Becoming a transformative vice-principal in culturally and linguistically rich diverse schools: “Pace yourself. It’s a marathon, not a sprint”

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Journal: International Journal of Mentoring & Coaching in Education, 6(2), 82-98
Version: Accepted Manuscript/Post-print
DOI: 10.1108/IJMCE-11-2016-0072
Publisher: Emerald Insight
Published Article URL: https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-11-2016-0072
Published Issue URL: https://www.emeraldinsight.com/toc/ijmce/6/2
Copyright / Open Access Policy URL: http://www.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo/issn/2046-6854/
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Citation:
Hamm, L. (Clean copy Feb 7 2017). Becoming a transformative vice-principal in culturally and linguistically rich diverse schools: “Pace yourself. It’s a marathon, not a sprint”.

Submitted for fourth review to the International Journal for Mentoring and Coaching in Education.

Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this study was to examine the leadership role(s) of vice-principals in diverse, multi-ethnic schools and communities and understand the supervision and mentoring support they require to help them become more effective leaders within them. The research questions guiding this study were: 1. What forms of mentoring do vice-principals, who serve in diverse schools in rapidly changing communities, require? 2. Who is in the best position to provide mentoring for them?

Design/methodology/approach – The author used a qualitative case study methodology. Data that were analyzed for this paper were drawn from surveys, semi-structured interviews, one focus group interview and school and community documents from three data sets within two case studies in Canada. The first data set was part of the author’s doctoral research program in a diverse school in Alberta; the other case study was part of a larger collective case study that the author is currently involved with and leading in New Brunswick. Several vice-principals were part of both studies. The author then constructed a survey questionnaire specifically focused on mentoring vice-principals in diverse schools. Vice-principals in both provinces, who were part of the two studies, were invited to respond to the follow-up survey. Using a constant comparative analytical approach, the author coded and analyzed the data from all three sets together. The author formed several categories and ultimately collapsed the categories into five distinct themes that illustrated and confirmed the social realities of the vice-principals in their schools and communities.

Findings – Five key findings emerged from the analysis of the data sets. They were (1) building leadership capacity, (2) fostering positive relationships, (3) increasing global awareness, (4) reducing stress and anxiety, and (5) becoming a diversity champion and peace builder.
Originality/value – To this researcher’s knowledge, this paper contributes to a significant gap in the literature on vice-principals who serve in diverse schools and communities.

Keywords – mentoring, vice-principals, diverse schools, social justice, transformative leadership, case study methodology, qualitative research methodology

Paper type – Research study

Introduction

“Most days, there is simply no rhyme or reason to this job. It just is.”

These were the words uttered by a vice-principal who had discovered he needed more social support, intentional mentoring and constructive coaching to effectively navigate the turbulence he experienced in the position. The most valuable lesson he learned was coming to understand the need to engage deliberately in self-care and practice compassion and kindness while working within the complex educational terrain of a rapidly changing school district and province.

Unprecedented and unremitting global change is redefining the nature of contemporary classrooms in Canada. Student demographics and technological advancements are shifting rapidly, and educational leaders at all levels continue to be caught unprepared to respond to the rapid changes. These circumstances have significant implications for the nature of leadership preparation for schools (Bush, 2009; Hallinger, 2001). The purpose of this study was to examine the leadership role(s) of vice-principals in diverse, multi-ethnic schools and communities and understand the supervision and mentoring support they require to help them become more effective leaders within them. Vice-principals are cast in an in-between role (Armstrong, 2010); often they have to provide service, on the fly and by the seat of their pants (Ryan, 1999) in multiple directions for multiple stakeholders. In her research describing the transitional experiences of assistant principals as they move from the classroom to the front office, Armstrong (2009) outlines the daily complexities associated with the role. Many follow a “do as I do” process of leadership training by observing and consulting with their direct administrative supervisor(s). Given this reality, “assistant principals are often constrained by their principal’s leadership style and top-down approaches, and novice assistant principals receive clear signals that they must buy into the system, learn the rules, and emulate their administrative superiors to get ahead” (Armstrong, 2009, p. 23).
Armstrong (2009) and Marshall and Hooley (2006) describe the socialization experiences of vice-principals as they transition from their classroom service into formal leadership roles in their schools. Armstrong (2009) developed a concentric model to show the “increasingly complex administrative trajectory” (p. 62) and developing confidence and competencies of vice-principals in their early years of formal leadership service. Her findings may suggest that the trajectories of the first two pathways widen further when new vice-principals begin their administrative service in diverse schools. Researchers report that intercultural competence and diversity education requires specific attitudes, knowledge and skills that help educational leaders and teachers to understand the unique cultural identities of students in diverse schools (Bickmore, 2014; Leeman, 2003; Peck et al., 2008). William Greenfield forewarned over 20 years ago that “As the populations served by public schools become increasingly diverse, school administrators must become proactive in creating environments for students, teachers, and parents that are supportive and inclusive of differences and that are responsive to the rapidly changing social contexts within which schools must operate” (1993, p. 267).

