

***Being 'The Principal': One  
Beginning Principal's  
Practices, Challenges and  
Feelings***

*A Case Study by Rinnelle-Lee Piggott*



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## **Abstract**

Much of the literature on beginning principals originates from developed countries such as the UK and USA, and generally it paints a dismal picture of the incumbent who is overwhelmed by a number of challenges which he or she is inappropriately prepared to manage. This systematic and empirically-based case study produces a rich description of the experiences of one beginning principal of Trinidad and Tobago, a developing country, and extends the discourse to highlight her practices in leading school change, her emotions and coping mechanisms in response to challenges and her advice-seeking disposition. The findings suggest that while there are a number of challenges faced by the subject, they are primarily concerned with re-culturing the school. Other findings suggest that many of her practices in leading school change appear to be student-centred and resemble those of more experienced, successful principals. Her challenges, negative emotions and coping strategies point to a significant finding of the nature of the principal-teacher relationship which appears to be largely discordant. Implications for principal preparation in Trinidad and Tobago and a number of areas for future research are identified.

**KEY TERMS:** *beginning principal, challenges, leading school change, emotions, coping, principal preparation*

## **Introduction**

Traditionally, the principal of a primary school in Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) was typically male, untrained in leadership or management, respected as a noble and educated member of the community and a stern disciplinarian who would often be seen brandishing a whip or strap. He was the sole decision-maker regarding matters of 'his' school and, as a consequence, the success of the school depended on him. Though many perceptions, stories and even myths continue to surround this individual, the passage of time has seen many changes to the principalship.

Today, in T&T, renewed attention has been directed to the principalship as the government seeks to transform the education system in order to create a 'knowledge-based economy' of 'innovative people' (Republic of T&T, Vision 2020, p. xviii) through improved school leadership and more effective schools. With improved entry requirements, a substantial increase in salary and improved status for principals, the Ministry of Education has sought to attract the most suitable and qualified candidates for the position, no longer confirming appointments based on seniority and proximity to the vacancy.

The now-coveted position has, as one of its base requirements, a Bachelor of Education degree with specialisation in Educational Administration. Positions are being filled quickly by individuals who would have formerly been informal senior teachers or heads of departments, vice-principals or acting principals. Many have taken up confirmed appointments in education districts that are geographically far removed from where they've taught for all of their careers and in schools replacing, in many instances, individuals who would have acted in the post of principal for up to as many as five years without the now-necessary qualification. The situation is, therefore, that a number of government and government-assisted primary schools are now headed by new principals who are faced with several tensions and dilemmas (Day & Yohansson, 2008; Stevenson, 2006). Consequently, concerns have been generated about their leadership. However, much of the concern amounts to speculation, indicating that very little is actually known about the beginning principalship in T&T.

This article provides a portraiture of the professional life of one such beginning principal of a primary school in T&T using an empirical and systematic case study. Particular attention is paid to the challenges she faces and how they affect her emotionally. The practices she employs

in her efforts to lead school change are also investigated as well as her perceptions on principal preparation. The article aims to present implications for principal preparation in T&T as well as contribute to the knowledge base on beginning principals locally and internationally.

### **Research questions**

1. What is the new incumbent's conception of the role of principal?
2. What was the transition into the principalship like?
3. How does the new incumbent go about leading school change?
4. What are the major concerns/challenges of the principalship for the new incumbent?
5. How does the beginning principal respond emotionally to the challenges of the job?
6. What is the beginning principal's perception of the effectiveness of principal preparation programmes in preparing beginning principals to fulfil their roles?

### **Review of Literature: The professional lives of beginning principals**

#### ***Situating new principals***

A number of authors have applied various models to understand and describe the work lives of principals. Weindling (1999, p. 98-99), using Merton's (1963) theory of socialization and combining the results of a number of studies (Day & Bakioğlu, 1996; Gabarro, 1987; Gronn, 1993; Hart, 1993; Ribbins, 1998 and Weindling & Earley, 1987) produced a useful model that maps the transitional stages of headship. Weindling (1999) identified six stages, starting at 0 with preparation for headship and moving through to the sixth stage, characterized as a 'plateau'. Brief descriptions of the stages follow.

#### ***Stage 0 – Preparation prior to Headship***

This preparation, or 'professional socialization' (Merton, 1963) includes experience as deputy heads or acting principal and/or participation in principal preparation programmes, which help to create a conception of the headship. Such conceptions began to take shape in aspirant principals during their career as they learned by observing both effective and ineffective role models of school leadership.

The remaining stages describe aspects of organizational socialization as defined by Merton (1963), i.e. the incumbent's learning while in role.

*Stage 1 – Entry and encounter (first months)*

The new head's conception of headship meets the reality. It is a time of surprise and sense-making of the complexities and culture of the school.

*Stage 2 – Taking hold (3 to 12 months)*

This is when the new head implements a number of organizational changes. The stage is also part of the 'honeymoon period' when staff members are more welcoming to changes, but which ends suddenly in aggressive resistance to some action by the head.

*Stage 3 – Reshaping (2nd year)*

A period of major change as the new head has become more confident and possesses a more realistic assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of staff.

*Stage 4 – Refinement (years 3 to 4)*

After two years, many of the structural changes have been made, but further changes are introduced while refinements to earlier initiatives are made.

*Stage 5 – Consolidation (years 5 to 7)*

After about five years when most of the planned changes have been introduced, a period of consolidation seems to occur although externally-imposed reforms may still be initiated.

*Stage 6 – Plateau (years 8 and onwards)*

This phase may see heads seeking to change schools, having achieved their goals. Those that stay are either looking to make further improvements, being motivated by their work, or have become frustrated or disenchanted, having not found another job and harbouring feelings of failure.

Using this model and considering that the timings are approximations, new principals would likely fit into one of the stages between 0-3, and having at most 2 years in post. Ribbins' (1999) natural history approach to the study of the incumbency similarly conceives an initiation phase, which 'normally takes at least three years before a head feels fully initiated' (p. 85). He notes that during the initiation phase, principals generally experience 'initial elation and enthusiasm'



and later 'a growing sense of realism and adjustment to what the real parameters of the job will be' (ibid.). In a similar interpretation, Day and Bakioğlu (1996) situate new principals — those in roles for 1-4 years — in the first of four development phases called an 'initiation phase'. This phase, they claim, is characterised by 'idealism', 'uncertainty' and 'adjustment'. They explain that though principals were enthusiastic about their jobs, seeing it as an opportunity to achieve ideals, they were unsure of what it entailed and so spent a lot of time acquainting themselves with its facets and contextual framework (Day, 2003; Day & Bakioğlu, 1996). Daresh (2001) however, making a slightly different observation of the beginning head's experience, highlights that during what he calls a 'coming on board' phase, beginning principals are usually more concerned about their own survival than about the needs of the school.

### ***New principals leading school change***

'Taking charge' (Gabarro, 1987) means for many beginning principals to lead change for school effectiveness or school improvement. School improvement, according to Hopkins (2001) is 'a strategy ... that enhances student outcomes as well as strengthening the school's capacity to manage change'. Although leadership is seen as acting as a catalyst (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris & Hopkins, 2006) in providing the conditions necessary for successful, sustainable school improvement and has a significant effect, albeit mostly indirect, on pupil achievement (Leithwood, et al., 2006; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003), there are principals, both beginning and experienced, that believe that their leadership has an increasingly direct impact in classrooms (Weindling & Dimmock, 2006).

