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Teaching Principals in Rural, Remote, and Northern Schools in Canada: An Empirical Analysis of Workload, Roles, and Instructional Leadership

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This paper reports on findings of a study that examined the role of teaching principals in rural, remote, and northern schools in Canada. A teaching principal is a principal who has a “double load” or dual roles in teaching and administration. The objectives of this study are: 1) to describe the role of the teaching principal in northern, rural, and remote school districts in the prairie provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, Canada; 2) to characterize the practices of teaching principals in rural, remote and northern school contexts in terms; and 3) to delineate implications of the above findings for leadership theory, practice and preparation. As part of a larger multi-methods study, we conducted a survey of 70 teaching principals in the prairie provinces related to school and community contexts, workloads, and leadership, administrative, and teaching responsibilities. This paper reports on the findings of the survey that demonstrate:1) difficulties that teaching principals face with respect to balancing administrative, teaching, and personal responsibilities; 2) a belief that holding a teaching role while serving as a principal improves leadership capabilities; and 3) instructional leadership practices for teaching principals that may be significantly different from those identified in the literature on instructional leadership.

***Keywords*: critical thinking, pre-service teachers, student teaching, practicum, higher education**

This paper reports on the findings of one phase of a research study that examines the roles and leadership practices of teaching principals in northern, rural, and remote schools in the prairie provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, Canada. A teaching principal is a principal who has a “double load” or dual roles in teaching and administration (Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Pendola & Fuller, 2018; Wallin et al., 2019). Literature on principal leadership practices, and often on the rural principalship itself, presupposes that principals hold full-time administrative appointments (Hallinger, 2018; Leithwood & Louis, 2011). Yet due to constraints

of declining enrolments and/or remote access, many rural/northern/remote principals spend a significant percentage of their time teaching (Jutras et al., 2020; Wallin et al., 2019). Our research is based on two gaps noted in the literatures on leadership and rural education: (a) teaching principals engage in a distinct set of practices not described in the leadership literature or provincial policies, and; (b) the teaching principalship is common in rural, northern, remote contexts in Canada that suffer from lower educational outcomes, but we do not know enough about their role and the supports they need to adequately bolster their efforts towards improving educational outcomes.

Research on Canadian rural education reports that there is a significant rural-urban gap in educational outcomes for rural students, educators and communities based on a number of educational indicators such as breadth and quality of programs, specialized support programs, teacher and leader qualifications, classroom learning environment, student achievement data, student and employee attrition rates, persistence in post-secondary education, and poverty (Van Maarseveen, 2021; Wood, 2023; Zahl-Thanem & Rye, 2024, Zarifa et al., 2019). In Canada, there is still a large proportion of rural students who are negatively affected by these indicators. Given the high proportion of rural students in the prairie provinces (49% in Alberta, 54% in Saskatchewan, and 45% in Manitoba in the 2023-2024 school year), it is crucial that these jurisdictions ensure that students are provided with a quality educational experience. Given the importance of the school leadership effect on student outcomes (Leithwood & Louis, 2011; Robinson, 2010; Robinson & Gray, 2019), it is essential that research focus on the improvement of the practices of school leaders who work in contexts that are known to suffer from lower student outcomes. The objectives of the research study include the following: (1) to describe the role of the teaching principal in northern, rural, and remote school districts in the prairie provinces by outlining: a) local frameworks within which the role is constituted; b) community contexts; (c) school contexts; and d) working conditions; (2) to describe the nature of teaching principals' practice in rural, remote and northern school contexts with respect to: a) management and leadership activity; (c) instructional responsibilities; (c) impact on student outcomes; and (d) the negotiation of roles and implications for self, staff, home life, and community; (3) to develop recommendations from cross-case and cross-context analyses for leadership theory, policy, practice, and preparation, and; (4) to contribute to the improvement of practice for participants and for teaching principals generally. The purpose of this paper is to present the findings of one

phase of this study based on an online survey that gathered data on principals' community contexts, school contexts, working conditions, and individual experiences.

Context

Research on student outcomes suggests that the school principal has an indirect, but significant effect on educational outcomes, second only to the classroom teacher (Hallinger, 2018; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Robinson & Gray, 2019). As a consequence, ministries and professional associations have worked to develop principal standards of practice to ensure that principals are equipped to effectively lead the schools they serve. In the prairie provinces, this has led to a number of initiatives, including the development of Principal Quality Practice Guidelines (2009) and the Leadership Quality Standard (2023) in Alberta, and school leadership certification requirements in Manitoba (2025). The research and literature upon which the principal practice guidelines and leadership standards are based presume that the school principal *does not teach*. The practices for which they advocate presume that principals are full-time administrators who do not attend to unique practices or concerns that may develop for those who work directly as teachers. This gap in knowledge prompts us to ask how local contexts and the dual role of teacher and administrator impact the role of teaching principals and how their leadership practice may be similar to or different from the literature and policy on effective school leadership. Other than our pilot study that preceded this larger research project (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2013), little Canadian research has explored the work of teaching principals. We do not know whether, or to what extent, teaching principals contribute to, or help offset, the rural-urban gap in educational outcomes. We also do not know what supports could benefit teaching principals in their efforts to improve educational outcomes in these contexts.

