

Teaching Principals in Small Rural Schools: “My Cup Overfloweth”

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This paper presents the results of interviews with 12 Manitoba and Alberta rural teaching principals regarding their leadership practices in small schools. The overwhelming theme mentioned by these teaching principals was the joy and sense of purpose they found in the relationships they cultivated with children, staff, and community members because of the ‘advantages’ they had working in small schools. The paper details the small schools context within which teaching principals are working in these two provinces and outlines the role of reciprocal relationality that is central to their leadership efforts in small rural schools.

Cet article présente les résultats d’entrevues auprès de douze directeurs-enseignants d’écoles rurales au Manitoba et en Alberta portant sur les pratiques de leadership dans les petites écoles. Le thème dominant qui en est ressorti est celui de la joie et le sentiment d’un but à atteindre qu’ils tiraient des rapports entretenus avec les enfants, le personnel et les membres de la communauté et qu’ils associaient aux « bienfaits » de travailler dans une petite école. L’article décrit en détail le contexte scolaire dans lequel travaillent les directeurs-enseignants dans ces deux provinces, et dresse un portrait du rôle de la relationnalité réciproque qui est au centre de leurs efforts comme dirigeants de petites écoles en milieu rural.

Introduction

Much of the Canadian research conducted on rural education in Canadian public schools has unfortunately occurred amidst the backdrop of rural depopulation, and economic downturns (Corbett, 2013b; Harris, 2002; Wallin, 2008). This research reports 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 (Barter, 2011; Canadian Council on Learning, 2006; Shaienks & Gluszynski, 2007). In the prairie provinces of Canada, there are still large proportions of students who attend small rural schools, and who are included in the statistics supporting this reported rural-urban education gap. Although there is no agreement in the literature of what defines ‘rurality,’ if the two primary cities of each prairie province are eliminated from public school enrolment data (Winnipeg and Brandon in Manitoba; Regina and Saskatoon in Saskatchewan; Edmonton and Calgary in Alberta), the proportions of children attending rural, remote and/or northern public schools in 2013/2014 were 43% (77,631) in Manitoba, 68% (89,484) in Saskatchewan, and 56% (246,588) in Alberta. It is imperative that the public school systems in

these jurisdictions ensure that the students who attend small rural schools are provided with a quality educational experience.

Those who remain committed to preserving small schools and the lifestyles of those who live within rural communities carry on their efforts recognizing that viability is often linked to radically transformed organizational structures, or economic or educational innovations that are often unsustainable (Budge, 2006; Schafft & Youngblood Jackson, 2010). For the most part, reforms for small rural schools are enacted through cuts to programs or positions, with school closure always looming in the nightmares of parents, teachers and communities (Corbett, 2013b) who consider the school to be the heart of the community (Wallin, 2005).

Despite some of the structural and organizational limitations that affect small rural schools, however, the educational practices that have been documented to occur within them are often noted to be on the cutting edge of current research on effective practices. Multi-age programming, team teaching, land-based programming, curricular innovation, distance education and technology, close student-teacher relationships, inter- and cross-disciplinary initiatives and school-community linkages tend to be common elements of small rural school programs due to economic necessity, to smaller population bases in which relationships cut across community groups, and/or to greater access to rural landscapes (Barter, 2011; Corbett, 2013a; Wallin, Anderson, & Penner, 2009). These same practices have been found to increase student engagement, motivation to learn, and relationship building (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Halversen et al., 2012; Howley, Howley, Camper, & Perko, 2011; Kobelin, 2009; Wright, 2007). Given the importance of the school leadership effect on student outcomes (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004), it is essential that research focus on the practices of school leaders who work in these small schools.

We argue that the role of the principal in leading small schools has not received the attention it deserves, particularly when one considers that these schools are constantly reorganized and reshaped in order to remain viable. In addition, the leadership literature typically defines the principal as someone who does not directly teach, but who influences teaching in the school indirectly through the supervision of teachers and management of instruction (Leithwood & Levin, 2005). In fact, many principals in small rural schools engage in direct instruction (Starr & White, 2008), either due to declining enrolments, because they work in "schools of necessity" in remote locations (Alberta Education, 2012/2013; Grady, 1990), or because they work in districts that promote the role modelling of instructional leadership through direct instruction (Goldys, 2009; Prabhu, 2007).

We interviewed 12 Manitoba and Alberta rural teaching principals regarding their leadership practices in small schools. The overwhelming theme mentioned by these teaching principals was the joy and sense of purpose they found in the relationships they cultivated with children, staff, and community members because of the "advantages" they had working in small schools. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to provide the context in which teaching principals are working in small schools in Manitoba and Alberta, and to outline the role of reciprocal relationality that is central to their leadership efforts in small rural schools.

