

The Role of Mentoring in Flourishing of Florida School Principals

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In the United States, reports show that school administrators face increasing social, political, economic, educational, and professional demands, leading often to significant negative impacts on their mental health and wellbeing. Mentoring is often used as a resilience-building strategy to provide necessary supports for successful school leadership. Our study examined the role of mentoring in promoting a sense of flourishing among school administrators in Florida schools. In this article, we describe participants' perceptions regarding mentorship experiences and perceived wellbeing among school administrators. Moreover, this article highlights the role of effective mentorship in facilitating perceived wellbeing for principals in Florida. Future research should examine how mentorship can be used as a protective factor for principal retention and satisfaction in Florida schools.

Keywords: Mentorship; principals; wellbeing; resilience; school administration

Introduction

The recent shift in educational structures and leadership has left principals with higher pressures, responsibility, and workload (Wang et al, 2018, 2022). School leaders report uncertainty in their responsibilities and roles in their position and an increase in demands, which led to high levels of burnout (Dong, 2022), lack of wellbeing and work-life balance (Fullen, 2014; Garcia, 2015). It is crucial for teacher retention, resource development, and student success to have stable school leadership (DeMatthews et al, 2021). In fact, turnover in school leadership is commonly associated with lower student achievement and overall school stability (Goldring & Taie, 2018). Continuing concerns for teacher wellbeing in Florida (Volz, 2022), the elicited concern for the wellbeing and flourishing of Florida principals becomes central. Through the use of mentorship and professional development, school districts across the United States, including Florida, are adapting mentorship programs to improve wellbeing and flourishing amongst school leaders.

The Florida Association of School Administrators (FASA) strives to empower and advocate for support and resources for all school leaders. FASA works alongside governmental entities and legislative bodies to support principals, assistant principals, supervisors, and superintendents in Florida public education systems. In this report, after a brief review of relevant literature and research methodology, the paper first describes survey participants' perceptions regarding what flourishing meant to them, what they felt when they experienced flourishing, and the challenges and supports they perceived to be influential in

their overall sense of flourishing.

Mentoring typically entails pairing experienced education professionals with novice educators to support them in the beginning phase of their career (Wong, 2004). Based on the premise of "critical friend," (Costa and Kallick, 1993), mentoring commonly facilitates professional growth and development through mutual planning, support, and guidance. Mentorship programs are commonly regarded for positive outcomes, especially in principalships (Hansford & Enrich, 2006; Swaminathan et al, 2020). Some of the benefits of mentorship in principalships includes stronger self-confidence, reduced stress, and increased motivation and learning (Allen & Eby, 2007, Rzońca & Madalińska-Michalak, 2023). In addition, the school community commonly benefits through increased awareness of best practices and clear goals on improving student outcomes (Hayes et al., 2021). When mentorship is provided for novices at the early stage it has the capacity to create a positive learning environment from the outset that supports individual learning and development and successfully fosters educators' competence and wellbeing (Richter et al. 2013).

This can lead to improved work satisfaction (Feiman-Nemser, 2003), enhanced feelings of competence (Hayes, 2019), and a reduction in the likelihood of attrition (Darling-Hammond, 2003, Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

Wellbeing of School Administrators

According to Diener (1984), wellbeing is a combination of functioning well and is inclusive of positive emotions (Ruggeri et al., 2020; Huppert, 2013). Those that demonstrate positive wellbeing in

commonly have strong pro-social skills, increased creativity, and more effective learning (Ruggeri et al., 2020; Diener, 2012). There are various frameworks in the wellbeing field including subjective wellbeing (SWB) and objective wellbeing (OWB). SWB is defined as “people’s overall evaluations of their lives and their emotional experiences” (p.89) including their evaluation of health, quality of life and life satisfaction (Diener et al., 2012). OWB is commonly centered on six main areas of wellbeing including health, job opportunities, socioeconomic development, environment, safety, and politics (Diener et al., 2012). Common stressors for principals include school management (Doyle Fosco, 2023), work-life balance (Molineux et al., 2023), and high levels of emotional labour (Wang et al., 2022). Doyle Fosco (2022) discusses the importance of educational leader wellbeing and the literature on promoting wellbeing through strong collegial relationship, external relationships, and engagement with the school community. In addition, generating meaning and purpose in their roles has been a strong factor in principals maintaining their wellbeing and autonomy (Cherkowski et al., 2020)

Methodology

The study of wellbeing among principals in Florida used a mixed-methods design (open and closed-ended responses to allow for elaboration on themes and triangulation of data (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). An online survey was developed by researchers based on the systematic review of the literature and adaptations of similar instruments (Patterson et al., 2009).

