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A Phenomenological Study of the Leadership Experiences of the Charter School Founder-Administrator in Florida

Kathy A. Thomas Ed.D.
Nova Southeastern University, thomask@nova.edu

Candace H. Lacey Ph.D.
Nova Southeastern University, chlacey@bellsouth.net

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the dual leadership role of a charter school founder-administrator. The question asked, How do charter school leaders who serve as founders and administrators describe their experiences as academic and business leaders? A phenomenological approach and constructivist perspective supported a unique appreciation of the participants' lived experiences. The researchers sought to understand how the participants experienced their sometimes conflicting, sometimes overlapping, and sometimes unique experiences. Participant interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim; the researchers coded the transcripts. Two core categories and 11 themes were identified. The findings suggest these administrator-founders share a common understanding of the uniqueness of their experiences in this dual role.

Keywords

Charter Schools, Charter School Leadership, Nonprofit Charter School Management Organizations, For-Profit Educational Management Organizations, Accountability, Phenomenology

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A Phenomenological Study of the Leadership Experiences of the Charter School Founder-Administrator in Florida

Kathy A. Thomas and Candace H. Lacey
Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, FL

This qualitative study examined the dual leadership role of a charter school founder-administrator. The question asked, How do charter school leaders who serve as founders and administrators describe their experiences as academic and business leaders? A phenomenological approach and constructivist perspective supported a unique appreciation of the participants' lived experiences. The researchers sought to understand how the participants experienced their sometimes conflicting, sometimes overlapping, and sometimes unique experiences. Participant interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim; the researchers coded the transcripts. Two core categories and 11 themes were identified. The findings suggest these administrator-founders share a common understanding of the uniqueness of their experiences in this dual role. Keywords: Charter Schools, Charter School Leadership, Nonprofit Charter School Management Organizations, For-Profit Educational Management Organizations, Accountability, Phenomenology

Founders of charter schools have been the focus of some research, but little has been written about the actual day-to-day leadership needs of charter schools in facilitating real change (Dressler, 2001, p. 171).

Traditionally, businesses are often founded by someone who does not take an active role in the day-to-day operations of the organization. However, when the founder is also an employee involved in the daily operation of the business, lessons can be learned by understanding the perspective they use when making decisions, problem solving, and collaborating with all stakeholders (Strickland, 2005). Many charter schools are run by nonprofit Charter Management Organizations (CMO) and for-profit Educational Management Organizations (EMO). These groups oversee the management and administration of the school. Another group of charter schools are considered freestanding. They are not affiliated with these organizations and are also referred to as independent and mom and pop charter schools. Running a freestanding charter school is akin to running a small business (Bierlein & Mulholland, 1994).

There is little doubt that a freestanding charter school founder who remains in the school as an administrator faces challenges, obstacles, and barriers. Regardless of the similarities and differences, it is important to note that leaders as managers and leaders as educators must be equipped with business and academic expertise and a level of leadership acumen needed to effectively manage and operate the charter school organization as an evolving infrastructure (Consoletti, 2011; Cravens, Goldring, & Penaloza, 2012; Wilkens, 2013).

Missing from the current charter school literature is an exploration of the day-to-day experiences of those who serve as both charter school founders and administrators. It is from within this context that this phenomenological study sought to understand how a cadre of individuals who have served simultaneously as a charter school founder and administrator described how they functioned in the dual roles of managing and leading the daily operations

of a charter school. The central question guiding this study asked, “How do charter school leaders who serve as founders and administrators describe their experiences as academic and business leaders?”

Literature Review

The following review of the literature focuses on charter school leadership. The discussion begins with the process of opening the doors of a new charter school. This is followed by the related research on accountability and challenges. We conclude this brief review with the literature on leaders as managers and leaders as educators. While this is not an exhaustive review, it does provide context for the findings from the current study.

Opening the Doors

The literature reflects on the rigorous procedures and requirements expected for individuals interested in opening a charter school. Additionally, statistics were reported with respect to the number of charter schools that have opened and closed their doors in recent years across the country and in the state of Florida.

According to the Florida Department of Education (2012), charter schools have grown significantly in the state of Florida to 518.... During 2010-2012 an additional 100 new charter schools opened in Florida. The number of closed charter schools stands at 192. The number one reason for failures appears to be financial, the second is academic, and the third is the decision on the part of the founders to close due to low enrollment. (as cited in Karanxha, 2013, p. 578)

As reported in the charter school research, potential pitfalls and school failure include but are not limited to financial and organizational mismanagement (Consoletti, 2011). Wilkens (2013) reiterates similar language reinforcing the essence of financial and organizational mismanagement that leads to failure or how to “lose your charter” (p. 225). The challenges of opening and sustaining a charter school for administrators who operate a freestanding charter, CMO, or EMO include maintaining accountability, student enrollment, student success, and creating a shared vision that moves the organization forward in a positive direction.

Accountability and Assessment

The trend of testing and accountability and assessment will impact both traditional and charter school options, and in non-traditional, non-letter grading systems. “Some charter schools use alternative assessment measures (with varying definitions and indicators) and lack standardized quantitative data, making it difficult to draw objective, standardized conclusions” (Bulkley & Fisler, 2003, p. 334). Traditionally, student outcomes are often measured quantitatively and may be perceived by the internal and external communities as the quintessential method or approach for measuring and assessing standards and student outcomes.

The charter school curriculum is purposely designed with some independence and flexibility, yet there is an ongoing debate with respect to accountability and assessment in a nontraditional setting affecting how a charter administrator embraces learning outcomes that are measured in very unique, innovative, and semi-flexible systems. The criteria for creating a meaningful academic experience is contingent upon the leader’s ability to support a

multifaceted and differential action plan with a focus on innovation and creativity while adhering to instructional accountability. As a result, the alternative methods to measure student outcomes and academic achievement must strategically align with the curriculum and the required district standards as an acceptable method of measurement.

