The power of collective narratives to inform public policy: reconceptualizing a Principal’s Qualification Program

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A narrative approach to policy development was utilized to collaboratively reconceptualize a provincial Principal’s Qualification Program. The stories, perspectives and lived experiences of teachers, parents, students and the public were included as essential voices and information sources within policy development conversations. These collective narratives of experience revealed the forms of knowledge, skills, dispositions and ethical commitments necessary for effective principals today and in the future. They also illustrated the transformative nature of narrative to enlighten, deepen understanding and alter perspectives. The policy development processes used in this publicly shared educational initiative are a model of democratic dialogue. The inclusive and dialogic methods employed to collectively reconceptualize a principal formation programme illustrate an innovative framework for developing policies governing the public good.

Given the change in demographics in Ontario, future administrators MUST have a solid understanding of the dynamics of power and privilege. A module in the Principal’s Program should be created that examines this dynamic, along with the concepts of racism, homophobia, Islam phobia, ableism, classism and discrimination. There is no doubt that minority groups are chronically underrepresented in the administrative ranks in education in the province and the student population we serve is very diverse. If we cannot recruit and mentor minorities into administration, then the current pool of applicants must understand their own privilege as well as systems of oppressions. (Ontario College of Teachers, 2008b, p. 12)

Principals in Ontario provide educational leadership in highly varied and culturally diverse educational contexts. Ontario affords school principals with a multitude of environments to learn and apply knowledge, skills and practices. The diversity of educational settings that school principals may find themselves in could include a rural French language school, a Catholic school, an urban public school, a small remote fly-in K to 12 First Nations school, a provincial school for the deaf or blind or an independent school. The educational settings available for the Ontario school

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principal are wide-ranging and contextually unique. A Principal's Qualification Program is offered in Ontario to help prepare and qualify educators for their future role as a principal in any of these various environments. This provincial programme is designed to support the leadership formation of educators in 'becoming reflective educational leaders who function effectively in dynamic, diverse contexts characterized by rapidly changing events and circumstances' (Ontario College of Teachers, 2009b, p. 1).

Purpose

This paper will explore the use of narrative methods to support the revision and implementation of a Principal's Qualification Program guideline in Ontario. The Principal's Qualification Program provides a foundation for teachers interested in assuming the role of principal or vice-principal in Ontario schools. The Principal's Qualification Program represents one dimension involved in the ongoing professional learning experiences of teachers. It focuses on the development of professional knowledge, skills, dispositions and practices that support the role of principal.

Ontario context

To be a qualified principal in Ontario, it is necessary for teachers to successfully complete all components of the Principal's Qualification Program. This programme comprises a Part I, Part II and a Leadership Practicum. Part I and Part II of the programme are each 125 h in length and contain relevant content necessary for fostering the professional knowledge, skills, dispositions and experiences that have been deemed necessary for effective principal preparation by the Ontario teaching profession and the public. The course content is also supported by educational research related to principal preparation. The Leadership Practicum consists of a 60 h leadership experience. Once a teacher successfully completes the Principal's Qualification Program, this additional qualification is then recorded on the teacher's Certificate of Qualification and Registration which is issued by the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT).

The OCT, as the self-regulatory body for 235,000 members of the teaching profession in the province, is responsible for developing the programme guideline that provides the framework for this important educational leadership qualification. The College's other responsibilities related to the Principal's Qualification Program outlined in regulation include:

- to establish and enforce professional standards and ethical standards applicable to members of the College;
- to provide for the ongoing education of members of the College;
- to develop, provide and accredit educational programmes leading to certificates of qualification additional to the certificate required for membership. (Ontario College of Teachers Act, S.O. 1996, c. 12)
Teacher education policies such as the standards for the teaching profession and the 369 additional qualification course guidelines for educators are developed in Ontario by the OCT through democratic dialogic processes. These processes always involve the teaching profession and the public. This form of democratic dialogic policy development is rare in Ontario. Democratic approaches privilege the voices of all groups that are impacted by the important educational role of principal. Dialogic processes support the co-construction of knowledge and understanding related to the principalship. These shared understandings are then translated into a provincial policy document that is designed to serve the public good. Including lived narratives of experience as valuable and valid sources of data to inform educational policy gives power to the collective.

