Exploring the challenges faced by a novice administrator: A case study

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ABSTRACT

With the changing world and the developing technology, many alterations occur throughout the world as a whole. Managing and directing an educational institution is not an exception. The teaching and learning process, as well as the place of stakeholders of these educational institutions, are currently in a period of development as the governments are concerned with raising the standards of education. All these changes and standardization movements put pressure on the administrators, especially on those new to such positions. The situation becomes even worse when these administrators lack the necessary experience and training. To draw attention to these issues, this case study aimed to elicit the opinions of a novice administrator concerning leadership and administration practices and identify the critical challenges she faced during the first year of her appointment. A qualitative case study research methodology was employed in the present research. Two different data collection tools were used: a semi-structured interview with the participant administrator and a diary of the participant. Content analysis was used to analyze the obtained data. The results of the study demonstrated that working as a novice administrator is a gratifying task, yet, it creates personal, occupational and relational challenges for the administrator.

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1. Introduction

The administrators are one of the most notable individuals in higher education institutions and are expected to be influential leaders and organizers for the well-being of their institutes as they need to manage the staff and other vital components (MacBeath et al., 2009). It is a collection of actions intended to use organizational resources effectively and efficiently in order to accomplish organizational goals. Effective management can be achieved through the optimum use of resources and operational guidance of the staff (Kukla, 2000; Özmen et al., 2007). In other words, the managers must be foreseeing leaders who can maintain all of the complicated issues in an institution. As stated by Quick, Macik-Frey and Cooper (2007), a healthy leader at work is the heart of an organization, and he/she must be aware of the requirements of his/her duty.

There is no doubt that the world is in a constant state of development, which also affects the different responsibilities the administrators own. As defined by Bush (2011), effective leadership and management are increasingly regarded as essential if education establishments are to achieve the wide-
ranging objectives set for them by their stakeholders. Similarly, Crow (2006) and Lortie (2009) state that the demands on administrators have changed, and the expectations from them are dramatically more than before. Inevitably, all of these demands put pressure on the administrators and other managing bodies. These challenges may have many adverse effects on them, influencing their motivation level and practicality, and may even lead to demoralization and discouragement among new administrators (Cranston, 1999).

This situation is not an exception for the new administrators. Several studies (Beam, Claxton & Smith, 2016; Arnett-Hartwick & Cannon, 2019) have revealed that novice administrators experience similar challenges in their roles. These challenges are various and discomforting for the new administrators. To illustrate, they may quickly lose their desire to continue as administrators and are more likely to leave their profession because of the pressure and unrealistic expectations from them. As stated by Saleem, Muhammad and Masood (2020), novice administrators generally suffer from a lack of resources, inadequate assistance, a severe workload, an unfavorable working environment, and burdensome duties. Likewise, other researches indicate that the common difficulties faced by novice administrators include lengthy hours, an insatiable workload, and requests from stakeholders. (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). In addition, Pineda-Báez et al. (2019) stated that for the new administrators, the shifting social positions within an institution might present some challenges. The social dynamics between novice administrators and other staff may alter significantly when switching to the capacity of a director. Considering the situation above, this study aims to examine the perceptions of a new administrator towards her new occupation as the manager of a state university in Turkey and the key challenges she faced as a novice administrator.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Administrators of the 21st Century

Today, most of the administrators at higher education institutions are faced with many challenges as they perform their official duties. As revealed by a number of studies (Bush, Briggs, & Middlewood, 2006; Cheung et al., 2006; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018), educational leaders play a crucial role at schools and universities. Thus, they are the most important and the first accountable people. However, as observed by Ogembo (2005), the managers are appointed to these positions after distinguishing themselves in their teaching profession due to seniority, age or years of experience and performance with little or no regard for their capacity to handle the task at hand. This lack of prior training leaves new managers with many challenges, including financial, managerial and communicational problems. Losing or demotivating administrators in their first year as professionals become a major worry when this issue is seen from economic and political viewpoints. Thus, to respond to this issue and keep managers in their profession, there is an urgent need for further research to explore what types of problems new administrators face in their current roles (Karakose & Kocabas, 2009).

