

# The Teaching Principal: An Untenable Position or a Promising Model?

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*This paper reports on an interpretive study that examined the role of the teaching principal, particularly as it relates to principals' moral and legal requirement to work as instructional leaders for student learning. A teaching principal is defined as a principal who has a "double load" or dual roles in teaching and administration (Clarke & Stevens, 2009). In this study, we explored the constitution and effects of this role on individuals and leadership practices of 12 rural teaching principals in Alberta and Manitoba. Findings reflect the need to develop policies that sustain the smaller schools which depend upon administrators capable of thriving in this dual role. Additionally, the way in which teaching principals practice as instructional leaders promises to enrich the literature on instructional leadership. Specifically, the practices that emerge through the teaching principalship are a unique adaptation of existing conceptualizations that offer considerable advantages over those that presuppose a full-time administrative appointment.*

*Cet article rend compte d'une étude interprétative portant sur le rôle du directeur enseignant, notamment par rapport à l'exigence morale et juridique qu'ont les directeurs de travailler comme leaders pédagogiques. Un directeur enseignant en est un qui a une « double charge », qui joue deux rôles, un en enseignement et un en administration (Clarke & Stevens, 2009). Dans cette étude, nous avons exploré la création et les effets de ce rôle sur les individus et sur les pratiques de leadership de douze directeurs enseignants en milieu rural en Alberta et au Manitoba. Les résultats reflètent la nécessité de développer des politiques qui appuient les plus petites écoles qui dépendent d'administrateurs en mesure de prospérer dans le contexte de ce double rôle. De plus, les pratiques qu'emploient les directeurs enseignants dans leur capacité de leaders pédagogiques promettent d'enrichir la littérature sur le leadership pédagogique. Plus spécifiquement, les pratiques qui ressortent des pratiques des directeurs enseignants constituent une adaptation unique des conceptualisations existantes, une qui offre un nombre considérable d'avantages par rapport à celles qui présupposent un poste administratif à temps plein.*

The literature on the role of the principal typically defines the principal as someone who does not directly teach, but rather someone who influences teaching in the school indirectly through the supervision of teachers and management of instruction (Leithwood & Levin, 2005). However, in many communities in Canada principals spend a significant percentage of their day teaching students, either due to organizational constraints related to declining enrolments and/or remote access (Grady, 1990), or because they work in districts that promote a philosophy that principals should be exemplars of teaching and learning (Goldys, 2009). An examination of

the unique leadership role played by teaching principals has much to offer our understandings of instructional leadership, and will benefit those whose work is invested in the areas of leadership development, school effectiveness, and school governance.

While some of the research on the role of the teaching principal focuses on the high workloads, costs to work/life balance, and professional tensions that accrue given their dual role as teachers and principals (Collins, 2004), also evident is research that suggests teaching principals remain “grounded” in teaching. This establishes credibility with staff, provides them with insight into teaching issues and curricular concerns, and enhances their efficacy as instructional leaders (Boyd, 1996).

One of the purposes of our research was to examine the impact of the role of the teaching principal on individual identity development as instructional leaders. In this paper, we explore the constitution and effects of this role on individuals and leadership practices of 12 rural teaching principals. The following sections of this paper delineate the findings of our qualitative semi-structured interviews with teaching principals in Alberta and Manitoba and their implications for supporting the small schools and individuals who work in this dual role.

### **Literature on the Teaching Principalship**

In 1921, McClure claimed that “the day of the teaching principal is practically past, in so far as large systems are concerned” (p. 736). Given the trends towards urbanization and the promotion of factory models of schooling in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was assumed, and even advocated, that smaller schools in rural areas would eventually cease to exist. As school consolidation increased, the role of the principal became one of managing and supervising instruction with no direct involvement in teaching. Although urbanization resulted in small school closures in many rural, Northern and remote areas, there remain communities in Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand that have resisted their demise. Many of the schools in these communities are now led by teaching principals (Starr & White, 2008). Teaching principals are most often found in schools with decreasing enrolments and/or in Northern or remote areas where the schools are considered to be “schools of necessity” (Alberta Education, 2012/2013). Teaching principals are less commonly found in urban centers. When they do exist, the rationale for creating the position of teaching principal is more often based upon a philosophical belief of the value of the principal as teacher/learner (Goldys, 2009); in rural/Northern/remote areas, the rationale for the position tends to be based on organizational constraints of reduced enrolment or remote access (Grady, 1990; Prabhu, 2007).

There is a paucity of literature and research on the role of the teaching principal. Literature on the instructional leadership practices of principals suggests that principals must put teaching and learning at the core of their leadership efforts (e.g. Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). However, this same body of literature presupposes that principals hold full-time administrative appointments. In fact, due to contextual constraints of declining enrolments and/or remote access, many rural/Northern/remote principals (and in fewer cases, urban principals) spend a percentage of their time teaching, often within schools consisting of cross-age, multi-grade groups of students (Wallin, 2008; Wallin, Anderson, & Penner, 2009). Because these principals work directly with students each day, an examination of their unique role would extend our understandings of the concept of instructional leadership and have implications for leadership development, school effectiveness, and school system governance.

