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Perceptions of Isolation Among High School Principals

Molly P. Howard and Barbara J. Mallory

The high school principal is trained to demonstrate a disposition, or temperament, that is respectful of all persons and sensitive to diverse needs, both within and beyond the school setting. Sergiovanni (2005) describes how the role of principal is changing to encompass increases in responsibility, with expectations from everyone. In this era of accountability, principals must lead large numbers of people toward the common goal of student academic growth. It is rather paradoxical that principals interact with people most of their workday, and yet the old adage, “It’s lonesome at the top,” applies to the 21st century principal. The principal’s role carries with it a degree of isolation (Mercer, 1996; Dussault & Barnett, 1996; Jones, 1994; Daresh & Playco, 1995). Principals are susceptible to the juxtaposition of job overload in a people-oriented business and experience feelings of isolation in their professional and personal lives.

More than a decade ago, Playco (1991) warned that taking a stance beyond “the safe harbor” of maintaining existing practices can be a lonely business, and, without some type of support, even the most conscientious administrator is likely to give up the fight and remain in the role of building manager” (p.124). In this era of a focus on test results, no comfort zone exists in the principalship. National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) Executive Director Gerald Tirozzi (2002) described the demands of the 21st century principal. He stated, “School leaders today are tackling tough curriculum standards, educating an increasingly diverse student population, shouldering responsibilities that once belonged in the home or in the community, and then facing termination if their schools do not show instant results. It’s no wonder we have a growing principal shortage” (p.1). The job of school leader is consumed with leading people within the organization to relatively better results, and yet, principals talk of “loneliness” and isolation.

The isolation may begin as an educator moves from the rank of faculty into the role of principal. In a study of the effects of a new principal on the school as a social system, Daresh and Playco (1995) found that novice principals experienced a profound sense of isolation from their peers as they moved into the principalship. Since leadership is social by its construct, Dussault and Thibodeau (1997) explained that professional isolation has a negative impact on school principals’ performance at work. In a doctoral dissertation on superintendents’ burnout, Graf (1996) found that adminis-
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Superintendents’ rise in status causes detachments in relationships with coworkers and contributes to burnout. Fowler (1991) referred to the environment of a principal as a “magnified fish bowl.” In a study of the loneliness of leadership, Jones (1994) reported that superintendents experienced loneliness—even in crowds. One superintendent’s description of the leadership “fishbowl” effect was described, “You become a celebrity of sorts; everyone knows you. The loneliness is that you are always ‘on;’ you’re always performing as a superintendent (or in your official capacity)” (p.30).

Dr. Eileen Piggot-Irvine (2004), Director of the New Zealand Principal and Leadership Centre (NZPLC), in working with principals at all levels during an eight-year period, professed personal pain in her attempt “to help principals to come to terms with the overwhelming loneliness associated with a job too big for even the very best of principals to survive alone” (p.24). Principals experience this loneliness or isolation in the realization
that the school’s success or failure is attributed to their leadership, and they are always “on” in their public role. Ironically, the unique perspective and responsibility of the principal for the entire school sometimes create a distance between the principal and the individual stakeholders, even though they share in many of the tasks within the organization.

School principals who express a sense of loneliness, isolation, and alienation also experience a diminished sense of meaningfulness, power, job satisfaction (Dussault & Barnett, 1996; Weindling & Earley, 1987; Jones, 1994; Mercer, 1996), and job performance (Dussault & Thibodeau, 1997). If qualified leaders are to be at the helm of schools, “the first priority is to recognize that professional isolation exists as a feature of the everyday existence of the secondary principal” (Mercer, 1996, p. 175).

The one-principal-one school still exists in 21st century schools. Therefore, coping strategies to deal with professional isolation are a necessity for the 21st century principalship. Maintaining a professional network has been described as a solution, even though time demands and job overload of high school principals often interfere with the potential to network. Attempts to share leadership have resulted in models of school organization, such as distributed leadership and leadership teaming. Recognition of job overload and the effectiveness of distributed leadership as an organizational model may assist school leaders in reducing feelings of isolation. The 21st century principal needs to develop coping strategies to overcome some degree of isolation experienced as the school leader (Howard, 2002).

A critical need to retain experienced principals in an era of high stakes accountability and principal shortage exists. In a study conducted by the Educational Research Service (1998) for the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), principals reported leaving the profession for various reasons. Of the respondents, 58% left because compensation was not commensurate with experience; 25% exited because of the time required; and 23% reported that the job was too stressful. Recognizing that principals are overworked, and understanding that solutions, such as job-sharing and reassignment of managerial tasks, may be forthcoming in another generation of principals, this researcher wanted to understand the experiences of isolation of high school principals and coping strategies utilized in dealing with this phenomenon in Georgia.

