

How sad, too bad: Rejection and resilience in the selection game

By Kathy Lacey

What happens when teachers decide to join the game called principal-class selection? Why do some people opt out of the game, others survive to 'tell the tale' and a few seem to thrive? In recent years, I have worked with a number of potential and avowed aspirants. As part of a number of research projects and consultancies teachers and leaders have shared with me their private musings and imaginings, sharing joys and venting emotional reactions.

Aspirants find the selection process demanding, time consuming, stressful and, in some cases traumatic (Lacey, 2002). Those who survive, manage their feelings of vulnerability and are seemingly more resilient (Gronn and Lacey, 2004). This led me to look further into current research into resilience. The Microsoft Word dictionary defines resilience as 'the ability to spring back quickly from setbacks' or 'the ability of matter to spring back quickly into shape after being bent, stretched or deformed.' I am sure some teachers would say that their experiences with the selection process left them feeling bent stretched and deformed!

In 1999, Moira Rayner and Meg Montague published a discussion paper based on a review of the international research literature titled *Resilient Children and Young People* (Rayner and Montague, 1999). They trawled the literature and found that the key elements of resiliency definitions included three elements:

1. Exposure to risk, adversity or stress, and the
2. maintenance of competencies, through
3. coping strategies, or successful adaptation or adaptation in the face of risk exposure.

They identified resilience as the presence, at any given moment, of emotional maturity, or 'emotional intelligence' characterised by: self esteem and self confidence; the capacity to create and maintain friendships with peers and to gain the support of adults; a well founded sense of trust; a sense of purpose; a set of values and beliefs that guide responses to the world; and a feeling of having some kind of internal locus of control, a sense that you can affect and influence your circumstances.

Ann Deveson in her exploration into the nature of resilience found that 'resilient people are formed by more than just their genes or their temperament. Rather it is the way they engage and respond to situations in life.' (Deveson, 2003). There is now an increasing body of empirical evidence that resilience can be learned (Coutu, 2002).

The selection game is one that exposures players to risk, adversity and stress. So what are the successful coping strategies used by the thrivers and survivors of the selection stakes?

Project Resilience is a private US organization that promotes a strengths-based approach to both youth and adults struggling to overcome hardship. They have developed a framework to describe seven clusters of strengths used in overcoming adversity (Wolin and Wolin, 1999).

For each of the seven strengths they have described three developmental phases: child, adolescent, and adult. In children, strengths appear as unformed, intuitively motivated behaviour. In adolescents, these behaviours sharpen and become deliberate. In adults, they broaden and deepen, becoming an enduring part of the self. For instance, insight begins with sensing in childhood, becomes knowing in adolescence, and matures into understanding in adulthood. Reading the mandala below provides an understanding of the development of individual resiliencies over time. The seven strengths are useful when exploring the coping strategies used by aspirant leaders.



The following provide brief examples of some of the ways in which senior leaders and aspirants use their strengths to cope with the trauma brought by participating in the selection game.

Relationships

Making fulfilling connections with others.

Resilient aspirants ensure that they take every opportunity to broaden and strengthen their professional and personal support networks. They strengthen professional networks through taking an active role in such activities as professional associations, local networks of educational leaders, participating globally through on-line discussion groups and maintaining regular contact with long-term trusted colleagues. An essential element in any kind of leadership development effort is the safe company of people who are willing to witness each other's stories, without necessarily trying to do or fix anything. This type of person-to-person connection can offer solace, hope and healing. Safety can come from being with others who share the burden of vulnerability of leadership. (Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002)

Initiative

Taking charge of problems – *a zest for projects and for tackling challenging situations.*
For many aspirants it is a personal desire for challenge that is a key driver. Focus group participants have commented to me

'it is amazing what makes you aspire. ... my main drive has always been for a new challenge ... it has always been that need to, when I feel that I have mastered an area I want to move on. I get bored I guess without a change and a challenge.'

Principals describe the job as 'providing the highest highs and the lowest lows'. They 'relish' the job.

It is challenging, it is exciting, it is frightening and it is the buzz. When you get that buzz it is worth it.

Humour

Finding the comic in the tragic – the capacity to make something out of nothing, *to minimize pain with a joke.*

The selection game requires long-term commitment. People rarely 'win' on their first job application. Some react seeing their lack of success as a personal rejection, others seeing it as a game, talking in terms of 'winning' and 'losing'.

During a number of focus group interviews I held with assistant principals aspiring to principal positions, many of them talked about how they felt after receiving the 'rejection' letter.

I don't want to get knocked back again.

Constant rejection is not much fun. I have been rejected from probably fourteen, rejected, unsuccessful, but rejected, listen to the words that I am using.

Every time I read this second quote, I wince with shared pain. For this woman, there was no humour in the promotion stakes.

But others minimize the pain of rejection through humour. One aspirant called the rejection letter the 'How sad! Too bad!' letter while a second unsuccessful aspirant comments

Got home to find another 'Dear Kathy, you're a loser' letter.

Creativity

Using the imagination, *developing refuges where experience can be rearranged.*

There are a number of ways that leaders can provide for themselves a safe haven. These might include time spent with trusted colleagues over a meal, participating in on-line professional chat groups, or journaling. A number of leadership development programs ask, and in some cases require, participants to write regular reflections in a journal. These journals may be private reflections or in professional development programs, may be shared with a mentor/coach. The journals provide a private or semi-private space shared with a trusted 'outsider' where aspirants can dream of possible futures, vent frustrations and share sorrows.

Morality

Acting on the basis of an informed conscience— *a sense of obligation to others.*

Teachers gain enormous job satisfaction from 'making a difference to others'. Many make similar comments to these aspirants,

I really love my classroom teaching.

For another it was *'the sheer joy of being with kids'* but both of these aspirants found after acting in principal roles

There is that positive, it may not be every day but there is something to take home at the end of the week that you say Wow.

There is an inner warmth that you get from what you have been able to achieve with dealing with the children.

Sometimes you can actually feel as though you can make a difference, not just with a grade but with the school, which is a community. . . . I think seeing a community grow is very, very satisfying.

Their acting experiences gave them an insight into a hitherto before hidden aspects of the principal role, the satisfaction of making a difference to others that is also available in the principal role.

Insight

Understanding – empathy, *comprehension of the self and others*, and a tolerance for complexity and ambiguity.

We live in times of great uncertainty and change (Duignan, 1998). Effective leaders know themselves and act on a well-formed set of values, have a high degree of self-efficacy and a deep sense of commitment and responsibility. Leadership starts from within (Bywaters, Parkinson and Hurley, 2004). Effective leaders at all levels spend time understanding their strengths and improvement areas. They participate in 360⁰ feedback processes, develop a habit of reflecting, have an articulated educational vision, and encourage others to as they develop their leadership skills.

Independence

Emotional and physical distancing from the sources of trouble in one's life; separating or taking control over the power of one's pain.

Many aspirants find that *'The application process is so draining.'* *'People are tired of going through it.'* but those who do not become overwhelmed by the process develop mental strategies so that they do not become defined by the outcomes of the process. Instead of seeing the unsuccessful applications as 'a rejections' they see them in terms of the loss of a game, but not necessarily the match. My observations are not meant to defend what I believe is a flawed process, just an explanation of the strategies some used by some to cope while participating in a game in which they have no control over the rules.

Conclusion

The scope of this article only allows a brief insight into strategies used by aspirant leaders as they play the selection game. Hopefully, the resiliencies framework will be a useful tool for reflecting on personal strengths and vulnerabilities while participating in the selection stakes.

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