With global migration on the increase (Guterres, 2015), it is imperative that vice-principals in diverse schools work toward becoming engaging transformative and ethical leaders for their schools and communities (Shields, 2013; Starratt, 1991, 2004). Individuals who occupy middle and supporting administrative roles as vice-principals will require extensive mentoring support to equip them to serve in their increasingly complex educational environments. From an American perspective, Searby (2014) argues that “As mentoring programs for new principals become normative, it is imperative that both experienced principal mentors and novice principal protégés become familiar with effective mentoring processes through training and professional development” (p. 256). It is additionally critical that this professional relationship between mentor and mentee or protégé develops and is sustained in diverse schools within the Canadian context.

Vice-principals are the unsung heroes of school leadership; they exist in educational social worlds that are often very difficult to describe. They “are usually the first ones to handle the most difficult disciplinary problems. Social issues such as poverty, racism, and family disruption help define the world in which assistant principals find themselves” (Marshall and Hooley, 2006, p. 2). It is no wonder they often feel isolation, dread and disempowerment in their jobs. By critically examining and understanding the roles vice-principals perform, particularly in
complicated learning environments reflecting increasing social, gender, religious, linguistic and academic diversity, they may begin to receive the type of support and mentoring they need to become the leaders they aspire to be.

In this paper, the author reports on research from two separate case studies in Canada (Alberta and New Brunswick) and argues that vice-principals are on thresholds of everything that is important for the effective functioning and success of schools in the communities they serve. Paradoxically, the educational literature reveals that their roles are fraught with conflict and ethical decision-making (Glanz, 1994; Rintoul and Goulais, 2010), and their efforts are frequently subsumed under the role of school principals, often leaving the important and complex service they provide unnoticed (Grant, 2013).

This paper attempts to bridge two academic fields – vice-principal leadership in diverse schools and mentoring vice-principals. Two research questions guide this study: (1) What forms of mentoring do vice-principals, who serve in diverse schools in rapidly changing communities, require? (2) Who is in the best position to provide mentoring for them? A selection of research on leadership in diverse schools and mentoring is reviewed in the next section, followed by a discussion of the methods and conceptual framework used in this research. Key findings from the study and recommendations for mentoring vice-principals in diverse schools conclude this paper.

**Review of the Literature**

A search of the literature on mentoring and school leadership yielded many studies and follow-up journal articles on professional support and mentoring for principals. There were also many studies that focused on supporting and mentoring new and future principals (i.e., vice-principals and teachers in leadership programs). However, when the literature search was specifically narrowed to “mentoring vice-principals,” only one discovery emerged in the digital library system. That article was related to the general mentoring and coaching of school leaders in Ontario (Robinson *et al.*, 2009). A final search for “mentoring vice-principals in diverse schools” recorded no hits on any of the digital databases in the university library system that was accessed, indicative of the paucity of educational research involving mentoring and supporting vice-principals in diverse schools.

*The elusive and complex roles of the vice-principal*
Armstrong (2010) points out that “the vice-principalship acts a key socialization point for upper management positions” (p. 120). In a critical review of educational leadership and administration programs, Murphy (2006) reported that there were serious flaws and problems with the ways students were being recruited and how they were being prepared by their university professors. This claim has far-reaching implications for schooling and leadership. Any global social observer committed to understanding the events taking place in the world today might note that the conflicts that are driving people from their homes and communities will definitely have an impact on the education of students and teachers everywhere. This is our world’s reality today, and ironically, some researchers have been saying this for some time (Goldberg, 2000; Hodgkinson, 2000; Wallerstein, 2005).

The vice-principal role is gaining interest from researchers (Armstrong, 2009; Brien, 2010; Greenfield et al., 1986; Marshall and Hooley, 2006), but it is still a position that remains elusive in the educational leadership literature. The role is ambiguous and demands more inquiry, especially given the turbulence experienced by individuals who serve as vice-principals in these contemporary times of rapid demographic and technological change (Hamm, 2015). It is against the backdrop of status quo and immovable policies and structures in schools that I believe vice-principals have the best chance to contribute their leadership knowledge, skill sets and service if they understand that organizational structures that are created in schools to manage the core technologies associated to learning “are human inventions … They can be changed by educational administrators so that more students have a better chance in school” (Starratt, 2005, p. 129). For schools in communities that are currently accepting more and more families from around the world (Ibrahim, 2016), the constructivist position, in my view, is a solid philosophical platform for educators to anchor to. By understanding that they have agency, vice-principals can advocate for social change and equity and thus ameliorate the possibilities of their schools and communities becoming contested public sites of dispute and disharmony (Robertson, 2005).

Vice-principals are more than just school caretakers who perform duties that their principals do not wish to do (Lee et al., 2009). It has been reported that far too often, vice-principals are assigned to perform “undesirable tasks” (Marshall and Hooley, 2006, p. 20) and that their days are filled mostly with management issues and discipline matters. For vice-principals to develop into effective leaders, they need to be part of meaningful, challenging and robust leadership programs (Bush, 2009; Murphy, 2006). To become increasingly effective in their roles,
particularly in diverse schools, vice-principals must have unconditional support for their authority from their principal and be empowered to serve beyond the school disciplinarian role and participate in or take a lead in the decision-making processes in the school (Arar, 2014).