This study addressed the perceptions of isolation among high school principals in Georgia. The data collection process, in which interviews were conducted, provided insight into the lived experiences of ten principals. One of the findings was that high school principals were relieved, in a sense, to discuss their perceptions of the “loneliness” aspects of their jobs.

The findings yielded greater understanding of the organizational culture in which high school principals work and the professional isolation as it relates to the culture of the high school. Understanding the professional and personal needs of principals is essential, as school systems attempt to recruit and retain quality school leaders for the demanding position of princi-
Because five participants were female high school principals, gender issues associated with the male-dominated position were revealed. Not only did the research reveal the phenomenon of isolation among high school principals, but the analysis also provided insight into strategies principals employ to reduce the potential debilitating effects on job performance.

**Methods**

**Research Questions**
The study addressed the overarching question: What are the experiences of isolation among a selected group of high school principals? The following additional questions were also addressed:

1. Do high school principals perceive themselves to be isolated?
2. How do selected demographics, such as gender, age, years of experience, size of district, and marital status affect the experiences of isolation among high school principals?
3. How do high school principals perceive that the culture of the principalship influences their feelings of isolation?
4. In what ways have experiences of isolation impacted the lives of high school principals?
5. What strategies do high school principals use to cope with isolation?

**Research Design**
The study’s design was a qualitative descriptive analysis. High school principals’ perceptions of professional isolation were examined, using a phenomenological interviewing strategy consisting of a semi-structured and an in-depth interview format. The researcher conducted face-to-face, in-depth interviews with ten high school principals to address the research questions. The qualitative research study employed a phenomenological approach in the study of the subjective reality of professional isolation as perceived by the selected high school principals. As a high school principal, the researcher identified with the participants and attempted to function as their equal in the interviewing process.

**Participants**
The researcher selected ten Georgia high school principals, five male and five female, which included one male and one female African-American principal and four White males and four White females. The participants ranged in ages from 40 to 64 years of age. The majority (70%) of the principals were married for the first time, while 20% were divorced and remarried for the second time. One of the principals was divorced. All of the participants held the position of high school principal at the time of the interviews. Seventy percent of the principals had been in the high school
principalship from 5 to 14 years. Regarding the location of the school where the principals served, 40% were located in rural areas and 60% in suburban/urban areas of Georgia. The selection of the participants was a purposeful convenience sampling of principals who varied in demographic descriptions. The purpose in using participants who possessed variability in demographic descriptions was to increase the possibility of a wide range of perspectives.

Instrumentation
The researcher-developed interview instrument consisted of 16 questions used to guide respondents in describing professional isolation. The items on the Isolation Survey interview instrument were constructed from the researcher’s observations, literature on the subject of isolation, principals’ working conditions, and culture. Internal validity was established through expert examination of the interview questions prior to implementation. Five high school principals who were not participants in the study reviewed the questions for validity in answering the research questions and exploring the phenomenon of professional isolation.

Data Analysis
The interviews were electronically recorded and transcribed. The researcher analyzed the qualitative responses and provided the opportunity for the participants to review the narrative data. The participants subsequently clarified their responses more fully. The data were objectively evaluated using QSR NUDIST software to code recurring themes and patterns. In the final stage of structural synthesis, the researcher explored meanings and divergent perspectives.

Results
The research questions focused on aspects of the principalship that predispose individuals to experience isolation, the impact of isolation on the lives of principals, and the strategies that principals employ to cope with isolation and loneliness.

Profiles of the Participants
The study’s results indicated that the participants represented a variety of backgrounds. The demographic data were analyzed for patterns of personal and professional background that affected the principals’ perceptions of isolation. However, the researcher did not find one demographic variable or combination of demographic variables that appeared to influence the principals’ perception of isolation.

Perceptions of Isolation
All participants shared specific experiences of isolation and loneliness in their careers. However, two of the female principals were emphatic that isolation and loneliness were random occurrences. The other eight principals
described moderate to intense perceptions of isolation and loneliness relative to their job. The common expression was of regret. The two who expressed the greatest amounts of isolation in the job planned to retire at the end of the school term. One of the female principals who planned to retire commented:

"I had really planned to continue to do this but let me tell you I have 13 more Mondays. It can’t happen soon enough. I don’t say I’m burned out. It’s more than that. My soul has been stolen. I loved my job. I loved teaching. I feel like my soul has been ripped out of me. Like my grandmother would say, ‘I’m plum give-out.’ I put on a show every morning. When you walk in, as Shirley Temple’s mother said, you sparkle. When you walk out the door in the evening, you droop. In about October of this school year, I said I’ve had it. I said why are you doing this. Nobody appreciates it. Yeah, sometimes you get kids that do and yes a few of the teachers do. But on the whole, it’s why can’t you do more, why can’t you do more and that’s all that you hear.