While principals are expected to focus on teaching and learning, they are also working in environments of increasing accountability and managerial imperatives (Newton et al., 2010; Dolan, 2020; Heffernan, 2017; Zuckerman et al., 2018). Principals are experiencing increasing (and often competing) demands related to workload intensification, and school systems are facing growing concerns with principal recruitment, retention, and stress (Jutras et al., 2020; Hansen, 2018; Pannell & McBrayer, 2022; Yan, 2020). In many northern, rural, and remote school jurisdictions, it has become increasingly difficult to recruit and retain qualified personnel

to assume administrative roles (Hansen, 2018) because the “traditional” workload is also combined with higher expectations for community involvement (Preston & Barnes, 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

Workload issues are exacerbated for teaching principals. In addition to having reduced formal administrative time allotments, there is little in the way of (and sometimes no) administrative support (Pendola & Fuller, 2018) to help teaching principals manage their day due to budget restrictions (Jutras et al., 2020; Klocko & Justis, 2019; Newton & Wallin, 2013). In addition, rural/northern/remote principals face significant public expectations to contribute to community life (Wallin, 2001; 2005; Jutras et al., 2020; Pendola & Fuller, 2018). In some cases, teaching principals face tensions between the need to be involved in community matters while trying to maintain an appropriate professional distance (Clarke et al., 2006; Wallin & Newton, 2014). As a consequence, principals find themselves torn between the priorities and expectations of community members and those of the district or province (Hicks & Wallin, 2013; Sutherland, 2023; Wallin, 2008).

Teaching principals are faced with unique professional concerns. The conflicting role demands of teacher and principal “create tensions, and [principals] feel stretched to the limits by myriad roles that cannot be executed thoroughly due to a lack of time for any particular task” (Starr & White, 2008, p. 6). In our own research, we have found that teaching principals were anxious and overwhelmed by heavy workloads and unrealistic professional responsibilities (Jutras et al., 2020; Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2013). They also identified a sense of guilt and dissatisfaction over the frequent need to be taken away from their classrooms (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin et al., 2019). Many teaching principals feel that they are not prepared to deal with the resulting tensions and dilemmas that are associated with their multiple roles (Ewington et al., 2008; Klocko & Justis, 2019; Wallin et al., 2019). This occurs because the professional learning of teaching principals comes mostly from informal activities, on-the-job experiences, and trial and error, as opposed to formal professional development opportunities or leadership training specific to their unique role, often due to limited access to universities or colleges (Pendola & Fuller, 2018; Wallin, 2008; Wells et al., 2021). Given their tendency to be found in sparsely populated or northern/remote areas, teaching principals have limited opportunities to be mentored or to acquire the career visibility they need for career advancement (Wallin, 2001; Partin & Hayes, 2024; Wells et al., 2021). They often struggle to find a balance

between their personal and professional lives, and prioritize their work obligations at the expense of their personal lives and families (Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Wallin & Newton, 2014).

However, the literature is also replete with positive attributes of the role of the teaching principal. Collins (2004) found that successful teaching principals worked hard, emphasized collaborative work amongst staff, and demonstrated emotional intelligence in their relationships. Other studies found that teaching principals enjoyed being able to work closely with community members, parents, staff, and particularly students (Jutras et al., 2020; Wallin & Newton, 2014). Teaching principals consistently rate their experiences positively despite heavy workloads (Berndt & Fasciglione, 2015; Collins, 2004; Wallin & Newton, 2014; Wallin et al. 2019). They also acknowledge feelings of accomplishment and confidence as they "cope and survive the trials and challenges of being a leader of a small school [which] developed their self-esteem" (Ewington et al., 2008, p. 546).

Bouchamma (2006) found that teaching principals have a stronger sense of personal efficacy than principals who do not teach. Our findings suggest the specific nature of the teaching assignment may be a significant variable in principals' perceptions of efficacy (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin et al., 2019). Principals who taught in their areas of expertise suggested that their teaching role contributed to their effectiveness as principals. Other participants worked outside of their specializations to "fill gaps in the timetable," or they took on assignments in which they might not have specialized training (i.e., special education) to provide them with more office "flex time." Principals' sense of efficacy appeared to be lower in scenarios where they felt less confident in their teaching roles.

Murdoch and Schiller (2002) found that teaching principals felt "their credibility as a teacher strengthened their position as an instructional leader" (para. 1). The assumption exists that this "grounding" in teaching: (a) improves administrative practice; (b) fosters teacher faith in the principal as one who "understands" their issues; and, (c) builds stronger relationships with students, leading to fewer discipline issues and a stronger school culture. Boyd (1996) concurred with these findings and suggested that the joy principals received from teaching "might even be a means for preventing principal burnout" (p. 69). Findings from our pilot study suggest that teaching principals are uniquely positioned to contribute to the discourse on educational leadership practices because they directly teach students and also indirectly affect the learning

environment through setting directions, managing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program (Leithwood & Louis, 2011).

Methodology

In order to create a context for our work, and to describe the prevalence of the teaching principalship, we requested that an anonymous online survey be distributed by superintendents of rural public-school divisions to teaching principals (n=29 Manitoba divisions, n=22 Saskatchewan divisions, n=54 Alberta divisions). Part one of the survey gathered data on principals' community contexts, school contexts, and individual teaching and educational backgrounds. Part two of the survey asked teaching principals to indicate how many hours per week they spent on a number of areas of focus linked to teaching, leading, and personal engagements. Part three of the survey asked teaching principals to rank a number of statements that have been commonly noted in the research literature on the teaching principalship related to four areas of concern: (a) teaching, (b) leadership and administration, (c) balancing the dual role, and (d) wellbeing. Part four of the study included open-ended questions that asked teaching principals to indicate what they believed to be three significant benefits of being a teaching principal, three challenges of the role, how they balance the dual role, and recommendations for those who may wish to serve as a teaching principal. Since the number of teaching principal positions is not reported directly in these school divisions, nor could we guarantee that superintendents forwarded our request, we are unable to provide a confirmed response rate. However, the findings are based on 70 completed surveys from teaching principals who elected to participate. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted using the statistical software analysis package SPSS. Data analysis searched for differences by province and context (northern, rural, remote).