In looking at beginning principals' approaches to leading change, Cheung and Walker (2006) realise that a typology exists. It is one, however, that is not static as movement within it is usual. They identified four types of beginning principals; namely: Shaper-Founders, Shaper-Changers, Moderator-Tinkerers, and Inheritor-Maintainers (p. 398). Some principals, Cheung and Walker (2006) assert, tended to be 'more proactive and reform-minded and, as such, gravitated towards more demanding leadership roles, such as change leaders or curriculum leaders' (p. 398). These principals fit into one of the first two types, while the Moderator-Tinkerers and the Inheritor-Maintainers appeared to be more 'inclined towards less controversial roles, preferring to serve as custodians or gatekeepers' (p. 398). These

principals are more centrally concerned with keeping things as they are, unlike the Shaper-Changers who are 'often dissatisfied with the status quo and worked to change the practices and traditions in the school right from the start' (p. 400).

Weindling and Dimmock (2006) too recognised that new principals differed in their approaches to change and found that those opting to make changes within the first year usually concentrated on modifications to communication or improving the school's image. The latter was usually the case where the community held negative views of the school. Typically, it is in the first five years of the principalship that incumbents do the groundwork for improving their schools, which involves setting up a number of work teams, curriculum and organizational restructuring, modeling appropriate behaviour and deploying and appointing key staff, particularly in senior and middle management positions (Weindling & Dimmock, 2006). But as new principals go about setting the groundwork, they face a number of challenges.

### ***New principals' struggles***

In the complex and dynamic environments of schools, principals have to 'juggle a number of existing tensions' (Stevenson, 2006). Daresh and Male (2000) and Walker et al. (2003a, b) note that as beginning principals take up their role, they almost immediately experience a 'culture shock' as they are cautioned against violating any cultural codes of the school (Langston et al., 1998 cited in Walker & Qian, 2006; Daresh & Male, 2000). The new incumbents, eight American and eight British, in Daresh & Male's (2000) study, admitted that prior to the principalship they held unrealistic conceptions of the role and have also found that they are treated differently on becoming head by persons in and out of the school. Quong (2006), also a beginning principal, attests to this.

In addition, some new principals have to deal with the influence of the 'ghost(s) of principals past' (Walker & Qian, 2006, p. 301). Draper and McMichael (2000 cited in Walker & Qian, 2006) found in their study that seven out of ten new principals reported on issues brought about by the difference between theirs and the previous principal's style of management. More than twenty years earlier, Daresh (1986, cited in Daresh, 1987), also reported on the presence of past principal 'ghosts' in his study.

In his analysis, Daresh (1987) also found that one source of beginning principals' troubles was a lack of clarity of their role. He later made the same observation with Playko in a different group of beginning principals in 1994 (Daresh & Playko, 1994). Daresh and Playko (1994) assert that new principals experienced difficulty in understanding the precise nature of their role. They also experienced difficulty in sensibly using their newly bestowed power and authority. Holligan et al., (2006 cited in Crow, 2007) and Wildy and Clarke (2008) in Australia also noted this.

Such uncertainty manifested itself in novice principals' attempts to accomplish duty-related tasks – another problem identified by Daresh and Playko (1994). Daresh (1987, p. 9) earlier recognised this as 'technical' or 'how-to' concerns. Hobson et al., (2002 cited in Crow, 2007) came to a similar realization, as did Daresh and Male (2006). They noted new principals' 'headaches' in managing school premises, dealing with ineffective staff, implementing new government initiatives, and managing the school budget. Weindling and Dimmock (2006), using data collected over a 20-year period, note similar concerns, but include new principals' difficulty in enhancing the public image of the school, coping with a weak member of the senior team and in dealing with low staff morale. Holligan et al., (2006 cited in Crow, 2007) had similar findings but also saw that new principals struggled immensely with managing time.

Time-management, as another critical concern of new headteachers, was also identified by the beginning principals in Draper and McMichael's (2000 cited in Walker & Qian, 2006) study. These beginning principals admitted to spending excessive time on administrative matters at the expense of educational leadership and the achievement of set goals. An aggregated diary of 5 new Scottish principals' logs, compiled by Cowie and Crawford (2008), revealed similar findings.

New principals are also reported as feeling overwhelmed by the unpredictability of their work and administrative overload (Walker et al, 2003a, b; Vandenberghe, 2003 cited in Walker & Qian, 2006; Thomas & Hornsey, 1991 cited in Quong, 2006). This overload was attributed to excessive paperwork, meetings and selecting potential candidates for employment, which were compounded by a lack of clerical assistance.

As new principals struggle with their workloads and are driven to compete with other schools, they tend to develop a sense of isolation from teachers and other principals (Rooney, 2000, cited in Walker & Qian, 2006; Weindling & Earley, 1987; Wildy & Clarke, 2008). Legotlo and Westhuizen (1996) found that in their isolation, new principals were disappointed at the limited feedback and guidance they received from their employing bodies and other principals.

Researchers have also identified a number of different problems reported by new principals as the most stressful challenges. 'Realizing their educational goals' (Parkay et al., 1992, p. 38), dealing with staff issues (Cheung & Walker, 2006; Sigford, 1998), curriculum reform (Cheung & Walker, 2006), handling incompetent teachers, developing a good learning atmosphere and seeking extra resources (Cheng et al., 1997) are among those identified as most challenging by new principals.

What has not been reported on extensively is how the challenges and dilemmas faced by beginning principals affect them emotionally.

### ***Emotions in the principalship***

'School leadership is hard emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983). Unfortunately, according to Harris (2007), only a few studies explore the underlying emotional dynamics of school leaders' work (pp. 39-40) and even fewer pay attention to the emotions of beginning principals. Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2004) call for 'more emphasis on how a leader feels and the quality of that subjective experience...' (p. 312). The literature that exists notes that school leaders can mistreat/abuse teachers or themselves be at the receiving end of '...a constant barrage of negative comments, complaints and interactions' (Sigford, 1998, p. 25). Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2004) assert that there exists a thin line between wounding and wounded leaders – a line that can be easily crossed in the absence of emotional intelligence (Boyatzis et al., 2001).

Harris (2007) notes that principals are often dehumanized and their feelings, anxieties and vulnerabilities disregarded. The result may be 'wounding' (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004). A wound, says Meizirow (1991 cited in Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, p. 313) can range from 'a disappointment' to 'a problem' to 'a disorienting dilemma'. A wounding experience, according to Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2004), offers an opportunity for the principal to 'question basic personal and organizational assumptions and values' so that 'new

ways of interpreting intrapersonal and interpersonal events can emerge' (p. 325).

### ***Coping and asking for help***

In order to cope with the emotional and physical distress brought about by the challenges and dilemmas they face, beginning principals have employed a number of strategies which have been categorised as physiological strategies, socio-psychological strategies and management skills (Parkay & Rhodes, 1992). Beginning principals in Daresh & Male's (2000) study mentioned going on outings with family or reading novels in a quiet space at home as strategies for 'personal renewal'. A not-so-healthy response of some beginning principals in the study of Walker et al. (2003b) was to depersonalize their job, by rejecting their role as administrator so as to appear as part of the teaching staff. Others opted to shield themselves using rules, regulations, policies and procedures. One novice principal spoke of the need to be highly diplomatic by '...keeping my mouth shut and some of my gut reactions to myself' (Walker et al., 2003b, p. 14).

