

Research Article

“I’m Not Where I Want to Be”: Teaching Principals’ Instructional Leadership Practices

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This paper reports on the ways in which teaching principals in rural schools in Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan, Canada enact instructional leadership within the five leadership domains conceptualized by Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008). Although participants suggested that they were “not where they wanted to be” in their efforts to enact instructional leadership, their actions demonstrate exemplary practice in this regard. The nature of the discourse perpetuated by leadership groups and teachers’ associations that equates instructional leadership with classroom visits only has the effect of decreasing teaching principals’ self-efficacy as instructional leaders. We argue for recognition of these leaders’ efforts to support learning, and a reconstitution of the role of the teaching principal such that instructional leadership expectations are realistically manageable for leaders in small rural schools.

Introduction

The tone of a conversation in which a leader states, “I’m not where I want to be” is telling. If the statement is made with a measure of nonchalance, it denotes that the individual is relatively confident of his/her ability to “get there,” and perceives challenges as a normal part of required effort. If the statement is said in frustration, it denotes a resentment towards barriers of concern that have lit a fire of determination to succeed. In both of these cases, the listener can infer a sense of hope that the speaker will achieve his/her ambitions with time, strategy, and force of will. When the statement is articulated in a tone of utter defeat, however, the listener senses that not only has all hope for achieving success been lost, but that the leader has internalized a sense of failure and guilt for not living up to expectations s/he has of her/himself. This becomes an awkward space of vulnerability for the leader, the listener, and the people who are implicated in this perceived inability to achieve the goal.

Unfortunately, such is the tone that was articulated by a number of teaching principals in rural schools in the prairie provinces of Canada who uttered this statement in relation to their efforts to enact instructional leadership. And yet, as researchers observing how the school communities were

operating, we perceived that their self-evaluations were grossly under-estimated. What was needed was a reframing of the discourse shaping their perceptions of what constitutes instructional leadership, and an acknowledgement of the many ways in which teaching principals excelled at this fundamental aspect of school leadership.

A teaching principal is recognized as a formal school leader whose position includes a dual role as classroom teacher and school principal (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Clarke & Stevens, 2009). In some provinces in Canada such as British Columbia and Ontario, school principals are out of scope of teachers’ unions, and therefore these positions do not exist. However, in the prairie provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, principals remain within the collective bargaining units of the teaching profession, and many teach within the schools they lead. In urban schools in these provinces, the phenomena of teaching principals is rare, except in spaces that hold a philosophy that principals who are connected to teaching and learning are better able to enact instructional leadership (Boyd, 1996). In rural areas, the framing of the role has often had a negative connotation attached to concerns of decreased enrolment, and staff reduction (Grady, 1996). It is also the case that although there are provincial policies related to teaching, and provincial policies related to the principalship, there exist no provincial

policies related to the teaching principalship. The design of the role is based on school district policy, which is inconsistent (or non-existent) within and across provinces, and more often than not, premised upon shifting general norms related to staffing levels and enrolment.

This paper reports on the plethora of ways in which teaching principals in rural schools in Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan Canada enact instructional leadership as conceptualized by Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008). In their meta-analysis of 22 studies that examined the effects of instructional leadership on student outcomes, the authors noted five dimensions that were commonly associated with instructional leadership practice: establishing goals and expectations; planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum; promoting and participating in teacher learning and development; resourcing strategically; and, ensuring an orderly and supportive environment. This paper reports on the ways in which teaching principals enacted these leadership practices in rural schools to support their primary aim of improved student learning.

Methodology

This phase of our study employed the qualitative approach (Merriam, 2009) of interpretive description. This approach is appropriate in cases where a broad description of relatively under-developed phenomena is the focus of study and where research is directly connected to issues of practice (Hunt, 2009). We conducted school observational visits and face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 10 principals from rural schools in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. Participants worked in school configurations that included elementary/middle schools, high schools, and K-12 composite schools. Enrollments ranged between 40-170 students, staffed by 4.75-9 full time teaching equivalents and 1-4 full-time support staff equivalents.