Similar instruments were used for studies in Canada and England. After being piloted among school principals, the final version of the survey included 23 closed questions and 11 open-ended questions were thematically organized into the following categories: flow, thriving, resilience, grit, mentoring and wellbeing. For this analysis, wellbeing is the category of focus.

In collaboration with the Florida Association of School Administrators (FASA), the invitation to participate in the survey was distributed to principals in the Fall of 2022. Invitations were sent widely through their networks. All ethical guidelines were followed throughout the data collection and analysis process. Prior to data analysis, the researchers removed unusable data (incomplete or partially completed survey responses), which resulted in 17 usable survey results. Descriptive statistics (means, percentages, and standard deviations) were obtained for all applicable demographic and Likert-scale questions. For open-ended questions, qualitative analysis was conducted using a mix of a priori and open coding through appropriate codes from the literature. The codes gathered from the participants responses were then grouped into themes. Research findings are presented below, with qualitative data complementing and expanding on the results of quantitative analysis.

The demographic questions in this survey included age, gender, school region, school location, school type, school size, school demographics, division level, role, academic credentials, years of experience as educator, years of experience as principal, and training in mental health or wellbeing. The mean age of the respondents was 48.7 years of age (SD= 6.37), with 23.5% male and 76.4% female. The school regions include Northwest Region (5%), Northeast Region (47%), East Central Region (29%), West Central Region (6%), and South Region (11%). Over 64% of the respondent’s school location was in a suburban area, while 17% were in urban areas and 17% in rural areas. Over 81% of the respondents indicated that their highest degree was a master’s degree in education with 12% having bachelor’s were asked to select the percentage (using slider) for all demographics that apply within their school including White, Black, Asian, Hispanic, mixed, economically disadvantaged, students with disabilities, English second language, and exceptional education students. The majority of students in respondent’s schools are economically disadvantaged and White. The majority of respondents (76%) indicated they have 21 to 30 years of experience as an educator. Roughly 17% had 11 to 20 years of experience and 5% has 31 or more years of experience as an educator. The years as a principal varied from 5 years or less (5%), 6 to 10 years (23%), 11 to 15 years (35%), and 16 or more years (35%). Finally, 100% responded that they had some form of mental health or wellbeing training.

In collaboration with the Florida Association of School Administrators (FASA), principals were sent an invitation to participate in a short semi-structured interview. As part of the survey, the respondents were asked to provide an email if they would like to be contacted about an interview in the future around principal flourishing. The research team developed the interview questions in alignment with the literature on wellbeing and flourishing in principalship. The semi-structured interviews were conducted online through videoconferencing. All ethical guidelines were followed throughout the data collection and analysis process. Qualitative analysis was conducted using a mix of a priori and open coding through appropriate codes from the literature.

The codes gathered from the participants responses were then grouped into themes based on the survey questions. There was a total of four participants from Florida schools that participated in a semi-structured interview. Interviews allowed participants to expand on the responses from the previous survey and provide more specifics on flourishing in their individual context. There was a total of four principals that participated in a semi-structured interview. Each individual was given a pseudonym and demographic information was recorded. Two respondents identified as female and two identified as male. The age of the respondents was between 42 and 49. Two respondents had 21-30 years of teaching expertise

and two had 11-20 years of teaching experience. The principal experience ranged from six to sixteen or more years.

Findings

Mentoring and Coaching

Mentoring was defined for them as an act or process of helping, guiding, or giving advice to a younger or less experienced person to support their personal development. Coaching was defined as a process whereas a more experienced or skilled individual provides another person with advice and guidance intended to help develop the individual's skills, performance, and career. Of the 17 respondents, 12 (70.5%) had a mentor and five (29.4%) did not. Respondents were allowed to submit multiple responses in discussing the

types of mentorships they have experienced. Five respondents had formally assigned mentorship (35%) and three developed mentorships informally (21%). One respondent reported more than one informal mentor/coach (7%) and five indicated more than one with a mix of formal and informal (35%). Most respondents also have served as mentors and have has formal training in mentorship.

Respondents only sometimes meet with their mentors (M=3.67, SD=0.98), but they often encouraged them to reflect on their leadership (M=4.00, SD=1.27), and personal development (M=4.33, SD=1.49). Most respondents indicated that their mentor/coach has professional conversations and discussed challenges and successes (M=4.42, SD=1.37). The trend in mentorship for respondents demonstrates positive and reflective trends in mentorship.