Ethical and practice standards

The Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession and the Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession (Ontario College of Teachers, 2006b) form the foundation of the Principal’s Qualification Program in Ontario. These, agreed upon principles of professional practice, were developed collaboratively by both the teaching profession and the public through democratic dialogic processes. The standards provide a shared understanding and vision for the collective identity of Ontario’s teaching profession and are the core of teacher professionalism. The standards serve to inspire and guide the ethical professional practices of teachers, principals, supervisory officers and teacher educators within the province.

These standards are not fixed frameworks. They are meant to be descriptive representations of the values, knowledge, skills, responsibilities and commitments embodied by the teaching profession. The meaning of these standards comes alive when educators collectively discuss these frameworks together within school communities. As the profession continues to evolve and deepen its ethical awareness and professional knowledge, so too, do the standards also need to continually develop to reflect this growth in members’ practice, professional knowledge and educational leadership.

Accreditation

Accredited Principal’s Qualification Programs in Ontario must reflect the Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession and the Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession as well as the College’s programme guideline. These requirements of accreditation are specifically articulated in Regulation 347/02 made under the Ontario College of Teachers Act:

A program of additional qualification may be granted accreditation under this regulation if the following conditions are satisfied: 1. The program content and expected achievement of persons enrolled in the program match the skills and knowledge reflected in the College’s ‘Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession’ and the ‘Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession’ and in the program guidelines issued by the College. (O.Reg. 347/02)
Course providers use the Principal’s Qualification Program Guideline to frame, develop and implement the Principal’s Qualification Program that they offer to educators. The OCT has developed narrative-based resources to support course providers in aligning their programmes with the standards. These resources support the effective integration of the standards within the Principal’s Qualification Program. The use of these resources will assist providers of the Principal’s Qualification Program to meet the accreditation requirements related to the standards. These resources explore the integration of the standards through a variety of educative and inquiry-based processes. Narrative professional learning methods are central components of these standards-based resources which have been developed by educators for use within teacher and leadership education.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for the revision of the Principal’s Qualification Program Guideline is rooted in the traditions of narrative (Bruner, 1986; Ricouer, 1988; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2006; Witherell & Noddings, 1991; Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002; Clandinin, 2007; Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007) case work (Shulman & Colbert, 1988; Shulman, 1992; Shulman, Whittaker, & Lew, 2002; Goldblatt & Smith, 2004, 2005; Smith & Goldblatt, 2009) and professional standards (Ontario College of Teachers, 2003b, 2009a). Narrative is a way of knowing (Bruner, 1986) and it is the natural mode through which individuals make sense of lives (Bruner, 1990).

Teacher knowledge is both personal and professional (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Cole & Knowles, 2000). Teachers store their knowledge in narratives (Doyle, 1990) and communicate implicit and explicit wisdom about professional practices through those stories (Jenlink & Kinnucan-Welsch, 2001). The team responsible for the revision of the Principal's Qualification Program Guideline believed that the facilitation of dialogic interchanges (Bakhtin, 1981) would support the identification and construction of collective knowledge regarding essential elements of the principalship. The use of narrative processes to inform policy development has been consistently employed by the College since 2001. Narrative was employed in the development of the standards for the teaching profession (Ontario College of Teachers, 2006a) and in the creation of over 360 additional qualification course guidelines.

Narrative embraces story as both the method and the phenomena (Clandinin, 2007). Narrative ‘begins in experience as expressed in lived and told stories’ (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 5) of individuals. The lived experiences of individuals become visible and accessible through the stories told and shared. Narrative processes involve the construction of meaning (Bruner, 1986; Ricouer, 1988) as ‘stories invite us to come to know the world and our place in it’ (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 13). Individual and collective stories told about the principalship can be ‘acts
of meaning’ (Bruner, 1990) through which we can make sense of the nature of the principalship.

Narrative conversations and case inquiry are narrative approaches that are holistic, constructivist and active. As experiential learning processes, these narrative methods offer an alternative approach to knowledge formation. The use of case narratives for illuminating and advancing the professional knowledge and skill of school leaders is well documented in education (Strike, Soltis, & Haller, 2005; Strike, 2007; Shapiro & Gross, 2008; Smith & Goldblatt, 2009). Narrative conversations and case discussion acknowledge that effective professional practice is not only informed by research but also by experience. The College’s respect for the lived wisdom of educators led to the use of narrative conversations and case discussion as processes to inform the reconstruction of the Principal’s Qualification Program Guideline.