According to Bush (2011), the main reason for this paradigm shift can be explained in terms of the increasing complexity of school contexts which forced administrators to engage with their communities to lead and manage effectively. They must exhibit a broad range of organizational and leadership qualities, as well as the ability to make more complex choices in conjunction with others in their school communities. (Pineda-Báez et. al., 2019). As part of this decision-making process, the administrators are subjected to enhanced accountabilities. All these changes make the leadership a more demanding and significant position, and the people in managing positions now need to be quick to comprehend and bring all the missing parts of the organization together to manage them successfully (Bednar et al., 1991). The significant changes in the roles and responsibilities of administrators resulted in their need to develop a broader and more complex set of skills and capacities than those held previously. To understand the changing roles of administrators in the 21st Century, the following table taken from Cranston (2000) provides a summary of the changes in the skills and capacities of administrators.
Table 1. Changes in Skills and Capacities of Administrators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENHANCED SKILLS AND CAPACITIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generally, various aspects of strategic leadership - people, school, educational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generally, various aspects of strategic management - facilities, budgeting, staffing, accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leading, visioning, and cultural change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of state, national and international educational developments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of wider organizational change and development issues beyond the education sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity to make meaning for others of these developments (educational and otherwise)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity to manage and lead through uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal, people skills - communication, collaboration, consultation, negotiation, persuasion, conflict management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity to empower and delegate effectively, leading to multiple leadership roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity to manage time effectively, identify and act on priorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity to operate in a culture of higher pressure and greater job demands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity to identify skill deficiencies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cranston (2000, p.5)

As demonstrated by the table, a good leader must have diversified capacities and responsibilities, which include not only personal relations and communication but also contain the knowledge and control of materials, staff and other sources. A good administrator also needs to have strategies to deal with challenges such as budgeting, staffing, and accountability. Most importantly, he/she has to identify deficiencies to find solutions for possible future problems. It is evident that the responsibilities of administrators are changing, and those wanting to become contemporary managers have to keep up with the changing trends.

2.2. Challenges Experienced by New Administrators

Working as a new administrator is a fascinating challenge, but it can also be a demanding experience. While managing the school, administrators may face several problems. In the early 1990s, Daresh and Playko (1995) synthesized the main issues confronting new administrators. These include struggles with role understanding about what it meant to be an administrator and how to make sensible use of their newfound authority, limited technical expertise, or how to do the things they are supposed to do, and difficulties with socialization. To solve these problems, educational institutions need competent leadership. That’s why the critical role of administration may be the single most crucial factor in successful education establishments (Marzano, 2003).

These visions provide a reasonable basis for understanding some of the interrelated matters facing beginning administrators. Clarke, Wildy and Styles (2011) identified the critical challenges as those of ‘dealing with the place,’ ‘dealing with people,’ ‘dealing with the system,’ and ‘dealing with the self.’ They identified the aspects of work that were considered most challenging for the administrators as managing paperwork, dealing with poorly performing staff, achieving a work-life balance and balancing system imperatives with local needs. Aspects considered to be the least challenging included working with parents and acquiring appropriate resources.

Beginning administrators need to deal with different issues as well as their selves, which can be the biggest problem while managing an educational institution (Dunning, 1996). Another problem for the new administrators is the issue of socialization. Nelson, Colina and Boone (2008) focused on the problems of the socialization process of novice administrators. New administrators experience a sense of professional isolation and loneliness, a significant contrast with their previous administrative positions (Earley et al., 2011). This may lead to low self-esteem and demoralization.

Another challenge documented in the literature is the difficulties novices experience with regard to the multifaceted nature of the tasks they are expected to perform (Bolam, Dunning, & Karstanje, 2000). With numerous unrealistic tasks, beginning or novice administrators often struggle to manage their time and priorities, and they are often irritated by the large volume of managing tasks, which limits their ability to get into classrooms and perform the duties that are expected of them as leaders. Dealing with ineffective and resistant staff is another problem for new administrators. Interacting with ‘difficult’ personalities can not only be stressful but tiring, requiring significant time and paperwork (Allison, 1997). Furthermore, novice administrators often do not feel well-prepared or well-supported.
in managing these personnel issues. A few other challenges also occur in the early experiences of novice administrators. As stated by Nelson et al. (2008), managing the school budget and operating school facilities are other critical challenges for new administrators.

Several studies are available about the challenges of being a novice administrator. Parkay and Currie (1992) conducted a survey about the challenges of a new administrator. The results show that the leaders saw themselves as inhibited in their perceived new role, as curricular and instructional leaders, by the constant need to respond to disconnected immediate demands. In another study carried out by Quong (2006) in the Asian context, the researcher reflected on his own experiences as a beginning administrator and demonstrated that the most significant dilemma he experienced was “when to act and when not to.” In one of their ongoing studies, Weindling and Dimmock (2006) found evidence of new administrators working in the shadows of their predecessors. Their discussion supports Draper and McMichael’s (2000) study, in which seven out of ten new administrators reported on issues brought about by the previous administrators’ style of management. In another study, Lindle (2004) found that school administrators show concerns about their unwelcomed working conditions that lead to high-level stress and burnout. In the Turkish context, Dağlı (2006) noted a thirty percent burnout rate in school administrators. As evidenced by these studies, the challenges of the managers are countless.