Challenges of Leading a Charter School

Not unlike public schools leaders, charter school administrators face a myriad of challenges as they learn to communicate effectively with a diversified group of stakeholders. There are major leadership considerations that impact performance, accountability, and how best to service the internal and external organization while simultaneously performing the routine business and academic roles. From authorization to opening day, the unexpected complications, unforeseen circumstances, and tough regulations required for charter school administrators who must abide by the charter are not unlike what a public school administrator encounters day after day in the district. Leaders in charter schools learn to adapt and adopt, and think critically to resolve issues and problems that could easily lead to mismanagement or the loss of the charter (Consoletti, 2011; Wilkens, 2013).

Equally important are “time concerns, priorities, and practices” (Bickmore & Dowel, 2011, p. 47), which are not necessarily mutually exclusive and present multiple challenges. Bickmore and Dowel (2011) coined “leadership intersection” as they “examined two principals’ priorities and practices through their expressed concerns and use of time” (p. 47). Leaders must learn to prioritize, delegate, and share responsibilities to avoid additional time management constraints that impact negatively on the daily operation and management of the organization. Time management is a relentless challenge for most leaders and categorizing priorities, monitoring, and modeling praxis is a monumental enterprise (Consoletti, 2011).

Leaders as Managers

Carpenter and Peak (2013) conducted a case study on how charter school administrators defined their roles and ability to lead a charter school organization. The findings were not overwhelmingly different, but how and why the leaders ranked the importance of managerial responsibilities and instructional leadership categories are insightful. In a like manner, administrators are aware of the demand to secure additional funding in a freestanding charter. Fundraising may be the catalyst driving charter school leaders responsible for securing additional funds and revenue. Bickmore and Dowell (2011) report the leaders in their study “seemed less concerned and spent less time on management issues uniquely related to charter schools, such as finding funding and dealing with local school districts” (p. 59). At the same time, “Charter leaders spend more time conducting meetings and handling parent issues and less time on hiring staff and fundraising” and expect to “operate without the resources, centralized personnel, and the expertise of a traditional school district” (Carpenter & Peak, 2013, pp. 150-151). Differences and variations reflect the diversity of charter schools’ internal landscapes, and the decision making network and performance of each independent leader in a charter school culture.

An administrator will need to adhere to regulations, legislation, and other obligations mandated by the charter school board agreement and the district. In order to manage, govern, and provide instructional guidance and quality leadership an administrator must be active and committed to the culture and academic success of their students (Wilkins, 2013).

The daunting and time-consuming task of securing funding is an additional barrier that could conceivably jeopardize the future existence of a charter school community. For some charters, the board or community members may collaboratively assume the task of

fundraising and responsibility for securing additional resources, but this may not be protocol for all charters. What the leader wants to ultimately avoid is the challenge of nonrenewal or revocation when extra funds or resources are unavailable. Administrators must be qualified to generate, manage, and balance the business and financial services and academic programming interchangeably so as not to put the organization at risk for school failure (Consoletti, 2011; Wilkins, 2013).

Leaders as Educators

For administrators who may have the business mindset, the strength in curriculum and instructional leadership may be perceived as undeveloped or less urgent and fall lower on the list of immediate responsibilities. The expectation is for qualified teachers to take control of the instructional component, thus moving the academic and instructional issues further down an administrator's list of immediate responsibilities. "Setting standards, building community within the school, articulating vision, strategic planning, and program evaluation remain at the top of the list of influential factors" (p. 152) as reported in Carpenter and Peak's (2013) study and reiterated in Dressler's (2001) examination of charter school leadership. Founders and administrators are motivated to identify the most competent staff for the job and rely on their expertise and academic experience.

Founders of charter schools have a clear purpose for their schools, a sense of accountability for determining the success of their schools, and they strive to identify staff who will be a proper fit among staff, the focus of the school, and what parents expect. (Dressler, 2001, p. 176)

As we reflect on the complexity of taking a charter school from inception to creation, from creation to sustainability we sought to identify men and women who could answer our research question, "How do charter school leaders who serve as founders and administrators describe their experiences as academic and business leaders?"

Methodology

Context

A constructivist approach most closely parallels the philosophical underpinnings of this study. This approach assumes an "emphasis on the world of experience as it is lived, felt, undergone by social actors.... what we take to be objective knowledge and truth is the result of perspective" (Schwandt, 2001, p. 236). What participants perceive as real is a construction of their minds. Individuals can have multiple, often conflicting constructions, and all of these can provide understanding for them regarding life circumstances (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Efinger, Maldonado, & McArdle, 2004; Schwandt, 2001).

Role of the Researchers

Denzin and Lincoln (2008) remind us that behind any qualitative research "stands the personal biography of the researcher, who speaks from a particular class, gender, racial, cultural and ethnic community perspective" (p. 28), this study is no exception. We are extremely interested in the topic of school choice. In particular, we are interested in how freestanding nonprofit charter schools evolve. One of the researchers has over 10 years of experience evaluating multiple charter school grants and serving on a blue ribbon committee evaluating freestanding charter school applications. Despite our interest and experience in

charter school research, we acknowledge our bias toward the topic and set aside or “bracketed” this bias when conducting this study in an effort to accurately depict the participants’ experiences (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013).