With regard to seeking help in response to professional and organizational challenges, Nir (2009) recognized that although all the principals in his study admitted to needing help in one way or another, a number of barriers to their actually seeking help existed, which include: a fear of exposing one's weaknesses, a lack of reliable help within the formal system, personal inhibitions, a fear of tarnishing their professional images and fear of losing influence over others. Nir (2009) also reports that beginning principals are very selective in asking for help, typically opting to seek advice informally from family and relatives or friends who are principals that preferably belong to a different school district from their own. Daresh and Male (2000) observed a similar behaviour in the beginning principals in their study. The British beginning principals actually refused support in the form of mentorship provided by the Local Education Authorities because of perceived ineffectiveness of such authorities, preferring to seek support from their deputies, other senior management team members or other principals in the district (Daresh & Male, 2000). Sackney and Walker (2006) note that should new principals ask teachers for advice, it was because the decision had to be implemented by the staff. Also, new incumbents sought advice on the range of problematic issues already identified (Sackney & Walker, 2006).

**Proffered causes of, and solutions for, the problems of new principals**

According to Weindling and Dimmock (2006), beginning principals do not necessarily progress from one stage to the next, as asserted by some authors (Cheng et al., 1997; Weindling, 1999; Ribbins, 1999). In fact, they contend that the findings suggest that new principals can stagnate or even regress in response to perceived feelings of success or failure or external circumstances, such as the influence of the previous principal. Many actually leave the job after the first 3 years (Grogan & Andrews, 2002 cited in Petzko, 2008).

Consequently, many researchers have investigated the preparation of principals and beginning principals' perceptions of preparation programmes. There is ongoing debate internationally about the quality of preparation programmes to equip aspiring principals to lead in the increasingly complex environments of schools (Bush, 2009) with some reporting on the ineffectiveness of such programmes to do so (Crow, 2006; Hale & Moormon, 2003; Onguko, Abdalla & Webber, 2008). Preparation programmes are generally perceived as too theoretical and unrelated to the real work of principals as they emphasise management and administration as opposed to educational leadership.

Induction programmes and mentoring (Daresh, 1987; Hobson & Sharp, 2005) are generally valued by beginning principals, though they have their limitations. Weindling, (1999) recognises experience as a deputy head as being influential to the process of principal preparation but notes that by itself it is inadequate. Bush and Glover (2005, p. 237) recommend a 'judicious blend of theory, research and participants' experience' for the successful development of would-be-principals. US principals in Crow and Glascock's (1995, cited in Crow, 2006) study noted that internships for aspirant principals were quite beneficial in conceptualizing the principal's role, where students would be afforded opportunities to solve real school problems and engage in leadership roles. Crow (2006, p. 316) calls this 'anticipatory socialisation'. A greater focus on the principal as instructional leader (Onguko et al., 2008), Information and Communications Technology (ICT) exposure, use and support (Harris & Day, 2003), action research (Harris & Day, 2003) and many opportunities for the various types of reflection and self-evaluation (Day, 2003; Onguko, et al., 2008; Shön, 1983 cited in Crow, 2007; Ribbins, 2003) have been recommended as necessary for principal preparation.

### ***Weaknesses in the literature on beginning principals***

The literature that exists on beginning principals focuses mainly on two major themes: the challenges they face and their preparation for the principalship. In fact, a dominant view exists that paints the picture of the beginning principalship as being fraught with overwhelming challenges which the incumbent is ill-prepared to face. This picture of 'doom and gloom' makes little or no consideration for the agency, personal values and philosophies and coping mechanisms that individual principals possess that may influence their exercise of leadership. As such, few studies pay attention to what beginning principals actually do, especially in leading their schools to improvement. There is also a lack of any significant account of 'the felt-experience of headship', according to Southworth (1995, p. 24), where what it feels like to be a beginning principal is explored. The study herein attempts to address some of the weaknesses in the literature, but there is need to first look at the methods employed in conducting this study.

### **Methodology**

A case study approach was adopted with the intention of producing 'a rich and vivid description' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007) of events related to the subject of the study. The subject of the study was selected using a number of criteria:

1. Domiciled and practising in T&T
2. Been a principal for no more than two years according to Weindling's (1999) transitional map of headship
3. Has formal training in school leadership/management

Having been provided with details of the study and ethical assurances, Sher, who is introduced later, agreed to be the subject of this study.

### ***The research methods***

The three methods used in developing the case study were (1) questioning (open- and closed-ended) in the form of a socio-metric data form and a questionnaire, (2) semi-structured interviewing, and (3) document analysis of Sher's reflective journal & daily activity record.

The socio-metric data form (SDF) was designed to capture the subject's biographical details and a description of the school context within which she works, while the questionnaire used with the subject, called the 'Beginning Principals' Critical Skills Questionnaire', was adapted from the 'Beginning Headteachers' Critical Skills Survey' designed by Daresh & Playko (1994). The original survey is a 24-item questionnaire, using a five-point scale, which asks participants to assess tasks traditionally and contemporarily associated with effective principalship. Each item was to be rated from 'extremely important' to 'totally unimportant' as a skill needed to effectively function as a principal. This was the primary intent of this study's questionnaire as well. The items were clustered into three categories: Scale 1 – Technical skills (8 items), Scale 2 – Socialization skills (7 items) and Scale 3 – Self-awareness skills (9 items).

Apart from some minor changes in terminology for use in the context of T&T, and an inclusion of a ninth item, 'How to address structural problems of the school building' under Scale 1 – Technical skills, there were two major adaptations. The first was the inclusion of a fourth category of 8 items, which was labelled 'Educational leadership skills' and included such items as reshaping the culture of the school, assessing the pedagogical needs of teachers and demonstrating educational content knowledge. Educational leadership is a critical part of effective principalship that needed to be included. The addition of an associated section, asking the respondent to select and prioritize among all the skills listed in the questionnaire 10 skills that are most personally challenging was the second major modification to Daresh and Playko's (1994) survey.

Although recognising that the subject's reflective journal (RJ) may lack objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), in this study, it was seen as a rare opportunity to be privy to a beginning principal's heartfelt reflections of the principalship and so, was deemed useful.

The Activity Record (AR) simply asked that Sher record her daily activities and the date and time/time period when they occurred so as to make discernible the scope and relative duration of activities. The idea of using the activity record came from Cowie and Crawford's (2008) study earlier mentioned in the literature review.

As the main source of data collection, two semi-structured interviews were conducted with the subject over the phone. The first interview



sought to capture the subject's feelings about the role of principal, her perceptions of her level of preparedness for fulfilling that role and her practices and efforts in leading school change. The second interview was used to expand on some of the data from the first as well as to gain a deeper appreciation of the challenges of the principalship, its rewards and its effect on the emotional psyche of the subject. The subject was provided with the opportunity to read 'interview transcripts' (IT) and preliminary interpretations following both interviews.

### **Data analysis**

For the interview data and reflective journal, thematic coding was used. Codes from the literature on beginning principalship as well as those emerging from the data were applied. The resulting themes were refined several times for lucidity (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, cited in Southworth, 1995). Findings from the interviews and journal were triangulated with that of the questionnaire and activity record. The socio-metric data was used to provide the background context of the subject and case. In this way, the previously identified themes were developed, ideas for discussion were noted and the trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the findings was established. Comparisons were also regularly made with findings from the literature for reliability and possible identification of context-specific and/or new knowledge.

### **Limitations of the study**

While the study produces a rich description of the experiences of one beginning principal and has established trustworthiness through method triangulation, there are some limitations. Although the phone interviews were productive, the signs that can be read from body language in face-to-face interactions were missing. The opportunity to actually observe the subject in her school setting and gain the opinion of others within the setting would have been valuable for further triangulation of the findings, but are also missing. As a result, the outcomes of the study are solely contingent on the subject's construal of her principalship and the author's analysis and interpretation thereof.