We argue that the interests of small rural communities have been underserved in the education system, and the knowledges of teaching principals in rural, remote and northern communities have been overlooked in the leadership literature and current policy movements. Boyd's (1996) work on the teaching principalship suggests that teaching principals are role models whose credibility increases as a consequence of their classroom experience. Because they are continually immersed in the realities of teaching, they send a message that teaching is

important, and are able to make better judgments about upcoming initiatives or policies. Boyd acknowledges that teaching principals' visibility and direct relationships with students have the potential to reduce discipline issues and increase positive school relationships. Finally, Boyd suggests that principals who teach gain a positive diversion from administrative tasks that may help offset principal burnout. Though beyond the scope of this paper, our own work on the instructional leadership practices of teaching principals confirms Boyd's contributions (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2013).

We argue that, given the contexts of small economies of scale in which many of these teaching principals work, they are likely well used to incorporating innovative practices in their leadership, as they commonly must search for, and implement, "the best achievable solution in the situation, given available resources" (Norcia, 2002, p. 246). This is why rural researchers have suggested that small rural schools are "innovative out of necessity" (Wallin, Anderson, & Penner, 2009, p. 5). It is therefore important to consider the perspectives of teaching principals who have a vested interest in the education of the children in small rural schools, and who thrive on the relationships they build with children, staff and community members that support educational and community interests.

Methods

This 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 face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 12 principals from rural school divisions located within a one to two hour's drive of three major urban centers in Manitoba and Alberta. Five interviews were conducted in Alberta and seven interviews were conducted in Manitoba. The only selection criterion for participants was that the principal must have had at least 20% of his/her work assignment as a teaching assignment. Interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and were digitally audio-recorded and then transcribed.

Data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using content analysis (Sarantakos, 2005) through the use of NVivo. The transcripts of the interviews were coded for themes and categorized for conceptual patterns (Stake, 2000). The initial coding of data employed the categories identified in the literature, and emergent codes were added in subsequent iterations of the data analysis process.

Findings

This section first describes the context in which the teaching principals of this study worked. It then discusses teaching principals' understandings of their relationships with students, teachers/staff, and community members (parents and other).

Context

In Manitoba, the seven small schools were structured as follows: one K-4 (enrolment 22); one K-7 (enrolment 24); three K-8 (enrolments 44, 58, 70); one 5-8 (enrolment 36); and one K-12 (enrolment 105). These schools staffed between 1 and 8 teachers who were not all full time equivalently assigned to the school; therefore, multi-age/multi-grade programming was the

norm. The educational assistant, secretarial, library clerk, and custodial staff complement were minimal, and in some cases, non-existent. In the five Alberta schools, the schools were structured in the following arrangements: three K-6 (enrolments 80, 120, 120); one K-9 (enrolment 240); and one 7-12 (enrolment 260). The teaching staff complement ranged from 5 to 13, and the paraprofessional complement ranged from 5 to 14. In the Manitoba schools, the percentage of administrative release time for principals ranged from 0% to 50%. In the Alberta schools, principals reported administrative release allocations of anywhere from 25% to 88%. The teaching assignments of these principals included subjects such as Social Studies, Language Arts, Physical Education, Math, Technology, and Resource and Guidance. Because these individuals worked in small rural schools, they also noted that they often carried out duties that included custodial, secretarial, and maintenance services, grant writing, and extra-curricular responsibilities.

Given that the Manitoba schools were typically smaller than the Alberta schools, it was no surprise that more of these teaching principals discussed the threat of school closure that loomed over them, even if it was not always articulated openly. One teaching principal articulated that the small school in which she worked has "been under the threat of combining two schools for a long time." Another acknowledged the subtle messages she received that underscored the idea that it was only a matter of time before the school in which she worked would be closed down:

It's never formally there in any respect and in speaking to senior administration that's never been officially or unofficially on the table with the board. But I think it's in everybody's minds. When you say, "How big is your school?" and you list something under 50, people say, "Really? Is it a [Hutterite] colony?" So that's always in my mind. And there's another principal in the division who likes to remind me of it and wants to recruit me to come work in his school when we shut mine down. So that's a pressure, kind of sort of like a vice that you always feel even though it's not officially there you know it is.