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative research method of inquiry using a phenomenological design that allowed the researchers to explore what Johnson and Christianson (2010) consider the, “foundational question in phenomenology: What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon by an individual or by many individuals?” (p. 385). In this study the experience of being a founder-administrator of a charter school was that experience. Additionally, a qualitative approach was best suited for the purpose of this study to gain an understanding of the perceptions of participants who have a shared experience and to describe these subjective experiences (Berg, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2002).

Participants

Participants were selected using purposeful sampling across the state of Florida. As Patton (2002) suggests, “Purposeful sampling focuses on selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (p. 230). We further utilized criterion sampling because each of the participants needed to be a member of the charter school community serving as a principal or a board member, and a founder of a freestanding charter school. We asked people who had been active in the charter school movement from its inception to identify possible interviewees from throughout the state of Florida. Given that we were looking for a very specific group of leaders we were able to identify six men and women who met our criteria. We reflected on what we considered essential in capturing the experience from varied perspectives, and chose four participants who lived and worked in various parts of the state. Four of our potential participants lived in the southern part of the state, one in the northern part of the state, and one in the western part of the state. We selected the four participants who most closely matched our criteria, two from South Florida and the two from across the state. Letters were sent to the charter school leaders, and then follow-up telephone calls were made. All four agreed to be interviewed. We were aware that we might need to expand our sample if we did not reach saturation. However, the four participants provided very consistent responses. The participants included three females and one male, two were white Americans and two were African-Americans with academic levels ranging from the Bachelor of Science (B.S.) through the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.).

Data Collection

Our research received university Internal Review Board (IRB) approval and followed required IRB procedures. We developed an interview protocol based on a review of the literature on school leadership and management. The protocol consisted of six open-ended interview questions which we believed would help us gather information from the four selected leaders (see Appendix A). Appointments were made for the individual interviews at a time and place convenient to the participants. All interviews were conducted at their individual schools in their office. Prior to the interview, each reviewed and signed an informed consent and were advised that they did not have to answer any of the questions and could end the interview at any time. The interviews were audio taped, and the tapes were transcribed verbatim by the researchers. During the interviews, the researchers wrote notes

related to the answers of the participants to later develop tentative ideas regarding categories and relationships (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 1996). The interviews lasted from 50 to 90 minutes. The researchers ensured interviews were consistent by using the same interview questions and allowing the participants as much time as they wished to respond to each question. Recordings, transcripts, and other data were secured in our offices on our password protected computers. Data were used only for the purpose as stated on the participant consent forms. Confidentiality was not an issue.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was the central technique to identify the patterns, issues, and themes that emerged from participants' responses (Berg, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). First, we read the interview transcripts in their entirety; next, each verbatim response to the interview questions was reviewed on a line-by-line basis. Then, for the responses to the question, units of information--words, phrases, concepts--that met the following requirements were identified: they contained information that contributed to the meaning of each research question, they were phrases or words that could stand on their own as pieces of data, and they were meaningful to the extent they could be interpreted similarly by individuals other than the researchers. After the units of information were identified, we coded and grouped them into subcategories based on their common content or theme. We further grouped the subcategories into broader or core categories. We used *in vivo* codes to label the subcategories and categories, that is, we chose labels based on the participants' own words such as "teaching" or "service learning" (Creswell, 2013). As we sorted the data into subcategories and categories, thematic connections and recurring patterns began to emerge.

Selecting our participants based on their firsthand knowledge of the phenomenon under study, and analyzing each interview as we conducted it allowed us to look at emergent themes. After conducting the four interviews and analyzing the data, no new themes emerged. We felt confident that saturation of each theme was reached through these interviews.

Steps to Ensure Trustworthiness

Guba's model for identifying rigor in qualitative research includes: truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality (Krefting, 1991). Trustworthiness is often used in qualitative studies rather than internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity. The trustworthiness or rigor of this qualitative study was upheld by addressing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. This study enhanced credibility by following the basic assumptions and characteristics of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013) and by using researcher reflexivity (Krefting, 1991; Creswell, 2013). Dependability which refers to the consistency or reliability of the research findings (Krefting, 1991) was enhanced by providing a "dense description of the research methods" and using peer examination (Krefting, 1991, p. 176). The researchers used reflexive analysis (reflexivity) to promote confirmability (i.e., neutrality or objectivity) (Krefting, 1991). Finally, transferability in this qualitative study will be determined by the readers of the study; thus, the findings of the study may be transferable to certain other settings as determined by readers.

Findings

Identifying Categories and Themes

Upon completion of the content analysis patterns, themes, and related elements

emerged in the initial coding of the interview transcripts. Two core categories and 11 themes were identified. The two core categories reflected the dual roles expressed by the participants and are: Leaders as Managers and Leaders as Educators. The 11 themes reflecting these dual roles are presented in the table below. Six relate to the Leaders/Managers role and five relate to the Leaders/Educators role. As previously mentioned, we used the participants own words to identify themes. We further annotated these themes for clarity:

Table 1

Themes and Clarification: Leader as Manager and Leader as Educator

Leader/Manager	
Theme	Clarification
“Hey Honey, What Do You Know About Charter Schools?”	Opening a Charter School
“It Is A Very Egalitarian Relationship”	Charter School Compliance – Satisfying the Statutory Requirements of the District, State, and Board of Directors
“I Have To Be In 10 Different Places At Once”	Building Internal and External Relationships
“I Am A Store-Front Educator”	Running a Freestanding Charter School
“I Don’t Like All The Challenges”	Meeting Challenges Head on and Feet First
“It Is So Complex To Start A Charter School Now”	Recommendations for Future Leaders in Charter School Administration
Leader/Educator	
“That’s What Socrates Did!”	Philosophy of Education
“I Am Not Involved In The Real Nuts And Bolts Of Education”	Delegation of Classroom Duties and Responsibilities
“So Now It Is Not Just Being About An A Anymore, You Have To Be A Higher A Than the Other School”	Instruction, Curriculum, and Grading System
“If You Are Hired, You Go Through Boot Camp”	Professional Development
“We Are Successful”	Measuring Academic Success

Leader/Manager

The role of the principal in this kind of the situation becomes much more of a manager than anything else. And for me who is passionate about education and who did this because I wanted to create a kind of vision that I think education should be, it can be very frustrating because I'm not involved in the real nuts and bolts of the education. I'm not in the classroom. I'm not creating curriculum. That kind of stuff you know, I'm really the manager.

