

Rural Teaching Principal: Leadership with Precious Few Minutes

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Abstract

This case examines a rural teaching principal in a small K-12 school in a prairie province. The case examines the work intensification of Mrs. Hayes, whose school has been affected by reductions in student enrolment, staffing, and administrative time. Overwhelmed by myriad responsibilities, the principal feels inadequate as both a teacher and a leader. She is exhausted in her efforts to provide quality learning and extra-curricular opportunities for students, as her workload continues to grow. Teaching activities examine the uniqueness of the rural teaching principal role and possible solutions that may support leaders as they manage work intensification in order to accomplish the responsibilities of this dual role.

Keywords: rural principal, teaching principal, rural education, work intensification

Case Narrative

Mrs. Hayes has a long history in the Liliium community; she loves the community and the school she serves as teaching principal. She grew up in the small village of Liliium and attended the school from kindergarten through grade 12. Aside from the four years she attended university, she has lived in the community her whole life, and Liliium remains home to many of her family members and closest friends. She began her teaching career in a nearby community and applied to work at the school as soon as a teaching position was posted. She has been a teacher at Liliium School for 14 years and became the teaching principal five years ago. Although she always dreamed of becoming the principal of Liliium School, over time, that dream has transformed into a guilt-ridden nightmare due to the increased work intensification that has made it impossible to manage her teaching and administrative duties.

Mrs. Hayes resides in Liliium, a village with 245 residents surrounded by farm and ranch land in a Canadian prairie province. The village is a two-hour commute from the nearest major center. Liliium is home to a few small businesses, but the village's largest building (and major place of employment) is the school. Since Mrs. Hayes' childhood, the village and surrounding area have depopulated significantly. Residents have long been fearful of school closure; however, the community's remote location has, thus far, protected the school from closing down. Liliium School has a population of 50 students between kindergarten and grade 12. Classes are all double- or triple-graded, and teachers have become adept at multi-grade/multi-age programming. In order to acquire a full high school program, students take some courses on-line and travel by bus to the nearest school (35 minutes away) a few afternoons each week to engage in shared programming. Despite the small population, the school continues to offer a wide variety of extra-curricular programs, some of which are combined with the nearest school, to ensure that community expectations around high school athletics can be maintained. The constant communication required between schools, to ensure that curricular and extra-curricular programs run smoothly, is a source of stress for Mrs. Hayes.

Mrs. Hayes is also a teacher, and she sees great benefit in her dual role of teaching principal.

Being an active teacher has afforded her a high level of credibility with her staff. Teachers know that she is in touch with the realities that they face daily in the classroom and that she can appreciate the added pressures stemming from new initiatives. She also teaches every student in the school, which allows her to develop a personal connection with every child and family. However, this dual role also adds great complexity to her daily life at school.

When she began as the principal five years ago, her time was split evenly between teaching and administrative duties. Recent changes enacted by central office administrators, in response to reduced funding from the province, have reduced her administrative time and increased her teaching time. Her workload has increased tremendously as a result of new teaching and administrative responsibilities impacted by the plethora of accountability measures expected by the division and province. Significant budget cuts for the current school year caused the school division to revoke their long-held policy on minimum staffing allocations for small schools. This budget cut resulted in the decrease of her teaching staff from 5.5 teachers to 4.5—the teacher who was transferred from the school was an elementary school teacher. The school is now staffed primarily by teachers who have more experience teaching the middle years and high school students. Aware of the potential for hurt feelings and increased workload for teachers, Mrs. Hayes did her best when creating the schedule to grant teachers their wishes for grades and courses taught. This decision meant that she was personally left teaching an assortment of subjects to all grade levels in the school. She readily admits that the outcome creates an awkward teaching schedule for her, given her background, but her staff seemed happy with her decision and comfortable with what they are teaching. In addition to the medley of classes taught, her teaching role was further complicated by the reduction in her administrative time that came with the staff reduction. Mrs. Hayes was supposed to teach 70% of her time this year, up from 50% last year, representing an increase of teaching an extra five periods per week. However, teaching has been an even larger portion of her time as she also assigned herself the role of special education teacher—a position for which she has no specialized training. Reflecting on her day planner, Mrs. Hayes estimates that she has roughly 10% of her schedule free for administrative duties. Despite these changes, her administrative duties have not declined; rather, she feels as though her administrative duties have increased.

