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## Teaching principals in smaller primary schools

Their issues, challenges and concerns

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### Abstract

Limited research has been conducted into the teaching primary principalship in Australia, as the focus has tended to be on full time school principals. It has often been assumed that the principalship role in smaller primary schools is a 'scaled down' version of a full time primary principalship and that similar leadership and management challenges apply. There is limited recognition of the unique challenges of teaching primary principals who have the dual roles of school management and classroom teaching responsibilities in devolving school systems. A mixed method research design was developed to explore the current issues, challenges and concerns of teaching primary principals in three school systems in New South Wales. In-depth interviews with teaching primary principals informed the development of a Teaching Primary Principals Perception Survey (TPSPS) which was forwarded to Department of Education and Training, Catholic and Seventh-day Adventist teaching primary principals in New South Wales. This paper explores the issues challenges and concerns of teaching primary principals in New South Wales and provides recommendations to address challenges associated with the dual role of teaching and leading a small primary school.

### The context

Providing equitable educational opportunities for children in the vast rural regions of Australia has been and remains a challenge for education providers. Consequently, small primary schools have played a significant role in community life across the nation (Lester, 2001). In the 1930's there were 7000 small primary schools, with around 2000 of these in New South Wales. By 1935, nine out of every ten primary schools in Australia had an average attendance below 200 (Bessant, 1978). Teaching primary principals in charge of small schools were "the heroes in the building of the nation" (Beare, 1998, 23).

While the teaching primary principalship has always been a unique challenge, the complexity of

the role has been increased by the restructuring of both public and non-government school systems towards the end of the twentieth century (Gamage, 1998; Wilson & McPake, 1998; Wylie, 1997). School restructuring across the world, with its emphasis on effectiveness, efficiency and accountability, occurred at a time when nations were moving into post-industrial, internationally oriented economies (Beare, 1995; Townsend, 1996). Governments saw education as the key to remaining economically competitive (Caldwell, 1993; Murphy, 1997).

There has been extensive research conducted into understanding the leadership role of the school principal (Leithwood et al., 1999). However, little of this research has focused on the challenges, issues and concerns of teaching primary principals in devolving school systems (Wilson & McPake, 1998). Teaching principals, with their dual roles of teaching and administration, find themselves in a situation where they are caught in the "slipstream syndrome" in which they are required to interpret and adapt changes imposed with larger school contexts in mind (Dunning, 1993, 85).

The most recent Australian research into the teaching principalship was conducted by Gamage (1998), who conducted survey and interview research with fifty government primary schools in the Hunter Valley region of New South Wales. While Gamage's research yielded valuable data into the issues, challenges and concerns of teaching primary principals, it did not explore an in-depth understanding of the 'lived' experience of a broad cross section of teaching primary principals across a range of school systems in New South Wales.

The following study investigated "a big gap" in the literature regarding the complexities of the role of the teaching principal in devolving school systems in New South Wales.

### Research design

Given the paucity of prior research regarding the challenges, issues and concerns of the teaching primary principal in New South Wales, a research design was developed which was emergent, flexible and heuristic in intent (Mishler, 1990; Nielsen,

“Teaching principals, with their dual roles of teaching and administration, find themselves caught in the “slipstream syndrome””

1995). Elements of this mixed-method design included semi-structured interviews, work-log journals, document examination and the subsequent development of a questionnaire (See Figure 1). The utilization of both qualitative and quantitative research methods provided insights into the research problem that individual methods may not have provided (Creswell, 1994).

Teaching principals in State, Catholic and Seventh-day Adventist schools were included in the study to provide a comparative analysis of the issues, challenges and concerns of teaching primary principals in primary schools with student enrolments between 26 and 159 students. In the NSW State School System, these schools are categorised as PP5 schools. PP5 principals maintain major classroom responsibilities with a set class of students while endeavouring to cover administration duties and educational leadership functions.