One other principal also reported a decline in job satisfaction as the reason for retirement. All participants expressed a degree of isolation, especially at the beginning of their principalship. Another source of isolation expressed by one and shared by others was the perception that few people other than another high school principal understand the demands of the high school principalship.

Four of the principals were much more definitive than the other participants in their responses and in personal accounts of isolation and loneliness. One female principal’s observation reflected the intensity of her perception of isolation. “It’s very lonely. It took me awhile to realize that was what was bothering me so. There are things you cannot tell another living soul.” Another female principal shared, “It is very lonely at the top. That is the truth . . . you hold in so much and you take. In this job you have to be able to take a lot . . . everybody’s problems are your problems. But your problems aren’t anybody else’s problems, and you don’t have anywhere to lean. There is nobody to lean on. They are all leaning on you.”

One of the female principals explained that her isolation was compounded by the fact that many of the male principals in her district had wanted her position because she was named principal of a new school, which had improved athletic facilities. As a female, she felt the other district high school principals were reluctant to assist her when they easily could have.

Nobody wanted to share, even when it came to the high school graduation program. The superintendent told them to turn their programs over to me to let me view them. Not one person would let me see what their program looked like. So we developed our own. We put a picture of our school on the front. Everybody else had always put their seal or their mascot on the front of theirs. Last year, our
second graduation, everybody put their schools on the front. But that’s ok; we raised the standard for everyone.

All of the participants shared specific personal experiences of isolation and loneliness encountered during their careers. However, when asked if the position of high school principal had isolated them from others and they felt it was lonely at the top, two of the female principals were emphatic that they would not characterize their careers by the random occurrences they had experienced with isolation and loneliness. These women also shared other commonalities. Each was a female high school principal in stable marriages with grown children. They both described supportive husbands who were not threatened by their wives’ positions or the amount of time they spent performing their professional duties. The most glaring similarities were evident in their beliefs and professional practices. They had each nurtured their own professional development. One had already earned a doctoral degree and the other had completed all of her course work toward the advanced degree. Each woman discussed her practice and commitment to mentoring aspiring principals on their staffs. They received great satisfaction from seeing others achieve professional goals and being a part of the individual’s personal growth.

Professionally, they described a collaborative leadership style within their school settings, which made isolation seem more random, rather than thematic in their principalships. They practiced distributive leadership within their organizations. They shared a common vision with their faculties and administrative teams. Even though one was responsible for a large high school, while the other was principal of a small high school, they both believed they had engaged others in the leadership of their schools.

Culture of Principalship that Influences Isolation
When asked about the culture’s influence on their isolation, the participants responded with statements and personal accounts of time demands; fishbowl existence; accountability demands; role and duties of the principal; and relationship with the central office.

Time Demands
The most pervasive and intense reactions of the principals were regarding the overwhelming amount of time required to do the job. The participants reported they worked from 60 to 90 hours per week performing duties and responsibilities as high school principals. Time demands were cited as a drawback to the principals’ sense of job satisfaction and sometimes the quality of job performance. The principals explained the time demands by describing the length of a typical high school day.

The number of hours I work depends on the season. I used to never think much about that, but after a while, I started to keep an account of it, just to see for myself. There have been weeks when I spent more than 90 hours at school. I’d say
the average week is between 60 and 70 hours...then there are so many night things. It is your life. If you want to be a high school principal, you don’t have too much of a life otherwise.

Magnified Fishbowl
Principals reported they sometimes feel they exist in a magnified fish bowl. This phenomenon, which was described as an intrusion to the principal’s sense of privacy, was largely because high school principals are widely recognized by a large number of people. The principals described their tendency to avoid public places and to seek the privacy of their own home. As one principal reported, “You are always on! You are the principal 24 hours a day.”

Accountability
The participants had a diverse range of knowledge regarding the accountability movement initiated by Georgia’s A+ Reform Act of 2000 and the national No Child Left Behind Act. The common theme among the participants was that they expected to be held accountable for their schools. They felt they had always been accountable, but some were unsure of how their level of accountability would change under the state and federal initiatives. Some of the principals expressed concern that they would be held accountable but would not be given the opportunity to make their own decisions on how to meet the challenges presented to them.

Another principal also spoke of the accountability that was self-imposed and was, therefore, not new to veteran principals. One of the female principals felt that the demands placed on her due to accountability had caused her to become more removed from the students and staff in her school.

Four of the principals discussed how they did not like being held accountable without the power to control the things for which they would be held accountable. They valued autonomy in addressing the needs of their schools as they viewed them. “You have this constant knot. I don’t like being held accountable for things I don’t have any control over.” Another female principal described how the effects of accountability had manifested in her staff and influenced her role as principal.