Mrs. Hayes knows that she was offered the position as principal primarily because of her reputation as an effective teacher and community advocate. She believes that modelling good teaching is a powerful way to enact instructional leadership with her staff. However, she now questions whether her current role will allow her to be this role model. She is frequently called out of her classes to deal with emergent concerns, especially student behavioural episodes. These interruptions result in a slower pace in covering learning outcomes, and students often working without supervision for periods of time. Because of the variety of courses she is teaching—many of them for the first time—she is usually only one day ahead in her planning. Most of this planning takes place in the evenings and on weekends. This last-minute planning has her scrambling for resources and relying more heavily on textbooks than she ever has before. As she has no vice principal, she has confided in a colleague, who is also a teaching principal in her school division, that she feels as though she is modelling poor pedagogy.

Her roles have changed, and she is still trying to keep up with all the demands. Mrs. Hayes struggles to find the time to accomplish her many important tasks. She makes an effort to get to school early in the mornings to answer emails, but most days, by the time she needs to be outside for her morning bus supervision, she has not had time to fully catch up from the previous day. At the end of the work day, she ensures that phone calls are returned before she leaves the school in the evening. Evenings and weekends have become her primary time to complete managerial tasks associated with her administrative role. She often is up late at night filling in forms, approving budgets and orders, and reviewing meeting agendas. With the arrival of spring, Mrs. Hayes' time has become *more* constrained since she coaches the school track and field team. Her husband has questioned her lack of work-life balance, and she worries that her relationship with her children—who are growing up too quickly—is suffering. Mrs. Hayes knows that she is neglecting her own wellness and has sacrificed important family time; she feels constant guilt knowing that she is not achieving the personal goals she set for herself professionally and personally. She struggles to cope with her intense workload and ever-present lack of self-efficacy.

Overall, Mrs. Hayes feels she is letting herself, her staff, and her students down. She is rarely able to visit teachers in their classrooms to see them in action and provide feedback. She is especially concerned that her teaching schedule coincides with the new teacher who is filling a half-time position.

As a consequence, she is physically unable to complete the classroom observation portion of the district's required new teacher assessment. Her feelings of guilt in not being able to be in teachers' classrooms grew exponentially when, at a recent principals' meeting, superintendents presented a new mandate requiring all principals to complete observation and feedback forms based on classroom observations for each teacher twice per term. Mrs. Hayes feels that this initiative shows how out of touch her district administration is with the pressures facing teaching principals.

Although she struggles to make it to classrooms, Mrs. Hayes does her best to ensure that there is a focus on learning. Mrs. Hayes aligns staff meeting time with the school's two goals of increasing literacy rates and high school credit attainment. She ensures that teachers have time during professional development days to work together in teams to support each other's growth in their school priority areas. She has purposefully engaged one of the veteran teachers as a teacher leader who supports some of the planning for staff meetings and professional development time. Mrs. Hayes does her best to communicate with staff through a weekly message and regular emails to ensure that staff meetings can be used productively for teacher learning and collaboration. However, she often feels exhausted Sunday night when she finally has time to write the memos for the events of the coming week.

Additionally, Mrs. Hayes is also worried about her relationships with her community members. Living in the community presents the challenge of managing blurred relational boundaries. Her two sons attend Liliun School, as do her brother's three children, and those of her extended family. Two other teachers also have their children attending the school. Mrs. Hayes is aware of the murmurs of preferential treatment, and she does her best to be fair in her dealings with all students and their families. The greater issue of blurred lines for Mrs. Hayes is the expectation placed on her availability to the community. She is regularly approached by community members about school matters while she is not at work—at her sons' sporting events and attending church. She is also frequently the recipient of work-related weekend and evening phone calls and texts; something she does not know how to combat since the whole village has her phone number or can easily get it from a neighbour.

