



Shadowing as a Method to Study School Principalship and Leadership – A cursory Overview and Analysis

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When studying school principals, surveys and interviews have long been considered prominent methods of data collection (Bridges, 1982, pp. 24–25; Hallinger and Heck, 1996, p. 5). Over the past two decades (at least), an increased range of methods and an increased acceptance in the use of a broader range of methods has been observed (Heck and Hallinger, 2005). Among these methods, shadowing has been employed to research school principals and their practices with some considering it a potentially powerful tool for learning about leadership (Earley, 2012).

While shadowing as a method has been analyzed and discussed (Czarniawska, 2007; Martinko and Gardner, 1985; Meunier and Vasquez, 2008), these discussions have been focused on (business) management research, not school leadership research. Additionally, little attention has so far been paid on the parameters of shadowing studies. Without knowledge of these matters the validity, merits and difficulties of shadowing and data collected through shadowing are impossible to assess. As shadowing has been used in quite a number of studies, the question of what knowledge can be gained by it also becomes more prominent. This contribution aims at tackling these issues. First, it attempts to offer a brief overview of the term shadowing. Next, it presents a closer look at the use of shadowing as a research method for studying school leaders. This is done via an analysis of studies on school principals employing shadowing guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the aims of the studies?
2. How is shadowing defined by the author(s)?
3. What are the parameters of the shadowing (duration, observers, observed persons)?
4. What constitutes the categories of observation?
5. In conjunction with what other – if any – methods is shadowing used?
6. Do the authors of the studies mention any merits or pitfalls of shadowing?

Finally, implications of the current use of shadowing are discussed and suggestions are offered to address desiderata uncovered during the analysis as well as to further develop the method.



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