### **The Case Study: Findings and Analyses**

*"Principalship" includes all aspects of the work lives of the beginning principals; that is, everything they do to try to lead their schools together with their personal attributes, including their perceptions, emotions and other feelings, as well as their knowledge and skills' (Cheung & Walker, 2006, p. 394).*

### **Introduction**

Over a period of 6 weeks, Sher, the subject of this case study, willingly shared with me her experiences of the principalship – her practices, challenges and emotions. The findings have been organised into 5 themes: (1) The transition, (2) Sher at work: practices and leading change, (3) Challenges of the principalship, (4) Emotional seesaw and (5) Coping and asking for help. Each theme has been subjected to both descriptive and interpretive analyses, from which a few conclusions have been drawn. These are presented. Vignettes of Sher's autobiographical account have also been interjected to support my findings and allow the reader to appreciate the realities of the beginning principalship. However, before these themes are addressed, I introduce the subject and briefly describe her school context.

### ***Getting to know Sher and her school context***

#### ***Sher's Background, philosophy and values***

As a trained teacher, possessing a Teachers' Diploma, Sher spent most of her teaching career in 2 government primary schools which served socio-economically disadvantaged communities. Her intent to reach the children of the disadvantaged prompted her to pursue training and qualification in Special Education (RJ). However, realising that her influence was limited, she registered at the University of the West Indies to pursue a first degree in Primary Education with a concentration in Educational Administration (SDF). Immediately after, a Master's degree in Education with a concentration in International Teaching (SDF) awarded by the Framingham State College in Boston was obtained. Her training in leadership/management included the management of human and educational resources, conflict resolution and developing community relationships (SDF).

Always willing to contribute to school improvement, as a young teacher she was considered 'too pushy' by administrators. However, as the years went by, Sher proved to be quite valuable to her school's administration and even acted as principal on occasions. Now aged 53, Sher finally realised her desire to make a difference when appointed to the principalship from a position of senior teacher. She mused:

*For years my greatest desire was to become a principal because I felt that I had so much to offer but I was being stifled in the classroom. Yes, I was meeting the needs of some but not all. I wanted to touch both the teachers and the children, especially in the area of methodology - how the teachers delivered the information to the children. (IT)*

Her strong awareness of self and intimately-held values and philosophies are critical factors in the exercise of her leadership. She earnestly believes that all children can learn and that her leadership has a direct and meaningful influence on student outcomes (IT). She is also a strong advocate of professionalism. For Sher, professionalism is more than being punctual and regular at work and dressed appropriately. For her, to be professional means functioning in such a way that does not bring the profession into disrepute. It means being dignified, au courant with best practices in teaching and an upholder of the codes of conduct and ethics of the profession to name a few (IT). She admits that she works well with teachers whose philosophies about and approaches to schooling closely resemble hers. Her leadership is also strongly influenced by her spiritual beliefs, which do not allow her to 'shirk' her responsibilities. In fact, on the 'Beginning Principals Questionnaire', Sher identified almost every item as 'extremely important' to performing her duties as a new principal.

Sher has, over the first academic year of her principalship, formed her own conception of the role of principal. She used an interesting analogy that captures the complexity of the role. She supposed:

*I have to be like the Almighty in a sense. I have to try to be everything to everybody and in many instances, because I know I wouldn't be able to please everybody, at every point in time or for every need they have, I now have to find a way to make the situation more palatable for each individual as I go along. (IT)*

Another analogy appropriated by Sher creates symbolism of the different roles that the principal plays and the different leadership styles he/she may employ.

*You have to be chameleon-like to a certain extent because you have to change with situations, you have to be adaptable. (IT)*



*School context*

Situated in the northwest of Trinidad, the government primary school at which Sher is now principal was established to serve the members of the socio-economically disadvantaged community that surrounds it. The school, originally built to cater for 840 pupils, currently has on roll 366 and boasts well-kept and recently refurbished buildings and 24-hour security service. As many as 60% of the pupils receive free school meals and most come from single-parent homes.

With a teaching staff of twenty-one, a clerical officer, and a number of other curricular support and ancillary workers; staff relationships appear to be collegial on the surface, but on closer examination is not. There is a School-Based Management (SBM) team consisting of the principal, Vice Principal and 2 Heads of Departments and teachers serve on one or two of several committees. A Local School Board, set up by the Ministry of Education (MOE), operates to assist with the management of the affairs of the school, while the school's Parents-Teachers Association (PTA) is currently being revitalised.

At the school are showcased many awards for prowess in cultural and sporting activities, projects and competitions; however, the school is under 'academic watch' because as many as 80% of its pupils are underperforming at National Tests and the Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA). Many have repeated at least one level, resulting in some students graduating from the school at age 14 years. There exists low parental involvement and high student indiscipline.

***The transition and perceptions of principal preparation***

Apart from the official 'handing over ceremony', which involves the instalment of a new principal by a School Supervisor at the confirmed school, Sher said the transition from classroom to the principal's chair was 'normal'. (IT)

*I didn't need help in writing up the log book or writing letters out and things like that. The administrative paperwork side of it, I didn't need help.* (IT)

Sher, not needing this type of help, was confirmed by the Vice Principal and the most senior teacher, who both acted in the position of principal at the school. She attributes the ease of transition to observing

different principals at work and embracing leadership opportunities that she was afforded, such as acting as principal, handling administrative tasks, organizing workshops and leading developmental work. Working at schools in similar circumstances to the one she now heads provided additional preparation. Sher reflected:

*I was subject to a variety of personal and professional experiences, that in hindsight, I realised were instrumental in actually preparing me for my daily practice as a principal. Some of these were: dealing with irate parents and disgruntled staff members; approaching corporate citizens for financial and other forms of assistance; eliciting the help of support services for both 'at risk' students and their parents; ensuring that the paperwork that resulted from my handling of administrative tasks was submitted in a timely manner; doing high quality daily classroom teaching... (RJ)*

In fact, Sher valorised the practical, on-the-job experiences she has had in preparing her for the principalship. When asked about her perception of principal preparation programmes and workshops in preparing her for the role, she rated management of human educational resources as highly valuable. She announced:

*Management of the human resources – it really has helped. So too has management of the educational resources. Those areas have really helped immeasurably ... The training I've had especially in deploying the staff - knowing how to work the assets we have - has really served me in good stead. (IT)*

*It has helped too in... I think it is character training because you ... are forced to stop and think before you act and speak. (IT)*

However, her ability to lead instructionally she attributes to her Master's degree in International Teaching, which allowed a special focus on educational leadership. She explained:

*We were confronted with a whole host of strategies that we could use to make a difference in the quality children get and to make teachers accountable for what [they] give the children. (IT)*

In evaluating the training workshops organized by the Ministry of Education for newly appointed principals, she said:

*... we had seven sessions, one day per week training sessions for new administrators, but all that focused on was the legal aspects of performing your duties - the terms and conditions that govern your role as a principal and the role of the [teachers'] union, and some of the OHS [Occupational Health and Safety] issues... (IT)*

One can see that Sher counted these sessions as inadequate in preparing new principals and had her own thoughts on improving such experiences. She remarked:

*... but we didn't do simulations. They wouldn't put you on the spot to see how you would handle the situation as a principal. I think those simulations would have been ideal, because then the participants would have a fair idea of what is expected, what's not and so on... (IT)*

Besides the use of simulations, Sher advocated internship prior to appointment to the post, and a period of mentoring soon thereafter for a more effective transition that would likely create a more competent incumbent who doesn't function predominantly by 'trial and error' or 'seeking advice always' (IT).