*Mentoring vice-principals*

In her work, Searby (2014) reviewed multiple studies on mentoring new leaders that theoretically grounded her work on understanding the protégé mentoring mindset. Her findings illuminate a reality that many vice-principals often experience during early phases in their leadership career – situations where support may not exist for them and if it does, the protégé may believe they do not require that support. The latter reality becomes problematic for vice-principals and invariably may lead them to experience stress and anxiety. The five thematic binaries that Searby (2014) reports and discusses in her research findings emphasize the need for the intentional conceptualizing, construction and implementation of mentoring frameworks for vice-principals as they begin their formal leadership service. The absence of such a framework may do great harm and damage the career of vice-principals who work in diverse schools and districts.

When children arrive from countries that are experiencing conflict, famine and extreme poverty, new vice-principals may need the support of an experienced mentor who has worked in a similar context and understands the complexities of working with children and families who have experienced war. If mentoring support is not readily available for new vice-principals serving diverse schools and communities, the mentees or protégés will have to take the initiative to find their mentor and be willing to listen and learn from them (Daresh, 2016; Fischler and Zachary, 2009; Searby, 2014). In diverse schools, it is to be expected that the new vice-principal will have to be mentored through situations that will take them far outside their usual comfort zones (Hamm and Cormier, 2015; Lopez, 2013; MacDonald, 2015; Varma-Joshi et al., 2004). For instance, in her work on anti-racist professional development for mentors working with new teachers in California, Lee (2006) describes the importance of helping mentors “reflect on how they address language, race and culture in mentoring” (p. 56). This form of support is crucial for vice-principals serving in diverse schools, as racism and discrimination affects everyone who is part of the school community. All forms of racism, including overt, covert, institutional and community-based marginalizing incidents, carries with it the influence of eroding school culture, climate and the sense of belonging for children from minority languages and cultures (Solomon et al., 2006). Racism is challenging for many administrators and their colleagues to deal with.
Yet, as unpleasant as racism is for educators and leaders, the most effective way to confront it (and often the most uncomfortable and difficult) is to challenge it head on (Shields, 2013). It is in these career turning-point moments when the protégé vice-principal in the diverse school and community will need an experienced and toughened mentor who has worked through difficult racial situations in their leadership service.

Johnson and Ridley (2004) go into great detail about the specific elements of mentoring, and they note that the mentor will have to counsel their protégé through difficult times and even protect them during their darkest and most challenging moments. Rapidly changing schools in communities of difference (Shields, 2003) where students from around the world are engaging each other on a daily basis will generate many situations that will require sound decision-making by educators and leaders in order to build peace and harmony in their schools and communities. And because of this social reality in diverse schools, there are abundant opportunities for reciprocal relationship building between the mentor and mentee to develop.

One way to invite, encourage and build reciprocity between the mentor and her/his protégé within the diverse school context is through the peer coaching model. Allen and LeBlanc (2005) argue that constant feedback in the peer coaching framework “counteracts isolation” (p. 22) for new teachers; this relational approach would also be highly beneficial for vice-principals in diverse schools. It is very important that vice-principals feel that they are never left on their own while building their capacity to work in a diverse school. Peer mentoring “is a low-cost resource” (Parker et al., 2014, p. 122) and encourages vice-principals to be active learners and agents in their own leadership development. Referencing modern day demands on leaders, Parker et al. (2014) argue that “In such a complex, turbulent world we need to find better and faster ways to adapt and cope. And we cannot do it all by ourselves. We need to use relational resources to learn our way through these challenges” (p. 122). Searby (2014) highlights this idea also, suggesting that “The protégés who could build relationships with others, and use those skills in networking with others, were deemed by mentors to be relationally competent” (p. 266). Thus, becoming relationally competent will support vice-principals who are increasing their skill sets while working with parents who do not speak the dominant language, with immigrant settlement workers and agencies who are supporting parents and families and, most importantly, with the children who have arrived from countries at war and are experiencing trauma (Stewart, 2007).
Finally, the mentoring relationship must continue long after the vice-principal has their feet firmly on the ground in their new school and begins to experience increasing leadership capacity, confidence, competence and comfort. An indicator of such a state may be when the mentor and protégé have reached a stage in their relationship where they are on equal terms – one mentoring the other (Daresh, 2016). This may be the confirming evidence that helps the protégés to understand that the mentoring they have received has been beneficial for their growth and development and inspires them to seek out the opportunity – or at least avail themselves to one – to support another vice-principal who may require mentoring support as they did. Thus, this form of mentoring and coaching for vice-principals in diverse school and communities has important cyclical implications and may become a sustainable leadership structure that diverse school schools and districts rely on to support their new leaders (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006).

Ultimately, it is vital for vice-principals to continually assess and reflect on the changing circumstances in the environments they work in and prepare the best they can to respond to their challenges (Walker and Dimmock, 2005).

