THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL'S ROLE IN LARGE-SCALE ASSESSMENT

Paul Newton, *University of Alberta*, Scott Tunison, *Saskatoon Public Schools*,

and Melody Viczko, *University of Alberta*

This paper reports on an interpretive study in which 25 elementary principals were asked about their assessment knowledge, the use of large-scale assessments in their schools, and principals' perceptions on their roles with respect to large-scale assessments. Principals in this study suggested that the current context of large-scale assessment and accountability has resulted in their roles being redefined. In particular, they suggested that it is the principal's role to teach other staff members about assessment, to advocate for assessment, and to organize and manage data. We argue that these emerging roles have the potential to redefine instructional leadership in schools.

Introduction

Over the past decade, large-scale assessments (LSA) have become a prominent feature of school reform efforts in Canada (Klinger, DeLuca, & Miller, 2008). Virtually all school systems in the country have expended considerable effort in preparing staff members to use data from these assessments, yet relatively little academic attention has been paid to the role of school principals in these LSAs (Noonan & Renihan, 2006). In this paper, we report on an interpretive study in which principals were asked to discuss their level of assessment knowledge, how LSAs are used in schools, and the emerging roles and responsibilities of principals in the context of large-scale assessments. The findings of this study suggest that the principalship is undergoing significant changes in response to the external pressures placed upon school systems by school

reform initiatives, particularly those initiatives that employ large-scale assessment as a key driver for school-level accountability.

Noonan and Renihan (2006) argued that the role of the principal has changed significantly because of "the sustained emphasis among governments throughout the world on school accountability for student achievement" (p. 1). Similarly, they suggested that these reforms have resulted in a "shift in emphasis from the supervision of *teaching* to the supervision of *learning*" (p. 4). In this study, we interviewed 25 elementary school principals about: (a) how data from the Canadian Achievement Test (version 3) (CAT3), the Canadian Test of Cognitive Skill (CTCS), and the provincial achievement tests (PAT) were being used in their schools; (b) the school administrator's role in large-scale assessment; and (c) the types of supports required by principals with respect to large-scale assessment.

The increased attention on LSAs has led to profound changes in the work of school principals. One change that has become central to the work of school-level administrators is that of "an educative role … in nurturing assessment-related professional development" (Noonan & Renihan, 2006, p. 8) Similarly, Picciano (2006) stated that "teachers' use of data-driven decision processes [e.g., LSA data] needs the support of confident administrators [and these data should be used as a springboard] for supporting professional development activities" (p. 144). Lunenburg and Irby (2006) stated that teachers "need training on using assessment results to diagnose learning gaps" (p. 16). Matthews and Crow (2003) stated that "the principal may have to help others understand which set of data is more important to consider in the assessment of the program" (p. 185). Presumably, it will fall to school principals to provide the training necessary for teachers to be successful in using LSA data, if not directly, then through the provision of appropriate professional development targeted at assessment.

The increasing centrality of LSAs in the work of principals has implications for the knowledge base of the principalship. Principals require sophisticated knowledge of the nature and purpose of LSAs, as well as the processes by which assessment data may be used. According to Creighton (2007), "using the many kinds of data collected at our school sites to help with decision making legitimizes the goals and strategies we create for change and improvement" (p. 11). Noonan and Renihan (2006) have indicated "a basic knowledge of the make-up of standardized tests, and what they actually measure, would seem to be important, as would knowledge of test construction and design" (p. 10) in order to lead change efforts. Sharkey and Murnane (2005) pointed out that administrators must also understand "scales, benchmarks, and percentile ranks [as well as] what inferences are appropriate to make from assessment results" (p. 184). Similarly, Hill (2002) argued that principals "need practical knowledge in interpreting assessment data and in monitoring trends in the value-added performance of the school over time" (p. 66).

Further, Hume (2010) lists five key administrative roles in schools with respect to assessment results and other evidence. Hume suggests that administrators:

- Enlist the support of others by developing a team that will share the leadership responsibilities of the work [of using assessment evidence],
- Bring all staff together in a thoughtful examination of the relevant data that inform a meaningful student achievement goal,
- Have processes in place that will engage teachers in collaborative inquiry around the meaning of data that have the potential to inform teachers' future actions and lead to greater student achievement,
- Ensure that the review of data leads to changes in the way things are done in the school, and
- Use data to track progress toward achievement of the goal, giving particular attention to improvements that will support the school's most vulnerable students. (p. 8)

This conception of assessment leadership focuses on process. The principal enlists teachers, facilitates collaborative inquiry, and ensures that planning from data leads to anticipated

outcomes. The emphasis here is not on the assessment literacy of the principal, but on the principal's ability to engage others in using assessment data.