Table 1

Experiences of Mentoring by Principals in Florida (n=12)

Question	Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Always	M	SD		
My mentor/coach and I have professional conversations			0	0	2	3	5	2	4.58	0.99
My mentor/coach and I discuss my successes and challenges.			0	1	3	1	4	3	4.42	1.37
Mentoring/coaching helps me with my personal development.			0	2	2	1	4	3	4.33	1.49
My mentor/coach encourages me to reflect about my leadership practice			0	1	4	3	2	2	4.00	1.27
How frequently do you and your mentor/coach meet?			0	1	5	3	3	0	3.67	0.98

In the open-ended responses, respondents were asked to reflect on the role mentoring played in their wellbeing as a school administrator. Two key themes emerged: fostering a supportive and mutually beneficial environment and enhancing future administrative practices. Many respondents highlighted the significant impact of mentorship opportunities and individual mentors. They also noted that engaging in critical discussions with current school leaders provided them with empowerment, valuable advice, and increased confidence. As one respondent noted, "It has helped me feel heard, valued... and process my feelings and goals." From these opportunities, multiple respondents indicated developing strong supportive relationships and guided their decision making and leadership skills. In addition, mentorship aids in the improvement of future

practices and fostering innovative administrative practices. Moreover, respondents were able to use mentors as a "sounding board" to problem solve and support their administrative journey. One respondent noted that mentorship has not had an impact on their wellbeing directly, but more commonly respondents noted the positive impacts of mentorship on their wellbeing.

Wellbeing of School Administrators

Wellbeing was defined for participants as a state of complete physical, psychological, and social health where individuals feel, think, and act in ways that foster life enjoyment and enhances their ability to deal with challenges. Most of the respondents noted positive wellbeing overall. On average, respondents slightly agree that they

have gotten the things they wanted in life so far (M=5.13, SD=1.62) and that their living conditions are excellent (M=4.88, SD=1.62). Moreover, respondents indicated that they were satisfied with life (M=4.81, SD=1.83) and that in most ways their life is ideal (M=4.44, SD=1.67). Aside from these

positive trends, there was varied responses across the responses to the phrase “If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing” (M=3.88, SD=1.92). Overall, responses indicate that well-being among respondents is relatively positive.

Question	Strong Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Nether Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Always	M	SD
So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life.	0	1	3	1	2	6	3	5.13	1.62
The conditions of my life are excellent.	0	3	0	2	3	7	1	4.88	1.62
I am satisfied with my life.	0	3	1	3	1	5	3	4.81	1.83
In most ways my life is close to my ideal.	0	3	2	3	2	5	1	4.44	1.67
If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.	1	4	3	2	2	2	2	3.88	1.92

In the open-ended responses, respondents were asked about their biggest challenges to well-being and how they mediate these challenges. Most respondents simply noted the challenges related to their wellbeing and overwhelmingly indicate concerns with support and workload, time management and high stress in the profession.

The profession is very demanding and requires a large number of expectations in which some respondents suggest are “unreasonable”. The workload is rising outside of work hours, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to managing other commitments. Other respondents indicated other challenges including the political climate, distractions, and trying to mediate relationships with parents or teachers. Some strategies respondents suggest for mediating wellbeing are reflections, long walks, exercise, and creating a supportive school environment. As noted, most respondents did not suggest how to mediate some of the challenges.

Respondents also discussed the types of training in mental health and wellbeing they completed. Most respondents noted receiving mental health and wellbeing training through professional development opportunities and workshops. More specifically, some respondents indicated the types of training included Trauma Sensitive Schools, Trauma Informed Classrooms, and Youth Mental Health First Aid as well as other online module courses. Respondents were also asked what the most important factor is in sustaining their wellbeing in their profession. Most respondents indicated that their family and friends were crucial

elements to sustaining their wellbeing. Aside from family and friends, some respondents discussed the role of a supportive supervisor, school community and other administrators. As one respondent noted, “a caring supervisor who values me and my opinion” is a distinct factor in promoting well-being in their work. Some respondents also used other strategies such as religion, exercise, time-off and staying busy. One respondent also noted that they do not have support currently to sustain their wellbeing. Overall, respondents use their personal connections and school support to mediate their wellbeing in their role.

Interviews

Mentorship in Principals

Each principal had a unique experience with mentoring others and being mentored in their position. Josephine discusses how the district she is in does not assign mentors, but she has always sought mentors herself to advance her professional and personal growth. To learn through mentorship, she would have informal lunches with her mentor, or simply watch the mentor teach and learn from their approaches. She says,

I think what’s important is you have that relationship you develop where you can be really vulnerable. You give permission for them to call you out on stuff too. If you’re never corrected, then you think you’re amazing all the time. You’re not. [Laughs] It’s important for somebody to say, “stop being a jerk.” Or “that was really harsh, and you don’t

have tact. You need to practice that.” I have a few.

This relationship allows Josephine to bounce ideas off her mentor and when some days are challenging, they can chat and support each other. She expresses that mentors for principals should be those in the field and not retired professionals so they can discuss daily challenges and modern approaches to leadership.