**Method**

The data for this project have been drawn from vice-principals in two separate qualitative case studies in Canada. The first case study was conducted by the researcher in a diverse school as part of his doctoral work in a small rural city in Western Canada (Hamm, 2009, 2013). The school was situated in a community and district that underwent rapid demographic change as people arrived from all over the world – many of them gained employment in a large secondary industry. Consequently, the school in this case became diverse quickly as their children enrolled continuously as they arrived, catching many educators unprepared and thus scrambling to respond to the needs of their growing diverse student body. The second case is part of a recently designed qualitative collective case study of five increasingly diverse high schools in an Atlantic province in Canada (Hamm et al., 2015). To date, one case has been completed. For this paper, the researcher selected specific data from eight vice-principals (N = 4 from New Brunswick; N = 4 from Alberta). Drawing from Greenfield (1986) and Bush (2003), both studies follow the subjective constructivist epistemology, taking schools as human social constructions where researchers “seek understanding of the ways in which individuals create, modify and interpret the social world which they inhabit” (Bush, 2003, pp. 121–122). The researcher is drawn to the transformative educational possibilities (Shields, 2010, 2013) associated with constructivist
philosophy that may allow vice-principals to improve the socio-cultural conditions of the students and educators they serve. If vice-principals in diverse schools can perceive and confirm that structures like timetables and classroom arrangements are not working for students, particularly those who are often most marginalized in their schools, they can then lead change for more equitable arrangements to be put in place (Starratt, 2005). This is particularly important for vice-principals serving diverse schools and communities who often are tasked with roles that are aligned with timetabling, student placement, behavior and discipline policy construction and implementation as well as school and community celebrations.

Sample, Data Collection and Analysis

Data in both projects were collected through in-depth interviews with vice-principals in Western Canada (WC) and Atlantic Canada (AC), one focus group interview (AC) and school and community documents and extensive field notes (WC and AC). All transcribed narratives were returned to the participants to be member-checked. At this stage, participants were asked to check for errors, add context or delete content at their discretion. Few changes were made on any of the interview or focus group transcripts aside from punctuation and spelling mistakes. After review of these data sets, a survey questionnaire was constructed and distributed to all eight vice-principals (see Appendix 1). Five survey questionnaires were returned and added to the overall data that were coded and analyzed.

All the data were read initially without any initial “mark up.” This provided the researcher with a sense of common patterns and ideas emerging prior to the textual analytical process. On the second and subsequent reading, data were aggregated together and organized into initial clusters, “chunks” or “data event frequencies” (Hamm et al., 2015) to begin the “deep immersion” process (Rossman and Rallis, 2003) that highlights the continuous regrouping and recoding in the constant comparative method (Fram, 2013; Hands, 2010; Stewart, 2007). After the three rigorous readings, data were aggregated further into nine developing/emerging categories and eventually down to five themes that describe the service of the eight vice-principals within their increasingly diverse schools. All the data were then recoded as a vice-principal in WC and a vice-principal in AC. The researcher chose to do this because of the smaller sample of participants in this study and protect the identities of the participants. This also allowed the researcher to reveal commonalities of experiences.
Findings

The five thematic categories to be introduced (see Diagram 1) and discussed in the next sections are (1) building leadership capacity, (2) fostering positive school and community relationships, (3) increasing awareness of global events, (4) reducing stress and anxiety, and (5) becoming a diversity champion and peace builder. All the categories have been further developed into thematic statements in the next sections to describe more fully the social realities that the vice-principals in the studies are confronting in their diverse schools.

1. Building leadership capacity - Vice-principals need to continuously develop individual and collective leadership capacities to increase their effectiveness for service in diverse schools

The data for this paper illustrate the importance of vice-principals continuously building their leadership capacities to position themselves better to support their colleagues and students. As new instructional leaders, participants indicated their peers look to them for instructional support and guidance. Vice-principals must work with the principal and key members of their staff to conceptualize, plan and implement a robust professional development agenda that will sustain academic and social growth in the school. As one vice-principal noted, building capacity “must be a true team approach, not hierarchical” (VP – WC). Capacity building can be developed through district professional development, but realistically it cannot end there for the vice-principals. One former vice-principal described his graduate leadership development as follows:

One of the most important steps I took was doing my master’s with a practical leadership focus. In my opinion, there are too many complexities for mentorship to be the only vehicle for support. I am not saying it can’t be done but it will occur quicker and with stronger research basis with a formal educational process. (VP – WC)

Vice-principals working in rural diverse schools have to build their capacities to identify and work through conflict of various forms and to varying degrees. One vice-principal mentioned the significance of developing conflict resolution skills.