3. Method

3.1. Research Context and the Participant

This study employs a single-case study research design exploring the first-year experiences of a novice administrator at a state university in Turkey. A purposive sampling strategy was used. The participant is named Selenga, a pseudonym, to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. To ensure ethical considerations, an informed consent form was obtained from Selenga, and the aim of the study was described. Since the first author of this study and Selenga were colleagues and had similar responsibilities as administrators, he had a chance to interpret the data more efficiently with the participant herself, and this fact is expected to increase the reliability of the study.

Selenga graduated from a teacher education department of a state university in Turkey. Soon after her graduation, she continued with a postgraduate program and received her master's degree in 2015. Selenga started her teaching career at a state university in 2013. At the time of the research, she was working as an EFL instructor in the school of foreign languages of the same university and concurrently doing doctoral research. Selenga was appointed as the head of the Modern Languages Department. Her primary duty is to organize the staff, English instructors, students, and exams.

3.2. Data Collection Tools

Data for the study were collected by the first author of the study using semi-structured interviews and diaries. The study lasted seven weeks. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted, and the participant was requested to write a diary during the study period. Information from the diary was used to complement data gained from the interview.

Several reasons can be given for using interviews. Gray (2004) has stated that an interview enables the researcher to attain highly personalized data and opportunities for probing. Diaries as defined as first-person observations of experiences that are recorded over a period of time (Krishnan & Lee, 2002); they are the recordings of the writer’s thoughts, feelings, and reflections. Richards (as cited in Özmen, 2007) gives a list of reasons for using diary writing. Diaries provide a record of the significant learning experiences which have taken place; they help the participant keep in touch with the self-development process. In addition, these data collection tools provide the participants with an opportunity to express themselves in a personal and dynamic way and foster a creative interaction.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

In the study, two semi-structured interviews were used. The objective of the first interview was to find out demographic and personal information about the participant administrator. The second interview aimed to find out the opinions of the novice administrator about her new occupation and the challenges she faced. The interview questions were prepared based on a detailed literature review. Then, the views of two experienced instructors were consulted to ensure the clarity of the questions.
and improve content validity. The first interview lasted 10 minutes, and the second one took 20 minutes. Each interview was recorded for further analysis.

During the study period, which lasted nearly eight weeks, the researcher asked the participant to write a diary expressing her feelings and opinions about her administrative duty and the challenges she faced during her new career at regular intervals. At the end of the study, diaries were collected to be analyzed.

3.4. Data Analysis

The content analysis method was used to examine the interview data. The data obtained from the participant’s diary were analyzed by adopting a categorical-content analysis strategy to identify the themes relevant to the research questions of the survey. Throughout the analysis process, constant member-checking was done, and the second author cross-checked the data to ensure inter-rater reliability.

4. Findings

4.1. The Perceptions of the Novice Administrator about Her Duty

Managing an educational establishment is a really complicated task. As stated by Clarke et al. (2011), one of the most important aspects of being an administrator is dealing with the self. In order to focus more on external factors and difficulties, an administrator needs to define his/her role as a manager and be aware of his/her potential. The interview revealed that Selenga did not receive any formal training before her appointment. She was chosen because she was the most convenient person for this position. Yet, she hoped to have the proper training for her career. She articulated that ‘sometimes I feel as if being deserted in the middle of nowhere. In order to deal with such an emotional state, it would be great for me to have an education about the responsibilities and duties of an administrator.’

In many educational institutions, assigning an administrator does not require formal training; instead, the selection is based on seniority or convenience. Another critical point for a new administrator is to know the requirements of one’s new position. Administrators may feel alone as a result of unpredictable challenges. Selenga is highly enthusiastic about her new position seeing it as a promising beginning and having some expectations. This is emphasized in the following interview extract:

‘I have more responsibilities now, but it was a great opportunity for me to learn the duty of "management" that I have never experienced before. It is a lifelong learning that I like very much. I’ve had to experience new things that I’ve not experienced before. It’s a pleasant experience for me.’

In order to be an effective administrator, one must be aware of both their positive and negative attributes. Selenga’s description of herself revealed that she was a helpful person contented to help others by making decisions and consulting them instead of taking responsibility herself. She explained the reason for this in her diary:

‘I’m still on my way, and the people I work with are older and have more experience than me. I show respect to people every time. I tend to help instructors, students, and other staff as much as I can, instead of creating problems for them.’