Five interviews were conducted in Saskatchewan, three interviews were conducted in Alberta, and two interviews were conducted in Manitoba. The only selection criterion for participants was that the principal must have at least 20% of his/her work assignment as a teaching assignment. Though research indicates principals commonly lament their ability to find enough time to enact instructional leadership (Wallin & Newton, 2013; Pollock et al., 2015), we wondered what

additional nuances principals who teach might bring to this conversation. The respondents held teaching responsibilities between 20%-70% of their full-time load. Seven of the 10 participants were in their first three years of the role. Interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes, were digitally audio-recorded, and then transcribed.

Data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using content analysis through the use of the qualitative software platform NVivo. The transcripts of the interviews were coded for themes and categorized for conceptual patterns (Stake, 2000) related to the five leadership practice dimensions of instructional leadership (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Initial coding of data employed the categories identified in the literature, and emergent codes were added in subsequent iterations of analysis.

Findings

The findings of the study are organized around teaching principals' senses of guilt in not achieving their vision of being an instructional leader, as well as evidence in their actions of the five leadership practice dimensions: establishing goals and expectations; planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum; promoting and participating in teacher learning and development; resourcing strategically; and, ensuring an orderly and supportive environment.

Guilt

Teaching principals carried much guilt regarding their perceived inability to enact instructional leadership. When we inquired into the reasons why teaching principals felt this way, we realized that their conceptualization of instructional leadership was limited to classroom visits. The messaging they received from school district leadership teams and teacher associations echoed messaging commonly found in the literature that suggests principals need to spend time in classrooms to effectively monitor and encourage curriculum implementation and quality instructional practices (Stronge, Richard, & Catano, 2008). Support for this conclusion can be found in commentary from teaching principals who talked about district implementation of classroom based observational models (i.e. Classroom Walkthroughs) accompanied by regularly scheduled accountability meetings with senior leaders. One teaching principal scoffed at the provincial union position: "so if you listen to the [Union] they say you should be spending

50% of your day supervising and providing instructional leadership to your teachers (laughs)...It is not because I don't want to." Though classroom visits are an important component of instructional leadership practice, this appeared to be the singular message about instructional leadership continually relayed. Teaching principals came to understand that effective instructional leadership is enacted by principals who engage in classroom visits, and ineffective instructional leadership is enacted by principals who do not engage in classroom visits.

As a consequence of this limited framing of instructional leadership, teaching principals suggested that their instructional leadership was "not where I want it to be." Given their own teaching responsibilities, many found it difficult to schedule classroom visits, and/or they were constantly rescheduling appointments. The idea that classroom visits came second to "putting out fires" was articulated by one teaching principal who noted, "you deal with what is at your throat and unfortunately instructional leadership is not one of those pieces that are screaming at you if you don't deal with it. It is one of those things that kind of hovers in the background". Another teaching principal offered, "all your time is getting eaten up with your classroom responsibilities, management responsibilities and family responsibilities. You are not able to have the time to have the conversations you want to have that are fun and exciting."

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. Some could not attend to their own goals for improving instructional leadership, which made one teaching principal feel like "I am role modelling bad behavior." Because many teaching principals changed teaching assignments regularly to ensure other teachers taught in their areas of specialization, some teaching principals felt guilt over their lack of knowledge regarding curricula and assessment. They did not feel able to support teachers when they were regularly struggling with preparation for their own courses. Others felt guilty in their "downtime" moments, feeling that they had to try harder to "spread themselves even more thinly." One teaching principal noted that she was continually sacrificing in her efforts, "and that becomes a frustration because I know I can do this better." The greatest source of guilt was felt over perceptions that they were doing a disservice to students:

you are trying to preserve what happens in the classroom as somewhat sacred because you don't want that kid to have negative or a poor experience because they have the principal as their teacher and yet you have this other role that you have to perform to support other people.

