

**PRACTITIONERS' MEANINGS OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP:
CASE STUDIES OF JAMAICAN HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS**

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ABSTRACT

Guided by the symbolic interaction premise that meaning is found in the interaction of individuals with their world, this study set out to describe and analyse how selected high school principals in Jamaica understand and practise school leadership by exploring how they view their circumstances, and how their meanings of leadership are modified by the contexts of their work.

To gain insight into how Jamaican principals conceptualise and experience leadership the study adopted a qualitative, collective case-study design. A purposeful sampling strategy was used to select four exemplary high school principals such that gender, school location and organization were varied. Data were sourced from semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation sessions and integrative diagrams as well as from school, principal and official Ministry of Education, Youth and Culture documents. Within-case and cross-case analyses were conducted using grounded theory modes of analysis, specifically the systematic processes referred to as open and axial coding.

Findings from the within-case analysis are presented as four individual cases that communicate the salient features of each principal's leadership and context. In the first case entitled *Mother of the Poor*, the principal defines school leadership as the pursuit of excellence within a framework of valuing and caring for students. The principal at the centre of the second case, *The Reculturing Principal*, portrays leadership as transforming school culture so that it is receptive to change and committed to growth and improvement. The principal featured in the third case understands leadership as a response to students' social problems, diminished self-concept and dysfunctional community relationships – hence the title *The Principal as Social Architect*. The final case presents *The Community Principal* who conceptualizes leadership in terms of building caring, co-operative relationships among all involved in the schooling process with a view to developing community connectedness.

Findings from the cross-case analysis are presented as two broad themes that characterize the principals' conceptualization and interpretation of school leadership. The first theme - 'Leadership as values-driven' - identified care and respect, social justice and excellence as the common values that defined the principals' leadership, permeating their interactions and informing their decisions. The second theme -

‘Leadership as responding to and acting on context’ - revealed that dynamics related to personal, school-community and policy contexts also entered into and interacted with their understandings of leadership. While all four principals in this study were guided and informed by common values, they applied them to their leadership in individual ways, modifying their approaches and emphases in response to a range of contextual elements that were both dynamic and unique. Generally, the principals conceptualized leadership as a moral undertaking, and values together with context emerged as powerful influences on how they defined, interpreted and enacted school leadership.

Findings from this study contribute to local knowledge about principals and school leadership. Currently, perspectives on what constitutes school leadership depend on frameworks developed for other environments even though the extent to which these are applicable to a Caribbean context is unknown. Furthermore, in the context of recent shifts in policy, it is important to understand what and how principals think about leadership. In this respect, the findings may serve as a guide for future decisions about leadership training and professional development for principals and aspiring principals.

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

This thesis represents the original research of the author. This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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