In addition to school closure, some of the teaching principals noted that their concerns and/or administrative issues were not treated as being of the same importance as the concerns of administrators in larger schools. One teaching principal talked about his perception that, "sometimes when you're in the larger admin council, sometimes small school needs are sort of pushed aside in favour of the larger centres." Another teaching principal spoke of the gendered nature of the teaching principalship, noting that many teaching principals in small schools were younger females with families. She suggested that the gendered nature of this reality was intertwined with the status and prestige that is granted to leaders in larger schools, and how that undermines the relationships between small school teaching principals and principals of larger schools:

Most of us are female, too, and younger, or just are having families, and there's a group, and it's growing smaller, but there's still a group of sort of, the old boys' club, who have the biggest schools and the biggest paycheques and figure they know the most or do the most, which maybe they do sometimes but isn't always the case ... Within the group ... you feel kind of like a fly to be flicked sometimes. As if your problems are too small because your school amounts to as many kids as one of their classrooms so it's seen as less important.

The notion of being devalued was also combined with the belief that administrators in larger

schools often did not understand the additional roles that impact upon the work of teaching principals in small schools. One of the teaching principals provided the following example to describe this perception:

One morning I arrived at school, and I shovelled the walk. There was a problem with the heating system; I called and dealt with that. There was a sewage smell; so I called and dealt with that. AND there was a dead mouse in one of the traps, so I dealt with that. And that was all before 8:00. And I thought, "I bet that none of them have even got to school yet." So it's just so different. We just deal with everything ... And I don't think what we do is valued. They figure we've got it easy and don't have the problems they do.

Another teaching principal spoke of the benefits of small school programming, focusing on the fact that it was the relationships that teaching principals have with staff and students, and not the number of programs, that makes the learning environment effective:

Getting people to value what we're doing in our school and seeing it as important, because when they see your size they think, "Oh, why? It can't be as good, you can't offer as many programs, it can't be as good for kids" and I think the opposite is true. We have huge multi-age ... but we also know the people in our building. All of them. We also have those relationships. I don't think that other people who aren't teaching principals understand that. Because there is that disconnect from being in a classroom with those people.

The commitment to working in these small schools, and the passion of these teaching principals, rests directly on the relationships they have created with students, staff and community members. As one teaching principal stressed,

But for right now this is where I need to be and it works. But it's getting to this point that I'm very personally attached. When that happens you have to ... sometimes you have to step away because you're personal feelings get too involved and issues like school closure, restructuring, staff movement ... that gets hard.

In each case, teaching principals articulated that all the work they do rests in the core belief that kids come first.

It's All About the Kids

Literature on the role of instructional leadership suggests that student learning has to be the primary goal of school leaders (Leithwood et al., 2004). The teaching principals of this study also asserted this. One teaching principal spoke of the additional flexibility she had to creatively schedule learning opportunities for children because she worked in a small school. A second teaching principal spoke of the fact that monitoring student learning was facilitated in small schools, "because we all teach virtually every student in the school. We know all the kids really well". A third noted that,

The best part of my day is still in the classroom spending time with the kids ... I have a relationship with the kids in a small school that I would never have if I were in a larger school ... They know me, and I know them.

Teaching principals were especially concerned with the encroachment of administrative responsibilities on their teaching time with children. These teaching principals were highly conscious of the impact their administrative duties had on the learning environment for children, and they worried about the effects of that missed instructional time. As a consequence, many of these individuals worked deliberately with teachers and their administrative assistants on ensuring that their teaching time with students was protected:

I've made it strict that when I'm in the classroom you do not ever take me out of class to take phone calls ... unless there's an emergency. But I've talked to the teachers about that. Most discipline is handled in their classroom. They don't need me. If there's something major that happens, of course you need to pull me out, but if there's a phone call, or it's something that can be left, I don't want to ever be pulled out of the classroom. That's not fair to the kids. I try very hard to keep that balance. It's not easy. I'm pulled out a lot.

Teaching principals held similar concerns over the toll that their administrative workloads took on their relationships with students. These teaching principals worked hard to give their best as teachers to the students. If they did allow the tensions of their administrative workloads to get the best of them in the classroom on occasion, several stated they were not above apologizing to repair the important relationships they had with the students. Teaching principals in small rural schools saw their role to be more than teaching students about the curricula. These principals also focused deliberately on building community with students, and developing their sense of personal responsibility to themselves, their classmates, their communities, and to the larger social world:

I hope the academic level is high, but even more than that, I hope that what students get from our school is the sense that they are important as a person, not just as a student. That they feel valued, that they feel important, and that they feel confident enough to contribute to society in a larger way, whether that be in their own lives and families or in their community... I think in larger settings the kids don't get that. What students get at our school is an individual touch. That somebody cares about them first, and then their learning.

Many teaching principals spoke of initiatives they undertook to promote that sense of responsibility and care. One of them mentioned that all students in the school inevitably get a chance to participate on student council in ways that reflect their interests, and "because there's only 18 students in the school the responsibility is that much higher." Another spoke of a fundraiser to build a well in India. Students in the school spent their free time making friendship bracelets and greeting cards that were sold in the neighbouring communities, and they eventually made more money than was originally necessary for the well. This teaching principal spoke of the valuable lesson students learned in that

they actually do make a difference. That money and that work you did this year just gave somebody a well so they can have clean drinking water and not have to walk miles for it. That's a real thing and you have the power to do that. It's a really big concept for everyone but especially kids.