Ultimately, many of these teaching principals felt that they were unable to live up to the multiple expectations placed upon them, and as a consequence, did not feel efficacious in any of their roles:

I think sometimes you just feel that you don't really do a good job of anything. You do an okay job of things but you don't really do a great job of everything because there is just not enough hours in the day.... it's a lot of guilt I find in this job. I think that's my biggest thing. I feel guilty.

This sentiment was expressed more so by teaching principals who were new to the role, or by those who worked in schools that were inching towards school closure. This sentiment was also expressed by teaching principals in rural schools where standardizing accountability regimes placed significant pressure on rural schools in ways that did not make sense given small enrolments, multi-age/multi-grade contexts, and cross-disciplinary instructional practices.

Despite the unique challenges to instructional leadership articulated by teaching principals, it was clear in our observations that teaching principals were enacting instructional leadership within the five leadership practice domains either directly, or indirectly, that drew from their unique perspectives as teachers, leaders, and rural community members.

Establishing Goals and Expectations

Teaching principals regularly shared their values and expectations with their staffs, which was made simpler by the fact that they worked on small staffs who were in communication with each other informally and formally. One teaching principal deliberately positioned herself as a role model and collaborator in order to make more explicit not only her values, but also her willingness to work with staff towards those ends:

I shared my beliefs about how kids learn and how I think that some traditional things we need to question...I shared videos of myself teaching when I had been in other schools and I encouraged a few people to go to some PDs with me and got them talking and willing to try some

new things...it is about sharing my values really strongly.

A number of teaching principals spoke about tying professional growth plans to teaching and learning frameworks that included instructional goal planning. As one teaching principal noted, using frameworks that incorporated teaching and learning expectations helped to facilitate critical conversations with staff:

Divisionally all staff have to do a professional growth plan...using the effective teaching practices framework to tie the goals together...there is that continuum, this is where I'm sitting, this is where I need to improve and this is my goal so I found that a lot more structured. And then it's easier to have conversations, those critical conversations.

Although all teaching principals noted the importance of goal setting, they lamented the lack of formal time to regularly revisit goals. Even though the small school context allows people to touch base during recess or lunch hour, finding time to coordinate sustained attention to school goals can be "tough to stay focused on because you are always dealing with other stuff."

Planning, Coordinating, and Evaluating Teaching and the Curriculum

Teaching principals were highly invested in planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum. Most of the participants spoke of strategic staffing for teaching and learning improvement, citing examples of positions created or shared across the district for learning coaches, facilitating team teaching, assessment support, or support for special needs. All of the participants spoke of how they capitalized on staff expertise within the building to distribute leadership opportunities and support staff learning. They also spoke of developing their own, and staff, skills in the use of data for teaching and learning improvement (assessment, demographic, referrals, benchmarks, student or classroom information summaries). One example of this use of data includes the following:

One of the things we've done this year...is to develop what I call learner profile for each grade level...assessment data...demographic information referrals to student services...benchmarks screening.... I've pulled it all into a one page summary for each student. I share this data with the staff regularly throughout the year...we look at what needs to change and

what needs to be focused on. At the end of term three I use those profiles to help transition kids into the next grade and it also gives staff a chance to look at what's been going on in terms of learning where they need to focus.

Teaching principals acknowledged informal and formal communication strategies for sharing information and problem-solving, and tried to implement initiatives using a team approach. Two of the teaching principals spoke about volunteering for pilot projects organized by the province so that they would be able to learn about, and potentially influence, new directions for teaching and learning. Perhaps the most taken for granted coordination were the efforts to create effective multi-age/multi-grade learning environments for students. In most of these schools, children learned in multi-age/multi-grade environments, and we observed classrooms and teaching practices that made this complex task look effortless.

Teaching principals noted four challenges that impeded their efforts to coordinate teaching and learning initiatives. The first is a lack of access to facilities and resources for educational programming, opportunities and services. Given the large geographical distances of some of these communities from larger centers, unrealistic travel costs reduced these schools' abilities to access services. Secondly, teaching principals spoke candidly about professional isolation, and the need to be guarded about sharing information given the blurred relationships that exist in small communities. Thirdly, teaching principals in Alberta spoke of the stress of standardized assessments and reporting in small schools. They often felt unjustly penalized for reported averages that they felt were meaningless given small sample sizes, yet they had to justify results to community members who did not understand data limitations of provincial assessments.