The discourse on the contemporary principalship suggests that the role of the principal “has become more focused on the management of teaching and learning within the school, consistent with local school board and provincial policies and directions” (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 3). However, while principals are expected to focus on teaching and learning, they are also working in environments of increasing accountability and managerial imperatives due to the impacts of neoliberalism across the globe (Newton, Tunison, & Viczko, 2010; Noonan & Renihan, 2006). The result is that principals are experiencing increasing (and often competing) demands related to workload intensification, and school systems are facing growing concerns with principal retention, stress and recruitment (Clarke, 2002; Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Collins, 2004; Dunning, 1993; Murdoch & Schiller, 2002). These findings are particularly apparent in rural districts with low student enrolments (Wallin, 2008).

This situation is exacerbated for those individuals who work as teaching principals. In addition to having reduced administrative time for their administrative tasks, there often exists little in the way of administrative support or ancillary personnel to help teaching principals manage their day (Clarke, 2002; Ewington, Mulford, Kendall, Edmunds, Kendall, & Silins, 2008; Murdoch & Schiller, 2002). However, standardized compliance requirements issued at the federal, provincial, and district levels require the same administrative responses from principals in all schools irrespective of size or location. In addition, rural/Northern/remote principals face significant public expectations to contribute to community life (Wallin, 2001; Wallin, 2005). In some cases, teaching principals face tensions between the need to be involved in matters of the school community while trying to maintain an appropriate professional distance with community members (Clarke, Stevens, & Wildy, 2006). As a consequence, principals find themselves torn between the priorities and expectations of community members, and those of the district or province (Wallin, 2008).

Starr and White (2008) spoke of conflicting role demands that “create tensions, and [principals] feel stretched to the limits by myriad roles that cannot be executed thoroughly due to a lack of time for any particular task” (p. 6). In some jurisdictions, teaching principals may find themselves caught in tensions over collective agreement and/or union issues as they straddle the employee/management relationship in their dual role. Clarke and Stevens (2009) found that teaching principals were anxious and overwhelmed by heavy workloads and unrealistic professional responsibilities. They also identified a sense of guilt and dissatisfaction over the frequent need to be taken away from their classrooms. Many teaching principals feel that they are not prepared to deal with the resulting tensions and dilemmas that are associated with their multiple roles (Collins, 2004; Ewington et al., 2008; Murdoch & Schiller, 2002). This often occurs because the professional learning of teaching principals comes mostly from informal activities, on-the-job experiences, and trial and error, as opposed to formal professional development opportunities or leadership training specific to their unique role (Clarke & Wildy, 2004). This diminished opportunity for learning may be exacerbated in rural/Northern/remote areas that have limited access to centres of professional learning such as universities or colleges (Wallin, 2008; Wallin, Anderson, & Penner, 2009). Given their tendency to be found in sparsely populated or Northern/remote areas, teaching principals also have limited opportunities to be mentored or to acquire the career visibility they need for career advancement (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2002; Goddard, & Habermann, 2001; Wallin, 2001). Finally, teaching principals often struggle to find a balance between their personal and professional lives, and privilege their work obligations at the expense of their personal lives and families (Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Dunning, 1993; Ewington, et al., 2008; Murdoch & Schiller, 2002; Wallin, 2005).

Although these concerns exist, the literature is also replete with positive attributes of the role of teaching principal. Collins (2004) found that successful teaching principals worked hard, emphasized team work amongst staff, and demonstrated emotional intelligence in their relationships. Murdoch and Schiller (2002) found that teaching principals enjoyed being able to work closely with community members, parents, and staff, and they privileged the fact that they got to know each child personally (Grady, 1990). Teaching principals consistently rate their experiences as being positive despite their heavy workloads (Collins, 2004). They also acknowledge feelings of accomplishment and confidence as they “cope and survive the trials and challenges of being a leader of a small school [which] developed their self-esteem” (Ewington, et al., 2008, p. 546). Partners and families play an important role in helping teaching principals find balance between their work roles and their personal lives (Clarke & Stevens, 2009). Also helpful in finding this balance is “developing an ability to keep a sense of perspective in dealing with tensions” (Clarke & Stevens, 2009, p. 290) which are ever-present within their dual roles as teacher and principal, and between work life and personal life.

Most of the literature on the role identity of the principal distinguishes the role of principal from that of the teacher (Hill, 2002). The journey of becoming a principal is seen as a transition from a state of being a teacher into a state of being a principal. In fact, “some scholars and practitioners have argued that it is imperative for beginning administrators to discard their former role as teachers” (Loder & Spillane, 2005, p. 268). Obviously, such a transition is not appropriate for teaching principals.