Mrs. Hayes' school day often extends into the evening, as she feels the need to engage with community partners and participate in community events. Though the village is small and does not have many businesses, local people take pride in supporting the school. Mrs. Hayes finds herself frequently meeting outside of school time at the coffee shop with local business people to initiate new projects and to maintain relationships. While these meetings are time-consuming, they have yielded positive results for the school, including the recent redevelopment of the playground, various career education work placements, new books for classrooms, and the provision of lunches for a family in need. Mrs. Hayes is an active community member who recently became the chair of the planning committee for the village's summer festival and slow-pitch tournament. Her role as school leader leads to the expectation that she will be a community leader as well, because the school is viewed as the heart of the community.

Another layer of her role to consider *is* the community. The community adds other pressures, most notably the pressure to ensure that local children have many opportunities, both academically and extra-curricular. Given that many of the parents and grandparents in the community attended the school themselves, there exists a strong sense of community nostalgia and a desire to keep things as they have been. Despite the decreased size of the school and staff since her time as a student at Liliun School, Mrs. Hayes notes that the extra-curricular program and number of community events offered by the school are almost the same. The community advocates for maintaining programming, but community members seldom volunteer for leadership roles, as they still believe that teachers should be responsible for extra-curricular options. Last week Mrs. Hayes floated the idea of reducing extra-curricular offerings to the parent council. She received a cold response in the meeting and several upset emails and phone calls in the ensuing days. Refusing to offer these extra-curricular options leads to community uproar, and Mrs. Hayes cannot afford to lose any support for the school. The result is that all staff maintain heavy extra-curricular commitments, including Mrs. Hayes.

In mid-May, an exhausted and guilt-ridden Mrs. Hayes has just received her staffing and administrative allocation for the following school year: the school will continue to be staffed with the equivalent of 4.5 teachers, and her administrative allotment will remain at 30%. Although she is happy to know there have been no further reductions, Mrs. Hayes feels her heart drop. What is she going to do? How will she plan for a full complement of quality academic and extra-curricular options? At what point is school closure a necessary option for quality teaching, learning, and leading? How can she manage her own teaching

and administrative duties? Are there ways she can put into practice the new district mandate of classroom observations? How can she get the community to understand the pressures on the school staff? Can she continue to do this job when it risks her personal wellness and time spent with her family? How can she set up some professional and personal boundaries? Mrs. Hayes feels another year of long hours and angst fast approaching.

Teaching Notes

This case presents a particularly challenging situation faced by a rural teaching principal. While the case may seem implausible, it reflects a reality faced by many rural teaching principals working in the prairie provinces (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2014; Wallin, Newton, Jutras, & Adilman, 2019). A multitude of teaching responsibilities complicates the accomplishment of duties associated with the principalship. Pollock, Wang, and Hauseman (2015) found that principals' workloads were increasing in both intricacy and volume, and that, on average, Ontario principals reported working 59 hours per week. The myriad responsibilities that make principals' workloads so time intensive and challenging are complicated by the time commitment of their teaching roles.

There is a paucity of research on rural principals (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Pendola & Fuller, 2018) and, more specifically, on rural teaching principals (Wallin & Newton, 2013; Preston & Barnes, 2017). Studies that have been conducted broadcast the intensity of the work that these principals face (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2014; Wallin et al., 2019; Starr & White, 2008). Starr and White (2008) reported that proliferation of workload was a common challenge raised by rural principals by noting that "small rural school principals unanimously state they require additional human resources to enable incessant workloads to be accomplished" (p. 4). Additionally, Wallin et al. (2019) observe that "as a consequence of the additional time pressures placed on them because of their dual role, teaching principals suffered from a number of sources of guilt" (p. 9).