Accountability has definitely affected my role. I’ve never seen morale as low as it is in the whole tenure of my educational career, and that’s 27 years. The accountability initially, as well as it may be intended, has certainly put a tremendous stress upon what I believe are very well intentioned educators, teachers. And they are now feeling that, and the morale is extremely low. So I feel more of a “cheerleader,” trying to boost them, and keep them on task. And it’s a shame that that’s where our efforts are needed most.

The demands and expectations associated with the new accountability initiatives were a major reason one of the principals decided to retire at the end of the year.
Role of the Principal
The principal’s role, in most cases, was dictated by the needs of the individual schools and by each principal’s expectations for the school’s performance. Many principals discussed how the principalship had changed over time. A major source of frustration for principals was the powerlessness they felt in determining their primary role as they performed their daily duties. The principals felt a need and desire to spend the majority of their time focused on instructional issues. However, time demands interfered with the role of instructional leadership. One of the female principals described how her role as principal had been altered by societal changes and time demands that had affected schools.

I’ve seen a transition from the leadership role, in reference to instructional leadership, to more of the person putting out fires. I regret it, to be quite honest. I know it’s part of the job, and it has always been there. But that part of the job has escalated over the course of time. I think there was a time when there was a respect for school authority. And I’m not saying that parents shouldn’t question; they have that prerogative, they have that right, no doubt about it. And I don’t deny them that. But there was a time when a “school house” teacher, principal, assistant principal- pretty much when they said what they needed to say, a parent would accept that. And again, I understand there are people out there who may create an environment where parents want to question a decision. But they do question a whole lot more than they ever did before . . . For the most part, the outcome of parent conference usually ends up on a positive note. I think the main thing I am seeing is the time-consuming part of it. It just consumes your time more to deal with those kinds of situations. Parents are extremely knowledgeable, sometimes looking for you to solve their family problems, and I think we have taken on the role of not only the principal or instructional leader, but of a social worker, sometimes even a counselor, psychologist, several roles that we really have no experience or no background to even perform in those roles. But yet we do it. And I find that very time-consuming.

Several of the principals raised the role of the principal as the ultimate decision maker in the school as a source of isolation. Several of the principals agreed that isolation was inherent to the principal’s role of decision maker.

Central Office Personnel
The principals described different levels of perceived support or lack of support from their superintendents and central office personnel. Two principals reported they had strong supportive relationships, while most of the others expressed almost disdain for everyone at the central office. Support from the central office appeared to be important to all of the principals, whether they felt they received it or not. One female principal expressed her perception that the central office had little respect for building-level administrators. She also felt the central office possessed very little understanding of what the job of the principal involved.
Administrative meetings, I hate them. Three to four hours in one seat with no cushion... When’s the last time you sat for three or four hours. You kind of jump up and down like a jack-in-the-box all day long then they want you to sit for four hours and you’re uncomfortable anyway and they can’t understand why you’re not responding favorably... We are preached to for four hours... like a long Sunday.... There is only one person in the central office who has ever been in a high school. They don’t have any kind of a clue. They don’t know about the hours. They don’t understand the kids well enough to know what’s important and what’s not. The things they want you to do sometimes you just go, I don’t believe anybody in their right mind would ask a 16 year-old or 17 year-old to do this... It really pushes your credibility... For heaven’s sake do not come up with any ideas, do not try something different or if you are going to you make darn sure you have traveled the road downtown a thousand times and you have cleared every step and you have written letters of assurance that this isn’t going to happen and this is not going to happen. Here again you are judged by someone who can’t even find your school.

Eight of the high school principals also perceived a lack of understanding and support from the central office. One even described the central office as a deterrent to her work as the school principal. In contrast to the principals who expressed a sense of isolation from their district’s central office personnel, two of the female principals felt significant support from their central offices. One of the principals described her superintendent as her greatest source of professional and personal support.

**Impact of Isolation**

The principals were very aware of the impact excessive time demands had on their personal and professional lives. All of the principals reported regret for the lost opportunities with their children, families, and friends due to the long work hours. One even questioned whether his time influenced his effectiveness. “It [time demands] certainly takes away from your family. And you know what, I’m not sure how much of a positive impact it really has on what we’re here for.”

**Relationships with Spouses**

Some of the participants reported that the demands on their personal time caused problems in their relationships with spouses. One female high school principal described the strain her job has placed on her relationship with her fiancéé.

There are times this relationship has been very strained because of this job. One time I talked to him and I apologized because there was a time I didn’t think we would make it because of this job and so much time away. I apologized to him and said that I was so busy doing my job that I forgot to do my job. And I wonder if I am doing right by... but he is old enough to survive... He and I try to do some things together. More than not, we don’t do things together. Most of the time it’s things I have to attend he goes with me and lots of time when he goes we
aren’t together. I mean I’m there and I’m having to work the crowd or I’m walking up and down making sure kids are behaving and he’s waiting for me to finish.