Bouchamma (2006) explored the perceptions that school principals have of their personal and professional efficacy. She defined personal efficacy as “wisdom that [principals] think they hold and the tasks that they think they can carry out in supervision situations” (p. 12). Bouchamma found that teaching principals have a stronger sense of personal efficacy than principals who do not teach. Her study did not, however, explore the specific nature of the teaching assignment, grade level, or the principal’s previous background in the teaching area as factors in principal efficacy.

From this brief review of the literature, the key concepts which inform our understandings of the phenomenon of the teaching principal and around which our findings are discussed include: a) the nature of the teaching assignment and its effect on the efficacy of the teaching principal; b) strategies for managing dual roles as teacher/administrator; c) work-life balance and implications for principal effectiveness, recruitment and retention; and d) the extent to which this unique role aligns with, or provides opportunities to extend, current understandings of how principals enact instructional leadership.

## **Method**

This study employed the qualitative approach (Merriam, 2009) of interpretive description. This approach is appropriate in cases where a broad description of relatively under-developed phenomena is the focus of study and where research is directly connected to issues of practice (Hunt, 2009). We conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 12 principals from rural school divisions located within a one to two hour’s drive of three major urban centers in Manitoba or Alberta. Five interviews were conducted in Alberta and seven interviews were conducted in Manitoba. The only selection criterion for participants was that the principal must have at least 20% of his/her work assignment as a teaching assignment. Interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using content analysis (Sarantakos, 2005) through the use of NVivo. The transcripts of the interviews were coded for themes and categorized for conceptual patterns (Stake, 2000). The initial coding of data employed the categories identified in the literature, and emergent codes were added in subsequent iterations of the data analysis process.

In Manitoba, the seven schools were structured as follows: one K-4 (enrolment 22); one K-7 (enrolment 24); three K-8 (enrolments 44, 58, 70); one 5-8 (enrolment 36); and one K-12 (enrolment 105). These schools staffed between 1 and 8 teachers, not all of whom were assigned full time status at the school. The educational assistant, secretarial, library clerk, and custodial staff complement were minimal, and in some cases, non-existent. In the five Alberta schools, the schools were structured as follows: three K-6 (enrolments 80, 120, 120); one K-9 (enrolment 240); and one 7-12 (enrolment 260). The teaching staff complement ranged from 5 to 13, and the paraprofessional complement ranged from 5 to 14. In the Manitoba schools, the percentage of administrative release time for principals ranged from 0% to 50%. In the Alberta schools, in contrast, principals reported administrative release allocations of anywhere from 25% to 88%.

## **Findings**

### **The Nature of the Teaching Assignment**

Several common practices emerged from the principal interviews. Teaching principals appear to consider three factors when determining the teaching component of their role: a) their own teaching expertise; b) the optimum daily schedule for administrative tasks; and c) school-level needs. Some principals selected a teaching assignment that best matched their experience and training. One participant argued that this approach is important, not only in order to establish credibility as a teacher and instructional leader, but also because selecting an appropriate teaching assignment affords more opportunity to maintain a tenable balance between administrative and teaching duties. She stated, “make sure that you’re doing something you’re comfortable in, or else, I think it would be hell if I had to do the kindergarten and do this... yeah, that wouldn’t be pretty. I love them, but they’re crazy.” Conversely, other principals suggested that they select their teaching assignments based on strategic considerations that could provide them with flexibility in managing their roles and time. For example, one participant stated, “I don’t see a way for me to teach anything other than at the beginning of the day or end of the day... My first consideration is what I can realistically do and can do really well and be very committed to what I’m doing.” A second participant chose to take on special education (resource) and technology because “I’ve got some additional flexibility with my resource time and the tech stuff. Because they are not always with students I can play with that a little bit if there’s nothing pressing there.”

Yet other principals suggested that they taught what was “left over” after ensuring that other teachers were provided with loads most appropriate to their areas of expertise. These principals suggested that the nature of the teaching assignment caused them considerable stress and impacted their effectiveness as a teacher:

The hard part is making sure you are demonstrating the ability to be a lead teacher in curriculum areas where you’re always pulled out [of class]... Social Studies is not my background area... Making sure that you’re...not just average but, you know, you have to be a leader. Do I feel I’m able to do that? No, I can’t. I’m so far behind.

A third principal suggested that her teaching assignment was becoming more and more based upon the economic realities of shrinking staffs in schools with declining enrolments:

Because of the staffing formula, we used to have over five teachers in this building. We've been cut almost a teacher and a half in the last three years. The job lists have just increased immensely for everybody in this building. I would also say with that, because I had to make some tough decisions we don't have a formal resource teacher, nor do we have a formal guidance counsellor. I take on both of those roles as well.