A third teaching principal spoke of creating ways for students to feel a sense of ownership of their school environment, by setting time aside on occasion for the group to decorate the school

for various events, or taking responsibility for cleaning or fixing up parts of the school. In her view, students learn to take pride in their school by also taking responsibility for caring for their learning environment.

Working with students also brought with it personal benefits to the teaching principals. For example, one of the teaching principals in our study acknowledged her developing self-efficacy that accrued as a consequence of her relationships with students:

Knowing that at the end of the day, whether it was my best day or my worst day, what I've done is affecting the world in some small way. I know that sounds really maybe naive but knowing that, you know what? This kid today walked in and didn't think they could do that... And the fact that I'm not just a part of these kids' lives for a five minute appointment. You're with them all day long, and they know you, and there's relationships there. You're helping them become who they're going to become. You don't get that in any other job.

These teaching principals in small rural schools were heartened by the fact that the students with whom they worked felt safe in their relationships with the principal. One teaching principal expressed her appreciation of the reciprocity in her relationship with students by suggesting that the students, were "loveable and they love you. They embrace you and they embrace everything about you. They know I'm here for their benefit...I treat everybody equally and they treat me very well." A second teaching principal expressed her core belief that "If it fits around kids and it's authentic around kids, everything else is icing...After the kids, it's all just stuff."

Effective Leadership Means Caring For/About Teachers and Staff

These teaching principals of small rural schools were conscious that they needed to be able to work closely with the staff in order to move school initiatives forward. The principal of one school suggested that his first priority was to:

develop a cohesive staff which, ... in a small school, unless you have everybody working together, it's not a good place to be ... People are respectful of each other, people are willing to help each other out, people who are eager to pitch in and there is no complaining with the extra-curricular which is really huge around here. We've never had difficulty getting people to do more than their share.

These individuals rely on the staff who have histories working in the school, or who live in the rural community; people who are heavily invested in creating a positive and effective school community. One of the teaching principals in the study reiterated the importance of being able to communicate openly with teachers in order to address the needs of students in the school by suggesting,

We're all in it together and we've got to support each other. That's not your kid, or my kid; these are our kids. If you see something that you don't like, then talk to me. So being part of a community is very important.

The teaching principals of this study recognized that everyone in the school community had to depend on each other, because the workload in these small schools is too big to be handled by any one person. One participant noted her appreciation for the leadership and responsibility all staff in the school took to ensure the school was functioning well:

You just can't do everything. And so I really believe in building people up and building leadership capacity and giving them leadership roles that they want... I think that saves us in these small schools, is that our teachers are so incredibly strong as leaders and really see it. Like, honestly, from our custodian to the lot ... every single person ... they all help with the goals, we all talk about budget, we can all do that in such a small staff.

These principals reported that they are able to learn about and utilize the different backgrounds and expertise of staff members because the roles of people's professional and public lives become blurred within these small communities. Teaching principals are able to learn from teachers and staff as they work alongside them in their dual role. Collaboration is key in these contexts because teaching principals cannot presume to be an expert in all areas, and they need to build on the expertise of others in the school, as one study participant noted:

I try and collaborate because I don't see myself as the expert in everything. I don't think it's possible and even if I want to come across that way I always want the people that I work with to know that their opinion is as important as mine and that we work to the same goal maybe in different capacities.

The teaching principals in this study believed that their dual role as teacher and principal helped to build strong relationships with teachers. Their responses reflected Boyd's (1996) finding that teaching principals remain 'grounded' in teaching, which establishes credibility with staff, provides them with insight into teaching issues and curricular concerns, and enhances their efficacy as instructional leaders.

These teaching principals talked about the need to recognize staff for the herculean efforts most of them put into their work. They believed that sending notes of appreciation, acknowledging staff efforts publicly or privately, and caring for them when the loads got heavy or staff got sick let them know that their efforts did not go unnoticed.

A second person discussed the need that staff members have to know that the teaching principal genuinely respects them and appreciates their work:

I think these people right from the beginning were amazing teachers. They didn't need me for that ... They just needed to be told that once in a while, and it needed to be genuine. They needed to feel like somebody actually believed it when they said that they were doing a great job.

The recognition that staff worked very hard in these small schools sometimes had personal effects on teaching principals who felt that they were not doing enough to minimize heavy workloads. As one teaching principal lamented:

The other staff that I work with are incredibly dedicated and committed people and that makes my job a hundred times easier, but in some ways a hundred times harder because you care about those people who are giving so much. You feel like you need to be giving more and you need to be supporting them more ...