### ***Practices and Leading Change***

#### *Practices*

Upon accepting the principalship, Sher engaged in a number of practices that are noteworthy. The first of her actions involved her familiarizing herself with the school, once confirmation was received. Sher firstly made arrangements to visit the area to get a sense of the community (RJ). On her first day, she asked for the school's official documents, which included its development plan and records of academic performance of the students, so as to learn about her new setting. By the end of the first month, Sher had a fair assessment of the teachers she was to lead and the culture of the school – information she acquired mainly on her daily walks about the school. What Sher saw prompted her to quick action.

#### *Leading school change*

Not one to procrastinate, Sher started almost immediately to change the way things were at the school. In order to improve teachers' practices, methodology, work ethic and relationships, Sher has wooed the staff by sponsoring meals on two occasions, asked teachers about their professional needs, conducted workshops and invited personnel to

speak with staff. Programmes and new methods of doing school business have also been introduced to enhance the educational opportunities of the pupils. The following excerpts feature some of the changes introduced by Sher.

To encourage lesson planning and improved teaching practice, Sher said she did the following:

*Now most teachers said that they were not equipped to do Measurement and Assessment in a meaningful way in the classroom ... to treat with the children's weaknesses as well as their methods. So that's why we are going to do the Assessment workshop... (IT)*

*I did two workshops in getting them to learn to embrace the Schema for Mastery Learning as a method of choice... With all the paraphernalia, everything... We worked through lunch one day and then another day we took a half day and we actually did a lesson on how it could work. (IT)*

These speak about professional development opportunities for teachers based on their pedagogical needs. While some of the changes were not personally executed by her, they offer teachers opportunities to lead and be empowered, resulting in evident returns.

*We had a pilot thing with the SEA [Secondary Entrance Assessment] students in January, where I had one person handle the Creative Writing, for SEA, Standard 4 and Standard 2. I didn't do Standard 3 because the Standard 3 teachers were already kind of strong with the Creative Writing. And we did see an improvement in the kind of marks children got in the Creative Writing this year because from the highest being 14 [out of 20] last year, we had a child making 16 this year but we also had quite a few students scoring over 10 this year as opposed to under 10 last year. So that did work. (IT)*

Again, Sher's choice of approach appears to be strategic, addressing first those areas of weakness and helping those whose needs are more immediate. The importance of a new principal learning the history and culture of a school in order to address organizational problems is captured in the following:

*...we [the school] have a history of children repeating, beginning school late, etc. So that when it comes to SEA, we have children turning*



*fifteen sometimes before the SEA results are released... So what I have tried to do to prevent the repeating, well from September, we are going to initiate looping. Now, if you think about the primary school curriculum, the infant 1& 2 is a two-year programme [and so are] the Std 1 & 2 and the Std. 4 & 5. The only programme that is not a two-year programme is Std. 3. So we're going to loop. We're going to loop infant year 1, the teacher goes to year 2 with them and so on... (IT)*

*I hate news carrying and I don't like gossiping. I don't engage in that... So from very early on I had to curb the tendency of some individuals to bring the gossip and the talking about others' affairs and getting personal with each other. One of the ways I did it was to say, 'Ok if you come to me and you make statements or allegations, I am going to call the next party in and say miss/sir I think this is something you should hear'. (IT)*

*Teachers also spend an inordinate length of time around the photocopier. To address this irksome situation, I issued a once weekly time table for its use. The aim was to have teachers plan in advance what they needed to have copied, and to reduce the amount of teaching time teachers spent away from their classrooms. (RJ)*

The above excerpts also serve as evidence of Sher's approaches to re-shaping the culture of the school from one that appears to have poor teacher relationships and low academic press as demonstrated in teachers' time wasting to one that is more student-centred and academically more rigorous.

Sher has also catered to the needs of those pupils who are underperforming. With the assistance of the Local School Board and the multidisciplinary team of the School Support Services, she has implemented a number of programmes, one of which is what she calls 'the parallel curriculum' (IT), which teaches basic numeracy and literacy through the children's interests, such as hair and beauty culture. She has also sought to motivate these pupils.

*I started giving them certificates. We are recognizing their efforts and we make a big production on assembly as an incentive for them to want to do well and what we've found is that some of them wrote in their essays that they felt so good when they were called out in front of the general assembly to be given their certificates... (IT)*

Again it appears that Sher's approaches to leading change are student-centred, providing opportunity and incentive for students to succeed. There is also evidence here to support her involving a number of stakeholders, such as the Local School Board and School Support Services in the enhancement of students' learning experiences.

Other changes have been focused on lifting the image of the school, increasing parental involvement, revitalizing the PTA and improving student discipline. Sher has admitted that she has and is introducing many changes, but has given teachers the assurance that 'if it doesn't work we can always revert to what it was before' (IT). Despite this verbal assurance, some changes have been met with resistance, forcing Sher into the realization that her vision of making the school the first choice of parents in the catchment area is 'going to take a little longer to achieve...' (IT)

### **Challenges of the principalship**

For Sher, there are a number of challenges that come with being a new principal. One such challenge is time management. Although she has always viewed herself as a good time manager, she recognises that the very nature of the principalship makes it almost impossible to have the day go according to her plans. She attributed this challenge to three factors: (1) unscheduled or ad hoc occurrences, (2) excessive paperwork and (3) crowd psychology of teachers. On the crowd psychology of teachers, Sher reported:

*...as soon as I get on the compound, ... before I move to the office door, people are on me: they want this, they want that, they want the other, and I sometimes have to be impatiently saying, 'Miss I just got here. Give me a minute to settle'...* (IT)

*...everybody's business is more important than what I was about to do... 'Excuse me miss.' and they start, they don't even give you a chance... They just make, to me, inordinate demands on your time that they are not entitled to.* (IT)

*There are issues that teachers can handle themselves that they insist on bringing to me... especially matters of pupil indiscipline...* (IT)

Teachers seeking the principal for everything and at any time, disregarding what she may be engaged in raises questions about the

relationship between teachers and principal in terms of power distance and, maybe, respect as well as a likely difference in conceptualisations about the role of principal from teachers' perspectives and that of the principal. A look at her activity record, though only spanning the last two weeks of the academic year, reveals some of the ad hoc occurrences she has also entertained. Activities appear to be mainly conferences and phone calls. Other activities that seem to steal the time include trips to and from the district office and completion of administrative paperwork.

Two additional challenges that Sher faces are dealing with the influence of past principals and a disregard for her authority. These two challenges appear to be associated due to the situational context that possibly exists because of the Ministry of Education's reform agenda to appoint suitably qualified persons as principals. Sher's appointment unseated the previous acting principal, who is presently the Vice Principal, and is soon to retire. A senior teacher, who also sits on the SBM team, was once an acting principal of the school for some time as well. Sher has found working with these two individuals and the members of their clique most challenging. They not only try to influence her leadership, but they seek to usurp her authority, stain her reputation and appear to be unwilling to work in harmony with Sher. She relayed on the influence of former principals:

*When I wanted to introduce different measures, instead of being supportive, I would often hear from the Vice Principal, 'I tried that and it didn't work', or 'Miss, you will not get them to support you'. (RJ)*

*Especially since the senior ones didn't like the immediate past principal. Ohho, everything was criticized. When I tried implementing the same idea but in a different way, I would get the resistance because, 'Miss [past principal] had tried that and I would keep saying, 'Honeys, I am not Miss [past principal]. I am [calls her name], do not be confused with the two individuals. Let's look at the idea for its merit. (IT)*

*I was informed that they 'were accustomed to running [a named event]' and that, 'The former principal never requested any such information during the years that she was here'. (IT)*

Notable in these excerpts is the presence of the ghosts of principals past, some of which are present because of the reform context. It

appears that the experiences of and with these past principals are being projected onto Sher, the new principal, and so her authority is questioned regularly.

