

## Proactively Mitigating School Leaders' Emotionally Draining Situations

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### Abstract

This case study focuses on emotionally draining situations for school leaders in the context of work intensification. Specifically, this study draws upon real-life reports from Canadian studies to present a fictitious scenario. This case depicts a high school principal who must simultaneously deal with student discipline, interact with parents, conduct classroom walk-throughs, complete tasks associated with being an instructional leader, and work with teachers—to name a few. Readers are encouraged to connect research to practice through several teaching activities that include: a *jigsaw discussion approach*, a *think-pair-share approach*, a *forum theatre approach*, and a *pro and con grid approach*.

*Keywords:* school leadership, student discipline, emotional exhaustion, well-being, work-life balance, work intensification

### Case Narrative

Katelyn Saunders sat at her office desk rummaging through her purse. She was looking for something to alleviate her pounding headache and, locating her well-worn bottle of ibuprofen. She then looked at the time on her phone. It was 10:30 a.m. on the last Sunday morning of October. With a jolt, she thought, “Where does the time go?”

Katelyn frantically began filling out yet another incident report—this time on student bullying—for the next meeting at the school board office. The incident took place the previous Monday, but it had taken her most of the remaining week to investigate. A student in her school was being bullied on social media. The perpetrators were both students enrolled in the school and others located outside the school community. The investigation was especially complicated because it was difficult to identify all the parties involved. She had contacted the police, who would continue to be involved; given that the cyberbullying incidents were virtual, the question of how involved the school should be was a grey area. On that particular Monday, some students in the school had also used intimidation and humiliation tactics toward the victim on the school grounds—a reason for school action.

Feeling overwhelmed, she remembered to breathe deeply—a coping mechanism she had learned in her meditation classes. She did not want the increase in her heart rate and blood pressure to be recorded on the monitoring device her doctor had made her wear. She breathed in and out, trying to help her body cope with the stress of filling out these reports, which was time-consuming and emotionally draining. She closed her eyes and remembered that she was supposed to pick up an air mattress on her way home, as her sister-in-law was coming to stay on Wednesday. She added it to her to-do list, which already filled a scrap piece of printer paper. She exhaled heavily.

In addition to completing her due diligence for the bullying case, Katelyn also needed to send the district school board the school enrolment numbers by October 31; these numbers would influence staffing decisions for the following year and, because her student population was changing, she was concerned

that there would not be enough full-time equivalent teaching positions to meet student needs. Her large high school was on the border of the neighbouring schooling zone, and there was a small but significant number of students who seemed to travel between these boundaries within the school year. Her school was always competing for students in the fall so that the overall number of students would remain quite high regardless of whether the numbers dropped or increased throughout the year. The higher, the better—more students meant more funding.

She started to rub her chest as she felt her heartburn starting. Her doctor had told her that, in addition to her heart palpitations, her daily stress levels were negatively impacting her digestive system. Reading over her to-do list, she was reminded that she also had to prepare for the monthly teacher staff meeting the following week.

“At least I have a week to prepare,” she thought to herself, adding a note on her to-do list to do some research on current practices for student engagement.

The last two years she had tried to use the first 20–25 minutes of the school day to focus on instruction—after all, that was why she took the position as principal. She had wanted to be an instructional leader who supports teachers. She had once been a very successful teacher: She had won a number of teaching awards and ran the teacher mentor program for the school where she had worked. Because of her success in classroom instruction, she had been encouraged to take a formal leadership role in school administration. Only a few months into her role, however, she realized she would spend far less time being an instructional leader than she had envisioned. Apart from the mandated walk-throughs—which have strict guidelines and a circumscribed purpose—her conversations with teachers were rarely connected to instruction in a way that felt meaningful. Unfortunately, her teachers usually only came to her when there was a problem they want her to solve. She sighed.

“Sometimes I just wish someone would recognize all the hours I put in behind the scenes to support my staff and students,” she thought to herself.

It was 10:45 a.m. and she needed to leave—she could not afford to put off another family gathering; three nights previously, her wife had expressed in no uncertain terms that she felt Katelyn’s inability to balance her work life and home life was putting a strain on their marriage. She had promised her family she would only work until 11 a.m. and spend the afternoon with them before going to the gym to meet her fitness trainer—and then back to answering work emails in the evening at home. As she gathered her belongings to leave the school, she realized she had forgotten to include the preparations for a parent meeting in two weeks. Recent gun violence in the area had some parents worried about student safety—not only coming to and from school but also within the school itself. Katelyn’s school, Baytona Secondary School, had a dual-identity: On the one hand, it performed just at the district school board average on the provincial assessments and was a leader because of its progressive approaches to student engagement and learning; on the other hand, it was located in an area known for gang crime, which gave the school a poor image. Recently, different groups of parents had approached Katelyn with potential solutions, some of which were controversial and in conflict with each other.