Earl and Katz (2006) referred to the assessment and data knowledge base required by school administrators as "data literacy". They suggested that, in the current educational climate that is focused on assessment and accountability, administrators must become "data literate". Further, they argued that to become data literate, leaders must understand the purposes of data and assessment, be knowledgeable about data and measurement, focus on data interpretation, and be thoughtful about the reporting of results.

Nagy (2000) suggested that the purposes for educational assessment are: (a) accountability (usually at the division- and/or school-level), (b) gatekeeping (typically at the school- and/or classroom-level), and (c) instructional diagnosis (primarily at the classroom-level). The distinction among these purposes is significant in that the type of assessment evidence collected in any given context must be appropriate to the stated purposes of that assessment (Earl & Katz, 2006). Anne Davies (2000) pointed out that, while LSAs can be used in several ways, they are most often used for division-wide monitoring. In other words, LSA results typically are used as drivers for the public accountability agenda and inform the division's various stakeholders about progress (or lack thereof).

The role of principals in LSA, then, appears to include the following considerations. Principals require: (1) baseline skills about assessment and interpreting data (assessment literacy); (2) an understanding of the purposes of various assessments; (3) the ability to engage teachers in collaborative inquiry with respect to assessment data; (4) the skills to educate other staff members about assessment and the interpretation of data; and (5) a sensitivity to reporting of results of assessment. In other words, assessment literate principals have knowledge of

assessment and data interpretation, educate other staff members, facilitate collaborative inquiry, and communicate results.

Method

In this particular school division, we explored the principals' understandings and use of three specific LSAs: (a) the Canadian Achievement Test (version 3) (CAT3), (b) the Canadian Test of Cognitive Skill (CTCS) and (c) the provincial achievement tests (PAT). Although many other types of assessments were used in the division, we chose to focus on the three assessments listed because they were commonly used among all schools throughout the school division. This project was designed as an interpretive case study consisting of semi-structured personal interviews. Principals in the school division were invited to participate in individual semi-structured interviews by providing their names and school placements. Interview participants were selected at random by the school division's research consultant from among those who indicated a willingness to be interviewed. Twenty-five elementary school principals were interviewed for approximately one hour per interview.

The school division under study is a large urban school division in Western Canada with approximately 45 elementary school and 10 high schools. Interview participants were sent an interview guide in advance of the interview; however, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed discussions to develop in ways that were not anticipated in the original design of the interview guide. The initial interview guide primarily focused on questions related to principals' understandings of the purposes and usefulness of the various assessments and on the processes used at the school level to plan using assessment data. As the interviews progressed, participants identified issues such as impact of these assessments on the work and role of the

principal, the challenges associated with communicating results, and the principal's role in teaching staff members about data interpretation and contextualizing data. These emergent themes were incorporated into the interview guides with subsequent participants. The raw data from the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and independently analysed for themes by three researchers. The codes for analysis were inductively developed as they emerged in the various iterations of the analysis.

Findings

The following discussion of the results from this study is organized under headings aligned with the primary research questions that guided this project. In each section, data from the interviews are presented to provide a comprehensive portrait of the perspectives and opinions of the respondents.

How Do Principals Understand the Use of LSAs?

In the interviews, administrators were asked about their understandings of the potential uses of particular LSAs (i.e., CAT3, CTCS, and PAT) both within their schools and throughout the division. Further, they were asked to articulate their perceptions of how data from these assessments were actually used both by personnel in their school (including themselves) and by division personnel. We found that most participants were able to articulate at least a basic understanding of the uses of LSAs within their schools and in the division. Their comments tended to follow three broad themes.

The most common theme was that the primary role for LSA data was to inform school-based planning and priority-setting. The quotation below is illustrative of comments that followed this theme:

> I've used [LSA data to] guide our [school] practices … and to identify our priorities. It seems that right across the system our students are not performing very well in math. So I made sure I did some deep digging on our CAT3 in the area of math [to understand how our students were doing].

