we were able to develop a second

conceptual category – I am a good principal. Identifying the supporting evidence for this conceptual category was much easier than the “I work hard” category. We had a better understanding of what to do. As Ivy became more comfortable with the process of analyzing and understanding the data, she became more objective and bracketing her biases was easier. While we continued to work through the data we were able to begin to identify relationships in our selective coding. Our general memos began to fit together so the participant’s picture began to evolve more clearly. We realized because we could not interact with the participant, there would always be missing pieces.

As we created our maps, we also began to reduce our coding (Appendix D). It became easier to identify extraneous information, therefore better supporting the emerging theory. We used only the evidence before us and were able to see the relationship between the two conceptual categories that we identified – I’m a good principal because I work hard. We became very comfortable with the two conceptual categories we identified and the relationship between them. We felt the evidence (properties, dimensions, and concepts) supported our thinking and now it was time to look for a mid-range theory. The data was self-serving even though we remained conscious that it was written for public consumption. Throughout the blog the participant consistently portrayed herself as someone who lived her role as principal in everything she did. She consistently referred to her role when sharing thoughts about her personal life and time out of school. There was a lot of open coding to support this line of thinking. Her thoughts always revolved around herself and her impact, therefore, leading us to piece together the mid-range theory and that her professional identity impacts her personal identity. We felt this was a big part of who she was or her essence and how she best identified herself.

Appendix A

<p>around!" It reminds me once again that it's simply all about kids -- everything we do for our school.</p>			
<p>I truly feel blessed with the staff I have at Jefferson. They say you can find good people anywhere you go, but I've been in education for 23 years in four different buildings and two different school districts, and I know that I have something very special here at Jefferson. I know that some of my staff may be surprised that I haven't "moved on" (I finished my doctorate last year). But it's difficult to explain sometimes to others how a situation "just feels right!"</p>	<p>"feel blessed" Appreciation for staff "have something special" Mobility "moved on" Finished doctorate Staying in this school because it "feels right"</p>		<p>Why is she putting her word choice in quotes? "moved on" "just feels right"</p>
<p>No matter how prepared I always think I am for the start of a new school year, there's always the "unexpected" that can seriously impact any planning that may have been made. Such was the case when I received a phone call at</p>	<p>The unexpected Impact on planning Concern for staff Received call at home Concern for start of new year</p>		<p>Seems to be a tension between feelings and the job that has to be done There seems to be a strong sense of time: at the start of the school year</p>

Appendix B



Carol Stack
 principal
 Jefferson Middle School
 Champaign, IL

Entry #1: No matter how prepared a principal may be, there's always the unexpected.

on-going
 activities

Being on a 12-month contract, I never really sense a "beginning" and an "end" to a school year. No sooner am I waving to our kids driving away on their school buses and wishing them a great summer, than I'm meeting them again as they come through the August registration line!

great feeling

kids excited

changes

found

awesome

about kids

It's a great feeling to see and hear the kids excited about coming to Jefferson and that they notice the changes we made to the building for them over the summer. They raved about the renovation work we did in the gym, including some "awesome" artwork featuring our new jaguar mascot on the gym floor and on the walls-- "coolest gym around," I overheard one future Michael Jordan-seventh grader mention to a new sixth grader! "Nothing like it around!" It reminds me once again that it's simply all about kids -- everything we do for our school.

Love

staff

I truly feel blessed with the staff I have at Jefferson. They say you can find good people anywhere you go, but I've been in education for 23 years in four different buildings and two different school districts, and I know that I have something very special here at Jefferson. I know that some of my staff may be surprised that I haven't "moved on" (I finished my doctorate last year). But it's difficult to explain sometimes to others how a situation "just feels right!" *Phase with herself*

with self
 emotion

Always

expect

the

unexpected

comes

No matter how prepared I always think I am for the start of a new school year, there's always the unexpected that can seriously impact any planning that may have been made. Such was the case when I received a phone call at home the night before students arrived to learn that one of my teachers had been seriously injured in a freak accident with no anticipated date of return. My first thoughts were on his condition and well-being and getting over to the hospital to see him. At the same time, I had a full schedule of Industrial Technology classes that needed to be covered in a day and age when teacher candidates in this area are few and far between, especially at the start of a new school year.

Still

working

on

starting

Industrial

Tech

classes

As I write this entry, school has been in session for one week, and we have temporarily designated these classes as study halls. I have a possibility I could consider to begin some type of Industrial Tech curriculum with an individual with limited experience in this area, but it's still too early to tell.

Appendix C

<p>around!" It reminds me once again that it's simply all about kids -- everything we do for our school.</p>	<p>New school year is always a new beginning</p>		
<p>I truly feel blessed with the staff I have at Jefferson. They say you can find good people anywhere you go, but I've been in education for 23 years in four different buildings and two different school districts, and I know that I have something very special here at Jefferson. I know that some of my staff may be surprised that I haven't "moved on" (I finished my doctorate last year). But it's difficult to explain sometimes to others how a situation "just feels right!"</p>	<p>"feel blessed" Appreciation for staff "have something special" Mobility "moved on" Finished doctorate Staying in this school because it "feels right"</p>	<p>Good relationship with staff (blessed, special, surprised I haven't moved on, "just feels right")</p>	<p>Why is she putting her word choice in quotes? "moved on" "just feels right" Personal training and preparation -- "finished doctorate"</p>
<p>No matter how prepared I always think I am for the start of a new school year, there's always the "unexpected" that can seriously impact any planning that may have been made. Such was the case when I received a phone call at</p>	<p>The unexpected "Prepared" Impact on planning Concern for staff Received call at home Concern for start of new year</p>	<p>Can never anticipate the unexpected (freak accident, full schedule of classes, unqualified teacher -- hard area to staff -- "few and far between")</p>	<p>Seems to be a tension between feelings and the job that has to be done There seems to be a strong sense of time: at the start of the school year</p>

Appendix D

<p>around!" It reminds me once again that it's simply all about kids -- everything we do for our school.</p>				<p>Deleted: new school year is always a new beginning!</p>
<p>I truly feel blessed with the staff I have at Jefferson. They say you can find good people anywhere you go, but I've been in education for 23 years in four different buildings and two different school districts, and I know that I have something very special here at Jefferson. I know that some of my staff may be surprised that I haven't "moved on" (I finished my doctorate last year). But it's difficult to explain sometimes to others how a situation "just feels right!"</p>	<p>"feel blessed" Appreciation for staff "have something special" Finished doctorate</p>	<p>Good relationship with staff (blessed, special, surprised I haven't moved on, "just feels right")</p>	<p>Personal training and preparation -- "finished doctorate"</p>	<p>Deleted: Why is she putting her word choice in quotes? "moved on" "just feels right"</p>
<p>No matter how prepared I always think I am for the start of a new school year, there's always the "unexpected" that can seriously impact any planning that may have been made. Such was the case when I received a phone call at</p>	<p>The unexpected Concern for staff Received call at home Concern for start of new year</p>		<p>Seems to be a tension between feelings and the job that has to be done There seems to be a strong sense of time: at the start of the school year</p>	<p>Deleted: Can never anticipate the unexpected (freak accident, full schedule of classes, unqualified teacher -- hard greet to staff -- "few and far between")</p>
				<p>Deleted: "Prepared" Impact on planning!</p>