Findings

The findings of this paper are organized according to the sections of the survey: (a) community and educational content; (b) time spent on teaching, leading and personal engagements; (c) ranking common research findings related to teaching, leading and administration, balancing the dual role, and wellness; and, (d) challenges and benefits of being a teaching principal.

Community and Educational Context

One of the fascinating discussions always considered by rural researchers is how we define what it means to be rural. Part One of our survey asked participants to respond in a drop-down list that included all the combinations possible of “Rural”, “Northern”, and “Remote”, but also allowed participants to self-characterize their communities. Of the total 70 returned surveys, the vast majority (83%) were returned by Saskatchewan teaching principals, followed by those from Manitoba (9%) and Alberta (9%). Most respondents characterized their communities as Rural (75%), with equal proportions (3.2%) describing their communities as Rural/Remote, Rural/Northern, or Northern. Another 15% characterized their communities as “other”, offering a number of interesting descriptions: Low Income/Poverty; Bedroom Community; Rural/Remote/Hutterian; Rural Hutterian; Small City; Semi-remote, and Rural, but close to Remote. The majority of respondents (78%) served in communities that had a population of fewer than 1000 people. The primary industries of the communities were noted to be agriculture (n=56), natural resources (n=26), and education (n=11), with most respondents suggesting there were two primary industries in the area (44.4%) or only one primary industry in the area (33.3%). In addition, most of the schools in which the teaching principals worked (47.6%) were serving two to five other communities, or they served a single community (39.7%).

In terms of the educational context, 95.2% of the respondents worked in the public education system, followed by the publicly funded Catholic/Separate system (3.2%). The majority of respondents (56%) worked in school divisions with enrolments between 2501-5000 students (22.2%) or 5001-7500 students (23.8%). Over three-quarters (77.7%) of the teaching principals worked in schools with enrolments of fewer than 250 students. The majority of schools reported on were either K-12 composite schools (39.7%) or elementary/middle years schools (30.2%). Over two-thirds of the school sites reported on were staffed with five or fewer full-time equivalent (FTE) non-teaching staff (65.2%), with 10 or fewer FTE teachers (63.5%). Included in non-teaching staff were descriptions of positions such as custodians, administrative assistants, librarians/library technicians, educational assistants, bus drivers, counsellors, and maintenance staff. Some of these staff had combined responsibilities (i.e., administrative assistant/librarian). Teaching staff included itinerant teachers (often band teachers) or combined positions (teacher/principal).

The backgrounds of teaching principals were also described. The average years of teaching experience held by teaching principals was 18.2 years, with an average of 7 years of experience as a principal. Almost half (47.6%) of the respondents held Master's degrees as their highest level of education, followed by a Bachelor's degree (36.5%), or a certificate/diploma (1.6%). None of the respondents noted that they held a doctoral degree, though one respondent noted current enrolment in a doctoral program. Almost 29% of the teaching principals had teaching responsibilities for a proportion of 41%-55% of their full-time equivalent (FTE) workload. Another 30% of the group had teaching responsibilities that were more than 55% of their FTE: 56-70% FTE (11.1%); 71-85% FTE (7.9%); 86-99% FTE (7.9%), and 100% FTE (3.2%). On average, teaching principals who responded to the survey taught 2.5 different subjects, with the top three subjects being English Language Arts (n=20), Mathematics (n=18), and Social Studies (n=15). Teaching responsibilities other than traditional subjects included student services, locally developed special projects, senior high flex programming, dual credit programs, and workplace supervision. A number of respondents noted that they taught “all subjects” and multi-age, multi-graded programming.

Time Commitments

Part Two of the survey presented respondents with a list of 32 items related to teaching, leading, and personal engagements. Examples included preparing for instruction, school/team staff meetings, and family time. Respondents were asked to report on how many hours per week (Monday to Sunday) they spent on the listed items. The mean score for the hours per week for each item was calculated to determine the issues upon which teaching principals spent the most of their time. The 10 items upon which teaching principals spent most of their time are listed in Table 1. In addition to the statistical information gathered, some teaching principals added comments that provided clarification for their responses. The items with the highest average of time spent per week included: spending time with family (17.63 hrs/week); direct instruction (14.68 hrs/week); office work/paperwork/reports (12.55 hrs/week); preparing for instruction (6.88 hrs/week), and extra-curricular activities (4.22 hrs/week).