Regarding the disrespect she is subjected to, Sher recounted:

*She [the most senior teacher] is very, very disrespectful, not as overtly as some of the other [teachers], but because she was in the administrative chair already, she feels that nobody could tell her what to do. (IT)*

*...teachers come to you and they talk to you any and any how and they think they are being respectful because they prefaced their statements with 'miss', but sometimes their tones are very disrespectful and insulting. (IT)*

*I spoke to the Vice principal as well as two teachers individually about their apparent disregard and disrespect for authority, quoting the relevant passages in the 'Code of Conduct' and advised that their infringements, although noted by me would not be put in the Log. (RJ)*

*A school's fundraising event, up to now I haven't had a final report ... I've been showing them from the [education] law where they must account but that resistance is because they can't get me to act in the manner in which they feel I should act. (IT)*

Apart from being subjected to 'disrespectful comments or personal jabs', Sher was reported on to the School Supervisor by the Vice Principal and adversely written about in the log book. Again, the issue of the principal-teacher relationship arises from these extracts. The principal appears to have to struggle for authority, causing her to use the tools of her positional power such as progressive disciplining and the National Education Code of Conduct against teachers.

Another challenge identified by Sher is 'getting teachers to behave professionally' (IT). In fact, Sher views this as her most challenging problem. 'Everyone' she says, 'wants the school to do well, but few are willing to "walk the talk"'. There are teachers who are habitually unpunctual and irregular at school. Some refuse to go through the established chain of command to deal with issues or submit required reports, records and updates in a timely manner, while others are unwilling to honour professional confidentiality on matters concerning

pupils and teachers as mandated by the 'Code of Conduct'. It is this lack of professionalism that Sher associates with yet another challenge; that of building collegial relationships. She says that some teachers have issues with other teachers which often lead to conflict. She lamented:

*I want to see relationships grow so that we can look to each other, rather than everybody looking to the principal to furnish all the answers. I don't have all the answers. (IT)*

Here again, Sher has cited challenges that speak to teachers' crowd psychology and school culture issues such as low teacher practice, support, collaboration and commitment. 'Getting teachers to behave more professionally' speaks to a reshaping of these school culture manifestations. Pupil indiscipline also proves to be a challenge that is perpetuated because of low parental involvement and the fact that few teachers are consistent in enforcing the school's rules. Other challenges include:

- lifting the image of the school;
- dealing with a recurrent electrical problem;
- sourcing/raising additional funds.

The items from the Beginning Principals' Questionnaire that Sher identified as challenges (See Figure 1) triangulate with those identified in the interviews. Most of the challenges are educational leadership pursuits and are her foremost concerns. The most pressing – 'understanding how to reculture the school to one that is focused on learning' (Figure 1, item 26) – encapsulates Sher's task of 'trying to get teachers to behave more professionally' and most of her other challenges mentioned herein.

Figure 1: **Duties/Skills of most concern to Sher as a beginning principal**  
(from most to least difficult)

1. Item 26 – Understanding how to reculture school to one that is focussed on learning (**Section 4**)
2. Item 27 – Ability to monitor and evaluate the quality of teaching and learning (**Section 4**)
3. Item 30 – Understanding the need to provide opportunities for the positive development of teachers, students and parents. (**Section 4**)
4. Item 14 – Developing interpersonal networking skills that may be used with individuals inside and outside the school. (**Section 2**)
5. Item 21 – Demonstrating a desire to make a significant difference in the lives of students. (**Section 3**)
6. Item 4 – How to develop and monitor a budget for the school. (**Section 1**)
7. Item 23 – Being aware of one's biases, strengths and weaknesses. (**Section 3**)

Items retrieved from the Beginning Principals' Questionnaire

### ***Emotional Seesaw***

For Sher, the experience of being 'the principal' equates to an emotional seesaw, where on a daily basis she experiences a myriad of emotional ups and downs and an assortment of feelings that many times she has to hide.

In response to untrue allegations made about her, she mused:

*I was hurt, disappointed and felt the beginnings of anger. My professionalism and dignity came to my rescue and I was able to*

*perform my duties with no one being aware of the turmoil I was experiencing. (RJ)*

She reflected on her feelings towards 'disrespectful' members of the teaching staff:

*I realised that this was just one more attempt to undermine me... I was fed up with the insults and the snide remarks to which I was constantly subjected [and]... was hurt. (RJ)*

*... if I cannot tell you that you've gotten me so angry..., tears will come to my eyes. (IT)*

*I am not superhuman and I am not going to attempt to be superhuman because I am only human. Oh yes, I get very, very angry. But then I know that I can't show the anger and I know giving into the anger can lead to a situation that can compound rather than amend. (IT)*

*...it's not as though they have feelings and I don't. ... the principal appears to have to be a person who if you feel hurt, you feel humiliated or what not, you have to camouflage and pretend... (IT)*

Sher has reported feeling inner turmoil, hurt, humiliation, anger and being moved to tears – a collection of negative feelings – in response to resistance, disrespect, insults, snide remarks and undermining. This evidence again flags up concern about the nature of the principal-teacher relationship. The above statements also illustrate Sher's emotional intelligence, so too her recognition of the extreme importance that self-awareness skills play in exercising her duties as principal and her appreciation of the importance of 'Being aware of one's biases, strengths and weaknesses' (item 23, Figure 1). Although the situations recounted may tilt one side of the emotional seesaw downward, balance is restored as she celebrates the mini victories of each day, which she had started with excitement to execute all she had planned.

### ***Coping and asking for help***

Faced with daily, sometimes unrelenting challenges, Sher has had to adopt a number of coping mechanisms and strategies. These strategies serve to save a professional face among staff that models the type of behaviour that is necessary for developing a school climate of calm and optimal performance. They also keep Sher personally on course to her vision for the school. Some of her strategies utilized intrapersonal skills, others drew on interpersonal competency, and still others called for managerial know-how. All necessitated an inner strength and resolve that prevented responding prematurely or inappropriately to situations. Each challenge forces Sher to act and sometimes make unpopular decisions. Sher related on coping with the challenges presented by teachers:

*...you keep your silence, you keep your counsel, etc. because if you say x in this forum, it might be misinterpreted. So, you count to ten as I usually do. (IT)*