I am surprised how often this is required when in leadership roles. Obviously, proactive approaches based on trusting relationships are key but the ability to work with students, parents and probably most often with staff to see the win–win in tough situations is vital. (VP – WC)
Vice-principals in diverse schools serve as the conduits between teachers, principals and parents. Sometimes, intersecting and mediating these relationships can be tricky. Rintoul and Goulais (2010) confirm in their study that though vice-principals are “expected to be decision makers, vice-principals, in reality must focus on the agenda of others – parents, principals, teachers” (p. 747). As vice-principals in this study suggested, all the teachers in their schools must value working on their own leadership development through the opportunities that exist in busy diverse schools. In the case of this study, it was often the vice-principals who identified emerging leaders in their schools and began mentoring them to seek professional growth opportunities:

We certainly have encouraged people to be involved and part of the direction of any areas that they want to be involved in. If they want to take a lead in professional development or they want to take a lead in something that’s going on in the school, they’re certainly encouraged to do that. (VP – WC)

We do encourage staff to be life-long learners and to get out there and to challenge themselves to get involved. (VP – WC)

All four of the vice-principals from WC described the leadership development program they were all part of in their own district, a program that not only elevated the leadership capacities of the individuals who were part of the program but sustained the leadership growth of their colleagues across their school district.

2. Fostering positive relationships through intentional communication strategies to serve multiple school and community stakeholders

Vice-principals in both cases reported that they are often the first contact for many people connected to their school. In diverse schools, this is not limited to students, teachers, parents and their principals; the vice-principals in this study connected and worked with business and community leaders, new immigrant settlement agency workers, leaders in multicultural associations, psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors, lawyers and members of the police force. Essentially, the vice-principals indicated they fostered relationships in multiple directions. Participants described the importance of building relationships as key for their leadership growth.
New administrators need to build relationships with all families, especially new immigrant parents. Building relationship trust helps to reduce family anxiety and establishes a culture in which courageous conversations take place. (VP - WC)

What jumps out to me are relationships in schools. Every student needs to have … regardless if they’re an international student, whether they’re an at-risk student … they have to foster some kind of relationship with somebody within the school or they’re not going to stay or they’re not going to want to be here. (VP - AC)

Two vice-principals discussed how intentionally communicating with parents can open up productive channels for communication. This is important for newcomer parents who often do not understand the dominant language and culture. Immediate communication with them is vital to build relationships and increase their involvement in diverse schools as four vice-principals described in their narratives.

If I was going to work with teachers and/or vice-principals it would be to talk about how important this is and provide strategies, for lack of a better word, strategies in order to ensure that our parental involvement is there. (VP – AC)

Once the school can communicate with the family that the intent is to support their child in whatever it takes, the barriers reduce and open channels are created. (VP – WC)

Everything in my job, in my estimation, revolves around and is made easier through relationship-building. By establishing and maintaining positive relationships with the students and their families many issues are solved before they even crop up. As well, when issues do arise it is much easier to get support from the families if a good relationship exists. (VP – WC)

One word … RELATIONSHIPS. If you cannot develop a strong relationship with your students … you are hooped. Life for immigrants is not easy. Many immigrant students that excel in their mother language, struggle with English classes. Be patient. Be sympathetic and care about them. Support them, connect with them and direct them to others that can help them overcome their barriers. (VP – WC)

 Showing patience with newcomer students and parents was very important for the vice-principals as they worked hard to establish trust in building their communication strategies with parents.
3. Increasing awareness of global events and how they impact the school and community

In both studies, the demographic changes in the schools and communities caught educators by surprise. Both schools experienced turbulence and “Arguably, the new millennium will witness mounting tensions in schools and these pressures will be fuelled by the conflicting interests of multiple stakeholders” (Dei et al., 2000, p. 2). Currently, the unrest and violence many African and Middle Eastern countries are experiencing are causing thousands of people to flee for safety. These events impacted the communities and schools in the study, and as one vice-principal suggested, “Social awareness on a global scale is very important. Making the time to become acquainted with issues around our globe can pay huge dividends down the road” (VP – WC). Sadly, another vice-principal described that he did not prepare for rapid changes or even consider addressing them early on when he was a younger teacher. “It’s been a challenge; it’s certainly not something that a lot of us have background with and so we lack that experience in dealing with issues like this” (VP – WC).

Other challenges the vice-principals confronted related to global issues and complexities. “For instance, just last week we had 7 children register as new students, all from Somalia, with little or no formal education and next to no English proficiency” (VP – WC). Refugee students who have had their schooling disrupted by conflict and war pose additional challenges for administrators and teachers to construct appropriate educational programming for them. What was evident in this inquiry is that the war in Syria and the Middle East is clearly on the minds of vice-principals on both sides of Canada. The current global events are causing feelings of uncertainty as they anticipate how these events may impact their professional service and that of their teachers.

4. Reducing stress and anxiety to work toward achieving and sustaining a healthy and balanced professional life

The data indicate clearly that the vice-principals in diverse schools encounter experiences that place them in complex, uncertain and ambiguous situations. These realities often force them to make rapid decisions that all too often become reactionary rather than appropriately responsive. All the participants desired more time to make important decisions in their busy schools; however, their time was limited and this reality contributed to additional stress and anxiety.
Stress is not healthy, nor is the pace these vice-principals conducted their lives in. Further, a fast pace is not sustainable under any circumstance or within any educational environment.

One vice-principal in WC stated, “If you allow the job to consume you, it will!” Another participant in AC agreed and then rationalized saying,

You can rail on about the system or about this, that or the other but you’re gonna do what you can with what you have for resources. But I would pace yourself ... because it’s a marathon; it’s not a sprint.