Table 1

Hourly Review of Areas of Focus Per Week: Most Time Spent

Area of Focus	N	Mean Hrs/ Week	Median	Minimum Noted Hrs/Week	Maximum Noted Hrs/Week	Qualifying Comments Related to Item
Time with family	48	17.63	13.5	0	60	"weekends—some time during the week"; "evenings, 4 nights a week"; "3-5 hours per day and Sat and Sun about 12 hours each day"; "limited"
Direct instruction of students	52	14.68	13.75	3	30	
Administrative office work/paper work/reports	51	12.55	10	1	54	"as able"
Preparing for instruction	53	6.13	5	0	20	
Extracurricular activities	48	4.22	3	0	16	"depends upon the season"; "varies"
Student discipline	51	4.09	2	0	30	"with social media this can spill into Saturday and Sunday really quickly"
Student assessment	48	4.08	3	0	30	"ongoing daily" "limited (varies per week)
Responding to school division requests	50	3.52	2	0.5	20	"sometimes—varies per week"
Travel for school-related purposes	50	3.23	2	0	13	"does commute time count?"; "varies"; "last year

						I logged almost 80 hours of unpaid travel”
Personal wellness	49	3.19	2	0	20	“reading, exercise”; “not near enough”; “not much”; “not a lot of time for this”; “very little”

Table 2 outlines the 10 items upon which teaching principals spend the least of their time. The items upon which teaching principals spent the least amount of their time included: school maintenance (1.25 hrs/week); health and safety (1.22 hrs/week); substitutes (0.91 hrs/week); building/infrastructure (0.88 hrs/week); and bussing (0.56 hrs/week).

Table 2

Hourly Review of Areas of Focus Per Week: Least Time Spent

Area of Focus	**N**	**Mean Hrs/ Week**	**Median**	**Minimum Noted Hrs/Week**	**Maximum Noted Hrs/Week**	**Qualifying Comments Related to Item**
Administrative meetings	49	1.92	1	0	10	“varies”
Professional growth of staff	49	1.87	1	0	10	“limited-varies per week”
Technology / Distance Education	47	1.84	1	0	15	“rarely”
Community engagement	49	1.82	1	0	10	“I live in the community so this never ends”
Personnel/HR concerns	49	1.36	1	0	10	“limited-varies per week”
School maintenance	49	1.25	1	0	5	“limited-varies per week”

Health and safety concerns	48	1.22	0.75	0	15	
Substitutes	46	0.91	1	0	3	“rarely”; “not very much time spent on this”
Building/infrastructure issues	46	0.88	1	0	5	“depends”; “rarely”
Bussing	45	0.56	0.5	0	3	“only with concerns”; “rarely”

Rankings of Research Findings

Part Three of the online survey provided a list of findings from previous research studies related to the role of the teaching principal. This part of the survey was designed to explore the extent to which participants affirmed the findings of previous research with respect to the nature of the teaching principal role. These items were categorized into four categories: (a) teaching statements (7 statements); (b) leadership and administrative statements (8 statements); (c) balancing the dual role statements (5 statements); and (d) wellbeing statements (5 statements). Respondents were asked to rank the items for each category based on what they perceived to be the level of relevance/importance of each statement for teaching principals. Table 3 presents the top two ranked statements for each category.

Table 3

Top-Ranked Research Statements Per Item Category

Category	**Rank**	**Statement**	**Mean Rank**
Teaching	1	Teaching principals gain credibility from other teachers because they remain grounded in the concerns of teaching and learning.	2.78
	2	Teaching principals understand the complex educational and social needs of students better than non-teaching principals.	3.4

Leadership and Administration	1	The role of teaching principal in rural, remote and northern communities has been created primarily due to budget constraints and low student enrolment rather than a philosophy that supports the leader as teacher and learner.	2.96
	2	The leadership style of teaching principals in rural, remote and northern schools tends to be more collegial, dialogic and relational, rather than hierarchical and managerial.	3.06
Balancing the Dual Role	1	The instructional and administrative expectations on teaching principals make it difficult for them to balance their dual roles.	2
	2	Teaching principals develop multiple time management strategies to ensure that they can attend to teaching, administrative and personal activities.	2.32
Wellbeing	1	Work-life balance is difficult to achieve for teaching principals.	2.22
	2	Teaching principals experience guilt over the frequent need to be away from their classrooms.	2.76

In addition to asking teaching principals to rank the statements overall, they were asked to consider the statements that most affect their work with respect to: (a) issues of which teaching principals should be aware prior to making the decision to take on the role of the teaching principal; (b) issues that have the most impact on the daily work of the teaching principal; (c) issues that have the most impact on the quality of learning that occurs in the school; (d) issues that have the most impact (positive or negative) on the teaching principal's senses of self-efficacy and effectiveness, and; (e) issues that have the most impact on their personal lives. Table 4 provides the most often chosen statements related to each of these categories. Three of the 25 statements were consistently listed as one of the top three impacts on the work of the teaching principal. One statement, "the instructional and administrative expectations on teaching principals make it difficult for them to balance their dual roles," was found to be listed in the top three impacts of four of the five areas of concern. Two statements, "work-life balance is difficult to achieve for teaching principals" and "taking care of one's physical and mental health is often overlooked by teaching principals as they focus on accomplishing their teaching and administrative duties," were in the top three impacts on three of the five areas of focus.

Table 4

Research Statements Impacting Teaching, Leading and Personal Lives

Statement	**Prior to Taking On Role**	**Impact on Daily Work**	**Impact on Quality of Learning**	**Impact on Self-Efficacy and Effectiveness**	**Impact on Personal Life**
The instructional and administrative expectations on teaching principals make it difficult for them to balance their dual roles.	X Rank 1	X Rank 1	X Rank 3	X Rank 1	
Work-life balance is difficult to achieve for teaching principals.	X Rank 2	X Rank 2			X Rank 1
Taking care of one's physical and mental health is often overlooked by teaching principals as they focus on accomplishing their teaching and administrative duties.	X Rank 3			X Rank 3	X Rank 2
Teaching principals regularly are called away from their classrooms to deal with administrative issues		X Rank 3	X Rank 1		
The leadership style of teaching principals in rural, remote and northern schools tends to be more collegial, dialogic and relational, rather than hierarchical and managerial.			X Rank 2		

Teaching principals develop multiple time management strategies to ensure that they can attend to teaching, administrative and personal activities.				X Rank 2	
Teaching principals experience guilt over the frequent need to be away from their classrooms					X Rank 3

Benefits, Challenges, and Recommendations

The final section of the survey offered teaching principals the opportunity to speak about the benefits and challenges of the dual role of the teaching principal in rural, remote and northern contexts. They were also asked to offer recommendations to other educators who might be interested in this work.