Perhaps the most challenging expectation of their role was dealing with staff supervision and evaluation given "life in a fishbowl" in small communities. Part of the issue of staff evaluation in small schools is related to the nature of scheduling itself. For example, one of the teaching principals had to have a central office person evaluate a staff member because his teaching schedule directly matched that of the staff member in question. More often, however, the difficulties of staff evaluation are more relational. Teaching principals acknowledged that when a staff conflict or teacher competence issue arose, it was necessary to have strong support from central office

personnel at the school district. Those who felt secure in this support were compelled to deal with the issue because they believed they had a moral obligation to safeguard the learning environment for students. However, as is often the case in rural communities, relationships within and across local spaces are integrated across multiple boundaries, and key community figures can play powerful political roles. One teaching principal told a story of such an incident:

I learned very quickly that the former principal had transferred one of these people out and the transfer had come back...and I walked into a church and one of the pastors said, "Well you know that there are problems if someone transfers out." He has a lot of clout in the community.

Without the support of central office personnel (who more often than not are embedded within the blurred relationships), teaching principals were very careful about balancing the complexities of relationships at work that inevitably filtered out into the community. As community members themselves, most teaching principals knew about their staff members' personal lives, and tried to lead with compassion. They were also cognizant of the intensification of workload for many staff members, and therefore might not address some of the issues they knew existed:

There are things that I should probably deal with but I also know that this person is working hard and doing x number of things so I'm not going to pick on that. Maybe if I was in a larger school I may be picking on some of those things. When you get this size of staff you get very close and you know each other.

Teaching principals also lamented that involvement in teacher supervision and evaluation usually focused on teachers who were struggling. Those teachers who were doing excellent work often went unacknowledged:

You are not going to your talented and gifted teachers who are doing fantastic jobs and supervising them and you know taking strategies out of their classrooms...you can't really force them to do more because they are also coaching three teams and running the students' union.

Even though teaching principals knew these individuals could become excellent mentors for other teachers, their recognition of these individuals' workload sometimes stopped them from requesting more from this stellar group.

Finally, one teaching principal regretted that she did not have anyone to evaluate her teaching:

What I liked as a teacher was someone watching your teaching style and even if it is a colleague and saying, "You know, your introduction was awesome and your set and your anticipation skill and you know what, or you know you can improve on this and you notice that you are doing that sort of thing because..." No one is evaluating me as a teacher.

Although the literature base discusses in detail the nature of principal evaluation, Sinnema and Robinson (2012) noted that "while instructional leadership features in both the standards and the assessment tools used in many jurisdictions, there is a mismatch between its strategic importance in terms of school performance and the importance it is accorded in principal evaluation policy" (p. 140). We note in addition that nowhere in this literature is there a discussion about the distinctions for evaluating teaching principals who perform this dual role.

Promoting and Participating in Teacher Learning

Teaching principals articulated five strategies that were enacted to encourage teacher learning. The first was to offer teachers the autonomy to learn in self-directed ways while tying learning to school initiatives such as Indigenous education or technology supported learning. Resources were made available and local expertise was utilized to help support teacher learning focused on immediate classroom needs. A second strategy mentioned to promote teacher learning was to create opportunities for teacher collaborations or team-teaching through innovative scheduling, provision of substitute teachers, or acquisition of division resources. A third strategy was to create action research or inquiry learning projects based on school goals during which teachers inquired into their individual or group practices while collecting data and making decisions that would improve the learning environment. A teaching principal described this innovation the following way:

we're trying to position our teachers as researchers, so this year we asked them what's the problem or professional practice that you are interested in exploring...and you're putting them through like mini action research cycles. As opposed to saying there's an answer in a book out there, we want you to do the research and we want you to own it and to create some solutions.

