THE MIDDLESCENCE PRINCIPAL: PROFESSIONAL GROWTH IN TIMES OF INCREASED ACCOUNTABILITY

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ABSTRACT

Middlescence is a term coined for a professional in mid-career and how this can be “a time of burnout or rejuvenation” (Morison, Erickson, & Dychtwald, 2007, p. 1). This qualitative narrative case study explores the lived experiences and perceptions of a high school principal in mid-career and the challenges that he, as do other public school administrators, face when confronted with increased accountability and student performance demands across the country. Effective school research, leadership and career development provide a theoretical foundation for this study.

Although the study examines the participant’s entire professional experiences, much emphasis has been placed on his mid-career period and the school’s improvement implementation process. Specific focus identifies the signs of burnout and his desire and need for rejuvenation. The story of one identified principal is studied to understand what lead to burnout and the strategies that supported his growth and rejuvenation.

In relation to middlescence, in-depth unstructured interviews allow for an understanding of the lived experiences of this principal and how it relates to career development and professional growth. The principal selected in this study had a historical career change in principal positions every three years during the first part of his career in school administration. What we know about principal retention suggests that school leaders are crucial to the school improvement process and that they must stay in a school a number of consecutive years for the benefits of their leadership to be realized. In addition, emerging research and theory has found that “Principal turnover
has direct negative effects on student- and school-level achievement, and that the strongest impact appears immediately after turnover occurs” (Béteille, Kalogrides, Loeb, 2011).

The leader in this rural Missouri school found himself on a trajectory of burnout and feeling the need for rejuvenation. Through this narrative study, the principal, in middlescence, was found to be transformed. Now in his 8th year at the same school, he attributes his stability to the leadership within the district and the professional coaching and informal mentoring that occurred. Critical conversations were held that instilled a sense of urgency to improve. In addition, he participated in the Missouri Professional Learning Communities project. Along with his leadership team, the school implemented this model with fidelity and was recognized within the state for deep implementation. Throughout this process, the participant created a network of support and trusted colleagues that continue his professional learning.

The major finding from this study found the importance of relevant training, consistent coaching, and the mentor relationship, all of equal importance, for the success and growth of the middlescent principal. This research study can be used by other school administrators, district leaders, and preparation institutions to better support administrators in mid-career. Recognition of the signs of burnout will also trigger the guidance necessary to focus the principals toward rejuvenation. Keeping our quality leaders in our schools is important to the continued success in school.