A second theme was that LSA data were used to drive professional development priorities at their schools. One principal said:

> In our school we share [LSA] data to lead our PD a little bit. Both the vice-principal and I look at [the results from LSA's] and say we're either doing writing, or math, it's usually one of those. [The data] is (sic) shared with staff; it provides us with discussion as to what we can be doing.

The third theme was that LSA data, especially when more than one type of LSA data was available, were particularly useful in identifying long-term trends within the student population:

> Yes, I think that certainly it's important not to just look at one year but kind of look at a longer period of a few years of [LSA] results … and look for trends. Other assessments or information and classroom assessments [can be helpful with this as well].

With some of the administrator comments, however, it was difficult to ascertain the level of engagement with LSA data. Some responses illustrated that, while administrators might espouse certain dispositions toward LSAs, it is not clear from the data the extent to which these dispositions are actually realized. For example, while most principals stated that data from LSAs were used in their school-level planning, several were unable to elaborate with specific examples regarding the nature of these planning processes and the role LSA data played in planning activities.

Most principals stated that each LSA was intended to address different purposes. Consequently, we asked them to comment specifically about the uses of each of the CAT3, CTCS, and PAT in their schools.

CAT3. Based on their comments, it appeared that principals used CAT3 data in three ways. First, CAT3 data were used for school strategic planning. One principal, for example, indicated that he used the data to engage staff in "scope and sequence" conversations to ensure that teachers' expectations of student performance were consistent from one grade to the next:

> Are the expectations of the grade four teacher the in the fall, the same as what the grade 3 teacher expects in June at the end of the school year? Do they match, what's not right here? I think it has to be a conversation for the entire school, not just the grade four teachers or the grade 8 teachers because that's when the CAT was given, but school wide initiatives on our [school's] strategic plan for measurement, problem-solving and geometry, those were the three we identified. The CAT3s were the ones that guided us on making those decisions.

Other respondents said that the CAT3 is particularly helpful in identifying students' strengths and weaknesses because it provides performance results at the level of the individual student. For example, one principal said, "we find that the CAT provides us a little more specifically with how [individual students] are with spelling, grammar. Also we get the individual student results with the CAT … although our teachers [also] do their own assessments [as well]."

Several principals also stated that they use CAT3 (sometimes in conjunction with the CTCS) to identify incongruities in students' performance or in confirming what they already know about their students' achievement levels:

> We use it to identify the kids that are extremely low or very high for special programming. We use them to double check theories we may have on certain kids, make sure that if, in certain areas, the kids aren't where we thought they were we double check it. The emphasis that the teachers put on getting to see

those results it's verifying that what they know is the truth, but at the same time they talk about them as just a snap-shot in time.

However, while there is fairly wide-spread acknowledgement of the value or, at least, the potential value of LSA data in general, not all administrators found the CAT3 assessment particularly useful:

> The information from the CAT3 is very limited, [the result is] a number but you don't know where or why specifically [the results are what they are]; I don't find it as useful as some people would like me to, and I think the staff are the same. It's not even a snapshot per se because it really is the results in certain areas but you don't have a really good sense of how they got there.

CTCS. According to the responses from our participants, the uses of the CTCS are similar to those identified for use as of the CAT3. That is, administrators indicated that this assessment was used primarily to confirm what was already known about individual students:

> I found it very significant as an administrator, I found those results informative. I knew every one of my students and some of them I had taught, I saw that the [C]TCS confirmed how I thought how each of the students were performing and their ability level.

Some administrators suggested that teachers examine the reports from the CTCS for discrepancies between students' achievement in classroom assessments and how he or she performed on the CTCS:

> I've asked [teachers] specifically how they use [CTCS results]; what they've told me is that they use it because it reaffirms what they already know [about their students]; they look for discrepancies, [for example] if there's someone who is a particularly high achiever in the testing and you're not seeing that, maybe there's something else going on there.

Other administrators pointed out that the CTCS is used only for placement into special programs or high school placement:

> In terms of CTCS, we really only use it in place to help us with placement of students in special programs… for the grade 5, or the grade 9 advanced program

at the high schools, an LD placement or some other specialized programming, but it's not something that we focus on for academic purposes.