“I need to get out ahead of this before parents go above me to the board or to the media. Or worse, begin a social media smear campaign about me, the school, and board,” she thought as she walked to the parking lot.

As Katelyn got into her car, she turned off her phone. She did not want to be distracted by email and text “pinging,” especially given that last week she caught herself checking emails while driving on a major freeway. She reached into one of her many school bags for the banana she had grabbed at the gas station on her way to work earlier that morning. It was now brown and beaten up, but she heard her cardiologist’s voice in her ear: “Your potassium levels are very low—you need to eat more and more regularly.”

“Well, I’m eating healthier food, and a little more of it, but how am I supposed to ‘eat more regularly’ when my work schedule barely permits sleep, let alone regular meals?” She thought as she peeled the brown banana.

She took her first bite as she merged into traffic.

“I wonder if eating in my car every day counts as regularity,” she thought wryly as she drove straight past the store that sold air mattresses.

## Teaching Notes

The case described above details the daily reality of a school principal dealing with work intensification, and the emotionally draining experience(s) she has as a result. Below, we have provided activities that are designed to encourage both participants and readers to engage with the research on emotions and effective leadership, and then connect this research to their own practice. The first activity involves a *jigsaw discussion approach* (Aronson & Bridgeman, 1979), the second involves a *think-pair-share approach* (Lyman, 1981), the third involves a *forum theatre approach* (Boal, 1979/1982; 2013), and the fourth and final activity involves a *pro and con grid* (Chang & Wang, 2011; Davidson, 2009). We have designed and adapted these activities for use in professional learning and development workshops for school and system-level leaders.

### Activity 1: Jigsaw Discussion Approach

Aronson (2001) developed the jigsaw discussion approach as an intervention in desegregated classrooms. The approach was originally designed to produce positive results through cooperative learning among K–12 students. We have adapted some parts of it here to facilitate learning for professional educators. Evidence has shown that this approach increases self-esteem, morale, interpersonal attraction, and empathy in students from diverse backgrounds (Aronson & Bridgeman, 1979). The jigsaw discussion approach requires students to work collaboratively in small and heterogeneous groups to achieve a common goal (Azmin, 2015). It is a unique instructional approach in which jigsaw students are learning from each other instead of learning from an instructor. Each jigsaw student is assigned the responsibility of learning one particular part of the lesson and teaching it to their peers (Aronson & Bridgeman, 1979; Blaney Stephan, Rosenfield, Aronson, & Sikes, 1977).

In the jigsaw discussion approach, the instructor acts as a facilitator who introduces a topic and its subtopics. The students are divided into small home groups that represent a diverse mix of backgrounds (teachers, school leaders, etc.). Each home group can have four to seven jigsaw students (although six is now a common figure)—this number is dependent on the total number of participants and could be adjusted (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2013; Blaney et al., 1977). Each member of the home group is given a different subtopic, and the jigsaw students who have the same subtopic are required to form an “expert” group to focus their discussion and research their assigned subtopic. Following their discussion, the students from each expert group return to their home group, shares their findings, and discusses the results with their peers (Azmin, 2015). In this process, the students must be interdependent to reach a common educational goal.

For this case study, we adapted the jigsaw discussion approach to help participants develop a comprehensive, research-informed understanding of the changing nature of school leaders’ work and how it is impacting their socioemotional health and well-being. This approach can also prompt participants to consider the various approaches that can effectively mitigate school leaders’ emotionally draining situations and create a healthy environment in which school leaders can successfully meet the increasing demands of everyday life in schools. Before the session, instructors assign a major topic, related to Katelyn’s emotionally draining situations, to each home group, and provide participants with a set of suggested and additional readings that should focus on existing research (see sample reading list) and complement professional knowledge many educators in the room will possess. Participants should come prepared with research to support their arguments and perspectives. The number of home groups can be adjusted accordingly based on the total number of participants. Each jigsaw student in the home group will focus on one of the following subtopics:

1. In what way(s) is Katelyn experiencing emotionally draining situations?
2. What factors are contributing to Katelyn’s emotionally draining situations?
3. How does work intensification factor into Katelyn’s emotionally draining situations?
4. What are the consequences of Katelyn’s emotionally draining situations?
5. What are possible strategies for coping with Katelyn’s emotionally draining situations?
6. What recommendations can be made to Katelyn to mitigate her emotionally draining situations?