Teaching cases have long been a cornerstone of professional learning in schools of business, law and medicine. Educators have also begun to explore their value in the preparation of teachers (McCarthy, 1987; Shulman, 1987; Engemann, Kitchen, Cherubini, Smith, & Goldblatt, 2008) and educational leaders (Ontario College of Teachers, 2002, 2003a, 2009a; Goldblatt & Smith, 2004, 2005; Smith & Goldblatt, 2009). Interest in this methodology has grown steadily in teacher education and leadership development. The use of cases in teacher education compels educators to go beyond what they know in a given situation (Gideonse, 1999).

Case narratives reflect lived reality. They help educators learn to connect theories and concepts to the complex, idiosyncratic world of practice. Discussion of cases enhances analytic thought, reflection, inquiry and, with some cases, content knowledge and practice. The growing interest in teaching cases stems from an increasing appreciation of the value of ‘narrative’ forms of thinking as opposed to abstraction and generalization (Bruner, 1986). Narrative forms of thinking are far more compatible with the ways educators actually organize their experiences and develop professional knowledge.

Professional knowledge in education and in other fields largely consists of the accumulated lived experiences of these professionals in the form of concrete cases. Experienced professionals develop knowledge of the kinds of experiences they are likely to encounter, what these experiences actually look like, what usually influences them and which approaches are likely to be productive in solving issues related to these experiences. By providing vicarious experience with a variety of concrete cases, the case discussion method (Ontario College of Teachers, 2003a, 2009a; Smith & Goldblatt, 2007, 2009) expands and sharpens the educator’s understanding of the dimensions inherent in professional practice.

As educators read and discuss a written case, they consider questions and actions that principals actually think about in practice: through unpacking or deconstructing this lived experience, they become aware that such concrete educational situations illuminate dimensions of professional knowledge, skills and professional practice that are necessary for effective educational leadership.
Narrative conversations

Narrative conversations were employed to gain insight into the perceived essential dimensions of the Principal’s Qualification Program. The Principal’s Qualification Program Guideline provides the conceptual framework for supporting the effective professional practice of principals in Ontario as outlined in the Ethical Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession and the Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession (Ontario College of Teachers, 2006b). The programme guideline is a policy document that will guide the nature of principal development in Ontario for years to come.

Narrative conversations were structured to focus on the principalship in Ontario. These conversations took place within focused discussion groups, open space technology discussion circles, case discussions and within a dialogic writing team. Rich data were gleaned from these narrative conversations that informed the review and implementation of the Principal’s Qualification Program Guideline.

Explicating the stories and lived experiences of individuals through conversations focused on the principalship enabled significant information to be revealed regarding principal formation. As individuals shared vignettes and narratives about their own experiences related to the role of the principal, the professional knowledge, skills, attitudes and practices associated with effective educational leadership were illuminated. These retold stories also contributed to the identification of leadership development processes that were viewed as being essential elements in a course related to principal formation and qualification.

Open space technology conversations

The College hosted a full day bilingual open space (Owen, 1997) technology consultation with approximately 100 participants. The theme for this consultation was Supporting Leadership Formation. The guiding question for each of the conversations that occurred during this consultation was: what does it mean to be a Principal in Ontario? Open space technology is based on the premise that individuals are fully capable of self-organizing themselves around a given theme or area of focus. Participants in Open Space sessions create the consultation agenda, select their own conversation sessions from a collaboratively generated schedule and then collectively take responsibility for recording the story of their conversations.

Participants in the open space session included representatives from a wide variety of educational roles: classroom teachers, students, principals, supervisory officers and ministry of education officials, representatives from faculties of education, independent schools, teacher organizations and College staff. Members of the public and students also participated in the conversations. Participants accepted invitations to attend the sessions. Original invitations were sent to educational partners and community organizations and they were asked to invite members from their organizations that represented Ontario’s rich diversity and who had lived
experience related to the principalship in the province. Educators who had previously indicated an interest in being involved in teacher education policy development related to educational leadership were also invited to participate in the dialogue. Principals and teachers were invited to bring students and parents with them to the sessions. Extensive outreach practices were also employed to help involve Aboriginal and French Language participants.