Benefits

Table 5 provides the primary benefits of the teaching principalship acknowledged by respondents. Overall, being in touch with classroom realities, having the opportunity to build relationships with students, building credibility for their efforts, and developing strong relationships with teachers were mentioned most often as the primary benefits that accrued with the role.

Table 5

Benefits of the Teaching Principalship

Benefit	**N**
In touch with classroom realities	46
Relationships with students	24
Credibility	12
Relationships with teachers	11
Enjoyment of teaching	8

Influence on vision/direction	6
Learn to see the “big picture”	5
Impact	5
Instructional leadership	3
Relationships with families/communities	3

Teaching principals qualified being in touch with classroom realities by talking about their increased ability to understand the demands that teachers face, having immediate knowledge of curricula and assessment, the value of having insider perspectives on how initiatives affect the classroom, and having intimate knowledge of students’ learning needs. One teaching principal noted, “remaining connected to the realities teachers and students face in classrooms helps keep expectations realistic.” Another suggested that “being in tune with division/provincial initiatives…creates an atmosphere of ‘we are in this together and I have to do this too’. This makes new initiatives and change easier to implement.” A third teaching principal suggested, “you know the students well and have often taught them or been around them for multiple years - you get to see their growth and success over many years.”

Relationships with students were important to teaching principals, noted by a respondent who suggested that the role enabled him/her to have a “greater connection to students - you gain a greater insight into the students in the school by making stronger social connections with them and their families.” The importance of developing credibility that motivated other staff was evidenced by a teaching principal who suggested that “in a small school the rest of the staff and teachers see me in the field daily doing my best teaching just like them, they see me give it my all, so do they. I am not just sitting behind my desk.” The ability to develop strong professional relationships with teachers (Hohner & Riveros, 2017) was also important to a teaching principal who suggested that “continuous growth professionally and collegially with teachers - this strengthens the entire learning community in a school when leaders can demonstrate their own learning, as well as learn from others openly and transparently.” The satisfaction of being able to influence the teaching and learning vision of the school was mentioned by one respondent who was happy that “I get to wear both hats and have influence and say about direction of the school but still have direct involvement and impact on students.” Finally, the dual role was satisfying to some teaching principals who maintain a passion for teaching: “it keeps me doing

my first love--teaching (I don't think I would really want to do the admin if I was not still able to teach)."

Challenges

Table 6 provides the primary challenges of the teaching principalship acknowledged by respondents. The major challenges noted by teaching principals included the difficulties associated with balancing the dual role of teaching and administration, adverse effects on the classroom, the heavy workload of the position, and difficulties associated with maintaining positive relationships.

Table 6

Challenges of the Teaching Principalship

Challenges	**N**
Imbalance of the dual role	33
Adverse effects on the classroom	14
Workload	12
Relationships	11
Meeting expectations	10
Work-life balance	9
Personal wellness	7
Feeling compelled to take on more for the "greater good"	6
Leadership suffers	6
Professional growth suffers	2

When teaching principals spoke about the imbalance of the role, they most often spoke of time management issues that affected their ability to manage the dual role, or they spoke about the lack of balance inherent in the role expectations. As one participant noted, there are "too many forks in the fire and knowing which one needs attention now! It's a constant juggling act - when should admin duties trump planning for the classroom? When do I focus on issues in

other classrooms and when do I focus on issues in my own classroom?" Others spoke of the adverse effects their role often had on the classroom when they were pulled out of the class to deal with administrative or student discipline issues. Teaching principals noted that being pulled away from the classroom affected their ability to be present with students and prevented them from putting their best effort into teaching. This was mentioned by a teaching principal who suggested, "being away from the class for meetings - planned or unexpected means a lot of time planning for subs and trying to ensure the students don't lose out on instructional time." Many teaching principals spoke of the challenges associated with maintaining positive relationships (Preston & Barnes, 2017) with staff, family and community because of the "blurred lines between teachers, parents, friends...confidentiality and friendships...all those professional lines are totally blurred and coming into that situation is very difficult."

A number of teaching principals spoke to work-life balance issues related to the heavy workloads of the teaching principalship along with their high visibility in communities. As one teaching principal noted, "in rural communities, you are the principal wherever you go, whether that be the rink or church or whatever, so you can never escape from the expectations of the public." Another teaching principal suggested that this overbalance meant that there was little quality time with family where s/he could completely disconnect from work: "Time - enough time to be at home with family and to have quality time without thinking about work." Another spoke of the potential for the development of health concerns given the never-ending responsibilities of the role for teaching principals:

> I was spread too thin. Home life suffers or health suffers. After ten years in a teaching principal role, I retired because I was too sick and exhausted to keep going and felt that was my only way out. After a year of rest and regaining some of my health back, I accepted another teaching principal position in a very small school which is much less stressful. So the size of the school is an important factor.