Some of the principals in this study had been secondary teachers prior to being appointed to the principalship in an elementary school. In these cases, not only are principals placed out of the teaching area of expertise, many of them have been placed as principals in schools outside of their levels of training in elementary, middle years, or senior years education.

Choices made with respect to teaching assignment appear to affect the principal's ability to be an effective instructional leader and to maintain a sense of self-efficacy. Principals who reported teaching in their areas of expertise suggested that their teaching role contributed to their effectiveness. We suspect that it is likely that principals' sense of efficacy is lower in the scenarios where principals worked outside of their specializations to "fill gaps in the timetable," or when they took on assignments in which they might not have specialized training (such as special education) to provide them with more "flex time" in the office or as a consequence of decreasing budgets.

Participants noted that their administrative peers in larger schools often perceived small school principals' needs to be less important than those of principals of larger schools. This may impact on small school principals' feelings of self-efficacy as leaders.

There's still a group of... the old boys' club, who have the biggest schools and the biggest paycheques and figure they know the most or do the most, which maybe they do sometimes but isn't always the case. And the respect level is not always there.... Within the group it's still...you feel kind of like a fly to be flicked sometimes. As if your problems are too small because your school amounts to as many kids as one of their classrooms, so it's seen as less important.

It appeared to many of the principals in this study that the need to teach at all—though based on the economic shortages faced by schools of small enrollments—somehow minimized their status as principals amongst their administrative peers.

## **Managing Dual Roles**

**Challenges of dual roles.** Participants were asked how they managed the competing demands of their roles as teachers and as administrators. Many of the respondents spoke about the need to protect their teaching time from being eroded by administrative demands. As one principal stated, "You've got to work around anticipating those problems... to try to minimize those interruptions in class." Unfortunately, there were times when the administrative demand had to be prioritized over teaching time, which has implications for teaching principals' sense of efficacy. One principal noted:

I can't wrap up all the administrative duties, emails, phone calls and things that have to happen in that one sit. Three hour period a week. It just doesn't work.... If it's the afternoon and I'm the only person with K-7, and somebody comes into the building to deliver something or somebody comes into the building for whatever reason, I need to go and deal with that, and who's teaching? Who's helping kids?

A second principal suggested that not only are missed classes problematic, but that the administrative stresses can impact on his emotional or affective state in his work with students:

The day is going to happen from beginning to end and I have a 100 chips to give. Who is going to get those 100 chips?... And sometimes, making sure that my kids get most of those chips is my biggest challenge. Because if I have an hour long meeting here or a stressful meeting with a parent or a student and then I have to teach Phys Ed I want to make sure I'm positive or gung-ho in the class. So that's a challenge and I'm conscious of that.

There were three primary ways of dealing with disruptions to teaching time: a) scheduling administrative tasks around teaching responsibilities; b) preparing teachers and/or other school personnel (and trusting them) to deal with misbehaviors and disruption without administrative assistance; and c) building positive relationships with students along with preparing them to accept the disruptions that inevitably occur. In terms of the first strategy, one principal suggested:

Morning time would be planning and prep for the classroom. And then when staff start coming in, there are just lots of things.... It's not until sometime in the afternoon when I'm actually back and free... at the office.... When most of the staff are gone is the time when I can try to pick up the pieces.

Another spoke of having to complete tasks during breaks or before or after school: "Because I only get release for one afternoon a week. So if I've got an issue, that's an issue I resolve at lunch time or before or after school which becomes more of your own time."

A third alluded to how busy the day becomes trying to complete all the tasks necessary in between teaching:

I try to spend, 15-20 minutes to catch up on phone calls and emails to get them out of the way. I also try very hard in those three periods to get into classrooms as much as I can and observe and be present....So I try very hard to do that....So it's catching up. It's getting letters written, emails sent out, writing proposals, grant proposals because I'm always doing that. Writing plans, paperwork, resource, guidance. I've prioritized certain kids that I pull out. Once a cycle I meet with them....And resource...I'm writing IEP's, BIP's, and organizing with teachers.

As a second way of dealing with disruptions to teaching, participants spoke of the work they did to prepare teachers or others to deal with issues without administrative assistance:

You try to prioritize and find out what the incident is because what a crisis is for someone else may not be one for me. It's the 7-8 kids that pay the price for me to be a teaching principal because I'm not in there if I have to go deal with a crisis.

Another principal was adamant about the importance of protecting her teaching time:

If there's something major that happens, of course you need to pull me out, but if there's a phone call, or it's something that can be left, I don't want to every be pulled out of the classroom. That's not fair to the kids. I try very hard to keep that balance. It's not easy. I'm pulled out a lot. The end of last year was terrible. I felt like a failure as a teacher because I was pulled out of there all the time.