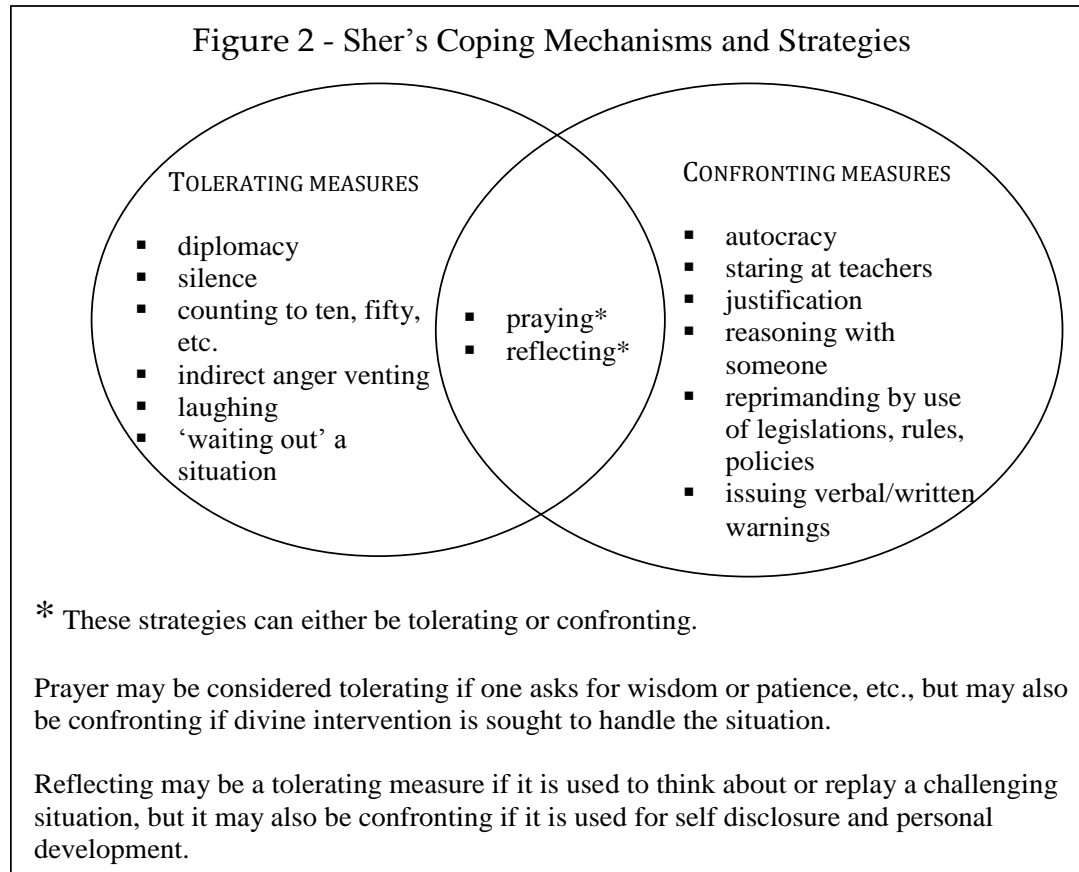
*I sometimes felt an impotent anger against these individuals. This was not one of the situations during which I remained stoic. I went into the office bathroom and quietly fumed, giving vent to my anger. I emerged several minutes later, my composure intact. (RJ)*

*... sometimes I go in the bathroom and I pray. In fact, I don't start the day without praying and sometimes, I just stare at the teachers... I told them, 'While you may not see me reflecting the fact that I feel hurt, you will get a blank expression across my face and that should warn you that you are being out of place'... but at the end of the day, ... I replay the day and laugh like a demented soul... I laugh because they try to needle me and get me to fly off the handle and act in a rage and say things that I would have to apologise for and I have determined that that is not going to happen. (IT)*

Coping strategies mentioned in these excerpts include keeping silent, being tolerant or 'stoic', fuming in privacy, praying, staring at offenders and laughing it off – all of which aid in maintaining the professional face or composure. It's interesting that Sher feels that the actions by teachers to 'wound' her are deliberate and that it is important to not give them the satisfaction as alluded to in the last of the above quotes by emotionally breaking. In addition, Sher has tried justifying her actions to no avail. Other times, if the individual is willing, she would invite him/her to reason with her in reaching a solution. In the case of the Vice Principal who is due to retire, Sher has opted to 'wait out' the



situation. Keeping a reflective journal also provides a healthy recess for Sher to think through situations and her actions with the benefit of improving future actions. Figure 2 shows Sher's coping strategies as classified using Bridges' (1992 cited in Yariv & Coleman, 2005) classification of 'tolerating measures' and 'confronting measures'.



When a situation warranted it, Sher used an autocratic style of leadership to deflate the challenge before her. She described:

*I reminded them about the terms and conditions of their employment. I was given varying explanations/reasons for their non-compliance. Although I understood that there would be contingencies, I insisted that all teachers must comply by submitting their records in a timely manner, and reminded them that failure to comply would result in Warning Letters being issued. (RJ)*

*... I used autocracy. I said, 'Well, I have been given the mandate to assign or deploy teachers to classes and you will have to teach the*

*class, because that is what you have been assigned to do'. When I tried persuasion, you know, the niceties, she remained dogmatic. (IT)*

There have been times, however, when Sher felt that a situation had escalated beyond that which she could handle. In one such circumstance, she asked the School Supervisor to mediate. When she did require advice on a matter, interestingly, she was not hesitant in asking, but selective. As noted by Nir (2009), there appears to be a fear of or unwillingness to expose her weaknesses coupled with a fear of tarnishing her professional image which should they occur may result in her losing influence over school members.

In seeking advice Sher also weighs the practicability of the advice offered and modifies it where necessary. Her remarks were:

*I try not to involve family in school affairs because I value confidentiality highly. When I need advice on how to handle some issues of professionalism, especially on matters relating to teachers' rights, I often ask either [of my two] friends who are principals, or some of my friends who are either current or past supervisors... Other than call the supervisor, I would call one or both of them, get their take on things and sort of meld it to suit our school context. Sometimes you'd find it working and sometimes it doesn't work and would need to be tweaked... (IT)*

It appears that Sher utilises an informal support group of her making rather than available assistance from the district office or the existing principals' support group referred to earlier. This is in response to a seeking-help barrier noted by Nir (2009), where principals tend to believe that there is a lack of reliable help within the formal system. The following excerpts also support the existence of this barrier for although the personnel at the district offices are also presented as viable sources of support for beginning principals, Sher chooses not to become too dependent on the supervisors, whose motives she considers questionable.

*...the supervisors need to have principals calling them. ... I think it's a dependency syndrome that they are developing in principals, where you keep calling them for guidance and counsel. (IT)*

Another option Sher is considerably wary of utilizing for support is the Primary School Principals' Fraternity. The fraternity is a support group

for principals, experienced and beginning, who head schools belonging to the same education district. Attempts at providing 'elements of advice' (IT) are made at the monthly meetings. When asked if she found the advice given helpful, Sher retorted:

*No, because I don't believe in airing dirty linen in public. ...some things should remain in-house... Too many of my colleagues use these forums to be critical about staff and I don't like that. I don't find that I've learnt much from those fraternity gatherings at all and if there was a way to avoid going I would avoid. But attendance is mandated... (IT)*

Her thoughts on the usefulness of the fraternity meetings may provide explanation for her rating item 16, 'Establishing a positive and cooperative relationship with other principals within the same education district', as 'somewhat important' rather than 'extremely important' as she did nearly all the other items. Most other challenges Sher manages through delegation, distributing leadership, taking work home and working long hours, even going into the school on weekends.

The following chapter discusses some of the major findings mentioned here and identifies possible areas for research. A number of implications particularly on principal preparation in T&T are also highlighted.

### **Discussion/Implications**

This account of the experiences of Sher, a new principal, bears some relatability to findings in the literature but also presents findings that may be context specific. One can clearly situate Sher in stage 2 (taking hold) of Weindling's (1999) model of headship stages or in Day and Bakioğlu's (1996) initiation phase, since many of her actions resemble those noted by the researchers. However, there was no mention by Sher of a 'honeymoon period' as noted by Weindling (1999), possibly because it was so short lived due to her approach to leading change or because there was none. Also, this study produces a counterexample of a beginning principal who demonstrated cogent conceptualization of her role and not uncertainty, as identified by Daresh (1987), Daresh & Playko (1994) and Day & Bakioğlu (1996). Sher strongly believes that her influence directly impacts teaching, learning and school improvement. The role of 'principal', she reasons, is an archetype of 'the Almighty' in meeting the needs of all under his/her charge, who

also possesses the special characteristic of being changeable enough in playing different roles to suit situations as a 'chameleon'.