An external bilingual facilitator was responsible for ensuring the meeting space was open for multiple and diverse conversations to take place. A First Nations Elder opened and closed the session using traditional indigenous processes. The Elder modelled the importance of storytelling as he opened the space for the conversations to occur. His stories and teachings conveyed the importance of hearing, including and honouring diverse voices and perspectives in each of the conversations.

The stories and perspectives of parents and students were important voices included in the conversations. Their stories of experience revealed that the forms of knowledge, skills, dispositions and commitments they believed were necessary for principals. Each conversation group was facilitated by the individual who suggested the topic. Participants were highly engaged in the process of sharing their stories of experience related to principal leadership and development. The initiator of the conversation assumed responsibility for recording the key elements of the conversation. Thirty-six reports were generated from the conversations. These reports varied in length, format and detail. The public’s expectations and beliefs regarding principal knowledge and development in Ontario were identified within the narratives that were shared.

Principals are responsible for creating the culture and tone of the school. As parents, we expect principals to ensure we are authentically included in the school. We want principals to hire teachers who are knowledgeable, kind and committed. The principal must be a strong and knowledgeable leader who creates a safe and innovative learning environment. The principal needs to engage parents and students in all aspects of the school. Openness, honesty and flexibility are essential. The principal must ensure that our children are learning and reaching their potential. (Ontario College of Teachers, 2008a, p. 18)

The dialogic exchange enabled new information and options to enter existing educational policy development structures. Members of the teaching profession and the public were drawn together in this public space to interact, discuss and explore alternatives for action related to the second highest teaching qualification an educator can acquire in the province of Ontario. This public dialogue created space for diverse perspectives to be included, voiced and heard. Differences in perspectives created tension in some of the conversations and these conflicts were worked through within the collective dialogue. Listening to the lived experiences as retold by students, parents, teachers and principals served to transform the perspectives of many participants. These dialogue processes contributed to the development of shared understandings related to the complex and multidimensional role of the principal in Ontario. These open conversations also served to help sustain public trust in the role of principals.
Focused discussions

Practising principals, supervisory officers, directors of education and instructors of the Principal’s Qualification Program participated in six focused discussions. Each discussion consisted of approximately three to six participants and all discussions were completed by teleconference. Each focused discussion was taped and transcribed. The participants’ stories of experience helped to elucidate their extensive learning and perspectives related to the Principal’s Qualification Program.

Case discussions

Case discussions were facilitated at educative sessions on the standards at Principal’s Qualification Programs and at school district leadership forums. Dilemma-based leadership cases, written by practicing Ontario principals and vice-principals, were used as a catalyst for reflection, critique and discussion with participants. Analysing these dilemmas through case inquiry enabled the explication of professional knowledge, judgement and practice to be made visible, articulated and then collectively scrutinized. The case discussion also enabled individuals to connect the case story to their own leadership stories and lived experiences. The case discussion process revealed significant information regarding the necessary knowledge, skills, values and experiences required of principals. Case discussions using the lens of the Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession (Bruner, 1986) were instrumental in helping participants identify the forms of ethical knowledge and action necessary for principals.

Dialogic writing team

Educational partners with an extensive interest and experience related to the Principal’s Qualification Program were invited to nominate a representative to participate in a provincial writing team to develop the guideline. The responsibility of this group was to analyse the data collected from the field as well as the relevant research regarding principal preparation and development. It was necessary for this team to strive to understand the principalship through the eyes of the teaching profession, parents, students and members of the public. The perspectives of these different groups were clearly illuminated through the dialogic review processes.