Due to the dearth of research regarding the complexities of the role of the teaching principal in the smaller primary school in Australia, the qualitative phase of the research process was designed to gain a broader understanding of these complexities. These understandings, gained from teaching principals and school clerical staff, guided the development of the TPSPS questionnaire. Patterns of relationships between school systems and intermediate and criterion variables were pursued through multiple standardised regression analysis of the quantitative data from the TPSPS questionnaire.

## Research findings and discussion

This paper will focus on commonalities related to the issues, challenges and concerns of teaching principals in NSW State, Catholic and Seventh-day Adventist school systems. There was a high level of correlation between the perceptions of teaching principals interviewed and those that completed the TPSPS questionnaire. With a seventy two per cent return rate, the TPSPS questionnaire identified four attitude scales: The Positive Perception Scale, The Teaching Principals' Role Concerns Scale, The Classroom Learning Focus Concern Scale, and The Community and Professional Support Scale. These attitude scales are now considered.

## Positive perceptions of the teaching principalship

While teaching primary principals face many challenges, there are aspects of their role that they find enjoyable. The sense of community that comes from working closely with children, parents and staff members was a dynamic that many teaching principals found rewarding. Working collegially with a staff team, knowing each child personally and being able to chat informally with parents was important to them. They felt that they were able to make a

tangible difference in the lives of children, as typified by this comment:

Small schoolies can say at the end of the day, "I made a difference". (Catholic 2)

Teaching primary principals also enjoyed maintaining their teaching role and found this to be one of the most rewarding aspects of their role. As one informant commented, "The joy of the job is being in class". (State 1)

Many full time principals regret having to leave the classroom behind (Lyll, 1993; McPake, 1998), whereas teaching principals feel that they have the best of both worlds.

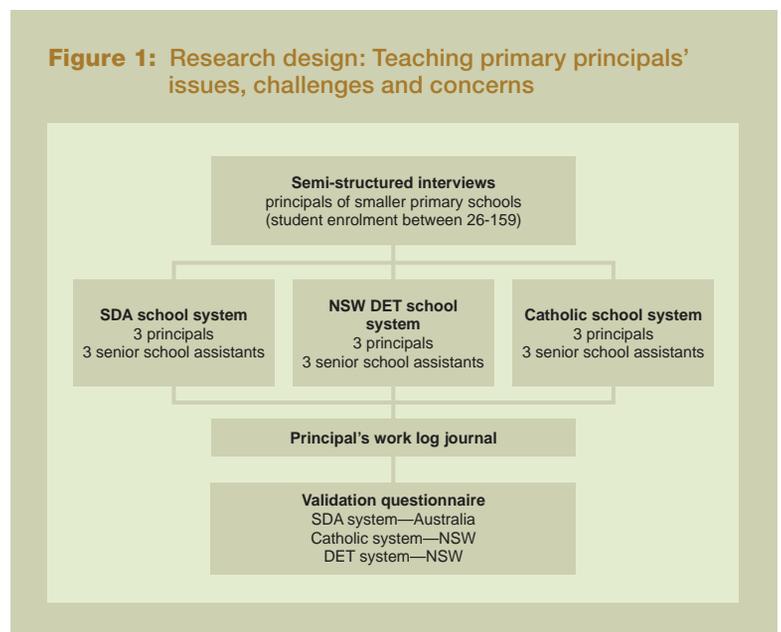
The Positive Perception Scale (See Table 1) confirmed the positive perceptions that teaching principals hold regarding their role.

## Challenges of managing their dual roles

Teaching primary principals are finding it difficult to balance the demands of teaching and management responsibilities, especially since the introduction of school based management and associated accountability requirements. On one hand, they feel a strong sense of responsibility to their class of students' and their learning needs, knowing that the parent community will judge them according to student well-being and progress. At the same time, they are attempting to meet the growing list of accountability requirements required by system authorities who tend to view them as managers rather than as teachers. It is a difficult and never-ending juggling act. As one beginning teaching principal put it:

“It is a difficult and never-ending juggling act”