A fourth strategy utilized to promote teacher learning was to deploy staff strategically, either by changing grade level, or focusing on a different curriculum, so that they would be compelled to try new ideas that might facilitate a culture of learning. The fifth strategy utilized was one whereby the teaching principal role modeled and/or was actively engaged in professional growth, whether that was through participating in professional development opportunities, undertaking graduate work, or participating in local leadership programs.

Teaching principals noted three major concerns with this dimension of leadership practice. The first was that small school time commitments do not allow for having too many people out of the building at any one time because schedules are very complex, and staff must cover preparation periods for each other. It can also be the case that one person with multiple roles may be required to be away from the classroom for extended periods of time, detracting from students' learning and their relationship with the teacher. Finally, professional development budgets tend to be small, and principals need to ensure that travel costs are not excessive.

Resourcing Strategically

Teaching principals in small rural schools engaged in multiple strategies for acquiring the resources they needed to serve their student populations. Their advocacy for additional positions to support students was evidenced by their acquisition of social workers, instructional coaches, support teachers, diversity education support workers, community liaisons, etc. They also worked with external agencies such as Child and Family Services or Justice to share resources. Although many positions were not granted full time equivalent status, without this advocacy, students would not be able to access support in these areas of need, and/or the work would become an additional responsibility of teachers or the teaching principal (which was most often the case).

In terms of teaching and learning initiatives, many teaching principals engaged substitute teachers to provide flexible time for teacher meetings around learning goals. They often coordinated professional development activities with teaching needs, and targeted resources that supported learning (e.g., team teaching, resource access, conference attendance). Two of the teaching principals spoke of becoming pilot schools for early opportunities because they

received free professional development and resources. Some teaching principals strategically targeted school budgets to resource mobile technology and bandwidth to support program and curricular options for students, while others developed shared programming with local schools in the areas of practical and applied arts, fine arts, or extra-curricular options. One innovative teaching principal was very deliberate in targeting funding to help change the teaching and learning culture in classrooms by purchasing student-friendly furniture that encouraged comfort, creativity and group learning.

Given their unique positioning as rural teaching principals, leaders capitalized on their relationships with the community to improve the teaching and learning environment. They regularly accessed external funding opportunities such as grants and community donations. Most valuable was the relationships they created with community members to acquire local community expertise or shared community facilities. This were able to access local expertise for guest presentations, support for curricular or extra-curricular programs, help with fundraising, and local donations of labor and equipment. Two examples are provided to demonstrate the integral link between rural schools and their communities, facilitated by the efforts and invitation of rural teaching principals:

We have our field of dreams...I am pretty sure that the price tag was upwards over \$100,000. We completely gutted our track and field, we built a football field, we built a 1.2 kilometer track, we put in baseball diamond... our community paid for everything. They did all of the fundraising and they found all of the people to do the work and the local businesses donated their time... and...products to do everything.

We have done a lot of different projects that involve different groups from the community. Like with the elevators there is the elevator museum we have done a project with them, we have a watershed conservation district here, we are building a community garden. Our local community wanted an artist to come in so we did a project with them. We had no vocational art at all, no sewing no woods no metals, no nothing. So we formed a committee and we had a little project where they built dog houses and they cooked and baked and sewed things and so the community helped out with that.

These examples highlight the unique opportunities that rural school leaders have to support teaching and learning. They illuminate the reciprocal relationships created between school and community, as well as the benefits that accrue from investing in the knowledge and resources that reside in local people.

Ensuring an Orderly and Supportive Environment

The acquisition of additional or specialized positions for student enrichment, supports for exceptional needs, data collection and analysis, and innovative course scheduling helps to create conditions in which teachers can focus on teaching and learning. The reorganization of the classroom environment, including the addition of furniture or cultural artifacts or artwork, lead to a more relaxed, inclusive, and culturally responsive learning environment:

We made sure that the learning environments are pretty flexible as opposed to the rigidity of an old-style classroom so you can walk into a number of classes and you will see kids kicked back on big bean bags or sitting on a chesterfield or a wicker chair with their knees up and it looks like they are in a living room rather than a classroom.