The writing was also responsible for recommending appropriate revisions to the programme guideline based on the feedback received through all the dialogic processes. As a voice for their organization, the writers were responsible for sharing the perspectives of their organizations and to ensure that their organization was continually informed about the revisions to the guideline. The writing team collaboratively created a working draft version of the document that was used for vetting purposes with the professional and the public. Members of the writing team were invited from the following educational partners:
The writers brought significant diversity of perspective and experience to the dialogic writing sessions. A bilingual professor from the University of Ottawa with recognized scholarship in educational leadership facilitated each of the provincial writing sessions. The writers participated in rich dialogue regarding the data gleaned from the narrative conversations: open space, focused discussions and case discussion. Review and critique of the research literature relevant to principal development was a focus of many rich conversations. A comprehensive literature review related to principal preparation and development served as a foundational data source for the provincial writers. This writing team also shared many of their own stories of experience which helped to elucidate and convey the vision, content, components and conceptual framework of the Principal’s Qualification Program. The diversity of voice and viewpoints represented within the writing team did lead to some conflict and tension. This tension and conflict related to the extent to which the explicit inclusion of First Nation content and the provincial leadership framework were to be integrated into the programme guideline. A First Nation educator from the Ministry’s Aboriginal Education Office was a member of the writing team. She strongly advocated for the inclusion of explicit and extensive text relating to First Nations content within the guideline. She engaged in considerable educative dialogue with the entire writing team in order for this group to collectively understand the importance of the inclusion of considerable First Nations content. This content will help to necessitate the inclusion of First Nations Elders and communities within the development and implementation of the principal qualification courses. The College’s accreditation processes will help to ensure First Nations, Métis and Inuit content are included in all Principal Qualification Programs.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection and analysis occurred throughout the review process for the Principal’s Qualification Program. Written cases, case discussions, open space reports and focused discussion transcripts comprised the
inclusive data sources that provided accurate representations of the shared dialogues and stories. These data sources were collected and analysed throughout the project. College staff and the provincial writing team collaboratively created and employed a multi-dimensional data analysis process for reflecting upon the feedback that was collected.

Several layers of analysis were necessary to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the essence of the lived experiences of the participants that emerged in the multiple data-sets. The analysis process included multiple readings. Matrixes were created to organize the data by each dialogic method and for outlining the distinctive perspectives of each group of participants. The data were coded using NVIVO software that supports qualitative analysis. Joint reviews of the various dimensions of each data source were engaged in by each member of the data analysis team: meaning, language, concepts, content and structure. The data analysis was then validated by an external data analysis team.

Themes were identified from the multiple narrative data sources and then used as conceptual organizers for the development of a provincial Principal’s Qualification Program Guideline. The conceptual organizers included: Setting Directions, Building Relationships and Developing People, Developing the Organization, Leading the Instructional Program and Securing Accountability, Course Expectations, Content Part 1, Content Part 2 and the Leadership Practicum. Inspiration software was used to graphically map the key concepts from the data and to assess the level of conceptual congruity within the guideline content and the practicum experience.

**Emergent principles**

Participants involved in the narrative-based conversations were extremely passionate about and highly engaged in discussing the review of the Principal’s Qualification Program Guideline. The conversation format enabled participants to draw upon and use their own lived experiences and stories of leadership as valuable information sources. These narrative-based conversations honoured the lived wisdom and knowledge of participants. It illustrated that lived professional practice is similar to a diamond in the rough. When professional practice is mined and respected, it can lead to great illumination for teaching and educational leadership. Several core principles emerged from the narrative conversations that are now substantially embedded throughout the entire revised guideline. The guiding principles that emerged from the narrative conversations were ethics, diversity and inclusion.

**Ethics**

Educational leaders must create cultures in schools that collectively guide the ethical behaviour of the school community. Leaders have the power to awaken the ethical conscience of their school community. They have the power to bring together the ethical concerns of their staff, students, parents and the community. (Ontario College of Teachers, 2005, p. 9)
Participants spoke passionately about the central role of ethics for effective educational leadership. The central role of ethical knowledge and awareness emerged as a significant thread that weaved through all conversations. In open space conversations, participants generated many topics related to the ethics associated with educational leadership and then told lived stories related to these topics. In case discussions, the ethical practices and knowledge of principals emerged from the written leadership dilemmas. The trustworthiness, transparency and integrity of principals were identified as essential dimensions of ethical leadership. In focused discussions, the ethical formation of principals was identified in the narratives shared by the educational leaders who participated in these sessions.