Stress and anxiety was high among the vice-principals. Due to the nature of the intensity of their roles, special attention is given to the emerging reality of stress and anxiety that these vice-principals experienced as outlined in the following data events:

Anxiety and stress for a VP at a culturally diverse school is not uncommon. It is how you handle the stress and whether you have your support team in place. (VP – WC)

Oh no, there’s stress. My [spouse] will tell you there’s stress and anxiety. (VP – AC)

Being able to de-stress at the end of each and every day is vital. It is also important to learn how to let things go. Whether that be issues that you have had with students, staff or parents or possibly ways in which you feel you are not reaching students in the way in which you would like, it is very important to be able to set things aside when you leave work each night … I can guarantee it will be there again the next day. (VP – WC)

When asked specifically if they felt increasingly diverse classrooms were a source of added anxiety for their teacher colleagues, two vice-principals provided descriptive accounts of their perceptions of the stress the classroom teachers in their school were experiencing.

I think it’s hardest for the classroom teachers quite honestly because they want to do well. They want to serve the students. I think that they feel in some cases unequipped to do so because they’re not language teachers necessarily. They are teachers in content areas and I think in a perfect world, they would have more support at the classroom level and how to serve these kids because they want their kids to be successful. (VP – AC)

We do try and support them. Does it add pressure to the teachers? Yes it does. Yeah, I really think it does. It takes longer to explain things. A simple question that an English-
speaking student would understand, you have to go back, explain the question, explain
the vocabulary where the teacher might assume that the vocabulary was understood … It
can be as simple as they don’t know what rain is, they don’t know what snow is
depending on how long they’ve been in Canada. So yes it does, it takes a lot longer to get
the concepts through. (VP – WC)

5. Becoming a diversity champion and peace builder for school and community harmony

Vice-principals have been described as the “in-betweens” (Armstrong, 2010), the difference
makers, and the behind-the-scenes transformative cultural workers (Glanz, 1994, 2006;
Madhlangobe and Gordon, 2012; Shields, 2010, 2013). These leaders persistently advocate for
those who do not have the necessary social, cultural or institutional capital to advocate for
themselves – in these cases, their new immigrant students and parents. The vice-principals in
both studies care deeply for the students and teachers they are working with. They champion
diversity and serve as peace builders in their schools and communities and understand the
importance of reaching out to community members and service agencies to invite additional
support in their schools. One vice-principal reported,

One of the most important areas in developing relationships with our immigrant families
is communication. We make great use of the translators available through the School
Workers in School program run by our local SPEC Association, as well as the Immigrant
Services. Between these two programs we have access to individuals who speak over 16
languages. (VP – WC)

Developing these community connections and relationships encourages a growing trust among
the multitude of school stakeholders and community members. “By making use of these
translators we work very hard to make sure that the correct messages and information are getting
into the homes of our students” (VP – WC).

The participants in this study also understand the significance of being part of community events
outside of school hours to show students and their families that they care about them beyond
simply providing academic support. This is a powerful message to send to new immigrant
parents who may not always be able to attend school functions. In fact, many new immigrant
parents may be hesitant to approach teachers and leaders in schools due to their own perception
of lacking the ability to speak fluently and clearly in the dominant language. The vice-principals
here recognize that they can break down language and cultural barriers for parents, instill more confidence within them and include them more effectively in the school community by reaching out to them in their homes and through safe community shared spaces.

Several vice-principals in this study did not wait for the parents to come to them. In both case studies, school leaders went to the local multicultural associations to meet with new immigrant parents and to discuss school activities, student progress, academic pathways for student success and various other school-related protocols. These actions clearly broke away from the traditional status quo communication formats that many Canadian school systems still rely on (i.e., waiting to communicate during parent/teacher evenings or simply through newsletter and email). One vice-principal described the many cultural events that new immigrant communities organize for their wider community and described how it is imperative that educators and leaders get involved in them because these events provide opportunities for community engagement for increased understanding between various peoples. He noted that students love to see their teachers at these events. “Many of the cultural groups organize events that highlight their heritage and many of these events are open to the public. Get involved and show your students that you do care and are willing to learn about them” (VP – WC).

As peace builders in their schools, several participants made themselves aware of segregating structures and events within their schools and communities and worked to bring students together as much as they could. One vice-principal said, “It is vital that every adult in the building help to maintain a culture that is safe, caring, and consistent. No exceptions” (VP – WC).