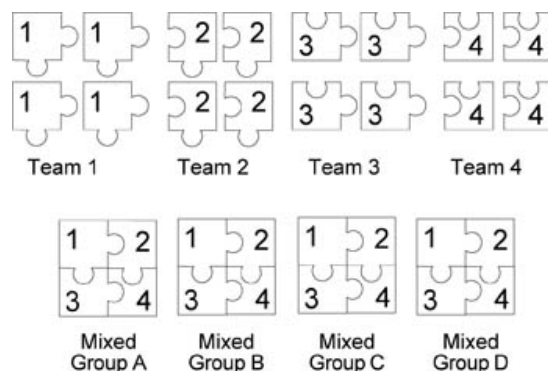


Figure 1. Jigsaw Approach (Tewksbury, 2016)

After working collaboratively with peers in the expert groups, each participant returns to their home group to share their findings and engage in discussion to make up the final jigsaw. Figure 1 depicts the grouping procedure for the jigsaw discussion approach.

The jigsaw cooperative learning technique can help foster a sense of group identity and break down barriers between participants to create a supportive learning environment (Azmin, 2015; Slavin, 1996). The above instructional technique could be one of many variations or types of cooperative learning methods that instructors can use to meet the needs of their participants. We also believe it is an effective way to cultivate research-informed leadership, as participants connect research to practice (or lack of practice) as a central part of the exercise.

### Activity 2: Think-Pair-Share Approach

Think-pair-share is another cooperative learning method, created by Dr. Frank Lyman (1981). This pedagogical method gets its name from the three stages of the exercise: think, pair, and share. During the first stage, the instructor provides participants with time to think and formulate their individual thoughts and ideas about a given topic or concept. Then the participants pair-up with a peer to share, compare, and discuss their responses. During the third stage, participant pairs share their individual thinking, a synthesis of their combined thinking—or something entirely new that came out of their discussion—with a group of four, or with the entire group. Think-pair-share is an effective and equitable pedagogical practice: (a) the *think* time provides participants with an opportunity to think and process new ideas and information and allow them to compose quality responses; (b) *pairing* provides rehearsal opportunities with their peers to practice stating their thoughts or to reveal and clarify their misunderstandings and misconceptions about the topic or concept; and (c) *sharing* with a quad, or the whole group, after the think and rehearsal time may help reduce the pressure they feel presenting their ideas and encourage increased participation (Lyman, 1981).

Given the complexity of the given case study, we have modified our version of think-pair-share to include research. Participants are given the case ahead of time so they can contemplate and research the various situations Katelyn faces, and conceptualize the various situational factors in relation to their own experience or prior knowledge. Instructors can use think-pair-share—and variations of this pedagogical strategy—to help promote participants' understandings of the challenges and struggles school leaders face daily. Based on the scenario, instructors can focus on topics or prompts such as:

In what ways are Katelyn's emotionally draining situations related to:

- Work intensification;
- Time management;
- Instructional leadership;
- School management;
- Duties and responsibilities;
- Work-related challenges;
- Work-life balance;

- Well-being;
- Job satisfaction; and
- Professional development and mentoring.

Given the number of suggested topics, instructors can implement think-pair-share at various points throughout the lesson by focusing on a particular topic or prompt at one time by dividing students into groups with each group focusing on one topic. For example, an instructor can choose one topic (e.g., Katelyn's emotionally draining situations and work intensification) and give participants a minimum of two to three minutes to think about the topic and formulate their responses to the question. In the next step, the instructor has participants pair with their partner and each pair discusses the topic to ensure a mutual understanding. In the final step, the instructor asks volunteers to share their thoughts with the rest of the group; this step is crucial, as it can potentially uncover participants' assumptions, misunderstandings, and misinformation. In this situation, participants should be encouraged to research the topic further. Instructors also need to consider giving participants the right to pass or not share information, in case some participants do not feel comfortable doing so.

### ***Activity 3: Forum Theatre***

Consisting of short performances (usually improvised, but sometimes scripted) that demonstrate social and political challenges, forum theatre is one of many approaches to performance included in Boal's (1979/1982) *Theatre of the Oppressed*. As with other theatrical approaches associated with the Theatre of the Oppressed, forum theatre has a social justice orientation (Boal, 1979/1982, 2013). In addition to highlighting and proposing creative solutions to address social issues, instructors can use forum theatre to demonstrate problems of practice that educators and other professionals face on a daily basis (Boal, 2013).

When engaging in forum theatre scenes, the instructor often serves as a facilitator who presents the various scenarios to participants, who then act out the scenes. At any time, anyone seated in the audience can change the direction of the scenario by yelling *stop* at which point the performers will pause. The person who halted the scene either replaces one of the acting participants or provides direction to reorient the scene. The participants then play out the redirected scenario, until another individual yells *stop*, and the process begins again. In this way, the performers and the audience participate in collective problem-solving to unpack problems of practice and challenging situations they encounter in the course of their work.