While all of the interviewees were clearly leaders of their schools, it was obvious that they were keenly aware that they also served as managers. This was evident in their experiences opening the doors to their school, dealing with compliance issues, developing constituents, running the daily operations of the school, facing the ever present challenges, and reflecting on these experiences, we hope to better understand their experiences, why they have decided to serve this dual role, the positive aspects of their jobs, the challenges of their jobs, and their recommendations for those contemplating following in their footsteps.

Theme One: “Hey Honey, What Do You Know About Charter Schools?”

All four participants talked in depth about the process for submitting a charter school application, and the rigorous planning and preparation before opening the charter school doors. This was a very complex process for all participants even when the buildings and infrastructure were intact. Interestingly, they all remarked on how it was not necessary, initially, to have prior knowledge or experience to accept the responsibility of opening a new school. As one participant put it, “My wife said to me, hey honey, what do you know about charter schools?” Another participant reflected on how opening a charter just seemed like the right thing to do.

We started talking about what it would take to open a school ourselves. At that time my mother actually sent me this article about the school district having an information meeting about starting charter schools. And I happen to just go to that meeting and from that meeting is where the whole thing started. I just kind of sat there thinking to myself, you know, I could really do this. I could see myself doing this.

What became apparent from the interviews was the fact that despite facing unknown challenges each of the participants followed through on opening the school. As one of them shared,

It didn't seem that difficult, actually, and it ended up being of course a 100 times more difficult than anything I could have imagined, but at the same time it seemed just so doable and that's kind of how it all started.

There was no training ground for our participants, and what they did not know they learned quickly and on the job, “I was an educator and so I had this idea that somehow if I could just be an educator that would be enough...I was completely wrong!” Another participant shared this lesson learned, “You have a contract for everything that you do so you need to understand the terms of those contracts....be careful, very careful when you deal with contracts.” While passion and motivation were important qualities for these leaders, some basic management skills would have helped them in the initial stages of their journeys.

It was also clear from the interviews that the leaders juggled multiple responsibilities and duties. One participant spoke at length about the multifaceted knowledge needed when making the decision to open a charter school. Opening the school on time was a key necessity. In addition to school leadership training our interviewees found themselves in need of a unique skillset not taught in education programs. These skills included knowing the community landscape, the applicable laws and regulations, and the general architectural history of not only the building but the surrounding community.

Being in charge of a charter school, you have to understand real estate, you have to understand business, you have to understand, you know, legal issues like zoning laws and how to deal with utility companies. It is more than, just an academic administrator or leader; it is so much more than that. You have to be a business person...a public speaker...you have to be a marketing person.

One of the biggest challenges for most of our participants was actually finding and renovating the physical facility. While their actual experiences were not the same, they all reported being involved in locating a site for their school. As one of them reported, “There was nothing here but a field, a field with a couple of houses. Actually, one house, this was a garage—somebody’s garage used to repair trucks and cars.” Another participant recalled the quest for space this way.

I had to go find the facility. So I went all over town looking in churches, in strip malls, everything I could. Finally, we found the back end of the warehouse in the worst part of the town. The No Tell Motel and the Greyhound Bus Station, an interesting location. I said this will do.

Despite the difficulty locating a potential facility site, learning code compliance, and managing budget limitations, the administrators also had to establish and build community partnerships during the initial startup. In other words, without support and acceptance, credibility and good faith, and financial backing from the local businesses the charter may never launch. Nevertheless, while the locations for each of the schools were in very diverse locations, each site was ultimately successfully renovated and opened.

Theme Two: “It Is a Very Egalitarian Relationship”

Running a freestanding charter school depends on building a strong team and developing professional alliances. Having a board of directors, faculty, and staff that provide support and collaboration are necessary in order to manage the responsibilities of running the school. One participant described the relationship of the principal and the board the following way.

Though I’m a founding principle, I was hugely responsible for finding the people to make up the board and so there’s a very egalitarian relationship. It’s not like I have to do what the board says; it’s very much like we work together as a team and they have total respect for what I think is best. In addition, a relationship must be built with the district and state overseers.

All of our participants acknowledged the need to be aware and responsive to the various state and local mandates and regulations. As one of them put it.

There is this enormous amount of mandated activities that has nothing to do with real education. But because there’s also an evaluation system in Florida, and if our school continues to score low, it will be closed. So the hardest part of the job is balancing what the state requires with what I know is true solid, good education.

Additional recognition of the role of external funders was expressed, “Running the charter school requires relying on student enrollment, additional funding, limited resources,

and soliciting community members with deep pockets.” Each of the participants acknowledged the importance of external funding if they hoped to maintain and grow their schools. So balancing enrollment dollars along with fund raising dollars was an important part of keeping the doors open.

Theme Three: “I Have to Be In 10 Different Places At Once”

Each of our participants discussed the various roles they play within the school. Some are academic, but most seemed to reflect pure management functions. Leading a small business led one of our participants to comment, “I have to be in 10 different places at once.” A clear picture of what this entails was provided by a participant.