All eight vice-principals perceived their schools as positive environments for student engagement and learning amidst the changes that were constantly taking place. The dialogue in the interviews never turned to deficit thinking. As one vice-principal described, diverse school leaders and educators must take a strength-based approach to guide their service; this attitude embedded with transformative leadership perspectives (Shields, 2013) enhances the overall quality of education for all the students in the school, as noted by the vice-principal in the following excerpt:

We let everybody know we are a multicultural facility. It’s something that we don’t think of as a burden; we think of it as an asset. We have kids from all cultures get along with
each other and we have a cafeteria that is full of excitement and joy of sharing, you know, stories about, you know, the past, the present, and the future … And what makes our kids so tolerable and so understanding I think is when they leave this place is that they’ve seen what the world’s all about. They’ve listened to people from other parts of the world. (VP – WC)

Diagram 1 - Intersecting Themes

Conclusion – Suggestions for Mentoring Vice-Principals in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Schools and Communities

Carolyn Shields (2013) describes the world that educators exist in today. It is a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) landscape that challenges teachers and educational leaders to think differently about their pedagogy and leadership approaches as they move along the trajectories of their careers. It is a world where “learning with” is more important than “teaching to” (Freire, 1970). She calls for transformative leadership – an approach that breaks
free from “previous technical and mechanical approaches to leadership” (p. 11) and instead allows leaders to develop a language and skill set based on student, school and community strengths. The data collected and analyzed in this project are encouraging. With effective mentoring and support, vice-principals in diverse schools can begin the process of becoming the transformative-type leaders that our rapidly changing schools and communities in Canada require. The themes that emerged and were developed through a rigorous analysis of the data in this project illuminate possibility and hopefulness for schools and communities confronting rapid change. Shields (2013) strongly suggests that transformative leadership praxis requires leaders to take a stand, embrace the chaos and ambiguity, focus on information sharing and relationships, and develop a strong sense of the core organizational vision. It requires that we identify our ‘non-negotiables’ – those aspects of education that will not be sacrificed to the current pressures of accountability, or standards, or testing. (p. 11)

To address the two research questions in this study, the following suggestions arise from the data from the study.

*Developing leadership capacity*

It is important that vice-principals in diverse schools – both new and experienced – be provided sufficient funding and opportunities to be mentored and supported through focused professional development (PD) at the district, provincial and national levels. This support and mentoring should be provided by individuals who are theoretically grounded in intercultural pedagogies and leadership approaches and have professional experience working in diverse contexts.

This mentoring and support could initially come in the form of graduate work. As one of the participants shared, graduate studies in university supported his leadership capacity building. There, he formed networks and reciprocal mentoring relationships with other educators from districts in his province. Further, it is not uncommon for graduate students to be in mentoring-type relationships with their university professors. For vice-principals in diverse schools who find themselves unprepared for intercultural challenges, it is important that they are encouraged to find an education colleague – at the university level or at the K-12 level, who has a keen interest and passion in intercultural and diversity education and will share their knowledge and expertise.
With the onset of digitally delivered graduate courses through online learning platforms, graduate students can take rigorous web-based courses that are focused on topics related to cultural diversity in schools, social justice and transformative leadership perspectives. This form of PD puts them in continuous contact with researchers and teachers in the field of diversity and intercultural education and with students from across Canada and around the world who may be facing similar challenges working in their diverse environments. Together, they may form peer-mentoring relationships and learning communities and work through their challenges.

_Fostering relationships in and out of school_

In diverse communities, it is vital that vice-principals are encouraged and mentored to find opportunities to authentically engage new immigrant parents in their homes or in common public spaces within their community. Individuals who may be best positioned to provide this mentoring for the vice-principals include intercultural educators and leaders who work in diverse schools, parents and leaders within diverse communities, and settlement and community intercultural leaders who have on-going contact and experience working with families after they arrive in Canada. Parents who do not speak the dominant language or who are tentative about engaging the school and their child’s teachers need to be assured that their voices and educational concerns will be listened to by a caring leader. By stepping into the worlds of their students’ families, vice-principals demonstrate transformative leadership in breaking down barriers and institutional obstacles (Shields, 2013). “To give the simplest of examples, the communications from school to parents including report cards are often incomprehensible despite any translations that might be provided” (Bernhard, 2010, p. 321). Not only is this behavior transformative, it is also an ethical human action by the school leader (Starratt, 2005). The vice-principals in this study clearly viewed and understood the necessity to work with their diverse communities. Many were mentored to do so, and some were the mentors who demonstrated positive leadership role modeling to the teachers and support staff they worked with. As Starratt (2004) explains, there are many teachers who still, and perhaps unknowingly, are guided by misconceptions and deficit pedagogies when working with new immigrant families:

> Many teachers disparage or patronize immigrant or welfare parents, believing that they have nothing to offer that would help in teaching their children. Many of these parents experience obstacles to attending parent-teacher meetings due to work schedules,
language barriers, lack of baby-sitting, or cultural unease with public authorities. School leaders should see that partnerships with parents in supporting the learning of children in the school receive the sustained and sensitive attention that they require. (p. 54)

It was reassuring to learn that the vice-principals in this study were focused educational leaders when it came to developing relationships with multiple stakeholders.

*Increasing awareness of global events*

The vice-principals in this study generally reported they were aware of the demographic changes in their schools and communities, but the researcher still wondered if they were fully aware as to why the demographic changes were occurring, where the children and their families were arriving from and what was causing them to leave their communities in the first place. Global knowledge is vital for vice-principals, and they must be encouraged and mentored toward acquiring it. New immigrant and refugee parents and community leaders who have experienced and escaped from conflict zones are best positioned to provide this educative mentoring for vice-principals. First, the vice-principal, or person mentoring the vice-principal, must be sure that the individuals are willing and able to share their experiences and wisdom. This is due to the emotional side effects that the individuals, who have experienced war first-hand, may be struggling with.