**Figure 1: Research design: Teaching primary principals' issues, challenges and concerns**



**Table 1: Teaching primary principals' perceptions of individual items on the Positive Perceptions Scale**

| Item | Description  | Number | % disagree | % agree |
|------|--|--------|------------|---------|
| 50   | Small schools are great, they do a lot more for children who are at risk than anywhere else  | 132    | 6          | 94      |
| 31   | In a small school you can arrive at a collaborative decision much easier   | 133    | 14         | 86      |
| 2    | As a teaching principal it is easier to be an instructional leader because you're in touch with the reality of life in the classroom | 132    | 8          | 92      |
| 1    | Small schools offer a kind of family community that large schools can't offer  | 133    | 3          | 97      |
| 37   | Parents like the size of the school, they know all the staff and they feel they can approach any staff member                        | 133    | 3          | 97      |
| 14   | Small schoolies can say that at the end of the day, "I made a difference"  | 132    | 5          | 95      |
| 8    | I like being in control—management and leadership wise   | 132    | 11         | 89      |
| 42   | The joy of the job is being in class   | 131    | 15         | 85      |
| 47   | Parents have the opportunity to raise issues and to discuss school policy at Parent and Friends meetings                             | 133    | 7          | 93      |

It is like a clown on a stage who is juggling all the balls and he is dropping some of them. Well I haven't got to the point, I don't think, of dropping anything major, that anyone would notice, but I can tell you that the clown is getting a bit tired, you know, and some balls are going to drop soon if there is not something that comes up and says "long term you can handle this". (SDA 3)

“*Teaching principals often resent the intrusion of management issues into the classroom realm*”

Teaching principals often resent the intrusion of management issues into the classroom realm and endeavour jealously to guard the classroom environment while 'on class'. The increase of management and accountability responsibilities associated with devolution has detracted from the time and energy that teaching principals are able to give their class. This is a source of considerable frustration and concern as the following comment illustrates:

I get a lot of job satisfaction being a teaching principal but I think that it is gradually eroding because I do feel guilty that I just don't get enough time doing my core business. (State 3)

The Teaching Principals' Role Concerns Scale (See Table 2) confirmed a range of challenges, issues, and concerns faced by the teaching principals interviewed. In terms of educational management, these included: insufficient time to manage their dual roles, meeting accountability requirements, policy development and paperwork, and student welfare and behaviour management issues. Additional concerns related to school system appreciation and support included: a sense that they were being given more work but no additional

time allocation, feeling undervalued in terms of remuneration, rarely seeing District Office leaders or support staff and at times not feeling valued by their school system.

In Stage One of the study, teaching principals maintained a work-log for a seven day period. Teaching principals reported working 59 mean hours. Respondents to the TPSPS questionnaire reported working similar hours. They were typically spending 59.5 mean hours on school related activities, while they perceived that they required 74.4 mean hours to do justice to all aspects of their dual roles of teaching and principalship.

All teaching principals, regardless of their experience, were finding it a major challenge to do justice to their dual roles. The consequence was feelings of guilt and frustration. Prolonged feelings of guilt and frustration are a recipe for high stress levels and burnout. The teaching principalship has been shown to be particularly prone to these conditions (Cross, 1992; Enever, 1997). The majority of principals in this current study, regardless of experience, commented on the impact that the teaching principalship was having on their health and well-being. The following comment is indicative:

The small school principalship is a burn out field waiting to happen. (Catholic 2)

Given the heavy workloads of teaching principals, the support of an experienced clerical assistant was greatly appreciated. When present in the school, they were able to reduce the number of interruptions faced by the principal and handle