Some of the teaching principals spoke of the additional pressures that they experienced working as a teaching principal in a small rural school. One teaching principal suggested that one of the drawbacks was "taking on too many responsibilities because you are scared of losing teachers or burning out your teachers." Another spoke of how s/he questioned their ability to provide effective leadership for the school.

There is no time for educational leadership, although you are instructed that "this is

> your number one job," but you can't find time between paperwork, parental concerns, discipline, staff concerns, and ALL the other administrative duties to do in half day, and that is not counting prep for your class and marking/assessment. Sometimes there is not even enough time to do a walkthrough of classrooms or support teachers.

Perhaps the greatest worry of teaching principals was the effect this role could have on their self-efficacy: "when you become a teaching principal, you have to come to terms with not being great in either role. Both the teaching and the administrative duties suffer because you don't have time to be great at both. Feels like you do a half-hearted job of both." Recognizing that they would not be able to live up to their vision of what it meant to be a good teacher and a good leader was significantly damaging to the self-esteem of these individuals who were generally high achievers highly committed to students, teachers, and communities.

Recommendations

Table 7 lists the recommendations offered by teaching principals for educators who are interested in pursuing this role. The top three recommendations noted by teaching principals advocated that individuals interested in the role must find ways to manage their own expectations of the role, they must focus from the beginning on finding ways to achieve work-life balance, and they must work hard to develop positive, professional relationships with staff, students, parents, and communities.

Table 7

Recommendations

Recommendations	**N**
Role expectations	13
Work-life balance	12
Relationships with staff, students, parents and communities	12
Organization	10
Teaching	9
Administration	6
Be thoughtfully cautious	6

Just do it!	3

Because of their disappointment in their lack of ability to accomplish all they hoped to achieve in their roles, teaching principals recommended that those interested in the role go into the position with realistic expectations of what they are going to be able to accomplish. A teaching principal spoke directly to this point when s/he noted: “You can't solve all the issues every day when you are jumping between admin and teaching, at some point in the day, you have to be willing to close the door and start fresh in the morning.” These individuals suggested that in order to do the work, interested aspirants must be prepared to work hard, be willing to ask for support, and “be kind to themselves” when they realize that they cannot accomplish all that they hoped to do for each aspect of the dual role. They were also adamant that the family needed to remain a priority, even though the role expectations are never-ending. One teaching principal affirmed this point by suggesting, “Remember that it will be your family at your deathbed, not your staff and students.” The need to focus on relationships with staff, students, parents, and community was stressed by another teaching principal who noted, “managing all the personalities on staff while dealing with difficult parents and students can seem overbearing at times because of the immense closeness within the community.” Another reminded aspirants to “be prepared to be asked by the community to represent the school in the community.”

In terms of recommendations for teaching and administration, teaching principals were adamant that being as pre-planned as possible was absolutely necessary, but that aspirants had to be prepared to veer off-schedule on a regular basis. One teaching principal focused on teaching when s/he suggested, “Be very well planned for your classes, and you must have good management and set up routines that the kids know well. There will be times you have to leave the classroom, and they need to be able to keep working with supervision of someone who is not their teacher.” Another suggested that teaching principals needed to “protect administrative time and learn to delegate.” A third advocated that teaching principals needed to be strategic about creating networks of professional and personal support.

> Create a small network (3 or 4 of you) of like thinking administrators in similar roles/school formations that you can network with. See who you click with and start a little email group to be able to talk with them to ask what they do in certain situations, if you need help finding a form, how to do something, what their school policies are, etc. I network with two others, and we help each other out all of the time, even though we rarely see each other in person. But, it needs to be someone you click with. We even crack jokes at each other through email when we are stressed!

Some teaching principals recommended that those who aspire to the role think strategically about whether or not they choose to live in the community in which they work, given the expectations placed upon teaching principals to be engaged in the community and yet maintain some semblance of objective distance. Others spoke of the need to engage wholeheartedly with the community in order to build the relationships necessary to be effective. As noted by one respondent, “you have to really love your school and community to do this job because that is the reason for this job. If you don't have a connection to both, the job will be harder because you are under much greater scrutiny.” Regardless of the challenges and cautions in the recommendations, however, most of the teaching principals suggested that they enjoyed their role, the relationships they created, and the professional learning inherent in the role: “My advice is...do it. Take the risk. You will be amazed at the journey of self-discovery. It will make you a stronger manager in your classroom as well.”

Discussion

The findings of the online survey offer valuable information regarding the community context and how it shapes the work of the teaching principal. As we thought about how we would categorize what constituted “rural, remote and northern” sites as constructs, members of the research team determined that we would list the terms as descriptors, include a category of “other”, and allow respondents to describe their contexts in ways that reflected their own sense of identity. The various ways in which respondents described their contexts demonstrate a type of resistance against categorizations that prescribe the identities of rural people “for” them. The rural identity is as much about the perceived sense of self based on lived understandings of the context as it is about an external definition based on population size, density, and geography.

The respondent group of this survey lived primarily in small communities of fewer than

1000 people, and they tend to work in schools of around 250 students with small staff complements. The most common school compositions were K-12 composite schools or early/middle years' schools, which is reflective of the centralizing public policies that have significantly affected the prairie provinces subsequent to the 1980s (Haynes, 2022; Newton et al., 2010). The loss of high schools in particular, and/or their regionalization in central communities, has been a common method of rationalizing services in rural school divisions, given the higher costs of high school programming and staffing specialization areas. There was also a need to be cognizant of multi-age/multi-grade or alternative programming that is commonly found in these schools, and the differential effects these alternative scheduling/programming forms have on teaching, learning, and administration. Most leadership programs do not emphasize that there are differences in how administration and teaching occur in these contexts, yet multi-age/multi-grade contexts are very common in rural, remote, and northern schools (Jenkins & Cornish, 2015; Morton & Harmon, 2018; Smit et al., 2015).