In general, both the CTCS and CAT3 appear to be primarily used for placement into special programs and are examined for incongruities between classroom teacher knowledge of student ability and achievement and that represented in the large-scale assessment data. Although a few of the participants indicated that these assessments were used in school level planning, they were in the minority.

PAT. Most principals suggested that the PAT was the most significant LSA for school-level planning:

> I would say [PAT is] way more powerful [than the CAT3 or CTCS]. PAT data is based on [the Province's] curriculum [and] PAT was designed by [the Province's] teachers … I would rather use that data to support a conversation with parents … than a CAT3 or a CTCS score, [the PAT] seems to be more meaningful in my mind as to what we are supposed to be doing with kids in a classroom.

Several participants indicated that schools do a much better job in planning from PAT data. They also suggested that the reasons for this lie in the amount of time and resources the school division has provided for professional development with respect to the PAT assessments:

> I would say the [PATs provide the most useful evidence of student learning]. Certainly we spend much more time looking at the data, talking about the data, planning around the data. That being said our Division has spent much more time with us as administrators and teachers, teaching and planning and talking with us about how exactly to do that.

Similarly, some participants suggested that teachers are much more knowledgeable about the PAT because of the level of in-servicing with respect to this assessment:

> I know that the [PATs], we've done a lot more with that than we've ever done with the CAT3s. I think the [PATs] certainly have more meaning, teachers can see where the questions are coming from and what the purposes are.

Other administrators made additional comments in support of the PAT in school-level

strategic planning:

> [The PAT] is more valuable as far as I'm concerned. It's not standardized and its
> curriculum based, the only downside with the [PAT] is that it's only done at two
> grades. I would like to see that done at more grade levels.   I look at assessment as
> the centre of learning and the centre of teaching. It's not the curriculum that
> should be the focus; it shouldn't be the community or the strategies. The
> assessment piece, if you look at what kids are doing and their competency, you
> use that in order to guide virtually everything else. The curriculum we've got it
> covered, what strategies do you use, what resources are you going to use, how are
> you going to find out whether the kids really know what they know? That's the
> core, the place where we ought to be starting.

Overall, although the CAT3, CTCS, and the PAT are vastly different assessments and

have different purposes, teachers and school principals clearly indicated a preference for the PAT

for school level planning. Some of the participants have significant expertise about these

assessments and understand their uses, while others are less certain as to the differences between

the assessments and the purposes of the assessments. The CAT3 and CTCS are perceived by

most participants as a diagnostic tool for individual students and are not generally seen to be

useful for planning. We hypothesize that the principals in this study seem less willing to consider

aggregated results of these two assessments and view them primarily as individual diagnostic

assessments used for program placement. On the other hand, the PAT, perhaps because it is

curriculum aligned, is perceived as highly significant for school level planning. This might

suggest that aggregation or disaggregation of data (and the ease of aggregating particular

assessments) might be significant in principals' perceptions of usefulness in school planning

processes. Alternatively, principals might view the PAT as more useful because it more clearly

aligns with what *ought* to be taught in the school.

Accountability Perceptions

In some cases, respondents indicated that LSA assessments were mandated by central office without returning results back to the schools. Principals pointed out that, in these cases, staff members assumed that assessment data were used primarily for accountability purposes. In other words, there was a widely-held belief that the collection of assessment data that are not immediately fed back into a school-level planning process was either irrelevant or for the purpose of evaluating the effectiveness of administrative or instructional staff. Administrators appeared to understand that, for the most part, accountability is a necessary feature of contemporary schooling, and that LSAs are central to this conception of accountability. However, this administrator argued that the division should focus more on formative assessment rather than on summative evaluations such as LSAs:

> I'm hopeful our division focuses more on formative assessment, than [on LSAs that tend to be more] summative or snapshot-type [assessments]. I say that with reservation because I still think those [PAT] tests are really important because they are based on our curriculum. I don't think there's anything wrong with testing kids province-wide, by school and by class on our curriculum. It is an accountability piece to the public for sure, but it can also help teachers for sure, where they can help their students and how.