**Table 2: Teaching primary principals' perceptions of individual items on the Teaching Principals' Role Concern Scale**

| Item | Description  | Number | % disagree | % agree |
|------|--|--------|------------|---------|
| 15   | I think the bottom line is they're giving us more work but don't want to give us more time   | 131    | 8          | 92      |
| 3    | I think that the system support personnel are too thinly spread  | 133    | 12         | 88      |
| 36   | I do not feel valued by my system  | 132    | 55         | 45      |
| 13   | I think that the teaching principal is grossly underpaid for what they put in—the time and the effort  | 133    | 4          | 96      |
| 21   | There are those who look down on a small teaching principalship because they are not seen as a prize catch                                     | 132    | 17         | 83      |
| 48   | They won't pick small school principals for a larger school principalship because they haven't had the exposure in a bigger school environment | 132    | 33         | 67      |
| 16   | A lot of small school principals feel they are going to be trapped in their schools for a long time no matter how good they are                | 132    | 31         | 69      |
| 28   | Student welfare issues have taken over from pure educational issues  | 132    | 16         | 84      |
| 27   | I rarely see the District Superintendent   | 131    | 34         | 66      |
| 22   | It is ludicrous expecting this little school to have the same policies and all the paperwork as a school with a thousand students              | 132    | 24         | 76      |
| 9    | There has been more and more work as far as accountability goes  | 132    | 2          | 98      |
| 44   | Unfortunately, behaviour management issues are becoming more of a concern in our school  | 133    | 37         | 63      |

a wide range of 'administrivia' that would normally distract the principal from classroom responsibilities. Many were seen to be an integral part of the staff team, sharing the additional management responsibilities associated with devolution.

The amount of time allocated for a clerical assistant significantly impacted on their ability to support their principal. In schools where clerical assistants were part-time, they were sorely missed on the days when they were not present in the school. As one principal put it,

In a small school, the school secretary is invaluable, if they are not here you're really up the creek. (Catholic 2)

Being 'up the creek' means that the principal or other staff members are required to answer phones, care for sick children, contact parents, follow up parental requests and deal with visiting sales personnel.

### Maintaining a focus on instructional leadership

Instructional leadership is a key aspect of a principal's role. Teaching principals are perceived to be more involved in instructional leadership than their non-teaching peers, by virtue of the fact that they are still intimately involved at the classroom

level (Williamson & Galton, 1998; Vulliamy & Webb, 1995). Their credibility as a classroom teacher strengthens their position as an instructional leader (Wylie, 1997). As one teaching principal in the study noted,

You're in touch with the reality of life in a classroom. (Catholic 2)

However, it would appear that the intensification of the teaching principals' workload, due to the growing range of management and accountability responsibilities, has negatively impacted their ability to function as instructional leaders.

Factors such as, limited out of class time, no executive staff, a small teaching team, isolation and thinly spread advisory staff, make it difficult for the teaching principal to keep up with curriculum implementation and documentation, let alone new educational initiatives. While it is generally easier to gain consensus and ownership of new initiatives leading to their smooth implementation, there are only so many initiatives that a small teaching staff is able to handle within a given timeframe. As one principal observed,

We have a really good staff here but we find it very difficult to get everything done. (State 3)

“  
Their  
credibility as  
a classroom  
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their position  
as an  
instructional  
leader  
”

**Table 3: Teaching primary principals' perceptions of individual items on the Classroom Learning Focus Concern Scale**

| Item | Description   | Number | % disagree | % agree |
|------|---|--------|------------|---------|
| 35   | Other teachers are working on different curriculum levels so you have no chance of sharing with anybody                                     | 132    | 42         | 58      |
| 33   | I'm compromising the classroom environment and I don't know what to do about it   | 132    | 36         | 64      |
| 53   | I have to trust my staff that they are doing the job because I just don't have the time to visit their classes                              | 133    | 31         | 69      |
| 32   | I don't have anyone to talk to regarding management issues so there is that personal isolation factor                                       | 133    | 39         | 61      |
| 54   | If you want to go to an in-service you're affecting your class and I hate that  | 133    | 22         | 78      |
| 45   | I don't have time for curriculum planning, trialling, monitoring, evaluating and replanning, and getting the cycle going                    | 133    | 17         | 83      |
| 10   | I think that an area that does definitely suffer is instructional leadership  | 132    | 21         | 79      |
| 41   | I don't have the right to take any more of my teachers' time even if I had the time to introduce new initiatives                            | 132    | 30         | 70      |
| 6    | In a bigger school you could lob things off to another member of the executive team, but here there isn't anyone so you just do it yourself | 133    | 7          | 93      |