Having a supportive spouse is essential, according to all of the principals. Spouses who were not resentful of the time spent performing their duties as high school principals were valued.

**Gender Issues**

Several of the female principals expressed difficulties that they perceived were gender-related. In some of these cases, they encountered situations that they could not share with their spouses because of the traditional husband and wife roles. One female principal was reluctant to be viewed as a “damsel in distress” who needed male assistance.

Last fall I was at a football game, and you know what it is like when you’re having a ball game on your own turf. I was sitting in the stands. I sit in the stands for a little bit, and then I get up and I walk around, check on things, and go back and sit again for a few minutes. I was sitting in my seat, which was right on the aisle for that purpose. And this man came, kind of tumbling down the aisle, and sat down right next to me in the aisle. He was leaning all over me . . . . The school board and one of the assistant principals and several other people like that were up behind me. They had already witnessed all of that. And he just happened to sit by me. It was just his bad luck that he sat by me. I was sort of waiting. His wife was there and I tried to kind of give her the indication through my eyes that, “I wish you would see about this.” She did try, but she couldn’t. Then he lit a cigarette in the stands. So at that point, I thought I’ve got to do something. So I said to him, “You need to put your cigarette out.” And he got very belligerent. He called me the “B” word. He was obviously drunk. My husband was sitting on the other side of me. Well, he did not hear that fortunately. But my first thought was, ‘I can’t do this the way I ordinarily would. I have got to solve this immediately before he (husband) thinks he has to help me.’ Then the one time in my career that my walky-talky was not working was that time. So I just got up. I climbed out over people because I couldn’t go out that way, and went, got the police officer, brought him back and got him to take the man out. But of course, everybody behind me was laughing uproariously in the stands, and enjoying the whole thing. But if my husband had not been there, I would have handled it differently. But I couldn’t take that chance of him getting involved, as most husbands would and as I would have appreciated, if I were not the principal.

Two female principals discussed how they chose to travel alone to conferences, whereas, their male counterparts often were accompanied by their wives for companionship. One described it this way.

The things I have to go to like professional meetings, conferences and things like that are awkward. A lot of the male principals bring their wives along. And that doesn’t seem strange to anybody. They are very comfortable, and they have become friends of mine. I enjoy talking to them and have become very good ac-
quaintances. But they will say, 'Why doesn’t your husband come on some of these trips?’ Well, there is no way my husband, being outside education, would go with me. What would he do while I am in meetings? Go shopping with the wives. He doesn’t play golf. For him to wait around and wait for me to engage him in the conversation—it’s just too weird. It just doesn’t work the same way for women.

Another female principal also chose to isolate herself from her spouse at a very important time in her life because of a perceived gender issue in which she wanted to be seen as strong and was afraid her husband’s presence would be misinterpreted.

I was to go to the board meeting two weeks ago when they were to make the nomination for my position as superintendent for next year. As I was getting ready to go he [husband] said, ‘Do you want me to go with you?’ And I said, ‘Oh, no.’ And he said, ‘Well that was quick.’ And I said, ‘Well I don’t want you to go with me (and this is bad; this is kind of a sexist thing). I don’t need to look like I’ve got to have you there. If this were you doing it, then I could come along as a supportive spouse. But the other way around does not work. It looks like you aren’t capable of handling it yourself, so you had to bring your husband along to help in case anything went wrong.’

Another female principal expounded on the complexities of doing her job and the awkwardness because she was a woman.

This is going to sound strange. But part of it too is the difficulty of being female. Some of the places that you need to go or have somebody there are places you don’t feel comfortable as a female going by yourself because in any other occupation your reputation can be besmirched very easily. So sometimes it’s a matter of having to send somebody because it’s not appropriate for you to go...Several times there have been get-togethers sponsored by different groups and because the vast majority of the participants are male and we are talking like 3:1 and they are held at a hotel or some place like that. It’s a little bit daunting to me to walk into someplace that eyebrows could be raised because people are always looking for something and that’s just one more thing that can be used against you at some point. It’s not true but you’re just a little more susceptible than men are.

Health Concerns
The principals reported health concerns that they felt were a result of the intense demands inherent to their positions. All of the principals described how the principals’ busy schedules and job-related stress affected their health, job satisfaction, and job performance. One principal summed up the perception of the participants.

I think physically it wears on a person. I know that it does mentally and emotionally it does. It’s sort of like, I guess, going out on a battlefield. After awhile you
get a little bit weary and you can't be as effective when you're tired like we find ourselves in middle to late fall.

All agreed that exercise was important, but there was little time to maintain a regimen.

**Relationships with Friends**

All of the principals intimated that the position of high school principal affected every aspect of their lives, including personal ties and friendships. Several of the principals revealed they had narrowed their scope of friendships. As one female principal stated, “You pretty much whittle your friends down to the ones you want to finish your journey with. There’s no time for more than the necessary relationships.” One of the principals admitted she had lost touch with some of her professional associations because of the time demands of her principalship.