**Benefits of dual roles.** Many participants spoke about the importance of relationships with students that result from their teaching assignments. Participants saw this as significant benefit of the teaching principalship, as it permitted closer relationships with students and was a source of satisfaction for principals in their daily work. However, because disruptions are inevitable, teaching principals often prepared their students to accept the realities of having the principal as their teacher:

I prep my classes at the start of the year, so that they understand... that with my role as principal sometimes it takes priority over my classroom... Like right now, for example, they have a project that they're working on... They're used to me, you know texting or emailing during the class time.

This principal also commented that students have little difficulty in distinguishing her dual roles. She stated:

I have some really strong connections with kids... I think it would be difficult to really know kids well if you are not working with them.... I think kids see me as being a teacher and a principal.... The little guys that I teach, if they get sent to the principal's office, I'm no longer the teacher.... They know that's serious business.

A second principal suggested that her own classroom management became stronger as a consequence of her dual role:

I find myself changing my teaching to be more proactive because I don't have the choice for someone else to be reactive. So I think in some ways it's made me a better teacher because you can't rely on that other thing.... So that's a good thing in one way, but it's also challenging in another. If you had a real issue, a student who was violent or who had an issue like that, if I had to take that student out of the room, who's with the rest of them?

A third principal suggested that students tended to be very flexible regarding the realities of the dual role:

Quite often, especially in the afternoon when there's no secretary in the afternoon, I've got the mobile phone with me. "Hang on, kids, I've got to take a phone call here." But they get used to it and they're pretty good with it. They understand and I try to keep it as quick as I can. If it's somebody I can delay I'll have them call me back later or I'll call them back later. But sometimes it's something you have to take care of at the spot and hopefully the kids are cooperative.

Amidst the difficulties they face in trying to protect their teaching time, one of the principals relayed a compelling story demonstrating the joy she found in her relationships with students:

That's where I'm lucky. I'm totally connected to the kids. When you lose that connection, then it gets wonky I think. If you can't sit down... I have to supervise Kindergartens and my EA needs a break...so I said I'd do nap-time and I lay down with them. So I said, "Who's got a pillow?" I'm laying down and I look over at the kids and they're watching me like, "Oh I can't believe this is the principal." So I did it again the other day and I have a girl on one side and there's a boy on the other side of her and I hear this [kissing sound]. I said, "What did he just do?" "He kissed me." So I said, "OK, change position!" So I said to him, "You really like Addison?" "Yeah." "But you don't kiss her." [laughter]. We just killed ourselves laughing. So I had to phone the mom just to let her know. And she's killing herself laughing and says, "So how do I tell my husband at the supper table, 'Oh by the way, your five year old daughter has had her first kiss at nap-time while the principal was there?'" We just killed ourselves laughing....But I always think, do those [non-teaching] administrators miss that? Do they miss that connection and the ability to do that?

Many participants also commented on their increased job satisfaction which was a result of their interactions with students:

I walk into my classroom and at least once a week I walk in and say, good morning. This is my favorite place to be in the world.... Being with my students is my favorite place; it's the best part of my job.

Although the demands of the dual roles are high, the general belief was that the benefits of being embedded in the daily social and educational interactions with students far outweighed the burdens.

### **Work-Life Balance**

Although teaching principals viewed their work positively, one of the most often cited challenges faced by these individuals was the effect their demanding roles can have on their personal lives. Many respondents stated that their administrative duties often fell outside of the school day. In addition to teaching responsibilities during the day, teaching principals have administrative and teaching preparation duties that consume their time, effecting their family and home life. Some participants indicated that work-life balance is a concern, and that they do not feel that they have been able to maintain a healthy balance. "I haven't figured that out. And this is my 23<sup>rd</sup> year, and I haven't figured that out.... The only thing I do to maintain balance is when I'm done and I don't feel like working, I don't." Another indicated, "the reality is... the role of the principal is just extremely difficult....if a kid goes off, my entire day can be consumed. And then at four o'clock everybody goes home, you need a stiff drink and you've got three hours of marking to do."

Yet another principal stated that he has sacrificed physical wellbeing in order to be able to attend to the demands placed on them by their teaching, administrative, and personal responsibilities:

I know people ask that balance question, I don't know what that means, really, I don't know. I don't have balance, I need to exercise more, I'm becoming more physically unhealthy.... But the reality is no, between my teaching, my admin, my coaching, and my family,... no, I don't have time for anything personal.

One principal commented on health problems as a consequence of the high stress and workload of the position:

I was here until late at night, I was here at 5:00 in the morning. I was planning all the lessons for K-12 and teaching them all, and I finally said, "I just can't do it anymore."...I spread myself so thin that all the kids suffered. My mood...I was always in a bad mood because I had nothing left in me....This year for my professional growth I put down managing stress more effectively.... Because if you're physically not healthy, you're mentally not healthy and you're affecting the kids in a very serious way. That's what happened last year. I hit rock bottom last year and I didn't realize it until I look back at it. I just said that my physical health and mental health had to come first because then everything else will fall into place. Now that's my priority.