Further, this participant, and others, expressed apprehension with the type of accountability regime that could potentially result from an ever-increasing focus on large-scale assessment:

> I am concerned a little bit about the notion of publishing [LSA results]by school, I'm not sure we're there yet, but in [another province] they do that. How do kids go to schools on the low end of [the spectrum]? To publish the results in the paper, I don't think that helps our society. If a community school gets low results then what good does that do, on the other hand though if they get good results, I'd be walking into that school and asking what they're doing different.

In general, however, most school-based administrators acknowledged the value of collecting large-scale assessment data for the purpose of sharing with educational stakeholders:

> We report those [LSA] findings to our Senior Administrators and to our School Community Council; it's an accountability piece too. It's helpful for us to have a picture rather than using our gut as our guide, I think we do that too often as [educators].

There was some sensitivity concerning how assessment data might be used by the various publics. Given that these assessments require a somewhat sophisticated knowledge of assessment and data to contextualize and interpret the findings appropriately, there was a worry among administrative personnel in the school division that someone could take data out of context to serve other purposes than that for which the assessments were intended. Most principals in this school division, however, were not overly concerned about data misuse. In fact, the majority of administrators saw the sharing of results from LSAs as a positive process of engaging stakeholders and those in the school community.

Most school principals also indicated that they share data with parents, school community councils, and other stakeholders. However, there is considerable variability in the types of data sharing that are occurring within this division. Some schools routinely share CAT3 and CTCS data with parents, while others never do. In fact, some administrators seemed surprised that other schools would share those kinds of data with parents. Almost all of the schools indicated that they were willing to share a summary of LSA data with school community councils. Most administrators, however, stated that they would not share the actual reports but would instead verbally summarize them for parents. Some of the respondents had concerns that summary reports from the assessments or raw data might be misinterpreted.

The School Administrator's Role in Large-Scale Assessment

The participants in this study suggested that the role of the principal has been fundamentally reshaped by the increasing emphasis on large-scale summative assessments and on the interpretation of and planning from data collected via these assessments. This elementary administrator also spoke about the scope of the changes on the role of this principal with respect to assessment and data use:

> It's huge. The administrator's role is huge. Creating a committee to look at this and having… certainly… representation from primary to middle years is important but if the principal doesn't lead or see the importance to it, there aren't many teachers that will step up to the plate and lead it. Certainly, being the guide, and working closely with staff and finding time at the staff meetings to focus on this and then have some sort of plan in place. What does that plan look like? Who's responsible? Carrying it through, everyone needs to be on the same page.

In other words, this administrator saw the role of the principal as that of *advocate* for assessment. According to this respondent, the principal's role is to elevate the conversation about assessment and to place assessment and assessment data at the center of the work of the school. In part, this administrator pointed to the importance of the principal modelling the placement assessment as central in the work of the school. From his perspective, there is clearly a role for principals not only in leading planning, but also in establishing the attitudinal and dispositional pre-requisites among teachers for meaningful engagement with assessments. In other words, administrators ought to put assessment "on the agenda" for teachers.

To the extent that principals communicate the "assessment imperative," teachers and schools will become more focused on results and assessment as a process of teaching and learning. The following principal provided this response when asked what the principal's role was in LSAs:

My role would be to encourage them [teachers] to use the results and to look at particular class results and to target areas [for improvement]. I know our biggest problem is that there isn't [as way to] follow-up [on the impact of the changes we make], for example a teacher can change certain areas, but there is no test to see if it made a difference.

This administrator spoke about the principal's role in facilitating through resource allocation – specifically, time resources. Time for interpreting and planning was seen as key to the process of working with LSA results:

Developing a bit of a common understanding [about LSAs] amongst staff [is crucial]. Setting aside the time for teachers to collaborate on this [is also important], because I think that's huge and it gets everyone moving towards the same page…. I also need to make sure that what we're seeing in the [LSA] reports and we're building on is written in our next strategic plan so that we continue to target it.