In an open space conversation entitled Leadership and Trust, participants shared two types of leadership stories. The first type of story focused on principal actions and attitudes that can break the bonds of trust within school communities. Participants stressed that ‘trust breaks down when actions are not congruent with what we say we are about’ (Ontario College of Teachers, 2008b, p. 28). The other type of stories that were told in this conversation dealt with principal dispositions, beliefs and actions that enhance and sustain trust within a school community. Participants explained that ‘trust is not based on a dependency model—it must be based on professionalism’ (Ontario College of Teachers, 2008b, p. 28). The importance and significance of the ethic of trust within leadership formation also emerged in the conversation entitled Paradigm Shift from Paternalistic Leadership to Transparent Leadership. In this conversation, vignettes of principals who embraced transparency were shared. These vignettes of transparent leaders were then compared to vignettes of principals who unilaterally made decisions or consistently did not share crucial information with others. The establishment of trust was associated with principals who were transparent. Participants explained, ‘In transparent leadership practices decisions are made and all can see the value and direction of the leadership then there is a community of trust established’ (Ontario College of Teachers, 2008b, p. 19).

The use of dilemma-based narrative discussions enabled participants to reflect on and critically review the forms of ethical knowledge that were evident within the thoughts, actions and decisions of the educators depicted in a particular written case. The participants consistently related the ethical issues and practices in the written case to their own lived experience. The case narrative resonated strongly with participants and led them to share their own stories and vignettes regarding ethical leadership.

In focused discussions, participants shared their experiences in supporting the development of ethical action with future and current principals. They shared stories of ethical dilemmas related to principal formation and offered recommendations for the development to develop this essential form of professional knowledge. The moral dimensions of leadership emerged in many of their narratives. An experienced educator emphasized this dimension: ‘To be an effective principal in Ontario you need a strong sense of integrity, commitment to students and a commitment to equity’ (Ontario College of Teachers, 2008a, p. 10).
Another principal with less than two years experience shared the following view of the ethical principal: ‘An effective principal in Ontario would be one that leads with vision, integrity, care, respect and trust. This educational leader would be truly committed to student learning and fostering positive relationships with all members of the learning community’ (Ontario College of Teachers, 2008a, p. 11).

**Diversity and inclusion**

Diversity and inclusion were also major principles that emerged throughout many of the conversations related to the Principal’s Qualification Program. In the open space conversation entitled *Understanding Power, Privilege and Systems of Oppression*, a participant began sharing his vignette about the importance of inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives in this manner, ‘I recently took Part I and Part II of the Principal’s Qualification Program and ALL but one of the presenters was White!’ (Ontario College of Teachers, 2008b, p. 12).

He then continued to share several brief vignettes of his experience in the Principal’s Qualification Program when he perceived that his voice was not the dominant voice in the course. The implications of this experience for educational leadership were also identified by this individual.

In the conversation entitled *Understanding the Unique Position of First Nation Education*, participants stressed the importance of including indigenous knowledge and perspectives into the Principal’s Qualification Program content. One participant told the story of her participation in this course. She explained that there was no First Nations content in the Principal’s Qualification Program. When she identified this omission to the course facilitator and requested inclusion of content and processes reflecting First Nations perspectives, no attempt was made to include it into the programme. This individual also spoke of the difficulty she experienced trying to connect to a Eurocentric model of leadership that characterized the Principal’s Qualification Program. Her experience had reinforced for her that there was significant ‘reluctance to share space for First Nation issues in the delivery of the course’ (Ontario College of Teachers, 2008b, p. 14).

Another participant in this same conversation told the story of the significant impact on personal identity when First Nations peoples have not had the privilege to come to fully know their history, culture, traditions and beliefs. He concluded his narrative by saying,

It is important for all educators knowing the significance of their history and ethnic background. When First Nation educators are reluctant to recognize their aboriginal heritage it creates an environment of disconnection. This disconnection results in not understanding the importance of the First Nation, Métis and Inuit issues, culture and perspectives specific to Ontario. (Ontario College of Teachers, 2008b, p. 13)

Stories of indifference, prejudice and lack of understanding were also told by other participants in this conversation. One participant suggested that the case method would be a good teaching tool in the Principal’s
Qualification Program to help increase understanding and knowledge of First Nations communities. A First Nations participant suggested, ‘Case studies reflecting Aboriginal issues, for example, warrior flag on board buses, student pen pal program where an individual student frames Aboriginals as “their enemy” and when it began, choosing not to stand for the national anthem’ (Ontario College of Teachers, 2008b, p. 14).