So I am on the foundation board, and I have to make sure that we do everything to raise money for the foundation. I work with the parent organizations. I work with the booster boards. So I am also evaluating all my principals. So I’m doing all this work. I have to be in 10 different places at once. And I have to be the superintendent. I was on the phone to help us build our football field; provide our scoreboards, and support us for all our long-term athletic programs. So I am brokering deals like that all the time.

A participant described the job functions being split between the district and the school, “Okay well I’m the liaison with the district.... I’m the ultimate parent communication.” While still another expanded on this idea and included the need to manage the budget, visit classrooms, and spend time building relationships with staff and teachers.

I write the check, pay the bills. I oversee the teachers and try to maintain a relationship with the teachers and what they are doing. I should be visiting classes on a regular basis, but because we are so small I’m around the school all the time.

Another participant reflected on the impact the recent departure of a teacher had on the role of the administrator:

We lost a teacher in the middle of the year for whatever reason, and I had to go back into the classroom...you just never know what you will be expect to do or what will be facing you.

Repeatedly, we heard the leaders describe the multiple roles they played with the school. While they would have liked additional help, they took pride in the work they were doing. None of the participants complained about the multifaceted job responsibilities. There was an implicit awareness that being in being in 10 places at one time was important for the operation of their school.

Theme Four: “I Am a Store-Front Educator!”

A consistent theme running through all of the interviews was the way the participants viewed their school operation and their role in the organization. A true sense of personal ownership was expressed throughout the interviews,

It really is like owning a small business even though technically, I don't own it; it is having the same sense of ownership as far as I am committed to making sure the school functions and it is healthy.

As another participant put it, "I told people that I became a small business owner overnight." And another described the role of the freestanding charter school leader as "A store-front educator." However, the definition of small business does not mean that these schools are all physically small. For example, we discovered that from a participant that they are, "...one of the largest mom-and-pop charters in the state." So while the size of each of the school varied, it was clear that the sense of ownership resonated throughout the interviews.

Theme Five: "I Don't Like All the Challenges"

We asked the participants to identify challenges they face in their jobs. One jokingly responded, "How long do you have?" What was very clear was that building the funding sources to operate the school was one of the most serious challenges facing these leaders. "The real challenge in a small charter school, in an independent charter school like us--money is a huge challenge." Without the funds, the chances increase that the charter school could fail. Another challenge discussed by the participants was school oversight.

The rules and regulations about everything change all the time so there is this constant need to stay on top of the game, about everything, including all the legislation as it goes through the legislation and federal government, and you know it's amazing how much there is to do and know about running a charter school.

This concern about oversight expanded beyond just rules and regulations and into the area of student achievement. The use of standardized test scores as a benchmark for success by state and local agencies proved to be an area of contention. Our participants did not consider this single measure and adequate reflection of success. One interviewee discussed the issue this way.

The biggest challenge is the requirements coming from the State Department of Education because of our demographic... the problem is that now that education has become test preparation and standardized tests and because standardized test scores basically reflect income level, of course the test scores of the school are low because we're 90% free and reduce lunch. When that happens the state comes in and micromanages.

Another area discussed by the participants was staffing challenges. Staffing differentiates according to the size of the charter, resources, and funding. Challenges often exist due to factors such as the lack of access to district support staff. One of the participants drew a comparison to the district staffing patterns to charter school staffing patterns.

So the challenge is, we don't have the same type of infrastructure and staff as they [the district] do. Our staff, there's seven of us. A comparable district of the same size they probably have 20 people at their central office and we have seven.

One of the respondents summed up the issue of challenges this way, “You know, I didn’t like all the challenges, and still don’t like all the challenges, still have some challenges, but it is a learning experience.” Despite these challenges, each of the participants learned how to work within the existing system to keep their doors open and their students learning.

Theme Six: “It Is So Complex to Start a Charter School Now”

Throughout the course of the interviews, many of our participants reflected on their experiences with starting their schools. They discussed how differently they see charter school start up today. One of them commented, “It is so complex to start a charter school now. And you have to hit the ground and be so successful.” Another lamented, “I think the days of mom-and-pop charter school are numbered. I think what’s happening right now is there is a push for these management companies.” One of them summed it up this way.

Well, I would have to say if someone came to me today and said I want to start a charter school, I would say to them you probably may not want to by the time you realize how much time it will take to do it.

While the participants lamented the change in the management structure and start up capabilities for independent charter schools, they were realistic about the limitations. The time and temperament to develop finance, management, and business skills seem to have placed limitations on the participants and as they reflected on the lessons they learned the future for independent charter school starts-up did not seem realistic.

Just as the leader must manage, there are many important instructional responsibilities required to fulfill this academic role. As an instructional leader, an understanding of how the classroom functions is critical. Participants in this study spent time in the classroom. This commitment provided opportunities beyond making observations, but provided additional time to participate in the instruction and keep a pulse on the culture and climate of a classroom. A discussion of five additional themes reflective of this aspect of leadership are presented in the following leader/educator overview.

Leader/Educator

I believe the main responsibility for the principal is not to be an operations manager but to be an instructional leader. And they should spend the majority of their time in the classroom. They should walk out at the end of the day and say, Gee what’s been going on all day because I’ve been in the classroom. They should know how many hairs are on each teacher’s head....Otherwise how can they effectively lead the change to help teachers become better at teaching.

In this section, we explore how administrators have the additional responsibility of delivering effective instructional leadership. The academic expertise may be less secure for some administrators, thus relying on building a collaborative relationship with teachers and/or principal to assume a school-based leadership role and help oversee the educational responsibilities. Regarding instruction, not all administrators have the academic expertise or competence to singularly manage the academic component.