Focusing on regular communication, data collection and analysis, and the achievement of curricular outcomes supports risk taking, pedagogical change, and student learning transitions, particularly in multi-age/multi-grade contexts. The creation of team-teaching environments helps to develop teacher self-efficacy and encourages risk-taking. Inviting the community to help create an inclusive environment brings huge returns for parent engagement:

The families are highly involved, the parents don't have any qualms about stopping by to ask questions or to send an email or make a phone call. Or to get involved in activities like finding drivers for teams or a class trip. I have enough within 10 minutes of the call going out that I don't worry about things like that. I think in that respect community support and involvement is huge. Everybody knows everybody and they're quite willing to step up when they have the opportunity.

The important phrase of this last statement includes the words, "when they have the opportunity." It is clear that the teaching principals of this study are

deliberately creating opportunities for community involvement to maximize opportunities for students. The relationships they nurture are key to the success of these small schools that otherwise may struggle with limited funding and opportunities. All of these examples highlight the ways in which teaching principals helped to foster an orderly and supportive environment for teaching and learning.

Discussion

Bandura (1986) defined self-efficacy as "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (p. 391). He distinguished between efficacy expectation (people's sense that they are capable to execute certain actions) and outcome expectation (their predictions that their behaviors will achieve certain results), noting that the most influential determinant of behavior is efficacy expectation. We argue that although teaching principals' outcome expectations related to their ability to engage in instructional leadership may have been high, their efficacy expectations related to their ability to enact instructional leadership withered given their inability to regularly visit classrooms. If efficacy expectation is a more influential determinant of behavior than outcome expectation, it is little wonder that teaching principals felt they were failing as instructional leaders and that they developed a sense of guilt for "not being where they want to be."

Alternately, however, the evidence from our study suggests that teaching principals are highly engaged in the work of instructional leadership, and they should be applauded for their efforts to support teaching and learning. It is their internalized discourse around instructional leadership, perpetuated by local district and teachers' association emphases on classroom observations, that needs to be reframed. As Leithwood and Louis (2011) articulated, district practices are an important factor in shaping school leaders' senses of efficacy. The discourse messaged by districts and teachers' associations needs to more closely reflect Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe's (2008) leadership practice dimensions that are robust and holistic in their focus on the entire school environment. Unless this discourse changes, it is unlikely that teaching principals' self-efficacy for providing instructional leadership in small rural schools will improve. Given that self-efficacy is known to influence individual accomplishment, level of persistence, optimism, motivation, and even career

trajectory (Bandura, 1993), changing the discourse is necessary to ensure that teaching principals in rural schools persist in their efforts and do not withdraw from leadership. Recruitment and retention can be difficult for small schools (Hansen, 2018; Wood et al., 2013). This fact does not need to be exacerbated by external expectations that are unrealistic, narrow in scope, and undermine the self-efficacy of individuals who are in actuality doing “double duty” in their efforts to create effective learning environments.

It is also evident that the constitution of the role of teaching principal affects how instructional leadership is practiced in small rural schools. Scheduling complexity literally dictates the extent to which teaching principals can engage in leadership practices outside of the classroom. Teaching load affects how much time is available during the day to engage in the leadership practice dimensions. The nature of the teaching load impacts how much new learning will be required by the teaching principal even as it provides opportunities to engage in professional growth opportunities alongside staff. The dual role provides a means for the teaching principal to create a shared vision amongst staff who are similarly invested in creating effective classroom environments. It provides the opportunity to gain credibility in instruction and assessment, and helps teaching principals discern where strategic resourcing may have the most impact. Because parts of the day are spent in the classroom, teaching principals must learn to distribute leadership and capitalize on staff expertise to accomplish school goals. They are able to see that the classroom is but one facet of the expectations placed upon teachers, and they are likely to be more compassionate in their outlook when working with staff members. They also are able to see the benefits of diversity in staff positions, pedagogical innovations, and action research as they must examine their own teaching practice because they are expecting others to do so.