Much of the leadership literature speaks to the need for distributed leadership. In fact, many of the teaching principals in this study talked about trying not to distribute any more work to teachers. Rather than stemming from a need to control, these principals deliberately spent time buffering staff from additional demands because they felt staff members were already

overburdened with work. Their attempts to minimize the distribution of tasks stemmed from a place of care and concern in order to ensure their staffs did not burn out:

Those people in your building are so few and so important and so valued that you want to make sure that they know that and that they want to stay there because you don't want them burning out either. When you've got an EA [educational assistant] who works four hours a day but wants to stay another three just as a volunteer, that seems really great and you'd like to take advantage of it, but you don't. So as a result if something needs doing, then I do it and I let those things fall on me.

One teaching principal acknowledged that the educational assistants in the school often take on roles that go above and beyond their actual work assignments, particularly so if the teaching principal gets called away from the classroom to deal with an administrative issue. A second teaching principal spoke of the additional demands that requests for meetings for committee work took on small staffs:

Staff could be gone virtually two days a week because we have to be part of the middle years committee, we have to be part of all these various things but when you've only got two or three people, it gets to be a really big thing. So the small school principals have really been advocating for them to spread it out over the year more ... Otherwise we're never in our classroom ...

A number of teaching principals also suggested that their staffs attempted to buffer them from demands, as they too worried about the workloads taken on by the teaching principals. Reciprocity in care was evident in the relationships between staff and teaching principals as they supported each other in the work of the school:

My secretary is wonderful; she's like a little pit bull. Unless it's [the superintendent] himself, and even then she'll say, "Well [superintendent], she's teaching, you understand that..." And then if there was something where I had to leave for, my super staff just says, "Don't worry; we'll do this, this, this, and this. It's not a problem."

Ultimately, although the mantra in education these days is that principals must keep their focus almost exclusively on student learning, these teaching principals understand that learning cannot occur if the intensification of workload causes staff to burn out. These principals constantly reflected upon what they were asking staff to do, and their role in facilitating that. As one teaching principal queried, "Are you supporting them enough? Do they feel like they can handle this? Do they need more help? Those are the things you think about when you go to bed."

Because these teaching principals worked in schools with no administrative colleagues, they often felt quite isolated in dealing with concerns. Where possible, teaching principals built networks with other teaching principals in order to gain support and ideas from each other, as one noted:

We have three really small schools in the division so we've developed really strong connections between those principals in terms of calling each other up if there's an issue we're not sure about. Some of the issues we deal with are things that larger schools can't relate to. So we've had a pretty good connection between the three of us ... it's almost like we have our own little small school principals' association.

Because of the blurred lines of relationality in small rural schools, teaching principals did not make decisions lightly, nor did they remain unaffected by them. A teaching principal spoke of the awkwardness of his experience with having to make the case for dismissing an educational assistant who lived in the community:

I've had to let one support staff go and that was difficult ... So I know that sick feeling in your stomach at the board table having to list off the reasons why we should let this lady go and then she's there with her representative, non-unionized, but telling you why she should stay. And she was a good person but she wasn't working, so that makes it hard.

In all cases, teaching principals in small schools noted that they learned quickly that they had to be able to be open with staff about their expectations, and to deal with issues that came up immediately so that they did not fester and ruin the relationships or the work environment that existed in these small staffs:

When you have one teacher who doesn't want to go with the flow, that doesn't want to try new things, that doesn't want to innovate or participate, in a large staff that might be one tenth or one twentieth of your staff. When you have one teacher like that in a small school, that might be 100% or 50% of your staff. And compounding that, because it's multi-age, your students are also getting that for half of their time at the school or maybe all the time at the school. So if you have a team that's not cohesive it's even worse because then you're really all by yourself.

A second teaching principal reiterated the same idea:

There's nothing worse than being in a small school with one or two people who are not on board. Because there's nowhere to hide. If you're having a spat with somebody ... well good luck to find a space where you can have a snit, because there's just nowhere to find. There's one hallway. Where else are you going to eat lunch?

The reality in these small schools was that the relationships between staff and teaching principals are integral to the effective functioning of the school. Teaching principals are well aware that status and hierarchy have their place in dealing with issues that impact upon their legal roles, but these are far less important overall than caring for those who are highly invested in their commitments to the students and communities they serve.

Community Counts

In order to establish effective relationships with parents and community members, teaching principals in the small rural schools in this study learned very quickly that they had to first respect the history and culture of the communities in which they worked. As one teaching principal suggested:

No matter who you are, or how much experience you have or how charismatic you are, you can't walk in and say, "OK this is the way it is." Because this is a whole system, this is a whole community that existed before you were even there.