Monitoring of the strategic plan developed from LSA is another task for which principals suggested they had primary responsibility. In particular, some school principals saw their role as managing data, interpreting results, incorporating results into strategic planning, and monitoring progress. For example, the following principal stated that he is responsible for ensuring compliance and engagement among teachers in following through on the plans developed as a response to assessment data. He also suggested that the administrator has the responsibility to ensure that the conversations about data are part of the work of teaching and learning:

My role is making sure that it's happening in class, and making sure that we're improving those areas. I should see it conversations, in people's annual growth plans, and I can help direct through those. My role is to make sure that the data that we do have is part of our conversations in our school, in staff meetings…

Some administrators also stated that a key strategy for ensuring that data and assessment are incorporated into teaching-learning practices is to encourage all professional staff to incorporate assessment use into their professional growth plans.

The following administrator suggested that the advent of an assessment culture has resulted in a fundamental redefining of the role of the school principal:

> I think it's becoming more of a role for the principal to be a data organizer in the schools now. In doing that [we must be] strategic in the way that we use it and taking the trends that we see in the data and applying it to what needs to be done in the school. Communicating that to the stakeholders in terms of why we're making these decisions is also very important. The strategic piece of it is very important, I can't stress that enough, we are being asked to develop strategic plans and reflect on those plans in an annual report every year.

A principal who had recently been appointed to his school at the time of interview indicated that his staff had not yet fully engaged with the planning process using data. It was his intention, however, to move the school forward in the assessment for learning agenda. He said, "I would like to see them use the [PAT] more with their planning here, it's my first year here and I'm going to challenge them to do that, that's what the [PAT] is for."

Many school principals saw that one of their fundamental roles with respect to data and results from assessments was in assisting staff members in understanding the meaning of results. Most principals spoke about their roles in large-scale assessment using similar language. It was suggested by participants that the administrators in this school division had been well in-serviced on data use as well as in interpreting and contextualizing data and results from large-scale assessments. The following statement from an administrator clarifies how many of the administrators feel with respect to their role in helping teachers interpret and contextualize data:

> I think first of all [my role] would be to know the data, and understand the bigger picture of why we administer [the assessments]. My concern has always been the 'what now'? Are we going to look at this in October when [the results] come back or is it something that becomes a part of our planning process, our planning document?

Many of the school principals identified similar concerns with respect to understanding data. First, principals felt that their role was to help teachers understand what the numbers and

the statistics mean in the reports. Second, they felt that they needed to communicate to their staff that data and results represented "snapshots" in time and the meaning of these data ought to be considered in that context. Finally, principals were emphatic in their belief that data from large-scale assessments serve particular purposes. They pointed out that each of the assessments highlighted in this study is limited by the purpose behind its design, and school principals felt that it was their job to help teachers understand that assessments were not evaluations of teaching, evaluations of the efficacy of the school program, or conclusive evidence of the quality of the learning program. Similarly, school administrators sought large-scale assessment as one diagnostic tool within a context of ongoing classroom-level and school-level assessments:

> I look at the results that we have with regards to our standardized tests that are requested at a Provincial level and division level. I'm trying the best with my staff to see how we can align the day-to-day assessment that our teachers are doing with our students, with what our home and school community council are telling us what they want to see at schools, to what our division is asking us to do, and then eventually what are Provincial level is asking us to do.

In summary, administrators viewed their role as providing encouragement, facilitating planning processes, assisting each other as well as teachers in understanding and contextualizing results, and monitoring the progress of interventions based on school-level and division-level strategic plans. Although the level of engagement with and knowledge of assessment is highly variable among schools and administrators, all of the administrators appear to have a clear sense of what is expected with respect to large-scale assessment. However, many of the administrators admitted that, although they have a vision for large-scale assessment either in their school or in the division, there is much work to do.

Support for Large-Scale Assessment

Perhaps not surprisingly, administrators who had a background in resource room teaching or special education tended to have a high degree of comfort and knowledge about LSAs. Approximately one third of administrators interviewed admitted limited knowledge of how to interpret assessment data, and indicated that they relied upon teaching personnel or, in some cases, central office personnel with expertise in this area to assist them in interpreting results from LSAs. Some administrators displayed a relatively mature understanding of assessments and assessment data and appeared to have a clear understanding of the challenges of working with data:

> I think we've had issues with reliability and validity over the years, so we're trying to create the conditions that are safe, warm, positive, fun, but we're also trying to adhere to the guideline of how [LSAs] are supposed to be administered. We noticed that since we've done this there is higher achievement, [the results] are more accurate and … we feel [the results] represent what they should represent.