It is evident that Selenga is aware of her responsibilities despite being an inexperienced administrator. She is an emphatic manager who shows respect to other instructors and staff. She is also aware of the potential threads created by working with more senior instructors and tries to take necessary precautions to cope with them by showing enough attention and respect. It can be stated that she is conscious of the characteristics of an ideal administrator. She defined her view of an ideal administrator as follows:

‘An ideal administrator must be a "charismatic" manager. I heard this phrase from a friend who was doing a master’s in the business department. A charismatic manager is one who can manage moments of crisis and situations in a cool manner. It is challenging to evaluate myself

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As seen, occupational problems included paperwork, organizing meetings and managing financial issues, all creating challenges for a new administrator. The situation seemed to become more complicated when she tried to find an equal balance in managing the department. Yet, she considered these duties as part of being an administrator.

2) Relational challenges

Relationship factor plays vital importance for novice administrators. The relationship of the participant administrator with other instructors, administrators and students also created challenges for Selenga. As she had the same status as the other instructors before, her promotion to the administrative position created some relational problems. The extract below defines some of the difficulties she faced with the instructors and the students:

‘The problems of the instructors are generally about the distribution of the lessons. Also, exams and other duties constitute the main interest of the instructors. Students’ issues are related to their personal lives, their grades, and their absenteeism. I always help students and other instructors. They know that they can come to my office whenever they need.’

As is clear from the extract, the nature of the problems with different people changes considering the context.

The shadow of the previous administrators posed another challenge for Selenga. The administrative style of the previous manager had a negative influence on her. In the interview, she stated that the instructors in the Modern Languages Department may like course books chosen by the previous administrators. As a result, they make comparisons and criticize her way of administration. The following extract from her diary provides supportive evidence for Selenga’s relational challenges:

‘Another problem for me is the previous implementations of the previous administrators. For example, the instructors in the Modern Languages Department may like coursebooks chosen by the previous administrators. As a result, they make comparisons and criticize my administration. I sometimes have difficulties in dealing with the previous practices of the former management. This creates some challenges to solve for me.’

It is evident that the managing style of the previous administrators created an extra challenge for the participant administrator. She needed to maintain authority by controlling the other staff, especially the instructors. Selenga’s personality seemed to prevent her from maintaining a healthy authority over others working for the department. Her tender character, combined with her lack of training for such situations, turned into a challenge for the novice administrator.

3) Personal challenges

Personal challenges constitute one of the most likely problems for novice administrators. In one of the diaries, Selenga stated, ‘there are many difficulties of being an administrator. It's important to strike a balance between asserting authority and showing affection. She felt that as a young manager, she learned a lot. She attributed her biggest problem to her inability to maintain authority over people. She admitted that she avoided breaking people’s hearts, which became a problem for her from time to time.’

Another problem is the effect of Selenga’s academic career on her managing skills. As a Ph.D. candidate, she needed to carry out academic tasks, and being an administrator at the same time seemed to put much burden on her. Sometimes she found it difficult to dwell on her personal needs. She felt that her administrative duties, the needs of students, the problems of other instructors and her academic studies created chaos for her. She states her feeling in the following diary extract:

‘There is a popular term, burnout. I usually experience it. It is not just because of being an administrator. I can admit that in the institution we work in, most of the staff are aware of their responsibilities. But a Ph.D. and other obligations create a real problem for me. As a result, I feel burnout, especially when we come close to the end of the deadlines of my obligations.’

The demanding nature of being a Ph.D. candidate doubled the adverse effects of being a novice administrator for Selenga. She needed to deal with her academic studies with the time left over from her managing duties. In many cases, this was a very stressful situation, even leading to burnout for her.
Selenga also stated that sometimes she experienced problems with her being a female administrator. The following extract sheds light on her feelings against gender discrimination:

’Sometimes I experience problems with my being a female administrator. In our culture, male figures represent stronger individuals in most community settings, and male managers can be preferred in the problem-solving phases. I think women and men can do tasks on an equal basis, but social values/norms can produce such thoughts that are difficult to change.’

Gender discrimination is a real problem for women in the business world. Selenga also experienced some challenges with this issue. She thinks that social norms and our culture are responsible for this discrimination.