These teaching principals also asserted the value of personally engaging in the community.

Because small schools are considered to reflect the heart of the community, the principal becomes a public representative of what matters most to the community. By participating in the community, teaching principals demonstrate that they care about the community, and in return, that care is often reciprocated in difficult times. One principal described this tendency:

It's very important in rural communities to make sure that you are involved and, like I said, people appreciate that and I think they come to respect you more because of it, and when those time get very tough sometimes, I think those people will be the ones that will support you the most...because they know that you are a valuable member not only for the school and their kids, but also for the community as well.

On occasion, facilitating community relationships was made simpler for the principals in this study because they had grown up in the community. For example, one teaching principal noted that her work with parents was made simpler because she used to babysit a number of them when they were children. Because of those past relationships, she said she was able to successfully deal with contention because, "As long as parents know you really care about their kids, you're not doing it to be mean. I've been around the block a bit with them ... they trust me."

All of the teaching principals recognized that building relationships with parents and community members was key to facilitating their work in the schools. They knew that small school budgets could not extend the kinds of opportunities that could enrich students' experiences, and therefore they went out of their way to cultivate relationships that could lead to community support of the school.

Teaching principals made an effort not only to bring community members into the school, but also to bring the school to the community. One teaching principal spoke of creating a goal setting evening with parents around Assessment for Learning in which the parents were partners in coordinating the progression of the event. Others spoke of their appreciation of the fact that community facilities such as concert halls, skating rinks, curling rinks, ball diamonds, soccer fields, and track and field venues were provided free of charge for the students as a means of supporting the school. One school partnered with volunteer local artists to work with students and then house an arts show and sale for the whole community where proceeds were sent to an African charity. Another created a human rights project honouring elders in the community that culminated in a community technology night and dance where the students presented their work. A third school on a Hutterian colony set up a community camp-out. The local colony boss bought cotton candy for the group and parents supplied the tents. The teaching principal who mentioned this event noted, "When it was time for bed, the kids went home and showered and then we brought them back, said prayers together, tucked them in and went to bed. I just said, 'I hope the population increases in 9 months.'" A teaching principal of a fourth school talked about the need to improve the school grounds by building a wind break, improving the local track field, and building a snow hill for the winter months. Given that there were no resources for making the improvements that the school desired, the principal started calling local community members for support, including the local greenhouse, the local municipality, and the local fire brigade:

I went to the local Greenhouse guy, and said, "You're a prairie guy. What do I put in here?" ... I went to the municipality and said, "I know there's a guy down the road who has a Bob-Cat"... It's knowing people, and knowing who to call helps, and doing local. You just get in there because I think we're

instinctive networkers. When you're raised in the country, it's always too big; so we find ways to get people to work.

Teaching principals in these small schools recognized that the school owed a debt of gratitude to the parents and community members who supported their schools. Rather than taking support for granted, these principals went out of their way to acknowledge that support with hearts of gratitude. As one teaching principal suggested:

When you do reach out to those parents, either for support or for a question, or just to phone them and tell them what a cool thing their child did, to build a relationship, they begin to trust you because they know that you're there for the right reasons...the support of our community... We know that the Co-op donates the food for such and such event, but that doesn't mean a thank you letter is enough. Going over there on your lunch break and talking to that person and getting to know them a little bit goes so much farther.

Two other examples spoke eloquently about how school initiatives spear-headed by children were having an effect on community dynamics. Teaching principals were quite proud of the agency and responsibility that students were exhibiting in both cases. The first concerned a school located beside a highway along which speeding was a perennial problem. As a school initiative, the students decided to conduct a rural speed watch with an invitation to community members to support the watch because of the danger that speeding presented for the students. The second example was mentioned by a teaching principal in a school in which the students had decided to become environmentally conscious. In her view, the children were changing the entire dynamic of the community:

The Council is all on board; they're recycling used batteries because of what the kids have done here. One of our parents on our parent council is on the Council, and the flow is just amazing. The kids...we've talked about our eco-terrorists because the kids go home and say, "You can't do that! You can't do that!" [laughter] ... It was a parent who said, "I never did any of this until the kids started it." And because they're so passionate about it in school, they go home and they're changing a community.

Of course, relationships were not always positive, and friction is bound to occur. Teaching principals were very much aware that "when there's internal conflicts in the community it filters into the school...If there's a parent mad at you, your name is mud for a while at the hockey rink or whatever. You can't take it too personally." They were also aware that the friction that filtered into the school was not always caused by internal decisions or dynamics, yet teaching principals in these small schools were sometimes called upon to deal with them because they impacted school functioning. One of them offered an example of this:

That rift that develops in that parent community finds its way back to the school somehow some way. And, you know what, if you can be aware of it, you can make a phone call and try to help to resolve it, and it will pay off ... there were two parents that were having a bit of a squabble concerning summer baseball. That had worked its way between the kids now, because the parents weren't talking to each other and having some friction ... you spend a lot of time with parents, more with families and parents, and probably on some good things, probably on some things you can't believe you have to deal with.