As extreme as the case presented may appear, other teaching principals with workloads similar to that of Mrs. Hayes exist in rural schools across Canada. The purpose of this case is to raise awareness, promote dialogue, and to seek solutions for an understudied segment of Canadian principals who also teach. The teaching principalship should not be dismissed as an aberration, nor as a misguided policy. Positive aspects of the dual role are plentiful and include: forming close relationships with students, modelling pedagogy for teachers, sharing common experiences with teachers, having greater credibility with teaching staff, personally testing out new initiatives, and providing a diversion from administrative tasks (Boyd, 1996). The unique intersection of a teaching principal's two roles provides great potential to expand current conceptualizations of instructional leadership (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Wallin & Newton, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2014; Wallin et al., 2019). To that end, it is not the position of teaching principal itself that is problematic; the role offers great potential for building instructional leadership capacity. Rather, what is necessary is more discussion around, and solutions to, what constitutes an appropriate balance of teaching and leading given local school and community contexts. This case challenges policy makers to be cognizant of the uniqueness of the position of rural teaching principal to ensure that the benefits of the role, and the great promise that it holds for instructional leadership, can be actualized.

The following teaching activities are designed to encourage dialogue and entice solutions for rural principals with dual roles around several themes that were presented in the case narrative. The intention of the activities is to draw attention to the nature of rural teaching principalship, the decisions that rural teaching principals will face, the consequences of those decisions, and to hope for possible solutions. Included activities examine the importance of selecting a teaching assignment, protecting and prioritizing time, and navigating detrimental or ill-fitting policies.

Activity 1: Selecting A Teaching Assignment

While teaching principals are typically assigned their teaching percentage from the school district, they are also charged with determining their own and their staffs' teaching assignments. A teaching principal's teaching assignment has the potential to greatly increase their workload. Newton and Wallin (2013) asserted that rural teaching principals must pay careful consideration to the selection of their teaching assignment(s). These authors identified three common methods in which teaching principals selected their

own teaching assignments:

1. The selection of a teaching assignment that best matched a principal's own areas of expertise. For example, selecting courses and/or grade levels that they have previously taught and/or are most closely aligned with their training and interests.
2. Selection of a teaching assignment for optimal time scheduling and/or to provide greater flexibility. For example, taking on a role as a special education teacher or a technology support teacher or teaching only in the morning.
3. Selection of teaching assignment based on school factors. For example, providing teachers with their optimum teaching loads and then selecting courses that remain unassigned, or selecting teaching assignment due to the logistics of time-tabling for small staffs.

The following is a recommended small group learning activity:

1. Students will read the section titled "The Nature of the Teaching Assignment" from Newton and Wallin (2013) on pages 59 and 60.
2. Students will review the case narrative and determine which method(s) Mrs. Hayes used to create her teaching assignment and what benefits and challenges resulted from her selection.
3. Students will consider the potential benefits and pitfalls of each of the three teaching assignment selection methods. Small groups will complete the attached chart by making notes on the perceived strengths and weaknesses of each of the three methods in each of the listed criteria (personal teacher efficacy, planning time required, time for administrative duties, relationships with staff, instructional leadership, and overall impact on workload). Additional space is left at the bottom of the chart for students to add criteria that they believe warrants consideration.
4. Groups will consider if all categories within the chart hold equal merit or if some criteria are more important when selecting a teaching assignment.
5. Groups will determine which selection method they believe is the most favourable. Groups must be prepared to defend their position (note: this activity presents expansion opportunities for debate).
6. Groups will consider other methods that might be utilized by rural teaching principals to select their teaching assignments and to consider the potential benefits and pitfalls that may be associated.
7. Groups will synthesize their findings from the previous activities into formal advice that can be shared with rural teaching principals to support time-tabling (three potential options include: creating a how-to video, writing an advice column, or creating a tip sheet).