The transition into the principalship was uncharacteristically described by Sher as 'normal', although she came straight from the classroom. The ease of transition was attributable to many opportunities for socialisation to the role of principal prior to appointment, such as acting as principal. The transition itself involved learning about the school's culture, context and its members as well as a readjusting of set goals to cater for the job's realities rather than a preoccupation on self-survival as supposed by Daresh (2001).

As a new principal, Sher's approach to leading change resembles that of the 'Shaper-Changers' identified by Cheung and Walker (2006), who sought to change the way things were done from the onset of their appointment or of a 'Culture Change Principal' perceived by Fullan (2002). However, her motivation, philosophies, values and desire for social justice greatly influence the direction and nature of her decisions and approach to leading change and cannot solely be attributable to her actions as implied by Cheung and Walker's (2006) typology of beginning principals' approaches to leading change. Consequently, the changes Sher actually introduced in her first year were farther reaching than the improvements to school image and communications observed by Weindling and Dimmock (2006). In fact, they amount to 'foundation laying' and a 'breaking down and rebuilding' of the school's existing culture. Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) refer to this as 'reculturing' – 'changing what people in the organization value and how they work together to accomplish it'. Her practices, too, bear resemblance to those of more experienced, successful principals: setting direction and creating vision; providing opportunities for people to develop; creating the conditions necessary for organizational development and responding productively to challenges and opportunities (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Sher's head-on approach to school improvement may also be because the school she heads is underperforming and is pressured to improve academically notwithstanding the number of challenges to overcome. Future research can investigate how the practices of new principals in more advantageous school settings, such as high performing, compare with those of new principals in less advantageous contexts.

Some of Sher's challenges, too, resemble those identified in the literature. One notable challenge is time management. Sher works, on average, 60 hours per week, which doesn't include weekends and the

hours she sometimes spends working late into the night at home. While excessive paperwork, ad hoc meetings and phone calls find support in the literature as contributing to the time management issue, for Sher and likely many other beginning principals in T&T, crowd psychology of teachers is another contributing factor making great demands on the principal's time. Sher also faces challenges that are specific to her context. For instance, in terms of finances, acquiring more is more of a challenge than is managing available funds. Mitigating the power struggle between her and members of staff who once sat in the principal's chair is another challenge not identified in the literature, but warrants careful attention by school supervisors in the present educative reform context in T&T. Another challenge mentioned in this study is Sher's efforts to have teachers behave more professionally, which she identified as posing the most difficulty and relates to dealing with staff issues found in the literature such as Sigford (1998) and Cheung and Walker (2006). An interesting study can seek to discover how much influence new principals really have and what factors influence how their power is wielded.

Some understanding has also been obtained about the emotional experience of this one beginning principal, who while 'reculturing' the school (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996) finds herself in many emotionally-taxing situations that sometimes 'wound' her (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004). These situations elicit feelings of satisfaction, excitement, frustration, disappointment, sadness, humiliation, impatience and anger, to name a few. However, Sher is cast as superhuman and her feelings are disregarded by those around her. There is reason to believe that new principals in similar contexts can relate to Sher's emotional seesaw. How they cope and ask for assistance may vary for a number of reasons, but Sher's coping mechanisms, as enumerated in Figure 2, seem to take the form of 'tolerating measures' and 'confronting measures' as proposed by Bridges, (1992 cited in Yariv & Coleman, 2005), while her seeking-advice strategies closely resemble those identified by Nir (2009). Of particular concern is Sher's selective attitude in approaching school supervisors for assistance. A worthwhile investigation would examine the nature of the relationships between new principals and supervisors in T&T.

The findings of this study also invite attention to principal preparation in T&T. It is apparent by Sher's ready use of the education act to

reprimand 'noncompliant' teachers that there is a heavy concentration on the legal aspects of the principalship in preparation programmes, which in T&T may be necessary as many teachers appear to be unaware of or indifferent to the laws that govern their practices and behaviour. However, whether this approach begets professionalism or hurts potential relationships between a new principal and teachers may occasion polarised opinions. An investigation into the nature of the principal-teacher relationship is worth performing. Moreover, although the management of human resources is considered valuable, there appears to be a superficial focus on educational/instructional leadership and re-culturing a school, which need to become more central goals in preparing aspirant principals. It is debatable, however, whether preparation programmes can adequately prepare principals for their job. Additionally, the focus of training workshops for the new incumbent is too narrow and principal fraternity meetings are, in Sher's opinion, not useful. These and other findings of this study also make a convincing argument for the inclusion of authentic leadership opportunities or 'anticipatory socialization' (Crow, 2006, p. 316) prior to appointment in the form of internship or engaging with workshop simulations and, immediately after, in the form of personal mentoring to better equip aspirant and beginning principals. Suitable mentors and practicum schools would need to be identified for successful outcomes to be realised. However, it may take a number of years before these become accepted and effective practices in the teaching profession in T&T. In the meantime, investigations into the extent to which preparation programmes offered in T&T actually prepare new principals to function successfully would be informative.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to provide a portraiture of the professional life of one new primary school principal and present implications for principal preparation in T&T as well as to contribute to the knowledge base on beginning principals locally and internationally. Some of the findings of this study support those within the literature on beginning principals particularly with regards to challenges of incumbents and include the influence of 'ghost(s) of principals past' (Walker & Qian, 2006, p. 301) and time management challenges as observed by Draper and McMichael (2000) cited by Walker and Qian (2006). However, in this study, the crowd psychology of teachers was a main contributor to Sher's time management issue.

There are four main findings of the study. The first is that the most challenging task for a beginning principal may likely be re-culturing a school, that is, reshaping or enhancing the way school members, mainly teachers, think about and perform their work and relate with each other towards a more student-centred, learning-focused school culture.

The second is that experience acting as principal in a similar school context to that of the appointment, the principal's own philosophy, values and motivation for becoming principal as well as an acknowledgement of the needs of the school context greatly ease the transition to principalship and influence this beginning principal's approach to leading school change.

The third major finding may be context-specific but regards the nature of the principal-teacher relationship. It appears that the relationship is discordant with staff wounding the principal by making untrue allegations and showing disrespect and overt resistance. In essence, the principal must struggle for authority. Such actions have caused the principal to make ready use of progressive disciplining, which likely doesn't improve the relationship. The principal also seeks advice from her informal network of principal and supervisor friends so as to not tarnish her professional image and lose influence over school members.

The fourth finding which is related to the third, responds to the call made by Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2004, p. 312) for 'more emphasis on how a leader feels and the quality of that subjective experience...' and also extends the discourse to highlight how the school leader copes with those feelings. Because of the discordant nature of the relationship between principal and teachers, the principal often experiences an array of mostly negative emotions, such as anger, humiliation and sadness – a finding also reported by Sigford (1998). Sher copes using tolerating and confronting measures such as indirect anger venting and reprimanding, respectively, to name a few.

A major implication of these findings points to the need to reconceptualise principal preparation in T&T to focus on instructional leadership, reculturing schools and building collaborative relationships between principal and school members. Additionally, there is need to improve the existing support systems for beginning principals and provide additional support possibly by way of mentoring.

This study neither claims to address all the weaknesses in the existing literature on beginning principals nor does it make generalisations. However, its findings are trustworthy and can be related to those within similar contexts. Being 'the principal' is, for Sher, an exciting opportunity to make a difference in the lives of those for whom she is responsible. Though at times she is treated as an outsider whose authority and humanness are disregarded, Sher's practices in changing the culture of a school, the challenges she faces and her feelings as reported here are vital to understanding the beginning principalship. There is need, nevertheless, for similar types of studies on new principals in T&T and, indeed, internationally.

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