Prior to engaging in forum theatre, instructors send out a suggested reading list to participants. The goal is to have participants familiarize themselves with some of the existing research on work intensification and emotionally draining situations, so that they can root their performances in reality. For this case, forum theatre can be used to both highlight the emotionally draining situations Katelyn experiences as a part of her work, and provide an opportunity for participants to develop creative solutions to mitigate these challenges. Below, we have provided three potential starting points for improvised forum theatre scenarios:

#### ***Forum Theatre Scenario #1***

Roles:

- Katelyn (the principal)
- Her spouse/partner
- 1–2 children

This scenario begins with Katelyn informing her family (partner and children) that she will be unable to attend the family gathering described in the case description because of work commitments. The purpose of this scenario is to demonstrate how work intensification puts principals in a difficult position. Emotionally draining situations are often unavoidable and lead to a work-life imbalance. For example, by prioritizing her workload in an effort to avoid potentially emotionally draining situations in her professional life, Katelyn's family members feel neglected, which could lead to emotionally draining situations in her personal life. An additional goal of this activity is to have participants propose solutions to Katelyn's problem so she can achieve a better sense of balance between her work and personal lives.



### **Forum Theatre Scenario #2**

Roles:

- Katelyn (the principal)
- 1 police officer
- 2–3 students (one victim and two perpetrators)

Unlike the scenario described above, this one is designed to demonstrate the emotionally draining nature of Katelyn’s work and workload. The scenario begins with the police officer walking into Katelyn’s office to discuss the cyberbullying incident with her and the three students (one victim and two perpetrators) involved. Instructors should encourage the participants in the scenario, and the audience members, to play up the stakes in an effort to evoke genuine emotion—specifically, the emotions displayed by the participants playing the student roles should reflect a real-life meeting with law enforcement. As with the scenario described above, instructors can encourage participants to use this scenario as an opportunity to devise solutions that could help mitigate Katelyn’s emotionally draining situations.

### **Forum Theatre Scenario #3**

Roles:

- Katelyn (the principal)
- Doctor

This scenario is included to demonstrate some of the consequences of principals’ work intensification. Katelyn enters her doctor’s office and starts to explain symptoms of *emotional exhaustion* or *burnout* to her doctor. Katelyn and her doctor begin brainstorming strategies that Katelyn can use to alleviate some of these symptoms (apart from taking a medical leave of absence). To connect research to practice, participants should be encouraged to develop at least two strategies that are supported by the literature—to extend this activity, participants can also create a pro and con grid, as detailed in the next section, related to each of these strategies.

We have only included three potential scenarios due to limited space, but instructors can think about developing other scenarios related to principals’ work intensification, such as meetings with students, meetings with parents, discussions with parent groups, and interactions with teachers.

### **Activity 4: Pro and Con Grid**

Having participants develop a pro and con grid allows instructors to assess participants’ ability to understand, analyze, and interpret the advantages and disadvantages associated with both sides of a topic or issue (Chang & Wang, 2011; Davidson, 2009). Using a pro and con grid can be a particularly useful diagnostic assessment activity, as it allows instructors to develop an understanding of students’ prior knowledge on the issues presented, as well as the various perspectives and lenses participants use to approach the topic. This activity is also designed to stimulate critical thinking, as participants are encouraged to reflect upon, and evaluate their own preconceived notions, biases, or assumptions related to an issue (Chang & Wang, 2014; Davidson, 2009).

For example, participants could be asked to describe the advantages and disadvantages of the following issues related to the case description:

1. What are the pros and cons (or advantages and disadvantages) of Katelyn prioritizing her work and workload over her own health and well-being?
2. What are the pros and cons of Katelyn taking a short-term or long-term medical leave of absence?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of including instructional leadership activities within principals’ tasks and responsibilities?
4. What are the pros and cons of having principals and schools at the forefront of investigating cyberbullying concerns? Should principals get the local police involved in investigating cyberbullying cases (as is the case with other forms of assault that occur on school grounds)?
5. In the case description, Katelyn is concerned with her school’s enrolment numbers because they dictate the amount of funding her school will receive. What are the advantages and disadvantages of having school funding tied to enrolment? Do per-pupil funding arrangements promote equity for all?
6. Do you see any advantages or disadvantages related to Katelyn’s attempts to achieve a balance between her work and personal life?

This activity can be useful for current and aspiring principals, as the very nature of the position requires engaging in evidence-based decision-making. To ensure that students are connecting research to practice, and engaging in research-informed decision-making, the instructor should emphasize that at least 50% of the pros and cons that participants propose need to be supported by research.

It is also quite easy for instructors to engage participants in a pro and con grid activity, as it requires few, if any, resources. For example, the pro and con grid involves the use of a T-chart, or T-grid. Participants can list advantages on one side of the grid, and disadvantages on the other side. Another advantage of the pro and con grid activity is its flexibility. For example, the pro and con grid can be completed individually, conducted with small groups, or even involve a whole class (Chang & Wang, 2011; Davidson, 2009).

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