I have dropped some of my professional groups just through lack of time. Phi Delta Kappa I was a member of and was active for years. Since I have been a high school principal, I think I have been to one meeting, and I guess I have been dropped from the rolls. But there is no way I can add that to what I’m already doing.

**Fun and Relaxation**

The personal accounts of the participants revealed that the activities they chose for recreation and relaxation were influenced significantly by factors inherent to their positions. Eight of the principals expressed dissatisfaction in that they were isolated from meaningful relationships in their personal lives due to their jobs; however, they also described the need for solitude in their time away from the demands of their jobs. When asked to describe the activities they engaged in for fun and relaxation, nine of the participants described self-selected, solitary activities. Two of the female principals, however, described recreational activities that included going out with friends.

**Relationships with Colleagues**

The principals described an array of relationships with their colleagues, ranging from total distrust to close and personal ties. Several of the participants characterized their relationships with their colleagues by the practice of territorial safeguarding and competition. Relationships with other principals in the system were described this way.

There is, I guess, in any system, a lot of territoriality that needs a lot of trust to overcome. I am a blunt person. I am not going to say it with a lot of finesse, but you’re not going to be left wondering what I meant; you will know. And I wish we would all do the same thing. But I learned early on that in our principals’ meetings everybody is going to be very guarded. You say how are things at your school? Everything is wonderful. We have no problems. Every teacher is great.
You know, there is not a sharing of suggestions, ideas, thoughts, or anything else. It is like, ‘Don’t look at me. I’m not going to expose MY weaknesses.’ And I learned pretty quickly to just quit. And also not to make any suggestions out loud. I would make them in private if I had a suggestion to make . . . I would have always liked to be with people who would sit down and hash things out together and make decisions that would impact the whole system, and try to find ways that we could really work together. That really has not been my experience though . . . When you’re in the same system, with some there is an element of competition there. So that keeps you from being close. Also, a primary principal’s day and life is not like yours. So you can commiserate and celebrate up to a point, but it’s only up to a point.

I never thought it [the job of high school principal] would do this to me, where you watch everything you say, everything you do. And when you walk out you say, ‘Thank you Lord for getting me through today. Please let me get through tomorrow.’ We have our little principals’ group, but everybody sits there and watches everybody else because you never know—politics are so overwhelming sometimes.

One male principal described a phenomenon that he experienced almost instantaneously when he became an administrator, which others also experienced.

The ones [principals] who suffer the greatest impact emotionally on themselves are the ones who move up in the ranks. They move from teacher to an AP to a principal’s position. It happens instantaneously. One minute these people are cohorts, and they will sit with you at the lunch table and talk and carry on and talk about everything. And all of a sudden, they don’t even sit with you. They will go to the next table, for no reason other than the fact that you have changed positions.

One of the female principals who was promoted from teacher to administrator within the same school also felt she had a good relationship with her faculty and staff, but she had witnessed a change in the nature of the relationship. Another female principal described herself as a people-person who was willing to share with her colleagues; however, she too had experienced coolness from her peers on occasion once she moved into the administrative ranks. One principal summed it up it, “Once you become an administrator, things just change between you and them.” Others shared this sentiment.

Strategies for Coping
The interview results and analysis provided evidence of some common strategies the principals used to cope with isolation and loneliness, including: networking; confidants; support systems; spousal support; personal strategies; enlarging the circle; distributed leadership; and moral purpose.
Networking
Although all of the principals indicated that networking with other principals was important, they did not all practice it. They described obstacles, such as the lack of time and lack of availability of principals with whom to network. Most of the principals described their networks as consisting of principals within their districts and principals across the state with whom they were connected through their professional organizations. One female principal discussed the barrier that time demands placed on her opportunity to network with other principals.

To be honest, with our organization GASSP there is a wonderful opportunity for networking. And I'd say a year ago we probably networked a whole lot more than we are now. And it goes back to us being overwhelmed in our own situations. I think sometimes we don’t have an opportunity as often as we should.

One principal expressed regret that she had not developed a network of other principals.

Confidants
Confidants are important providers of support with whom the principal can share personal thoughts, fears, and desires. The majority of the participants who reported having a confidant named spouses as that person. Most of the principals named their spouse or a family member as their confidant. One principal named her superintendent as her confidant. She described the relationship as both professionally and personally supportive.