Those who indicated that they managed the demands of the position articulated that they had limited family and personal commitments, or that they had instituted some "rules" or strategies to help offset imbalances:

I'm not married, I don't have kids, and so I do a lot of work at home at night... I'm so super happy when I get a laptop, because then I keep working at home... I don't know how people do it sometimes, that have a younger family.

One principal spoke of making the decision to not have children as a consequence of the responsibilities of the position:

Personally, I'm at an age where I would like to have a child or more than one. And I am putting it off because of my work right now. Because I know in my heart that I can't do both to the extent that I want to with the responsibilities that I have right now.

Another principal committed to particular schedules that helped her organize work and family time:

the paperwork is done between 9:00 and midnight at home after my children have gone to bed. I try very hard to be done on Fridays. I walk out of here and I'm with my family. Fridays and Saturdays are just me and my family. Sunday morning I get up early and I come in and I work all of Sunday till 1:00 or 2:00, and then I take the rest of the day off for my family.

A fourth principal managed his personal and work life by vigilantly minimizing the influence of technology:

I generally don't bring my computer home any more. I used to, but I found out if I did I'm on it constantly, so I have sort of made a rule now that anything urgent I'll do it before I leave, and then the computer stays at school. The division is trying to get us more towards getting Blackberries and stuff like that, but I've been digging in my heels.

One participant commented on her personal situation by stating, "Well, divorce helped! [laughter]...It was struggling, but he knew when he married me that I was passionate about my work. And he suggested I take this job. And the rest is history..." Another demonstrated the prioritizing of family over work, understanding full well that there would be implications for career development:

I was actually offered the principalship at [large collegiate] which was a nice offer. It just didn't fit for me right now. Maybe when [my son] is in school and he's more independent. Right now, me being at school at 7:30 to 5:00, being at school and supervising ...teams... travelling...that would be hard on my marriage, hard on my family, and that's not going to work right now.

Finally, one of the principals discussed the effects of lack of balance on the children whom she taught. This woman consciously worked to improve her work-life balance to avoid it having negative effects on her teaching:

If you've been busy all day...if you work all day till midnight, what do you have left to give them? That was something I learned in teaching. I could work till midnight but I was cranky as a bear the next day, and what's the point? You just watch their faces and if they're giving me that look I just walk outside the room and come back in and say, "I don't know who was here, but she sure looked like me, miserable thing."

The comments above suggest that work-life balance of teaching principals' lives requires attention from policy makers and school jurisdictions. Though it was not the intent of the study to examine gender effects on the work-life balance of teaching principals, the findings suggest that gender may be an issue in teaching principals' abilities to manage the challenging and growing expectations of the role with the choices they make regarding personal lives and families. Certainly, there is a need to ensure that teaching principals are provided with family-friendly work environments and policies that enable them to be mentally and physically healthy individuals.

### **Understandings of Instructional Leadership**

The teaching principals in this study felt that their role as teachers and principals increased their ability to provide instructional leadership. One principal noted that her daily contact with children enabled her to maintain a clear vision that focused on the needs of children:

If it fits around kids and it's authentic around kids, everything else is icing.... All the rest, the team-building and all that, that's really just for the kids. Because if the teachers are happy, the kids are happy. Keep your eyes on the prize. And I think sometimes administration can take you away from that. And that stuff will always get done. And sometimes if it doesn't, it doesn't matter. I think that's one of the things that I've learned. After the kids, it's all just stuff.

Others argued that they became better instructional leaders because they were able to maintain a connection to the realities faced by members of their teaching staff. "[Being a teaching principal] guides me in what to do and I think I have a clear sense of what's important and what's realistic and what we can do in classrooms that have the biggest impact."

Another principal suggested:

But when you're actually in the classroom it gives you maybe a bit of an edge over a principal who is not teaching. I know what the teachers are going through when the stuff comes down.... I'm actually doing it with them.... Just the fact that you're actually doing it with the staff really influences the instructional leadership part of it.

A fourth principal suggested that his ability to monitor programs as an instructional leader was facilitated as a teaching principal because, “it’s not hard to monitor anything just because you’re right in the middle of it all the time. There just isn’t anything happening that you don’t know about.” This individual felt his instructional leadership as a teaching principal was facilitated because “monitoring the progress of students is really easy in our school because we all teach virtually every student in the school. We know all the kids really well.”

Participants spoke about instructional leadership as an informal process in which they were able to interact with teachers on an ongoing basis because of their proximity to their colleagues:

I just think you see more, you know what I mean? If you have that teacher across the hall and you’re teaching, and what you hear and what you see is different even if you just walk into a classroom for a couple of minutes... In some ways I almost feel like I know them better than if I was... full time admin... I think it’s a benefit.