On the occasions when teaching principals did make mistakes or over-step their boundaries, they suggested that it was important to be able to apologize in order to help repair the damage done to relationships and to work positively together in the future. One of them explained further:

You know it never hurts to say you're sorry. "Gee, I'm so sorry. If I had known that, I wouldn't have said that. Yeah, I really appreciate you calling. I'm so sorry that went down the way it did." Probably learning that in education has been the best thing. I don't have to fight you on this one; you've given me something to think about, thank you. I think it helps that you're just human.

These teaching principals took their roles as public representatives of the community very seriously, and knew that supporting the students also meant supporting the community in times of need:

It's putting out fires when there's a fire; it's standing up front when there's a crisis. It's shutting your school down when someone has died in your community who's related to one of your children and you all stand as a united team; you go to that funeral and you support that family. That's my job.

In the end, however, the greatest joy teaching principals received was knowing that they were making a difference for children and the community, and that they were appreciated for those efforts across a web of relationships that lasted long past the time that children were in school. As one teaching principal indicated proudly:

The connection you get with the kids is the biggest thing that's kept me here. I felt bad thinking that I might leave. I had parents say, "You can't leave. I still have two more kids to go through. Promise you're not going to retire till they're done." ... when the kids come back once they've gone from the school, and they come back and say those were the best years that they had when they were in your little school, that's kind of nice.

What a lovely tribute to the teaching principals whose daily efforts contribute to the learning and the relationships that can be built generationally in a small rural school.

Conclusion

A number of tensions and/or conclusions can be teased out of the findings of this descriptive study that add avenues of consideration for our future research. Firstly, although it has been documented in the literature that rural schools in general tend to be marginalized or viewed as "backward," non-progressive, or that their issues are not as "important" as those of larger, or more cosmopolitan places (Corbett, 2013a), our study found that this sentiment may also be replicated within rural school divisions for the smallest schools in the division, and/or particularly for the smallest elementary schools in the division. It appears that a "pecking order" exists within these rural school divisions, and small school teaching principals can often feel isolated as a consequence. They have found ways to network with each other, but they also regularly fight against the threat of school closure, the privileging of issues faced by larger (often secondary) schools, and a lack of empathy or respect for the complexities of small school administration. Further research on this dynamic, and how small school teaching principals can

be better supported in their unique work environments is necessary to minimize this type of marginalization and to demonstrate the complexity and innovation of their efforts.

The findings also hint at the results of other studies focused on women in leadership that have found that women (and often younger women with families), are obtaining administrative positions in very small school divisions (Gupton & Slick, 1996; Wallin, 2005) or inner city urban sites (Mertz, 2003; Murtadha-Watts, 2000). Tallerico and Blount (2004) wrote an award-winning article that used sex-segregation theory to discuss women's access to administrative positions. They noted that when any profession becomes dominated by one sex, three outcomes may result. The first is that of resegregation, whereby the influx of one sex into a profession is coupled simultaneously by an exodus of the other. The second is that of integration, in which an enduring gender balance in the same work role is achieved. The third outcome is that of ghettoization, in which one sex becomes relegated to the least valued positions. Given that the profession of teaching is highly dominated by female teachers, the proportion of women in administration has always been challenged by feminists who work in the area of educational administration. On the one hand, the apparent numbers of females in small rural school administration may be viewed as achieving resegregation, as more women are moving into these positions, while males are leaving, or not being recruited to, the profession (particularly in the area of elementary schooling). Based on another perspective, however, many school divisions would suggest that they have achieved integration by ensuring that their principal teams are represented by equal numbers of males and females (though arguments exist on what constitutes an equitable balance given that the profession itself is dominated by almost 70% by women). Finally, it also has been demonstrated in the research that more women than males access principalships in elementary, rather than secondary, schools, and/or they find their way into very small schools that are often highly demanding and complex given that many are facing school closure, and the emotional labour involved in the work is very high. In this case, the movement into small rural school positions may exemplify the ghettoization of women in administration. Our small study cannot provide a definitive answer to these possibilities, but the ideas will provide another avenue of consideration for our larger research project.