Spouses were reported as supportive but also responsible for some levels of added stress, although all were well intentioned. Some of the principals shared details of their professional lives and experiences with their spouses, while others did not. Three of the female principals reported they could not share with their spouses. One principal said she could not share information related to her school with her spouse because he had on more than one occasion inadvertently repeated something she had told him in confidence. One principal stated that she did not share with her spouse because she could not bear to see the pain and worry it caused him. Another said she did not share her struggles with her spouse because he really did not understand and he would try to fix it for her. She said she did not want him to fix the problem; she just wanted someone to listen to her as she worked through the problem herself. These female principals felt that if their spouses were too visible, it would make them appear as weak females who needed protection from a man. While the female principals denied that they employed their spouses as a sounding board on school related matters, three male participants reported that they did discuss school matters with their spouses.

One female principal believed her longevity put her in a position to be others’ confidant, but she did not have a professional confidant. She felt her longevity might have precluded her from having someone specifically in whom she could confide.
Support Systems
Most of the principals named a family member or a spouse as their greatest source of support. One male principal identified the inner office staff at his school as his greatest support system. He felt they understood him and the basis of his decisions more than anyone else in the school. He felt that the school secretaries saw the “real” person behind the principal cloak more than anyone else in his school because they had opportunities to see him in many different situations.

Spousal Support
Several of the participants named their spouses as their confidants and included them in their list of support systems. However, when asked specifically about their spouses as a support system, half of the participants described a reluctance to totally involve their spouses in the burdens they faced in their jobs. Most of the females reported the reluctance, whereas males relied more heavily on spouses.

Enlarging the Circle
Several of the participants gained great personal and professional satisfaction through sharing their expertise with aspiring administrators. By enlarging their circle of colleagues, the participants broadened their own network of alliances and felt intrinsic reward for giving back to the profession to which they were committed. One principal did not feel that his services as a mentor for aspiring and new principals were valued or needed within his system. However, two of the female principals served as mentors for aspiring principals and felt self-fulfilled through that role.

Distributed Leadership
Research suggests that principals who practice distributed leadership within their schools might have a ready-made support system. Some of the principals had developed a support system that consisted of faculty and staff who shared a common vision and mission for the school. Several of the principals described their practice of distributive leadership as a source of ready-made support. The practice included an expanded role for department chairs and other teacher leaders. One principal reported that distributive leadership improved the link between the administrator and the rest of the staff and faculty. Another reported that distributed leadership helped the faculty feel more like a team. One principal reported that the school goals were more readily accepted by the entire school and were viewed as faculty goals instead of the principal’s personal goals.

Moral Purpose
The participants described their positions as a calling rather than a job. They each possessed a strong sense of what they wanted to accomplish and to whom they felt they were most responsible—their students. This sense of moral purpose appeared to provide strength and support for the princi-
One principal described moral purpose as a source of strength, as all of the principals felt motivated by their sense of moral purpose.

I think if you like young people and you enjoy that time trying to help them make good decisions and have successful lives that would motivate anybody. And that’s what I draw my strength from. That’s why after 36 years I’m still doing this. I still enjoy that part of my job.

A strong sense of moral purpose and mission prevailed among all of the principals and seemed to be the last defense against the obstacles and ambiguities that the principals reported they experienced on a daily basis. The participants’ strong sense of moral purpose offered hope and belief that their jobs provided for the greater good of their students, their schools, and society as a whole. This focus and belief provided comfort and gave meaning to the job of the high school principal.

Conclusions

Isolation and loneliness are complex phenomena and are multidimensional. Isolation on one dimension may or may not affect isolation on another dimension. Perceptions of isolation and loneliness are interpreted and framed by the individual in his or her own unique set of circumstances.

Isolation is inherent in the culture of the high school principal. There are factors within the culture of the principalship that predispose the principal to experience various levels of isolation.

Effective personal and professional support systems can alleviate the potentially debilitating effects of professional isolation. Principals’ perceived isolation could lead to feelings of powerlessness in meeting their job demands therefore, resulting in burnout and frustration.

Colleagues are an important source of perceived social support. The quality of the relationships plays an important role in the perceived isolation and loneliness of high school principals. Relationships with central office personnel are desired by principals but are often an added source of stress and alienation.

Resilient principals build time for family and friends, maintain supportive relationships with colleagues, practice distributive leadership, network with other principals, have a strong sense of purpose and mission, and are available to other administrators or aspiring administrators.

Discussion of Findings

The findings in this study of high school principals revealed that all of the principals in the study agreed with the statement, “It is lonely at the top.” However, the degree to which they felt isolated and lonely varied from occasional situations to intense and chronic feelings of isolation and loneliness. It appears from the findings that isolation is inherent in the culture of the high school principalship. Golubovic (1974) argued that isolation
should be looked at as a complex social phenomenon. The findings supported Golubovic’s (1974) theory. Isolation was indeed a complex phenomenon and that no single demographic variable predisposed the principals to perceive isolation and loneliness more than any other demographic variable. The availability and viability of support systems employed by the participants appeared to be the determining factor of the principals’ perceptions of isolation. Common factors that predispose principals to perceive themselves as isolated included excessive time demands, a magnified fishbowl existence, the changing role of the principal due to societal demands and accountability, relationships with colleagues, and lack of central office support. Disincentives to the principalship in this study included lack of support from the district office, isolation, and demanding responsibilities, and, according to findings of a study by Fraser and Brock (2006), these factors continue to be related to retention of principals.