Additionally, building collaborative teams that work diligently to construct the academic framework is a priority for leaders as educators. As important, leaders in a charter school setting strongly believe that their “specialized settings and programs will create new

educational opportunities for new students” (Bancroft, 2009, p. 250) and base their principles and value system on school-based autonomy and raising academic standards. Hays (2013) expounds on the “essential elements” and principles of school-based leadership.

The effective characteristic of a school is the product of school-based leadership rather than outside forces. The individual actions and policies of a school leader combine to create a particular ethos or set of values, attitudes, and culture making their school distinctive. Often, leadership of effective schools is empowered to make decisions that affect the academic curriculum, teaching, and school culture. (p. 40)

As parents seek new and diverse curriculum to match their child’s interests and needs some are exploring charter schools. However, these schools, because of their autonomy, require leaders who are aware of the opportunities and risks presented to them. Our participants discussed their roles as educational leaders and how this is reflected in their schools.

Theme Seven: “That’s What Socrates Did!”

Education beheld as a passion was widely supported and reported in the interviews of the participants. A constructivist approach supports quality education with a deep-rooted philosophy of education. The philosophy of education must clearly identify and connect with the vision and mission principles and best practice supported by the members of the charter community who agree to apply the core values to promote academic success. One participant offered an explanation of the philosophical principles and beliefs concerning constructivism, Socratic teachings, and pedagogy.

Constructivist is the word that most describe and apply to what I believe. But I even think that constructivism goes back to Socrates. That’s what Socrates did. He had dialogs with people and you know he asked questions and they asked questions. He, you know, encouraged them to question and learn, and build their own knowledge.

The participants agree that philosophically, instructional leadership means gaining expertise and the ability to operate at this academic level.

I believe the principal is not to be an operations manager but to be an instructional leader...because I have been in the classroom. They also have to understand that we’re built on the philosophical construct that we’re not in the entitlement of education, we’re in the business.

At the same time, not all leaders have the academic, deep-rooted conceptualization of what translates into education--what works and what doesn’t work.

I find that in education today a lot of people are operational experts, but they are not really good at understanding the philosophies of education. They are doing things that don’t work... you know, it’s the definition of insanity and it’s usually what we do in education.

While the ability to operationalize philosophical principles and develop critical thinking skills are powerful tools, maintaining an educational vision is the glue that holds everything

together. When asked, what is your vision? One participant responded with a clear message: “They asked me, “What’s your basic vision in this?” I said, “High expectations and high achievement.” If achievement is the common goal and expected outcome, so are the students’ well-being and happiness. One of the participants made the connection this way.

All they know as a kindergarten student when they walk in here is that they have a great place, great teacher, and everybody is happy and people treat you with respect and there’s some foundation... and the underpinning is philosophical.

While not all of the participants directly referenced constructivism as the philosophy upon which their programs were built; their words reflected this philosophical underpinning. They saw values and vision as a direct path to respect and learning. And they saw their role as providing the opportunity to create an environment where students and teachers thrive.

Theme Eight: “I Am Not Involved in the Real Nuts and Bolts of the Education”

As reported, not all of the participants were directly involved in the daily instructional component leaving the teaching to competent and highly-qualified teachers and professional members on the team. The administrator may oversee the system and academic domain, but relies heavily on the expertise of the staff hired to assume the responsibilities while remaining actively visible and conducting daily observations.

I oversee the teachers and try to maintain a relationship with the teachers and what they are doing. I should be visiting classes on a regular basis, but because we are so small, I’m around the school all the time. Everyone sees me all the time. But there’s a difference of actually being seen and actually going into the classroom and sitting there for a while. So I do that.

Additional time in the classroom may require an administrator to delegate duties and responsibilities. The art of delegation may require relinquishing certain duties and relegating responsibilities. This was the reported expectation from participants who relied on competent educators to take charge and lead the academic community. However, this transition did not relieve any of the participants from their active daily routine.

Yes, I have delegated a lot and in the beginning I did everything, and I had people helping me, but now I have people who do it full time and I am more of a manager of those people doing things full time. So it is different right now.

The art of delegating some of the business aspects of running the school allowed the participants to focus on building relationships with their faculty. As one participant shared, “A happy principal will stay....so happy teachers will stay.” This was no exception for one participant who acknowledged the importance of maintaining team collaboration, “Yes, they are a great team. They started to click this year. The teachers, the staff...even with our non-instructional security team...they have clicked.” However, maintaining this level of collaboration often required delegating both academic and management responsibilities thus feeling that they were not always involved in the real nuts and bolts of education.

Theme Nine: “So Now It Is Not Just Being About an A Anymore You Have To Be A Higher A Than The Other School”

Charter schools face competition from not only district schools, but also from private schools, church affiliated schools, and other charter schools. Academic achievement was an important consideration for parents when selecting a school. One participant reflected on the children who attended the school.

I really do believe, in my heart of hearts, I truly believe that these kids that we serve who come from such dire circumstances have the capacity to be high-achieving kids. Leaders will learn to adapt quickly and delegate, provide instructional support, ensure professional development, and build a generous academic knowledge base that supports academic success with teaching and learning advancement in the charter school arena.

Many charter schools opened as alternatives for students at low performing public schools. However, in some places this is no longer the case.

The irony in this district right now is that many of the schools are “A” schools. So now it is not just being about an A anymore, you have to be a higher A than the other school. So even within the whole A thing, parents are now looking at who has the highest A.