Certainly, schools in which administrators or key personnel have backgrounds in special education or assessment have a significant advantage in terms of the knowledge available about the assessment practices and data interpretation. One administrator said, "[teaching staff] do need help in understanding and dissecting it." Another stated,

> I don't feel as confident with it, I always bring [the consultant] out to help me through it, and I just don't want to miss anything. He will come out to your staff meeting and take you through it, and dissect it. He can't do that with all the schools but he does as much as he can at principal's meetings, it's much better coming from him than it is from me. I don't think I'm inept, I just think he's so thorough. We go through it at staff meetings and then we talk about how we want to follow through up with it. Once he has given them the initial information and walked them through it for about an hour, we can follow up with it as a group fairly well. They get collaboration time once a month, for an hour, one staff meeting a month and that's their opportunity to talk about it then. Sometimes we designate specific time for just testing results.

This administrator suggested that, although the existing supports are generally positive, there were still some significant needs for staff training and development in the area of assessment:

> There needs to be some significant in-servicing, even around CAT, CTCS and I think that sometimes we make assumptions, and we have a lot of new administrators coming up, young ones and we make assumptions that people know. I think there needs to be procedures in place where everybody gets the same in-servicing and they can ask questions. Even around the assessment for learning that's coming out around the province, I don't think everybody knows how to interpret that data very well and then to share it. I think we have to be really conscious that we're sharing appropriately, I think semi-prepared, some more than others.

Principals suggested that central office personnel ought to be thoughtful about the amount and types of data that is being collected for Division purposes. They argued that collecting data that is not directly related to student learning is perceived as being counter-productive and needlessly increases teacher and administrator workload. Most administrators suggested that there was great potential value in data generated from LSA, but have concerns about their own capacity to respond to multiple initiatives and multiple demands for school-level data. Participants frequently acknowledged that there exists finite good will and energy for division-initiated requests for school level data.

Many school principals pointed to the need to get "better data." Many of them pointed to strategies for ensuring that students are engaged in the test taking process in the most meaningful way possible. Several participants indicated that, particularly in core neighborhoods, students don't always take the test seriously, and the data are not an accurate reflection of the ability or achievement of those children. Several administrators also argued that teachers need additional support to be better versed with respect to preparing students to complete LSAs. Many participants stated that it might be helpful to have more direction provided in how to ensure data

fidelity in this way. One principal stated, "We could definitely use more help, and seriously look at the idea of test taking and why it's important and how to help kids do the best they can, that it's important to take tests".

Discussion

The administrators in this study indicated that LSAs have become a prominent feature of the work of principals. What seems apparent is that the amount of effort and time invested in in-servicing personnel, in administering LSAs, and in interpreting and planning with LSA data is significant. In the majority of cases, principals responded that LSA data was, or ought to be, a regular part of school-level planning processes. The prominence of LSAs in the current context of schools in this division has resulted in fundamental changes with respect to the role of the principal and to the knowledge required for the administration of schools.

Principals suggested that the ubiquity of LSAs in schools has resulted in a redefinition of the nature of the principalship. A significant portion of principals' time was required for managing data, assisting teachers with the interpretation of data, and ensuring that school-level planning descends from LSA results. Further study is needed to explore the implications of such an expansion and redefinition of the role of the principal in the context of accountability and cultures of assessment. It appears obvious that, as expectations increase around the use of data in school-level planning, principals will either find themselves adding LSA-related duties to their already full calendars or will need to change their practice to create space for these new roles.

Principals indicated that they received some support to assist them in working with LSAs, but indicated that more focused support in particular areas is needed. Principals suggested that the following four areas require both consistent direction and adequate support for school-level

personnel: (1) ensuring data fidelity, (2) interpretation of data, (3) sharing data, and (4) planning with data. Specifically, participants stated that data fidelity would be improved as student dispositions and skills for test taking were improved. It is not clear what types of support from the division would be helpful with respect to this, but some principals suggested that the timeliness of results from the assessments might help in ensuring that assessment results could be used in classroom level assessment. This would likely make such assessments more relevant to students. Principals suggested that teachers are not well prepared in the use of and interpretation of assessment data. Considerable professional development for teachers is needed in this area. Principals also indicated a need for support from the division on what types of data and results to share with the various publics. Finally, principals identified an ongoing need to provide support for strategic planning processes at the school level. They stated that such supports were available, but sustained support would be required for meaningful progress to continue.