It was abundantly clear in this study that teaching principals attributed their leadership success to the quality of relationships they were able to develop with students, staff and community members. As one individual emphasized, "this is what this all is about—relationships, relationships, relationships. And without those connections I'm not exactly sure what you're doing." Although there is no doubt that the potential for burnout is high, of the 12 principals in our study, 10 of them had been offered positions in larger schools with less or no teaching time, (and therefore larger administrative salaries), but they decided to remain in their local small schools because of their commitment to the students and communities in which they worked. We found that teaching principals do tend to work long hours, multi-task to the extreme, complete more than their share of the work to buffer staff from having to do so, and often put their school commitments first to the detriment of their family time and personal health (Wallin & Newton, 2013). Even so, they developed self-efficacy as leaders and their decision to remain in their positions is based upon their strong community connections and the integration of their work with teachers and students. As one participant acknowledged, "there's not a day where I wake up and not want to go to school. And there's never been once in the 17 years that I've been here that I've felt that way. I love coming to school."

Budge (2006) articulates that "habits of place" such as connectedness with others have "influence on educational leaders' beliefs about the purposes of schooling and theories of action

related to student learning” (p. 3). Our findings reverberate with the importance of ‘place consciousness’ for rural teaching principals whose connections with students, teachers, staff and community members are underpinned by the values they hold in alignment with the communities in which they lead. Though they recognize that these small places pose problems for leadership, teaching and learning, they never-the-less also value their communities as places of privilege in which they, the staff, and students develop “a sense of efficacy and worth as contributing members of the district and community” (Budge, 2006, p. 5).

The findings of this study echo those of Collins (2004) who found that successful teaching principals worked hard, emphasized teamwork amongst staff, and demonstrated emotional intelligence in their relationships. Although they acknowledged the difficulties associated with their work, they did so in a manner that demonstrated their pragmatic imperative (Norcia, 2002) to work with the strengths of their local communities to provide the best education possible for the students in their care. They also acknowledged feelings of accomplishment and confidence they gained 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):

Every day I get to walk into a building filled with people who are glad that I’m there and people who benefit from me being there. With students who see how busy everyone is, and who work collaboratively. Who share that responsibility like everybody does in our community, that we only have so many resources so we’ve got to help out too. We’ve got to do part of it. And that’s huge.

Leadership in these small rural schools is very different from what exists in urban schools, or even within large rural schools (Wallin, 2010), because leaders are expected to understand community values, to “be highly visible, accessible and approachable, as well as reach out to members of the community to provide rationale for district action” (Budge, 2006, p. 7). Informality and relationality are more important to the success of these leaders’ ways of acting than appearing as an ‘objective professional’ who becomes the ‘boss’ of the school. For example, our work on the instructional leadership practices of rural teaching principals (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2013) noted the awkward imposition of formal clinical supervision practices that are foreign to the more organic nature of teaching and learning in small schools. Students, teachers, and leaders acknowledge how these practices amplify a distorted sense of distance between individuals that does not exist in these places. Such findings echo those of Barter (2007) who found that challenges related to government requirements and policy often create complications for role requirements and expectations of employees in rural areas where relational lines between school and community are blurred.

Having responsibilities for teaching also impacted upon the nature of relationships these leaders developed in the school. Our research suggests that being a teacher helped to maintain a relational bridge with fellow teachers since these school principals remained immediately connected to changes in curriculum, assessment, discipline and students’ learning needs. They gained a stronger appreciation for the workloads of staff, and became more cognizant, and protective, of staff time. Being a teacher helped to connect these principals with children’s lives and family situations beyond that of being the school disciplinarian or problem-solver. They became intimately involved with the social, emotional and academic backgrounds of students in ways that principals who do not teach cannot. Overall, these principals felt that their role as teachers enhanced their efficacy as instructional leaders (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2013), and provided them with credibility in conversations related to teaching and learning because they were living these realities with other teachers, students, and families.

Such findings lead to the need to design targeted preparation programs for rural small school teachers and administrators that focus directly on the complex issues facing these communities (Barter, 2008). Programs should be designed in ways that deconstruct current understanding of curricula, leadership, and governance that work to marginalize and undermine rural contexts, and provide in their stead holistic, relational and place-based curricula and pedagogies that respect local knowledge and foster innovative and sustainable strategies for rural education. Collections of courses with a focus on rural education do exist at the undergraduate and graduate levels in many universities, but they tend to be offered by individual professors with a passion for rural education, and are often electives rather than part of programs designed specifically for rural educators.

We found that the role of the rural teaching principal cannot be captured by the euphemistic language we often use to describe leadership practice because of the very real and unique challenges these individuals face as teachers, leaders and community members. Yet, we acknowledge that for the persons with whom we spoke, their commitment to teaching and leading was filled with a positive sense of hope for what they could do to improve the lives of the children under their care, and the communities they served. For these individuals, the glass (even if it is made of porcelain in some cases) is at least half full—if not overflowing on occasion.

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