One principal spoke of the importance of developing a sense of community with staff:

I think your relationship with the teachers is really important. If they feel they can come in to talk to you. I’ve said, “We’re in it together. Come and talk to me about it”... We’re all in it together and we’ve got to support each other. That’s not your kid, or my kid; these are our kids. If you see something that you don’t like, then talk to me. So being part of a community is very important.

Interestingly, few teaching principals spoke about instructional leadership as teacher supervision, and when they did, there was an implication that formal supervision was viewed as an awkward imposition to the work usually done in the school because of the immediacy of relationships and overlapping collegial initiatives that were more organic than formal supervision models:

I’m in the classrooms all the time doing the informal supervision but in terms of the formal stuff it’s only every so often....And since I’m in and out of the classrooms all the time there isn’t an issue. The few times I’ve been in the classroom with my little notebook the kids are wondering what the heck I’m doing [laughter].

The way in which principals characterized instructional leadership was collegial. One participant argued that he was not an instructional leader, but rather he was a learning leader. By this, he meant that he felt his role was to initiate conversations about student learning, rather than provide guidance for teaching. Another participant characterized herself as a “back-seat leader”:

I think these people right from the beginning were amazing teachers. They didn’t need me for that. They were already all of that. They just needed to be told that once in awhile, and it needed to be genuine. They needed to feel like somebody actually believed it when they said that they were doing a great job.... they’re very intuitive people.... I like to take a backseat. I don’t want to be in front; I don’t want to be in the spotlight.

Participants spoke about the challenges of being perceived as “an expert” in teaching when their teaching practice was clearly visible to other teachers on staff. Teaching principals in this study were reluctant to classify themselves in this way and preferred to speak about their instructional leadership role as a facilitative one.

Teaching principals in this study worked in relatively small schools in local communities where the lines between professional and social relationships tend to blur, and where they desired to minimize formal hierarchies of power. Yet these same individuals also noted that there was a distinction in their responsibilities that caused difficulties in working with people whom they considered colleagues, and often, friends:

They're my colleagues. I never view myself higher than them. Period. We're a team, and that's how I've always run things. But on the same token there are times when you have to make really tough decisions and you're called to duty. Those aren't every easy. So when you're that closely related to them, when you have to make those tough decisions it's even harder. Having to let a teacher go or having to discipline a teacher...it's hard.

Although principals suggested that the teaching principalship provided many advantages with respect to instructional leadership, the closer and more equal power relationships with teachers that result from their teaching role presented some difficulties with respect to difficult staff or staff dismissal, particularly in small rural schools. One principal noted:

When you have one teacher who doesn't want to go with the flow, that doesn't want to try new things, that doesn't want to innovate or participate, in a large staff that might be one tenth or one twentieth of your staff. When you have one teacher like that in a small school, that might be 100% or 50% of your staff. And compounding that, because it's multi-age, your students are also getting that for half at their time at the school or maybe all the time at the school. So if you have a team that's not cohesive it's even worse because then you're really all by yourself.

Dealing with difficult people and making difficult decisions is also impacted by the need (and inescapable reality) of having to be visible as instructional leaders, which sometimes has an exhausting effect on principals:

There's always an audience and a watchful eye and there's always those relationships.... it's tiring emotionally at the end of the day by being that person all the time....when you teach in front of a class you're always monitored. You always have an audience; you always have to be upbeat and the model of everything all the time. So it would be nice to be able to shut the door some time and do some of the more critical things without an audience. Have a little more privacy.

As this participant's comment demonstrates, however, the role of teaching principal can be enormously gratifying:

Knowing that at the end of the day, whether it was my best day or my worst day, what I've done is affecting the world in some small way. I know that sounds really maybe naive but knowing that, you know what? This kid today walked in and didn't think they could do that.... And the fact that I'm not just a part of these kids' lives for a five minute appointment. You're with them all day long, and they know you, and there's relationships there. You're helping them become who they're going to become. You don't get that in any other job.

These individuals enjoy teaching and they enjoy administration; but perhaps more so they enjoy the sense of efficacy they feel as they work alongside others to improve the conditions of education for all people whom they serve.

## **Discussion**

Given the emphasis on teaching and learning that has developed over the past few years, and the limited research in Canada that exists on the role of the teaching principal, we believe it is important to consider how, and to what extent, engaging in teaching and learning while also being responsible for leading teaching and learning, influences the development of the principal as an instructional leader. Of particular interest are the implications this has for school effectiveness, leadership development, and school governance.

Much of what is known theoretically about the teaching principal originates from the assumption that the “normal” role for the principal is a non-teaching one. Consequently, the teaching principal is viewed as an aberration, and a less than ideal position to occupy. Some research (including ours), however, points to a more positive perspective on the teaching principal – one in which the dual role of teacher and administrator enhances the instructional leadership and efficacy of the principal.