Jamie’s experience with mentorship is a little different. For the first two years of her career, she did not have mentorship or even a colleague to support. She wishes she had a mentor to help navigate the system, but she did find herself chatting with some local principals further into her career. As she started her role during the pandemic, this caused more challenges and challenges. Now she has her current principal that is very knowledgeable and passionate about their work to informally mentor her through her career. Although this is not a formal mentoring relationship, Josephine feels she can go to him for support and guidance. Max did not have any formal mentorship either. To support themselves, they reflected on their principals they had as a teacher. He says, “I just considered the other principals that I worked under both as a teacher. You see examples of good and bad”. From this, Max describes how you learn as you go through the role and see examples that align with your philosophy and recreate them in your own school.

Tom did receive formal mentorship through a teacher driven mentorship program at his last school. He received a mentoring handbook, and their school district put emphasis on mentoring for retention and retainment. Tom emphasizes the importance of these programs for building personal relationships with trust and competency. In his own district, they have a leadership mentoring program that lasts one year. With his mentor, Tom discusses informal and formal discussions at least two to three times a year. As principals are very busy, Tom says sometimes it is difficult to find mentors, but he has mentored two principals and worked diligently to support their success.

Wellbeing of School Administrators

The interviews, drawing on wellbeing, heavily focused on pre-pandemic times. Although principals had mixed experiences through the pandemic, most respondents noted that their wellbeing remained relatively stable. Tom was an assistant principal when the pandemic began and was promoted to a full principal during the pandemic. He discusses that many of his colleagues expressed the stress, strain and burden of the pandemic and notes the great impact and lasting impact the pandemic has had on students’ wellbeing. For Jamie, her wellbeing did not change dramatically. She describes that her role changed during the pandemic and the change in role was difficult. She did describe some additional stress of the pandemic overall. She says, “just that uncertainty, and the health concern, and

just in general, figuring out all the logistics. That was very challenging.” As the pandemic raised concerns around health and school safety, this was challenging but did not have a large impact on Jamie’s wellbeing.

Max feels that his wellbeing has gotten better in the past few years through the pandemic. The pandemic allowed for his school to be refurbished, and this meant a brand-new school after the pandemic subsided. He also notes that the superintendents can make a large impact on the principal’s wellbeing and school climate, which have been relatively supportive and positive in previous years. Josephine’s wellbeing has also been relatively positive over the past few years. Through the pandemic she had a great support system she could rely on for support and she has been met with grace from the school community. Josephine sought a therapist to support her wellbeing and the additional stress of the pandemic.

As Josephine reflects on her own experiences, she highlights the need for additional support and recentering through the pandemic. She expresses how individuals do not discuss additional supports like therapy enough and how it has helped her realize the skills she possesses. Overall, principals had mixed experience through the pandemic, but their wellbeing remained relatively stable.

Discussion

Most respondents have experienced both roles of mentor, and mentee. Some experienced more formally assigned mentors, while others experienced a combination of formats. Principals discussed some of the benefits for improving future practices in the school environment similar to the work of Hayes et al (2021). Similar to the literature (see Allen and Eby, 2007, Lacey, 2000), most respondents indicated the guidance, support, and leadership skills, empowerment, advice, and an increase in confidence. Respondents further added the need for mentorship as a “sounding board” for their problem solving and decision making.

This made respondents feel heard and valued, inherently having a positive impact on their wellbeing. According to the literature, wellbeing is a combination of positive emotions and functioning demonstrated through the ability to manage challenges (World Health Organization, 2015; Diener, 1984). Principals in Florida demonstrate a high level of wellbeing overall despite the demands and high stress of the profession.

Similar to Wang et al, (2018; 2022), respondents discussed the increase in responsibilities, pressure, and workload in their roles. This directly connects to the literature that outlines common as school management (Doyle Fosco, 2023), work-life balance (Molineux et al, 2023), and high levels of emotional labour (Wang et al, 2022). Some of the respondents used reflections, long walks, exercise, and collegial support to manage the stress and maintain wellbeing. The results from the principals’ interviews reflected wellbeing as relatively stable

over the pandemic. Although it was difficult for some principals to transition in roles and adapt, their wellbeing remained stable, and they sought additional support and resources to cope with additional stressors and tasks.

Conclusion

In conclusion, mentorship can support in enhancing school principals' wellbeing and professional skills in Florida schools. Mentorship provides school principals with guidance and support through challenges in their roles and scaffolds school principals leadership skills, ultimately improving confidence. Mentors can act as a critical 'sounding board' for their mentees and can be a critical friend when navigating their roles. By maintaining strong personal and professional relationships and support, Florida principals were able to maintain their wellbeing despite stressful and demanding professions. The results emphasize the need for continued mentorship for school principals and leaders alike to maintain professional satisfaction and personal wellbeing.

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