5. Discussion

It has been revealed that working as an administrator poses many challenges for a novice manager. These challenges are categorized as occupational, relational and personal challenges. Occupational challenges are generally related to problems the participant faced at her workplace. First, she lacked formal training for her position. As a result, she had difficulties in responding to emerging challenges adequately. As stated by Karakose, Yirci and Kocabas (2014), administrators who have not gone through a training program nor lack administrative experience face significant problems during the first years of their profession. Increasing responsibilities, dealing with financial issues and spending so much time on paperwork and other issues create other demanding challenges for the novice participant director. As noted by Friedman (2002), administrators show concerns about their unwelcome working conditions, which lead to high-level stress and burnout. The opinions of the participant administrator about this issue are in line with that of Lortie (2009), who states that the work of administrators tends to be fragmented, fast-paced, and varied; it involves long hours and a relentless workload, along with demands from multiple, diverse stakeholders. Borg and Riding (1993) have affirmed that inadequate support, lack of resources, workload, unwelcome work conditions, and heavy responsibilities are the reasons for administrators’ stress.

Relational challenges are another type of struggle faced by the novice administrator. Maintaining a good relationship with others in the same educational establishment carries vital importance for administrators. The participant administrator of the study defined some relational problems related to her position, such as the difficulty of pleasing everybody and maintaining the flow of information through having a good relationship. Administrators have to work with people who have different values and expectations (Karakose, 2007). This diversity can sometimes create challenges for administrators, especially when some people fail to fulfill their responsibilities. Another relational challenge faced by the participant administrator is related to the managing style of the previous administrators. The results of the study demonstrated that the managing style of the previous administrators created a challenge for the new administrator. This is a common problem leaving the new administrator with new challenges to handle. There are some studies finding similar challenges for new directors. As stated by Hart (1993), the leadership style of the previous administration is another challenge for a novice administrator. Hart illustrated that beginning administrators have difficulty dealing with the legacy, practice, and style of the previous managers. Members of the school community not only compare the new administrator to the previous one but also often resist changes to the routines and culture to which they have become accustomed. Changing the status of the participant administrator constitutes another problem under the category of relational challenges. The new administrator’s rapport with the other teachers may deteriorate if he or she is promoted from teaching. Spillane and Lee (2014) state that new administrators often struggle with feelings of professional isolation and loneliness as they transition into a role that carries ultimate responsibility and decision-making powers. According to Loder and Spillane (2005), after transitioning to the position of administrator, the social relationships between the administrator and the other instructors change. At this point, it can be said that new social relationships are another challenge for administrators.

The participant administrator encountered some personal challenges. Clearly, administrators have a life out of their managing duties. They also need to deal with other responsibilities. For example, the participant director of the study is a Ph.D. student with other commitments. Friedman (2002) has found that administrators have a lot of things to do as a leader of a school. They must participate in
meetings, manage the needs of schools, and find time to meet all their responsibilities. When such duties are combined with the challenges of being a novice administrator, this may create problems for the administrator.

Another problem defined by the participant administrator is gender discrimination. She faced a few challenges about being a female administrator. Considering males as strong figures and suitable for managing positions might be a cultural and traditional viewpoint that can create challenges for female administrators. Coleman (2005) and Blackmore et al. (2006) demonstrate the continuing preference for male leadership, which primarily manifests at the level of appointment. This is a severe problem for the workforce which needs to be dealt with by the authorities.

6. Conclusion

This case study has demonstrated a portrait of the experiences and challenges of a novice administrator during the first year of her appointment as the department head. It has been revealed that being an administrator is a highly demanding task requiring much attention and patience. The lack of formal training for this position may create personal, occupational and relational challenges for the novice administrator. These outcomes have some parallel points with Bush (2011), who stated that the lack of formal training for young administrators leaves them with many responsibilities which are hard to tolerate, leaving them feeling disappointed and desperate about their new appointment.

Considering the results of the present study, the following recommendations might be given by the researchers to help new administrators handle the challenges more effectively:

- Policies should be set up to arrange some training programs to help novice administrators in educational institutions.
- Mentoring programs need to be organized for novice administrators.
- Leadership development programs, pre-service and in-service levels, might directly help administrators manage the stress associated with the job.
- Standards must be established to regulate the administrators’ authority and duties.
- Necessary precautions must be taken to prevent gender discrimination in educational institutions (Coleman, 2005).

The results of this study can guide policymakers, researchers, and educators in their attempt to develop strategies to overcome the challenges associated with being in a novice managerial position based on the findings of the present study. Also, this study will be informative for the readers of the encyclopedia to gain insights into one of the hot issues in the field of educational administration. The findings will be of utmost interest to directors and assistant directors themselves and teachers.

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