Table 1
Selection of a Teaching Assignment

Selection of a Teaching Assignment			
	Selecting teaching based on personal expertise	Selecting teaching based on optimum schedule and/or flexibility	Selecting teaching based on school factors
Personal teacher efficacy			
Planning time			

	Selecting teaching based on personal expertise	Selecting teaching based on optimum schedule and/or flexibility	Selecting teaching based on school factors
Time for administrative duties			
Relationships with staff			
Instructional leadership			
Overall impact on workload			

Activity 2: Protecting and Prioritizing Time and Alleviating Workload

Mrs. Hayes’ case illuminates the struggles that rural teaching principals face in terms of protecting and prioritizing their time while dealing with mounting workloads. The literature clearly states that challenges unique to the rural teaching principal position make maintaining a schedule, time management, and protecting personal boundaries particularly difficult (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2013; Starr & White, 2008; Wallin & Newton, 2013). For this activity, the issues of protecting and prioritizing time and alleviation of workload have been broken into three important areas for consideration: teaching time, administrative time, and personal and family time.

The following is recommended as a jigsaw activity:

1. Instructors will divide the class into three groups with group A assigned teaching time, group B assigned administrative time, and group C assigned personal and family time. Groups should be assigned prior to class time to allow group members to engage in the required reading. Groups should be assigned their respective research summaries for their area and the associated readings. Additional resources are included at the conclusion of this section.
2. Groups will brainstorm promising strategies that may be activated to help Mrs. Hayes and other rural teaching principals maintain their focus on the area of time that they are assigned. Careful consideration must be paid to ensuring that these promising strategies also aim to alleviate workload.
3. Groups will select their top strategies and apply them to Mrs. Hayes’ case. Groups will determine if they believe that these strategies would have a positive impact on the management of Mrs. Hayes’ time and contribute to the alleviation of her workload. Groups will consider what consequences may be faced by applying (or by not applying) these strategies in a small community like Lilium.
4. Instructors will reconfigure into groups of three for sharing. Each group must have one member from each of groups A, B, and C. Individuals will share the findings of their group(s), including the results of the brainstorm, the top strategies selected, and the perceived impact on Mrs. Hayes’

case.

5. Students will remain in their mixed groupings after the sharing. Groups will consolidate the top strategies shared for each of the three areas into one prioritized list of advice that can be shared with rural teaching principals to help them protect their time.
6. Groups will present their lists, created in step five, to the full class, allowing for the class to collectively determine the best strategies.

Additional Resources

Group A: Teaching time. Consider what strategies rural teaching principals might activate to protect their assigned teaching time from administrative interference. Research has identified significant workload pressures facing rural teachers, including teaching multi-grade classes and a lack of resources (TempleNewhook, 2010). Research is clear that teaching principals face constant interruptions during their scheduled instructional time (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Starr & White, 2008; Wallin & Newton, 2013). Newton and Wallin (2013) reported that one of the primary challenges described by rural teaching principals was the adverse effects of the dual role on their classroom time, which led some principals to share that they felt guilty about not living up to their own high standards of teaching. Despite the potential for guilt, research has also identified that the teaching portion of the dual role often provides a sense of gratification for teaching principals (Boyd, 1996). Wallin and Newton (2013) noted that unique to the teaching principal role was the ability of principals to model the importance of school goals by privileging their own teaching time over non-emergency administrative duties. Newton and Wallin (2013) recognized the need to protect teaching time and shared the insights of rural teaching principals on how they have been successful in trying to protect their time with their students.

Required readings

- Ashton, B., & Duncan, H. E. (2012). A beginning rural principal's toolkit: A guide for success. *Rural educator*, 34(1).
- Newton, P., & Wallin, D. (2013). The teaching principal: An untenable position or a promising model? *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 59(1), 1-17.