It seems ironic that while school-based management was designed to ensure that systems were more responsive to the needs of individual schools and in turn enhance student learning, it appears that it has undermined the teaching principals' ability to be an instructional leader. The following comment by a teaching principal is illustrative:

I have to trust my staff that they are doing the job because I just don't have the time to visit their classes. (SDA 1)

The Classroom Learning Focus Concern Scale confirmed that teaching primary principals are struggling to maintain their focus on the classroom and instructional leadership. (See Table 3)

### Community and Professional Support

Principals interviewed from the three school systems in the study consistently reported that their induction programs were inadequate. The majority had no induction program and those who did felt that it was very general and not targeted to meet the unique leadership dynamics of a small school. A State principal summed up systemic preparation,

Nobody prepares you for the teaching principalship because nobody understands it. People out there just close their eyes to it. (State 2)

Generally, it is a matter of being "thrown in the deep end" (Catholic 2) as one Catholic principal put it.

Factors restricting the ability of teaching principals to participate in professional development and support activities at their disposal include limited professional development funds, lack of time due to

class responsibilities and distance from professional development sites. State principals in particular, commented on the lack of funds to participate in professional development activities, while Seventh-day Adventist principals found their system provided very limited opportunities. All teaching principals struggled with taking time away from their class and the expense that their absence generated, as illustrated by a Seventh-day Adventist principal,

One of the problems of small schools is if you want to take a day off to go to an in-service you're affecting so many areas. You're affecting a whole group of kids and you've got to get someone in and it tends to be expensive for the school. (SDA 2)

PP5 schools are often located in small towns or in isolated rural locations. Community expectations are high in these areas. Challenges regarding community expectations identified in the interview phase of this study included: meeting parental expectations regarding quality educational outcomes, implementing change in conservative community contexts, maintaining an objective and balanced approach to community problems, presenting a public persona, being available at all hours, and maintaining a community profile through involvement in civic life.

The Community and Professional Support Scale confirmed the challenges associated with accessing professional support and the unique realities related to working in small communities. (See Table 4)

### Recommendations of the Study

The perceptions of teaching principals in the three

“There are only so many initiatives that a small teaching staff is able to handle within a given timeframe”

**Table 4: Teaching primary principals' perceptions of individual items on the Community and Professional Support Scale**

| Item | Description  | Number | % disagree | % agree |
|------|--|--------|------------|---------|
| 12   | There is this big expectation that you will be a community leader  | 133    | 14         | 86      |
| 19   | You're an integral part of the local community   | 133    | 8          | 92      |
| 11   | Isolation is definitely a factor in our area when it comes to participation in professional development activities | 133    | 24         | 76      |
| 18   | I think that a mentoring program is essential and not just the odd day here and there                              | 131    | 7          | 93      |
| 26   | Professional Association meetings are very important for networking and getting ideas                              | 133    | 6          | 94      |
| 34   | I think that peer networking is very important for small schools   | 132    | 3          | 97      |
| 4    | Some people think that they own you and they expect you will be on tap twenty-four hours a day                     | 133    | 15         | 85      |

school systems showed variation regarding their issues, challenges and concerns. However, the following recommendations were perceived to be applicable to all three school systems.

1. That in order to enhance the morale of teaching principals, school system authorities recognise, support and affirm the achievements of small schools and the important role they play in the lives of children and the local community.
2. That in order to maintain a focus on educational leadership, school system authorities address the disproportionate amount of time spent by teaching principals on school management.
3. That in order for teaching principals to manage their dual roles, school system authorities provide increased levels of administration release time and clerical assistance and greater flexibility to arrange their role in a manner that suits their leadership style.
4. That in order to attract and retain teaching principals, school system authorities consider a range of incentives to increase length of tenure.
5. That in the interests of providing quality induction and ongoing professional support for teaching principals, school system authorities and higher education institutions provide school leadership programs tailored to the needs of PP5 principals. **TEACH<sup>®</sup>**

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