The findings of this study suggest that, at least in this school district, assessment has become a much more significant feature of the principalship. Such an emphasis on assessment has intensified pressure on those occupying school leadership roles. Bellamy, Fulmer, and Muth (2007) suggested that the increased emphasis on accountability and standardized assessment "has raised the pressure on principals to the boiling point" (p. 59). More research is needed to explore the effect of large-scale assessment and increased accountability on the working conditions of school principals. Additionally, the emphasis on assessment leadership might have the unintended consequence of narrowing the conception of instructional leadership. Reitzug, West, and Angel (2008) argued that the emerging assessment culture threatens to reassert "the traditional instructional leadership role of principals, as principals sacrifice the long-term gains resulting from teacher professional growth, for the short-term goals of an 'inspect and direct'

instructional leadership role" (p. 695). They further suggested that such an emphasis might result in "linear instructional leadership [that] is grounded in structural functionalist assumptions of rationality, linearity, and straight-line cause and effect" (p. 699). The emphasis on assessment leadership, in other words, has the potential to become an all-consuming ideology, and "one wonders whether principals and teachers, in their discussions, will go beyond issues of alignment and test achievement to issues of the types of people they want their students to be and become" (p. 709).

Finally, the findings of this study suggest some implications for principalship preparation and for defining the "knowledge base" of the principalship. If, as we have found in this study, working with LSA data has become a significant part of the role of the principal, then foundational knowledge in the area of assessment is needed. As Noonan and Renihan (2006) have suggested, principals need to have a basic understanding of the principles of assessment, the purposes of assessment, and how to plan educational interventions based on LSA data. Currently, most administrator preparation programs do not require courses in assessment. Stiggins and Duke (2008) asserted that "the well-prepared principal is ready to ensure that assessments are of high quality and used effectively. Yet, historically, preparation for productive assessment has been missing from principal training programs" (p. 286). If it is true that assessment has become central to the work of school administrators, it would seem reasonable that some significant attention be given to providing the necessary skills and knowledge for administrators to be successful in this context.

References

Creighton, T. (2007). *Schools and data: The educator's guide for using data to improve decision making* (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Davies, A. (2000). *Making classroom assessment work*. Courtenay, BC: Connections.

Earl, L., & Katz, S. (2006). *Leading schools in a data-rich world: Harnessing data for school improvement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Bellamy, G., Fulmer, C., & Muth, R. (2007). Five ideas for reframing the principalship. *Educational Leadership and Administration*, *19*, 57-74.

Hill, P. W. (2002). What principals need to know about teaching and learning. In M. S. Tucker & J. B. Codding (Eds.), *The principal challenge: Leading and managing schools in an era of accountability* (pp. 43-75). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hume, K. (2010). *The evidence-based school: An administrator's guide*. Toronto: Pearson.

Klinger, D. A., DeLuca, C., & Miller, T. (2008). The evolving culture of large-scale assessments in Canadian education. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy, 76*, 1-34.

Lunenburg, F. C., & Irby, B. J. (2009). *The principalship*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.

Matthews, L. J., & Crow, G. M. (2003). *Being and becoming a principal: Role conceptions for contemporary principals and assistant principals.* Boston: Pearson Education.

Nagy, P. (2000). The three roles of assessment: Gatekeeping accountability, and instructional diagnosis. *Canadian Journal of Education, 25*, 262-279.

Noonan, B., & Renihan, P. (2006). Demystifying assessment leadership. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy, 56*, 1-20.

Picciano, A. (2006). *Data-driven decision making for effective school leadership*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Reitzug, U., West, D., & Angel, R. (2008). Conceptualizing instructional leadership: The voices of principals. *Education and Urban Society*, *40*, 694.

Sharkey, N., & Murnane, R. (2005). Roles for the district central office. In K. Parker Boudett, E. City, & R. Murnane (Eds.), *Data wise: A step-by-step guide to using assessment results to improve teaching and learning* (pp. 179-188). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Stiggins, R., & Duke, D. (2008). Effective instructional leadership requires assessment
leadership. *Phi Delta Kappan, 90*, pp. 285-291.