It is evident in our findings that the rural context shapes how instructional leadership is practiced in two areas in particular: supervision and evaluation, and community engagement. What is similar to other supervision studies nationally and internationally is that, in general, principals tend to avoid teacher supervision and evaluation in their desire to avoid conflict with the individuals in question (Le Fevre & Robinson, 2015). What is different in the small rural school context is that the desire to avoid conflict extends beyond the individual to include potential

conflict with members of the community given the complex networks of relationships that exist in these spaces. When teaching principals plunge into the fray, they tend to focus their limited time on performance management issues rather than engage with high-quality teachers who have the potential to mentor others. The unfortunate consequence of their desire to not ask more of these highly capable people, however, is a missed opportunity to develop teacher leadership amongst staff.

The second area in which the rural context shapes instructional leadership practice is its link to community engagement. Our work indicates that rural teaching principals who invest in local community knowledge reap benefits that improve the learning environment in terms of increased parental engagement, program enhancement, and facility improvement (Wallin & Newton, 2014). The investment by community members in time, donations, labor, and service is phenomenal, but it is the local school principal who creates the conditions for this positive engagement to occur.

Finally, there are two areas that were not developed strongly in the responses from teaching principals given our initial focus, but are areas that need to be more fully explored in future work. The first was that the accountability regimes in Alberta impact the work of teaching principals, particularly in rural small schools where standardized testing and quality improvement mandates are frustrating teaching principals in their efforts to help local staff and community members make sense of achievement outcomes. This finding echoes the work of Seashore Louis and Robinson (2012) who suggested that “external accountability policies will not develop the instructional leadership that is needed to bridge state and district policy intentions” when those “policies are [not] aligned with their values or preferences, and where they see their district leaders as [not] supportive of school-driven accountability initiatives” (p. 660). The second area upon which we would like to focus is on acknowledging the exemplary practices of teachers in small rural schools who are teaching in multi-age/multi-grade environments. Research has demonstrated that teachers in these environments are highly adaptive and innovative (Smit et al., 2015). It would be particularly interesting to study more closely what instructional leadership practices might best serve the needs of these teachers.

Conclusion

Although the challenges faced by teaching principals in small rural schools can be daunting at times, only two of our participants appeared to be struggling. One of those worked in the smallest school in our sample that was dangerously close to school closure. The second was in her first year as a teaching principal in a highly political community environment. None of our participants wanted to give up their teaching role even though it brought about complex challenges. One person suggested, “I like the teaching piece, I just have to figure out a balance.” Another suggested that in order to be a truly effective instructional leader, “every administrator should be teaching at least something. Even if it’s just 10%.” A third person acknowledged “I don’t think I could go to full admin, I think I would go crazy.” Overall, our study affirms that it is not the dual role alone that precludes teaching principals from engaging in instructional leadership in small rural schools. Teaching may actually enhance their ability to create effective teaching and learning environments. Robinson (2010) suggested that there are three interrelated leadership capabilities

required by principals in order to engage in effective instructional leadership: (a) using deep leadership content knowledge to (b) solve complex school-based problems, while (c) building relational trust with staff, parents, and students. The teaching principals in our study are highly cognizant of, and focus their efforts on, building relational trust with staff, parents, and students in their local rural communities, and they integrate their leadership knowledge to solve the complex problems found in these schools. Teaching principals have integrated these leadership capabilities in their enactment of instructional leadership in a plethora of ways—they simply have not been recognizing it as such. School districts and teachers’ associations must change the nature of the discourse around instructional leadership so that teaching principals do not measure their efficacy as instructional leaders based only on their ability to visit classrooms. The constitution of the role of the teaching principalship must be reconceptualized to make recommendations on optimal parameters within which instructional leadership expectations are realistically manageable. The aim must be to support teaching principals so that they can say with assurance, “I am where I want to be.”

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