Given that significant numbers of teaching principals reported teaching more than 55% of their full-time equivalent loads, it may be that the teaching principals who self-selected to respond to the invitation are those who were facing significant worries about the nature of the position and their ability to effectively lead schools that may be in danger of school closure. Certainly, there were grave concerns about the sustainability of this model of administration over time given the very real effects this position was having on the ability of teaching principals to be effective in both roles, to achieve work-life balance, and to maintain personal wellness (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Jutras et al., 2020).

It was heartening to learn that personal time with family remained prominent in teaching principals' weekly time management of engagements. However, given that weekends were included as part of the time commitment from Monday to Sunday, there is some concern that respondents were spending fewer than 20 hours per week with family. Attention to work-life balance and personal wellness must be taken into consideration in determining how the role might be more appropriately shaped to make the role manageable for potential aspirants (Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Wallin, 2005; Wallin & Newton, 2013; Jutras et al., 2020). Interestingly, dealing with office work was the only administrative item on which teaching principals spent a significant number of hours. The remaining items dealt directly with classroom teaching or working with students. This finding likely speaks to the importance that teaching principals in this study placed

on teaching, learning, and relationships. It appears that they were more likely to put their administrative duties aside to focus on learning and relationships first. Curiously, many of the teaching principals suggested that they were unable to be instructional leaders because they had no time to do this work. In actual fact, the findings suggest that teaching principals were exemplifying instructional leadership in their daily practice, through their daily organization of the teaching context and student learning with attention to the professional and personal relationships they fostered with staff, students, and parents/community. It may be that teaching principals' understandings of the construct of instructional leadership are limited to traditional ideas around classroom visits and clinical supervision, most often purported in leadership training programs (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Leithwood & Louis, 2011), and is not reflective of what they were actually doing each day that fostered good teaching and student learning. This finding support the assertion that "how principals enact leadership for learning is contextually relevant" (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018, p. 5).

It is perhaps not surprising that the fewest weekly hours was spent on areas of concern that were peripheral to their emphasis on the immediacy of the classroom context (facilities and bussing). The one area of focus that was somewhat surprising in this regard was the reported lack of time spent on securing substitute teachers. It may be that some divisions had centralized their substitute call list, and this was no longer the responsibility of local principals. It may also be that most of these communities were distant from each other, and therefore, teaching principals already knew who, and how many, substitute teachers were actually available. It may also be that these schools were small and that the principals had figured out ways to "cover" classes if staff were away (using teacher preparation periods or their own administrative time, for example), and were therefore less reliant on substitute teachers.

Three commonly noted research findings were consistently affirmed as significant impacts on the teaching, leading, and personal lives of teaching principals, and four others were acknowledged as being significant. The common finding that instructional and administrative expectations make balancing the role difficult (Parsons & Hunter, 2019; Jutras et al., 2020; Wallin et al., 2019) was consistently ranked as a primary influence on the daily work of the teaching principal, the quality of learning that takes place in the school, the sense of self-efficacy and effectiveness of the teaching principal, and something that must be considered prior to assuming the role. The difficulty in achieving work-life balance (Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Newton

& Wallin, 2013; Jutras et al., 2020) was noted to have a significant impact on the daily work and personal life of the teaching principal. The common finding that teaching principals often overlook their physical and mental health was considered to have significant impact on the personal life of teaching principals, and their sense of self-efficacy and efficiency.

In addition to affirming the significant impact of these three findings across three or more of the provided areas of focus, the fact that teaching principals were often called away from their classrooms was noted to impact the daily work of teaching principals and the quality of learning that occurred in schools. Teaching principals also affirmed that the leadership style of teaching principals in rural, remote, and northern schools tends to be more collegial and relational, which, in their view, significantly impacts the quality of learning in the school. The fact that teaching principals learn to develop multiple time management strategies was noted to have a significant impact on their sense of self-efficacy and effectiveness. However, they also acknowledged that they felt guilt over the frequent need to be away from their classrooms, and this sense of guilt had an impact on their personal lives as they had difficulties trying to disconnect from work.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the discussion regarding the average hours per week spent on teaching, learning, and relationships, the benefits that teaching principals discussed were related to their enjoyment of the nature of the work in the classroom, the credibility that being a teacher provided them in their administrative role, and the relationships they created with students and teachers. Clearly, the respondents of this study privileged the microcosm of the classroom and the relationships that developed within it. The benefits about which they spoke then moved away from the classroom to the level of influencing the direction of the school, and eventually outwards to the value they placed on the family and community. Interestingly, there was not much emphasis in the discourse on the benefits that accrued for teaching principals at the system level of the division/district. These findings may suggest that teaching principals were most heavily invested in their local communities and therefore did not see beyond the immediacy of their daily work. However, the findings may also suggest that teaching principals in small schools often find that they are professionally isolated from other administrative colleagues in larger centers/schools who are often working at 100% administrative time, who are remunerated more highly, and whose “issues” are often considered to be more important (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2013). If this is the case, the finding may suggest that the role of the teaching principal may be marginalized within many school systems, and that more attention

should be paid to the nature of the work and the unique leadership skills and talents teaching principals have to offer. Otherwise, there may be little systemic incentive to apply for these positions, which could in fact add to the difficulties associated with attracting and recruiting principals in rural, remote, and northern contexts.