Unfortunately, attaining a high grade may be an unrealistic expectation for charter school leaders in the initial startup year, yet all participants made a conscious effort to meet the requirements including scores on state assessments. “High-stakes testing...yeah, we have to deal with that and it’s a big headache...we have to have all that is required for the public funding...ESE, ESOL, FCAT. The district’s expectations are not gradual and for the new charter school leader, the demands are exceedingly stressful in the first year of operation.

Realistically, an A status may be a difficult or nearly impossible goal to reach, “Your first year, the expectations are absolutely insane as far as I can tell for a new school just starting out to have to get an A, like, that is just, it is totally unrealistic to expect.” But as one participant announced, it is all about maintaining high performance, “Our high school is high-performing and an A school...So it has nothing to do with anything but performance.” So while charter school grading systems vary; the schools are still held accountable for their choices.

Theme Ten: “If You Are Hired, You Go Through Boot Camp”

Professional development implies ongoing support and training for teachers and staff. All participants agreed that training and professional development opportunities are made available with a focus on academic advancement. The structure was explained by one of the participants.

I also have a hierarchical structure for faculty and our staff and we also go through training so people buy into the philosophical constructs. We also run boot camps every summer. If you’re hired into the [our] charter, you go through boot camp.

While not every school used the term boot camp, they each had a way to provide collaborative opportunities for staff. At one school, the interviewee reported, “I suggested that they do a retreat this year. It was really nice... I think that helped them to bond, too. So that was a good thing...we look forward to doing something next year, just keep it ongoing.” The participants recognized the importance of creating time during the school year for reviewing values, vision, and mission, building and maintaining good working relationships, and providing opportunities for professional development opportunities.

Theme Eleven: “We Are Successful”

Resoundingly, our participants identified success as the goal for their school. When asked how they measure success and how they know when their goals have been met participants identified success in a variety of ways. At one school, the answer was inspiring.

We are successful...you know it’s funny. Depending on how you measure success. For the District, we are a very unsuccessful school. We are rated F. Even though our school went up by 75 points, but one of the factors in their whole little plan is if the entire school does not have 75% of the students reading at a proficient level, the grade goes down.

So while deemed unsuccessful by reporting standards, in the eyes of those at the school seeing the growth helped them identify their success. Similarly, for one participant operating in a low socioeconomic neighborhood success was not measured by test scores.

If you talk to kids, if you talk to parents, if you talk to our graduates who come back constantly and say “I miss this place; I want to be here again”...in that sense it’s a successful school.

One participant defined success by looking at the graduation rate.

The students do succeed and graduate sending a very powerful message that a school is not just a “store front sign!” The graduation ceremony is worth it for everybody to see that we have pictures on the walls...so the folks can see – some people graduate, so I have a chance. So that is the good part.

In a community with very low graduation rates, graduation is about accomplishment and achievement. Graduation rates, unlike school grades or test scores are a significant measure of success. It also becomes a gateway to the future.

Limitations

As with all qualitative research, the findings from this study are not generalizable. However, the information collected from these participants adds to the understanding of the phenomenon of interest. This group of four participants may seem a relatively small number. However, the pool of potential participants who met our criteria was very limited and we did not want to be confined to one part of the state. We believe that their in vivo responses yielded compelling information regarding their shared experiences and resulted in thematic consistency. Additionally, our participants were limited to Florida, it is possible that conducting interviews in other parts of the country might enhance the findings.

Future Research

In order to broaden the scope of this qualitative study, expanding the number of participants and adding related research to enhance rigor are future recommendations (Creswell, 2008). Additionally, the participant base could be expanded by including administrators that might not have been founders, but were initial administrators. If a large enough pool of potential participants is identified, a qualitative study based on the themes identified in this study could be conducted on a national level.

The current research could be further expanded by seeking potential participants from other parts of the country. While it was challenging to find potential interviewees who met the study's criteria, working with a national charter school group could provide additional information on the phenomenon addressed in this study. Based on the current study, future research on charter school leadership can be expanded through the use of a questionnaire that focuses on the impact of the themes identified in this study.

Discussion

In addition to creating and articulating a vision, a leader needs to implement the vision (Northhouse, 2015, p. 160).

The participants for the study provided a unique perspective on their roles as they shared their experiences and what it was like to function in a dual role of leader as manager and leader as educator. Many of the commonalities threading through the experiences were shared experiences identified within the descriptive quotes. Their responses provided data that was "rich and thick" (Creswell, 2013, p. 194). As a result of this depth, the findings reflect a saturation of information. Thus, the researchers were able to identify common categories and themes and utilize the interpretation of the structural description to gain a better understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon.

The charter school literature reflects the importance of leaders and their perception when establishing a vision for their school.

School leadership preparation programs are beginning to focus more on the needs of 21st century schools. Charter schools are no different—they too need leadership that is transforming and provides vision, encouragement, and a sense of a team, while providing a positive learning and teaching environment, in addition to managing the day-to-day functions of a school. (Dressler, 2001, p. 175)

Additionally, providing sound financial stewardship, ethical leadership, strong academic performance, focused facilities management, and awareness of district obstacles can result in strong charter schools (Consoletti, 2011). These characteristics were clearly evident in the experiences of our interviewees. These leaders as managers and educators were able to develop the foundation and construct the framework for their schools with a strong vision and mission designed to meet the needs of their communities.

"With charter schools often being the creation of parents and others who have a vision for how schools can be improved, the governance of these schools has fallen to their founders" (Dressler, 2001, p. 171). This responsibility was reflected in the experiences of the participants in our study. According to Bulkley and Fisler (2003), "the governance of charter schools is diverse and includes schools that are dominated by teachers, administrators, and parents" (p. 324). The men and women in this study understood the role of these

communities. In addition, they recognized the need to ensure that all stakeholders were important resources for their school who collectively and collaboratively supported the vision and mission, understood the need for compliance and commitment, recognized the importance of student success, and developed the critical alliance.