The principals in the study employed various strategies and practices to cope with the stress inherent in their positions. They identified most often the following strategies: spousal support; a strong sense of moral purpose; the use of distributed leadership; maintenance of social contacts outside the school; mentoring of aspiring administrators and teachers; and networking with other principals. The principals who reported the least amount of isolation, as well as the least intense degree of isolation, employed all six strategies as regular practice.

The high school principal participants were a rich resource of information who provided insight, advice, and inspiration to those currently in the position of high school principal and to those who aspire to reach the position. Leaders of schools need effective strategies to cope with perceived or real isolation relative to the position of principal.

One of the major implications exists in the relationship of the principal and central office. The central office, including superintendents, supervisors, and directors, must understand the degree of isolation associated with the high school principalship. Central office support of the school leader is essential. As more women are becoming school superintendents, it is important for them to be aware of the distrust that may exist among male and female high school principals about the role of the central office. A school principal cannot be treated as a bureaucratic manager associated with accountability, if the principal is expected to serve as the instructional leader of the school. If principals feel more isolated from the classrooms in this era of accountability, then central office personnel may need to review how they assume some of the accountability tasks. In best-case scenarios, the central office can become involved in the distributed leadership model that seemed to help some of the principals deal with isolation associated with demands of the job.

It is not in anyone’s best interest for the principal to become “burned out” because of isolation inherent in the job as high school principal. Female high school principals struggled with spousal relationships and some gender issues, as they wanted to be perceived as someone who could handle
all situations alone. Fear of perceptions if a male (husband) intervened resulted in self-imposed isolation. Female high school principals need collegial support, and open and honest dialogue seemed to be therapeutic. The difficulty that women and men have in balancing their personal and professional lives as high school principals, as well as the increased role conflict that comes with that imbalance may affect recruitment and retention of high school principals (Eckman, 2004). Increasing support and creating working conditions that will allow high school principals to balance their roles will be needed to continue to attract leaders to the stressful high school principalship. If isolation can lead to a diminished sense of power and low job satisfaction, then it is in everyone’s best interest to make sure bureaucracy does not interfere with leadership. With the federal, state, and district involvement in schools, principals sense a change in their leadership capacity. While the literature supports that all schools need a strong instructional leader, the school leader today must enlarge the circle of leadership. Sergiovanni (2005) refers to the leadership density that is critical to school success. The leadership density refers to the total amount of leadership available from teachers, support staff, central office, and others. The principal who employs a distributed leadership model may alleviate some of the isolation as an instructional leader. The job overload must be addressed to balance the isolation inherent in the job.

Another implication is the key times in the principalship when isolation may be more of a factor in a principal’s life. Beginning principals, making the transition from a member of the teaching faculty to an administrative role, expressed the difference in their relationships with colleagues. Many factors affect women’s participation in school leadership, but the findings of this study converge with those of Kaparou and Bush (2007) who identified personal factors, covert discrimination, gender stereotypes, and constraints experienced through their socially defined roles as disadvantages to women in secondary school principalships. When a woman moves from a teaching position to an administrative position, there is an invisible barrier between former “teaching colleagues” and the new “female principal.” However subtle, the isolation may affect the beginning principal. The coping strategy to identify a professional network of peers has been suggested. Central office support of the beginning principal’s travel to professional conferences and professional organization membership may be beneficial to the beginning principal. Veteran and experienced principals may be called upon and compensated to mentor beginning principals. These strategies could influence the isolation experienced by beginning and experienced principals.

The findings of this study emphasize the importance of the moral purpose to the school principal’s sense of leadership. According to Fullan (2001), moral purpose is achieved by having a deep passion about improving life. All of the principals embraced their jobs because they believed in their abilities to make a difference in the lives of teachers, students, and their communities. It was evident in their decision-making, day-to-day
practices, and relationships with all of their constituents. A strong sense of moral purpose and mission prevailed among all of the principals and seemed to be the last defense against the obstacles and ambiguities that the principals reported they experienced on a daily basis. The participants’ strong sense of moral purpose offered hope and belief that their jobs provided for the greater good of their students, their schools, and society as a whole. This focus and belief provided comfort and gave meaning to the job of the high school principal. Although they experienced a sense of the magnified fishbowl, they felt their sense of moral purpose made it possible for them to sustain their leadership. It may be lonely at the top, but it is worth it to those who possess the deep convictions of moral purpose.

References