Other participants also highlighted the importance of incorporating ‘core content that addresses First Nations, Métis, and Inuit histories, education systems and engagement’ (Ontario College of Teachers, 2008a, p. 2). They stressed that the course must ‘help principals learn about the changing landscape of diversity and emerging social issues’ (Ontario College of Teachers, 2008a, p. 8).

The essential importance of inclusive education practices was consistently embedded in the narratives and recommendations shared by conversation participants. The need for the principal to be able to consciously include the stories of diverse groups of people was repeatedly highlighted and stressed by participants. Principals were viewed as central to the development of inclusive school communities that honoured and respected the diversity and dignity of all members. Case discussions that invited participants to reflect upon and critique leadership practices that were exclusive, inequitable and unjust facilitated deep and passionate conversations regarding inclusive educational practices that resulted in the explication of concepts and principles related to inclusive educational leadership. Intense deliberations regarding various dimensions of inclusion also occurred in the writing team’s conversations.

Writing team members shared stories of being a minority within a majority culture. These stories held the power to transform previously held perspectives of members of the writing team. This occurred on a number of occasions within the writing team’s dialogic exchanges. Individuals who strongly conveyed that there was no need to explicitly include specific groups into the guideline were observed to change their perspective after being exposed to stories of silence, marginalization and exclusion by colleagues on the writing team. These experiences illustrated the transformative nature of narrative to enlighten, deepen understanding and alter perspectives. These narratives helped to communicate the necessary and critical explicit inclusion of French Language, Catholic, First Nations, Métis and Inuit perspectives into the guideline.

**Narrative-informed reconstruction**

The narrative processes used within the provincial review of the Principal’s Qualification Program significantly informed the reconceptualization and redevelopment of this programme guideline. The stories, vignettes, commentaries and experiences that were expressed within the many conversations that focused on the Principal’s Qualification Program significantly contributed to the reconstruction of this policy document. This experience illustrated another opportunity employed by the OCT to
develop educational policy based upon narrative-based approaches. The College utilized similar narrative strategies and narrative professional learning processes to inform the revision of the Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession and the Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession (Ontario College of Teachers, 2006b). Narrative approaches can be used as an effective strategy used to inform educational policy development. These approaches helped to facilitate provincial dialogue related to a shared vision of the principalship in Ontario and the essential leadership dimensions associated with this important educational position.

Vision

A vision for the role of the principal in Ontario and for the qualification programme was explicitly identified in the revised Principal’s Qualification Program. This vision brought clarity and a shared sense of purpose to the programme. The explicit inclusion of English, French, First Nations, Métis, Inuit and Catholic perspectives in the programme guideline supported Ontario’s unique and rich diversity.

The vision of the role of principal was also extensively reconceptualized. It was reformulated from primarily being viewed as a managerial role to an instructional, ethical and knowledgeable educational leader. Sections outlining the vision of the programme and the diverse Ontario educational context were also included in the guideline. These two sections convey key explicit messages regarding diversity and inclusion as they relate to the role of the principal. The vision of the school principal, as articulated in the guideline, is inspirational and affirming. It states that principals in Ontario are ‘proactive, reflective, collaborative educational leaders’ (Ontario College of Teachers, 2009b, p. 1). These educational leaders ‘create and sustain school and system cultures that enhance student learning and achievement including the cognitive, character, social, physical and spiritual development of all students’ (Ontario College of Teachers, 2009b, p. 1) and ‘apply knowledge and skills with integrity, wisdom and positive attitudes’ (Ontario College of Teachers, 2009b, p. 1).

Leadership domains

The Principal’s Qualification Program Guideline was restructured to align with the domains and concepts embedded in the Ontario Leadership Framework (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2008). The five leadership domains of Setting Directions, Building Relationships and Developing People, Developing the Organization, Leading the Instructional Programme and Securing Accountability provided a conceptual framework for linking the leadership dimensions, course content and experiential learning into an integrated and developmentally based programme. This framework also provides a shared language for understanding and planning for leadership formation processes. The leadership content included under each
domain is reflective of the narrative feedback provided by both the public and the profession.