The challenges of the position affirmed common findings in the literature that suggest that teaching principals have difficulties finding the time to manage the dual expectations of the role (Parsons & Hunter, 2019; Starr & White, 2008; Jutras et al., 2020; Wallin et al., 2019). The volume of the workload expectations, and the need to "put out fires" or be engaged in meetings, etcetera, led to the perception that their classroom responsibilities and the need to be present with students were often adversely affected. It was not surprising that these findings surfaced given that large numbers of respondents noted they were teaching more than 55% of their full-time equivalent time allotment. Also, not surprisingly, these findings were linked to the inability to maintain work-life balance and personal wellness, with some respondents becoming very worried about their inability to disconnect from work, given the expectations placed upon them (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Jutras et al., 2020). Challenges related to maintaining professional and personal relationships in small communities (Clarke et al., 2017; Clarke et al., 2006; Hicks & Wallin, 2013; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018), where lines of authority were blurred but public scrutiny remained high, was a constant concern in rural, remote and northern communities, to the extent that many teaching principals questioned whether they wished to live in the communities where they worked.

Survey findings confirmed findings in our pilot study that indicated that many teaching principals take on much additional responsibility (extra-curricular, professional development planning, etcetera) as a means of offloading some of the responsibilities for staff members who are themselves coming close to burning out (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2014). Because of the ever-present threat of school closure, or calls for efficiency that tend to be "code words" for cuts to programs or staffing, teaching principals find themselves taking on more responsibility that often takes away from their ability to be effective in the dual role. As a consequence, many teaching principals spoke of the fact that they were not meeting their own personal expectations of themselves, causing them much stress and diminishing their sense of self-efficacy in the role. Many came to believe that they were not being effective in either role because the expectations were too demanding for any one person to be able to achieve. If such

is the case, then more attention must be paid to how the role is prescribed, both for the sake of recruiting and retaining principals in these schools, but also to ensure that the quality of teaching and leading is maintained.

Likely because many of the teaching principals who responded to the survey struggled with their sense of self-efficacy in their ability to do well in the role, their recommendations cautioned others who were interested in the role not to set up expectations of themselves that were impossible to meet. They also focused on the need to maintain work-life balance, and to keep at the forefront the necessity of forming positive professional relationships with staff, students, parents, and community members. And yet, similar to the findings of other researchers who have focused on teaching principals (Berndt & Fasciglione, 2015; Bouchamma, 2006; Boyd, 1996; Grady, 1990; Murdoch & Schiller, 2002; Wallin & Newton, 2014), the majority of respondents who responded to the survey enjoyed their roles, spoke of the value of the professional and personal learning that came out of their experiences, and advocated that others make the leap to take on these rewarding roles.

Given that respondents had taught on average for 18 years and had been a principal on average for seven years, their struggle to be effective in the role and to maintain work-life balance ought to be considered significant. For the most part, the respondents of this study were experienced educators who were not new to teaching, leading, or living in rural communities. To that end, we argue that it is the nature of the role itself, and how it is conceived in rural, remote, and northern schools, that must be reconsidered and redesigned. It is not sustainable to require teaching principals to teach more than 55% of their full-time allotment and expect that they will be able to be instructional role models for others, that they will be able to improve the teaching and learning outcomes of their schools, and that they will be responsible for all of the legal and administrative expectations of leadership. In fact, such expectations are likely to diminish the capacity of rural leaders to meet instructional improvement targets, and minimize the desire of others to apply for leadership positions. In no way does this improve the circumstances for rural, remote, and northern schools. Rather, such expectations will provide fodder for deficit thinking around rural education, and support the continued collapse and centralization of rural schools. The role needs to be reconceptualized to include realistic expectations that provide teaching principals with opportunities to be instructional role models, to lead with vision, and to lead healthy and happy personal lives.

Conclusion

This paper reports on only one phase of the larger study described at the outset of this paper, and therefore provides only a snapshot of the findings that we hope to disseminate as the study progresses. We believe that this examination of the role and practices of the teaching principalship extends understandings of effective school leadership and has implications for leadership development, school effectiveness, school system governance, and educational outcomes. A deeper understanding of the challenges, as well as the positive contributions, of the teaching principalship may provide policy makers with the tools to create relevant policy and facilitate effective school leadership practices in rural, remote, and northern contexts in which the teaching principalship is the norm. School divisions must learn to structure school governance roles in ways that recruit and retain school leaders, and support them in their efforts to improve student outcomes. We believe that the findings of this study can lead to the improvement of teaching and leadership practice for teaching principals in rural, remote, and northern contexts, if employers, policy makers, ministries of education, and post-secondary institutions pay attention to them. In particular, the way in which the role of the teaching principal is conceived, and the expectations of those who take on the role, have to be carefully crafted by local school divisions, and not based on rational economic models that may not support quality teaching, leading, and learning. In addition, the findings should be incorporated into leadership programs so that they become more responsive to the educational contexts within which rural, remote, and northern teaching principals work (McConnell et al., 2021; Pendola & Fuller, 2018). We also suggest that teaching principals should intentionally create professional networks that help to offset professional isolation and that allow them to co-construct understandings of what constitutes effective practice. By extension, improved teaching and leadership practices will positively affect student outcomes and help to reduce the educational outcome gaps experienced by rural, remote, and northern students.

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