Group B: Administrative time. Consider what strategies rural teaching principals might activate to maximize their scheduled administrative time and additionally leverage their own quality teaching for instructional leadership purposes. While teaching principals have less time during school days for administrative duties, they also face the same compliance regulations as schools with full-time and/or multiple administrators (Preston et al., 2013; Starr & White, 2008). Research indicates that principals, including those who are full-time and/or part of a larger administrative team, find immense challenges in finding time for instructional leadership duties (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012). Rural teaching principals report that they view instructional leadership as the most important aspect of their job, yet they feel deprived of the time required to engage in the work and often feel compelled to forego instructional leadership activities for managerial tasks (Starr & White, 2008). Rural teaching principals work in schools where staffing is typically quite small, limiting the ability of principals to delegate tasks and share leadership (Preston et al., 2013; Starr & White, 2008). Wallin and Newton have reasoned that there is a need to move beyond generic understandings of instructional leadership, as these conceptualizations fail to account for the distinct opportunities and challenges presented by the teaching principal role (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2014). What is the "best," or, at least, what should be the maximum percentage of teaching allotment for teaching principals? What circumstances should be considered when making this determination?

Required readings

- Ashton, B., & Duncan, H. E. (2012). A beginning rural principal's toolkit: A guide for success. *Rural Educator*, 34(1).
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Group C: Personal and family time. Consider what strategies Mrs. Hayes and other rural teaching principals might activate to protect their personal wellness and time with their family. Rural teaching principals have many responsibilities that often extend their workdays and require additional time commitments in the evenings and on weekends. Recent research conducted in Ontario underscores the importance of school leaders protecting time for self-care to ensure their personal well-being and effectiveness (Wang, Pollock, & Hauseman, 2018). Factors associated with teaching, such as planning and assessment, and factors associated with administration, such as reports and paperwork, as well as needs for communication with parents associated with both roles are frequently cited as contributors to a challenging work-life balance (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Starr & White, 2008). For those living in rural areas, Preston et al. (2013) described obtaining the principalship as a lifestyle choice, one in which principals are highly visible and are expected to engage in community life (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Clarke & Stevens, 2006; Clarke, Stevens, & Wildy, 2006; Preston et al., 2013; Starr & White, 2008; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Admittedly, the importance of rural principals cultivating relationships with community stakeholders has been established (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Clarke & Stevens, 2006; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Starr & White, 2008; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Rural teaching principals often take on many additional responsibilities tied to school programming, including heavy involvement in extra-curricular activities (Newton & Wallin, 2013). Expectations placed upon rural teaching principals are often so great that they have difficulty in disconnecting from their work (Newton & Wallin, 2013). Newton and Wallin (2013) argued that the "work-life balance of teaching principals' lives requires attention from policy makers and school jurisdictions" (p. 65).

Required readings

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Activity 3: Policy Implications

Rural schools and principals are often disadvantaged by urban-centric policies that do not account for context (Preston et al., 2013; Starr & White, 2008). Rural principals in small schools often report feeling as though they do not have a voice, or that their voice is somehow less important than those of their full-time administrative colleagues assigned to larger schools (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Starr & White, 2008;

Wallin & Newton, 2013). Preston and Barnes (2017) noted that rural principals often need to navigate ill-fitting policies to create a bridge between the mandates and their local context; they termed this dexterity “place-conscious and mandate-responsive” (p. 10). For principals in very small schools, policies around school closure are a constant threat to the community. At what point is the quality of teaching, learning, and leading compromised to the extent that school closure becomes the best option?

Drawing on policies applicable to the local provincial and/or school district(s) context, ask students to consider how they may be responsive to required policies while mediating potential damage within their local context. Examples of policies that students may choose to examine include: administrative time allotments, small school staffing allocations, instructional leadership mandates, administrative and teacher transfer policies, and school closure policies. Students are asked to create action plans that are (1) responsive to the provincial or district mandate that they have examined and (2) their own specific context. Within this action plan, students must focus on potential solutions for alleviating work intensification and other problems that arise. In action planning, students should consider how they can leverage school and community strengths in finding possible solutions.

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