Results from this study indicate that the nature of the teaching assignment assumed by teaching principals and the considerations for how those assignments are selected should be given careful attention. Our findings add nuance to the findings of Bouchamma (2006) who suggested that teaching principals have a higher sense of efficacy than principals who do not teach. The principals in this study reported increased efficacy as instructional leaders when they chose teaching assignments for which they felt they were qualified and in which they had significant experience. It is likely that principal efficacy is positively affected when teaching principals feel efficacious as teachers. In this study, we noted the common practice of teaching principals taking on guidance or special education as part of their teaching assignment. These teaching areas are often selected because it allows teaching principals some flexibility to attend to administrative duties that might emerge. Further research is needed to explore the implications for this on the efficacy of, in particular, special education programming in schools with teaching principals. It appears, from this small sample, that teaching principals feel more successful as instructional leaders when they assume teaching roles for which they have experience and for which they are qualified. Interestingly, many teaching principals did not assign themselves teaching duties with their own expertise and qualifications in mind. Many of them assigned their personal teaching loads based on strategic concerns, to “fill in gaps” in the timetable, or to provide other teaching staff with a preferred teaching assignment. Similarly, another common practice that was identified in the study is that of appointing principals who work as teachers at another age level into administrative positions for schools at a different age grouping. Several participants in this study were secondary teachers from larger high schools who were appointed as teaching principals in elementary schools. Given that some of the teaching principals noted a perceived status differential between administrators in smaller elementary schools versus larger secondary schools and suggested that the privileging of large and/or secondary schools continues to minimize the efforts of teaching principals, this practice, and the implications for principal efficacy, should be explored further.

Our findings confirm much of what has been identified in the literature with respect to work-load and work life balance issues for teaching principals (Clark & Stevens, 2009). Our findings indicate that many teaching principals (particularly women principals) pay a heavy price in their personal and family lives because of the heavy demands of their jobs. More research is required to identify how gender might play a part in the experiences of the teaching principal.

Teaching principals in this study identified the difficulties they faced with respect to balancing administrative, teaching, and personal responsibilities. The implications for principal recruitment and retention are considerable. However, the evidence from our study is somewhat contradictory in this regard. Teaching principals appear to be subjected to a great deal of stress because of the nature of the position, but they also appear to receive considerable satisfaction from their interactions with others, particularly students. Policy makers should consider that the opportunity to teach a reasonable amount of courses with appropriate supports might actually entice teacher leaders to consider taking on a teaching principalship.

Perhaps a point of divergence from the extant literature on the principalship exists in the way in which teaching principals practice and understand instructional leadership. In particular, the work of Leithwood et. al. (2004) presents a model of instructional leadership that is generic to the principalship. The findings of our study indicate that the specific practices of instructional leadership for teaching principals might be significantly different from those identified in the literature. In particular, the informal nature of instructional leadership for teaching principals and the apparent discomfort teaching principals have with formal supervision warrant further exploration.

One of the most significant benefits of the teaching principalship is its effect on relationships with teachers and other members of the community. Teaching principals suggested that their roles as teachers in their schools allowed for more collegial dialogue with other teachers, enhanced credibility with staff members, and fostered greater understanding of and empathy with teachers, students, and the community. The types of relationships developed by teaching principals result in a practice of instructional leadership that is grounded in the realities of teaching, learning and community, and is less hierarchical and managerial than other forms commonly practiced.

Results from our study provide evidence that teaching principals believe that their teaching roles improve their leadership capabilities. However, teaching principals often do not feel that they are acknowledged as “real principals” by their full-time administrative peers. It is also suggested that administrative pay structures, status and rewards privilege principal career progression into large secondary schools staffed with full-time administrators. Interestingly however, all but four of the 12 teaching principals in our pilot study chose to remain teaching principals even after they had been offered positions with full-time administrative assignments. More research must be conducted to determine what individual factors and what systemic factors work to foster (or inhibit) the role identities of teaching principals.

## **Conclusion**

Although much stress is experienced by principals who take on these challenging roles, there are clear benefits to the teaching principalship. Aside from the potential for improving instructional leadership through such assignments, teaching principals articulated an enthusiasm for their roles and expressed a deep satisfaction with the close relationships they developed with students and colleagues. The implications for policy and practice are profound. Many teaching principals expressed enormous satisfaction with their teaching roles. This element of the teaching principalship may play an important role in principal recruitment and retention efforts particularly in rural and remote areas. The role of teaching principal has been under researched and a deeper understanding of this position promises to offer alternative conceptions of instructional leadership, principal recruitment and retention, and the role of the principal in

improved teaching and learning. Although the work load demands require some attention by policy makers, the position of teaching principal is far from untenable, and the promise inherent in the teaching principalship for a robust form of instructional leadership makes this role worthy of further attention by researchers and policy makers.

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