A transformative vice-principal who wants to make a difference in their school and community has to have global awareness and be able to communicate effectively to their colleagues to help them learn about demographic change, global events and the circumstances that are contributing to them. They have to be encouraging of deep conversations on diversity in all classrooms in their schools. They need to be supported in order for them to support their colleagues to shut down the curriculum for a “teachable” moment, an entire class, or even a day, to have critical conversations on issues like racism and discrimination that unfortunately become part of the discourse in culturally diverse schools. Further, the transformative vice-principal needs to be supported in advocating for dialogical pedagogies in all the classrooms in their school, “where the teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach” (Freire, 1970, p. 80).

*Working toward reducing stress and anxiety*
Being an educational leader is challenging and the participants in this study described their challenges in great detail. Their narratives conclusively indicate that the rapid demographic changes in their schools and communities have immediate and far-reaching implications on educator health within the educational system that they are part of. Vice-principals have to work to take care of themselves before they can effectively care for and lead others. Indisputably, teaching and leading in this current educational era, based on demanding accountability protocols (Schmidt, 2010), is challenging.

The challenges for vice-principals are exacerbated when their schools become increasingly diverse due to rapid immigration and demographic change. As one vice-principal clearly outlined, teachers want to provide the best service they can for all their students; often the resources allocated to schools are insufficient leading to intermittent or even absent PD on issues related to the challenges they are encountering. Vice-principals clearly need support and mentoring in this area. They need to be part of networks with other vice-principals who share their struggles. “Teacher blogs or discussion boards are often great places to find other administrators, who have dealt with, or are dealing with, similar situations” (VP – WC). Another vice-principal suggested, “Surround yourself with experienced, caring people that share your vision and ones that you can trust” (VP – WC). Trusted individuals may include mentors such as colleagues and educational counselors who work alongside the vice-principals. The important mentoring they might offer is simply being present and listening to the vice-principal while encouraging them to always remain hopeful amidst the day-to-day turbulence of their jobs.

*Becoming a diversity champion and peace builder*

Due to their immediate link to all stakeholders in their school and community, vice-principals need to be encouraged to develop skills that support them in developing peace and harmony. This is perhaps the most complex role they will perform. They cannot stand by and watch teachers flounder in their classes when students and families from all over the world enter their educational settings. Vice-principals have to think and act; they have to be a leading diversity champion in their school as the vice-principals in this study were. By understanding their school and community context fully, and how the demographic changes will continually reshape their school culture and community, the vice-principal can then set PD activities that will support teachers, students and parents more effectively in diverse schools. As an example, they can
intentionally invite new immigrant parents into their schools to share their culture and lived experiences with students.

With the help of their colleagues, they can look for opportunities to get students together to share their stories with each other and to build community and understanding together. In taking such action, the vice-principals work from a transformative standpoint looking for root causes of school and community marginalization; they constantly work at developing more equitable educational programs and structures for teachers and students. Starratt (2004) states that,

Educational leaders must be morally responsible, not only in preventing and alleviating harm but also in a proactive sense of who the leader is, what the leader is responsible as, whom the leader is responsible to, and what the leader is responsible for. (p. 49)

The vice-principals in this study did not stray away from difficult conversations; they confronted them head on with their staff. Becoming a diversity champion and peace builder takes time, energy and commitment. But in this VUCA world, there is no other choice. It is time for transformative leaders to re-conceptualize the VUCA acronym. “This is leadership for the VUCA world. It is leadership that is creative, collaborative, innovative, and messy. It is leadership that requires vision, understanding, clarity, and agility” (Shields, 2013, p. 11).

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the reviewers and editors who supported him through this project. He would also like to thank the vice-principals who shared their time and wisdom.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire survey for vice-principals in diverse schools

Topic – Mentoring and Supporting Vice-Principals for service in diverse schools and communities
1. How would you coach or mentor another Vice-Principal on working with new **immigrant parents**? What have been some of your successes?

2. How would you coach another Vice-Principal to contribute to the development of positive student **relationships** in a diverse school?

3. How would you encourage and mentor another Vice-Principal in a diverse community to become **more aware of the demographic changes** that are impacting a school culture and community? In your perception, what are better practices for Vice-Principals to stay on top of demographic developments in their community, province and country?

4. How would you support or mentor another Vice-Principal working in a culturally diverse school to stay focused on **equity and social justice** for all students, particularly for new immigrant or refugee students who may need additional educational supports?

5. If you had the chance to mentor some of your Vice-Principal colleagues in other schools on **effective communication strategies** in fast-moving, demographically changing environments that reflect increasing diversity and immigration, how would you coach and mentor them? What would you tell them?

6. What would you say to another Vice-Principal in a culturally diverse school (or in any school) if you believed they were struggling in their job and experiencing **anxiety and stress**?

7. **Okay – a scenario** – you have many Vice-Principals in front of you listening to your experiences working in a diverse school. You are the expert…what are some topics you want them to be more aware of as their schools begin to change in rural Canada? Why?