Leading a charter school organization requires spending many hours devoted to the organization. As we know, this is not unlike any organization with dedicated leaders. Perhaps this was not the initial expectation or understanding of what it meant to function, manage, and lead a charter school for first time founders-administrators, but all interviewees learned to quickly adapt.

Oh my gosh, what have I gotten myself into. This is way more than I had thought or bite off. But you know, you go through one problem at a time and that problem is over, and you go through the next problem. Then three more problems come up. You just keep going...that is pretty much the experience as a charter school administrator.

The participants agreed that there are very high expectations of founders-administrators with obligations as leaders to be prepared for the unexpected work request. There is little reservation that the participants in this study learned how to juggle both roles, but that did not necessarily translate positively unless they were able to remove the obstructed obstacles that prevent a leader from moving forward with persistence. The recommendation for future participants who are thinking about starting a charter school-- unless you are fully prepared to tackle it "head on... or feet first" may want to reconsider this attempt.

There were many positive expressions and feelings of accomplishment. The participants were extremely passionate about their school and meeting the needs of the students. The motivation of the charter school movement is deeply rooted in philanthropic and self-serving endeavors, evident in many of the actions and experiences shared by these leaders in our study.

We heard the stories and shared experiences of the related challenges, pitfalls, and successes reported by the participants. We learned more about the in depth experiences of leaders as managers and leaders as educators. We now have an enhanced understanding, unique perspective, and wider lens of the charter school and how these founders and administrators worked diligently to move the organization forward, and why the participants in this study decided to serve in this dual role. We are hopeful that the shared analysis and understanding of the phenomenon will serve to enrich the charter school literature.

Conclusion

In closing, it is our hope that transferability in this qualitative study will be determined by the readers of the study. The intension of the researchers was not to try and generalize or transfer to a wider population as indicated in the criteria for presenting this qualitative research study, but to better understand and appreciate the lived experiences of these leaders operating in a robust academic charter school environment. The participants worked diligently to manage and lead their organization in a very exhausting dual role. As one participant summed it up.

If life ended today I can look back and say, I made a difference. My life had value. I didn't just get a job to make money...Monday is my favorite day. I look forward to coming here. I want to make things happen. Does that make sense?

The charter school movement continues to grow and provide academic options and choices for students across the country. While many charter schools are running successfully and operating with a strong commitment to teaching and learning and student achievement, the perception of charter school success remains controversial; particularly, when a charter school is mismanaged by incompetent leaders and educators and runs the risk of the district closing the doors before opening for business. The leaders we interviewed reflect the possibilities that exist when determination and dedication are present.

We learned from our participants that how a leader manages the school is contingent upon experience and skill level, and an ability to secure the money needed to operate the system. We heard the importance of recruiting students, hiring qualified teachers, and maintaining dynamic administrators to run the school. These were three critical components described by our participants to avoid putting the school's funding stream at risk.

What resonated throughout the interviews were the number of challenges, obstacles, and barriers in opening a charter school. Fortunately, that did not stop the participants from launching their school and actualizing their vision. Moreover, they learned to delegate and share the responsibilities and introduce new educational opportunities, innovative instruction, and diversified curriculum for unique student populations. We heard that two words, accountability and compliance were critical factors dictated by the charter and the district's rules for running a quality school. Charter school leaders are not exempt from carrying out this mission.

Every student has the right to a quality education, and charter schools may provide an alternative academic choice. Our participants clearly understood that opening a charter school was not an easy decision. When they began their journey they did not imagine how the dual roles as managers and leaders would impact their journeys. However, moving their vision and mission forward was critical. And we thank them for sharing their experiences.

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Appendix A

Six open-ended questions were constructed to guide the semi-structured interviews and highlight the significant individual, and to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the common shared "lived" experiences:

1. Would you please take a little time to share your personal educational philosophy?
2. How would you describe your experiences as an owner-founder?
3. How would you describe your experiences as an administrator?
4. Can you talk about your experiences with the challenges you encounter in your dual role?
5. Based on your personal experiences, if you were going to give advice to someone

contemplating becoming a charter school owner –founder and administrator, what would you say?

6. Is there anything that I did not ask you that you would like to share with me?

Author Note

Kathy A. Thomas, Ed.D. is an Associate Professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education. She has several years of teaching experience, working with children and youth in public and private classrooms, secure juvenile facilities, and residential treatment settings. She received her master's degrees in education from Tufts University and criminal justice from Northeastern University, and her terminal degree in Child and Youth Studies at Nova Southeastern University. Her academic interests include: juvenile and social justice, child abuse and neglect, educating children and adolescents with learning disabilities, and qualitative research practices. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: thomask@nova.edu.

Candace H. Lacey, Ph.D. is a former fellow at the National Center for Education Statistics and Past-President of the Consortium of State and Regional Educational Associations SIG of the American Educational Research Association. Dr. Lacey has extensive experience as principal investigator conducting local, state, and national research including the evaluation of the Safe Schools/Healthy Students prevention grants in Palm Beach and Broward counties and the State of Florida's Online Tobacco Education Grant. She has over 50 peer reviewed articles and has participated in over 100 presentations at peer-reviewed national, regional, and local conferences. Her publications and presentations have employed quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods designs. She has been nominated for the Florida Educational Research Association's Distinguished Paper on two occasions, once for a quantitative study and once for a qualitative study. She has taught Measurement and Assessment, Methods of Inquiry, Survey Research, and Program Evaluation. All of the dissertations she has chaired at NSU have been awarded Outstanding Dissertation status. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: chlacey@bellsouth.net.

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