

Chapter 2

Prologue

The Construction of the Principalship: Institutional Ethnography and Principal Selection and Succession

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When I agreed to write the prologue to this edited volume, I agreed without quite understanding what a prologue is or does. Of course, many books have prologues. Plays often have prologues. And prologues always come at the beginning. But what does a prologue do? The following Oxford Concise English Dictionary definition gives us two ways to think about prologue—as an introduction to, and as an action:

Prologue: noun

1. An introductory section or scene in a literary, dramatic, or musical work
2. An event or action leading to another

ORIGIN Greek *prologos*, from *pro-* ‘before’ + *logos* ‘saying’

In keeping with the orientation of my work as an institutional ethnographer, I am going to emphasize both aspects of the word—an introduction *to* something; an action *leading* to another.

Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People (Smith 2005), has a particular take on introductions and actions. What is occurring? Where did it come from and what happens next? How does it occur? Where does it occur? Who does it? How does it work? These are questions that begin in people’s experience—becoming a principal of a new school or being assigned to another school. That is where institutional ethnographers start. However, our research interest does not remain in individual experience. One action follows another—actions go from someone somewhere, to someone somewhere, often some-when else. What is introduced into one setting may be the final action in the previous setting—whether epilogue or prologue, actions lead to other actions taken up by other people.

But often we do not know much about how the products of actions come to us. Often, to understand what’s going on, we have to go beyond the actions that can be seen and ask where and how those actions came to be? For example, when one principal succeeds another, what are the actions that organize that change? As we know, principals do not simply decide to take up the principalship in a different school. Decisions may be made individually (‘I think I’ll retire’). Institutional routines are

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then activated so that a new principal can be assigned to that school. Administrative decisions are made based on decisions by principal selection panels, on school demographics, and on who is available. All of these actions are coordinated in order to decide who will be the next principal of that school. These are ruling relations—coordinated sets of actions involving many different people, based on institutional interests and resulting in a new principal succeeding the previous principal. The institutional ethnography project is to find out *for people* what the ruling relations are that are organizing their experience.

Staying with our example above, we often miss the essentially textual character of the work people do in institutions. Particularly in bureaucratic-administrative institutions like Education, texts are everywhere, all the time. Texts link people's actions across time and space. For example, in the Canadian province of Ontario, in order to apply to become a principal, the candidate must typically have an undergraduate degree, five years of teaching experience, certification in three divisions (primary, junior, intermediate, senior), two Specialist or Honour Specialist additional qualifications or a master's degree, and you are required to complete a Principal's Qualification Program. These multiple texts are from different times and from different places in a candidate's life—undergraduate and graduate transcripts from universities, a teaching certificate from the Ontario College of Teachers, a personnel record from a Board of Education, a record of professional development programs taken at institutions certified by the Ontario College of Teachers or provincial Ministry, and, at least in Ontario, a professional development certification called the Principal's Qualification Program (PQP).

We can begin to see that, in order to be considered for the position of principal, there are a series of actions, involving the principal-to-be *and* many other people, which culminate in a text. These texts then stand in for—become the textual record of the previous action(s). They become the prologue as the individual moves into the next action to be taken. They are taken up by other people who are in a position to evaluate and judge the textual record as 'evidence' of a candidate meeting the criteria. Becoming a principal is through and through a textually mediated process in which the individual engages their experience, ambition, interest, capacities, time, energy—their lives—with educational institutions. Being seriously considered for a principalship requires a textual record that represents the individual institutionally—courses taken, teaching experience, degrees, professional development, and so on. Without the correct textual prologue, a teacher cannot be considered for the principalship. This is not an individual matter but rather an institutional construct in which texts are central. A university transcript may be read as 'good enough' or not, but the text does not change. Texts are made to be the same text regardless of who reads it or where it is read.

Yet, the definition of a principal is fluid, not static. How, then, given the textual prologue described above, can the definition of a principal fluctuate? This has to do, in part, with how and when texts are *used* as part of a bureaucratic-administrative process. The processes described above are integral to the processes through which an individual is selected, or not, for the principalship, or for a transfer to another school. These texts enter the realm of interviewing, selection, decision making based on school demographics—the ruling relations in which the individual is

not present but the texts that represent her or him are. And these texts are ‘read’ in that local context. As questions are raised about principal selection and succession as they are in this volume; as questions are raised about social identities and education; and as the demographics of the city change: then the texts are read for different criteria. The ability of the textual record to represent the individual is sophisticated and intricate. Within its textual boundaries the textual record *shapes, but does not determine*, the textually mediated selection processes that frame appointment and succession decisions.