Leadership practicum

The importance of a leadership practicum experience was recognized as being an essential component of principal formation. The leadership practicum experience was also restructured to allow additional time and more meaningful integration of this core component into the programme. Participants recommended that this leadership experience required adaptation in length. It was suggested by participants that,

Longer practicum, including shadowing and possibly being, allowed to participate to some extent in decision-making with the person being shadowed. A practicum needs to be relevant to the actual role of the principal and not just a one dimensional experience. (Ontario College of Teachers, 2008b, p. 13)

The essential role of collegial mentoring and coaching emerged as a significant theme for supporting principal formation in all narrative conversations and in the leadership literature. These professional learning processes are central to the leadership practicum and infused throughout many of the programme’s leadership domains. Participants emphasized that ‘mentorship is an important element to promote ethics, values, skills and process driven leadership. There is a need to provide more support and guidelines for mentors who are supporting future principals’ (Ontario College of Teachers, 2008b, p. 8). The Principal’s Qualification Program now includes a framework for coaching and mentoring along with guidelines to support this process within the practicum experience.

Instructional practice

Case inquiry was strongly validated by the English, French and First Nations communities as a fundamental instructional approach within the Principal’s Qualification Program. The College’s case materials that are based on the standards were highlighted by participants as being highly relevant and a valuable core resource for the Principal’s Qualification Course Guideline. These resources were also identified as being very applicable and useful for principals to use in their daily practice. As one participant explained, ‘I am convinced that “cases” are a powerful way of authentically bringing the voice of staff into the school. It is a powerful way to foster shared leadership’ (Ontario College of Teachers, 2008a, p. 14).

Reflection was recognized as a process for explicating the knowledge and experience of each educator. A secondary school principal identified case discussion as an essential tool for creating cultures of shared leadership within school communities based on reflective practice. She expressed:
I now understand that reflective practice is essential and that it is a process which requires time, interaction with others, and requires guidance in order to reach deeply into the wisdom and experience which we already carry within us as educators. (Ontario College of Teachers, 2008a, p. 15)

An experienced principal also supported the use of case inquiry for ongoing principal formation. She reflected, 'The case has allowed me to become a more reflective practitioner. It has sensitized me to being aware of the many stakeholders. It has focused me to relate my experiences to the standards of practice and improve student achievement’ (Ontario College of Teachers, 2008a, p. 16).

**Final reflections**

We, as educators are in a position of trust. The community entrusts us with the responsibility for educating their children. It is our responsibility to model trust in our relationships, in our use of information, and in our curriculum. I maintain that students would rank, as the most trustworthiness people they encounter in life, as being teachers and principals. To live up to this is a big responsibility that we have. (Ontario College of Teachers, 2005, p. 7)

A narrative conversation model was used for the revision of the policy document that guides the development and implementation of all Principal’s Qualification Programs in the province of Ontario. This inclusive methodology and dialogue resulted in the collaborative creation of an educational guideline that reflects diverse voices, perspectives and experiences. It is a forward thinking document that provides a framework for supporting the complex development of future principals.

Shared narratives of experience significantly informed the collaborative reconstruction of the Principal’s Qualification Program Guideline. The use of these narrative processes provided many benefits for the College as an institution, the profession as a collective, and the public as a democratic Ontario community that is served by the teaching profession. Some of the benefits of these collaborative dialogic and narrative processes were that they:

- allowed for the voices of all educational partners to be included;
- contributed to increased public confidence in the teaching profession;
- fostered a sense of shared ownership and commitment to principal formation;
- demonstrated a consultative and transparent inquiry approach to educational policy development;
- resulted in the creation of a collectively agreed upon Principal’s Qualification Program guideline;
- illustrated the accountability of the teaching profession to the public it serves;
- utilized standards-based resources to inform the development of the policy guideline; and
- ensured that the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion were embedded in all aspects of principal formation within the revised Principal’s Qualification Program.
Most importantly, the review process served as a model of democratic dialogue. This form of policy development illustrates the power and potential of narrative-based conversation for addressing educational issues and policy. It illustrated that the educational community with the public can construct new frameworks for policies governing the public good. They can work collaboratively together towards a shared moral purpose of supporting principal formation that will ultimately serve the students of Ontario. This dialogic process holds promise as one approach for engaging in critical reflection and discussion in the development of policy related to the education of principals. It also invites policy-makers to reconsider the traditional and widespread methods currently employed in the development of educational policy. And finally, it provides a strong illustrative example of how educators’ lived experience can be used to inform educational policy and support professional learning.

References