Once the selection process is complete, other texts come into play. Currently, and in continuance with the previous example, the Ontario Ministry of Education’s definition of a principal emphasizes the concept of an ‘effective leader’ and their effectiveness is tied to student achievement. Ontario has adopted a particular orientation to education called ‘school effectiveness and school improvement’. For example: “Leadership is second only to teaching in its influence on student achievement.” This construction of the principalship is relatively new and subordinates other characteristics that, historically, would have been prominent. For example, ‘curriculum leader’ was historically one of the definitions of the principal. Now, it has been reframed as ‘instructional leader’ and is secondary to effectiveness and student achievement.

Until recently, it was assumed that those selected to be principals had all the necessary skills and competences to do the job. Ontario Ministry of Education documents note that leadership is not an innate character trait, it is a learned process. Thus, the new definition relies on extensive charts available to principals listing competencies, skills, knowledge, and attitudes. The charts are for self-governance. A principal can work through the charts to ensure that he or she is doing the job of principal as it is currently conceived. As the principal checks their actions against those prescribed by the texts, they coordinate the ‘fit’ between the standard texts and their own action—they become, without losing their individuality, more like the textually framed principal. In other words, the textual representation of a principal is historically organized—grounded in current governing conceptions of what constitutes a ‘good’ principal.

Currently, specific websites are being used as active texts (texts linked to other texts; texts that shape action) that are coordinated across organizational boundaries and organizational strategies—with mentoring programs for principals as well as performance appraisals. In order to teach the skills and competencies required for the principalship of today, the Ministry of Education in Ontario has developed a mentoring process for new principals. In concert with the Ministry, the Ontario Principals’ Council has developed a mentoring and coaching model that is available to more senior principals who are interested in professional development.

Concurrently, the Ministry is introducing a performance appraisal process for principals that provides principals and vice-principals with processes and procedures that will support improvement in their leadership and in turn, student achievement. Mentoring or coaching for leadership and student achievement is not required by the Ministry, but the performance appraisal is. Performance appraisals are texts that bring particular actions into view while subsuming others. It is not clear what the consequences are for individual principals if they do not ‘score’ highly on their

appraisal. What is clear is that the texts of appraisal construct and maintain a normative understanding of what a ‘good principal’ is. Appraisal texts are not built for individuality; they are built for accountability and standardization across different places, times and individual personalities.

Succession: noun

1. A number of people or things following one after the other
2. The action, process, or right of inheriting an office, title, etc....

PHRASES in quick succession following one another at short intervals in succession following one after the other without interruption (Oxford Concise Dictionary)

Succession is also an action. The chapters that follow show a complex process of change at many levels from the institutional to the subjective. The authors in this collection tease out the theoretical and inter-personal subtleties that weave through the shifts that occur when one school principal is succeeded by another.

Interestingly, outside of this volume, there is little written on what happens when one principal succeeds another. The new principal may have never been responsible for a school prior to their assignment, or he or she may be an experienced principal who has been at their previous school ‘too long’. There may be an opening in the middle of the year, or as happened at C. W. Jeffries Collegiate in North York, Ontario, a traumatic incident resulted in a change of principals. The incumbent principal was suspended; to be replaced by a new principal who was quickly promoted and another new principal was assigned to the school.

Since the new principal was promoted to a position of additional responsibility as superintendent of schools, the question for decision-makers is how to balance what’s good for the school and what’s fair for the incumbent principal. In this case, the Toronto District School Board decided in favour of the principal since most would argue that the school would have been better off with that principal remaining in place for a longer period of time. Much of the succession literature appears to focus on *planning* for succession (identifying possible leaders, encouraging potential leaders, and so on), not for the actions of succession itself. This volume begins to address the gap in this educational conversation.

In this prologue, I have pointed to textually mediated relations as an invisible yet essential aspect of the principalship and matters of succession. Briefly, I have showed how these two concepts are textually coordinated; yet refer to different times in an educator’s career. One textual relation acts as a prologue for the other: The other succeeds the first. The following chapters focus on different aspects of principal succession. Throughout these articles, you may be able to see how texts organize the actions of those involved in becoming a principal, and changing schools. These almost-invisible textual threads can be empirically researched, adding a dimension to the study of the principalship and of succession.

Reference

Smith, D. E. (2005). *Institutional ethnography: A sociology for people*. Lanham: AltaMira.

Principals in Succession

Transfer and Rotation in Educational Administration

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