# 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 principalship role in smaller primary schools is a 'scaled down' version of a full time primary principalship and that similar leadership and management approaches 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 survey which was forwarded to Department of Education and Training, Catholic and Seventh-day Adventist teaching primary principals in New South Wales. The paper explores results of the qualitative aspects of the research design which indicate that teaching primary principals are experiencing work intensification and increased role complexity conflict resulting in guilt and frustration as they endeavour to cope with the dual roles of teaching and administration. Issues of adequate administration release time, isolation, professional preparation and support, capacity for instructional leadership, and career advancement are compared across school systems.

**THE CONTEXT**

Providing equitable educational opportunities for children in the vast rural regions of Australia has been and remains a challenge for education providers (Boomer, 1988). Therefore, 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).

The New South Wales Department of Education and Training is the largest school system in the southern hemisphere. There were 623 teaching primary principals representing 34 per cent of primary principalships in this education system in 2001. These principals were leading schools that were educating 32,724 students out of a total student population of 462,715. In addition there were a further 133 teaching primary principals in the NSW Catholic school system, the fourth largest education system in Australia. In combination, teaching primary principals in these education systems constitute a significant proportion of the NSW primary school leadership base, yet research into their issues challenges and concerns is minimal (Gamage, 1998).

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 orientated economies (Beare, 1995; Townsend, 1996). Governments saw education as the key to remaining economically competitive (Caldwell, 1993; Murphy, 1997). All Australian states have embarked on some form of school-based management program during the 1980's and 1990's (Sharpe, 1996), which has directly impacted on the role of the principal (Caldwell, 1993; Wohlstetter, 1995).

Of particular concern were the impact of increased workload and the lack of additional time and resources provided to meet new role expectations (Cavenagh, 1994; Cheng & Chan, 2000; Mulford & Hogan, 1999; Summers & Johnson, 1996). School principals are seen as the "*linchpin"* (Hallinger, 1992: 35) for change in schools and a key factor in successful school improvement (Caldwell & Spinks, 1992; Fullan, 1991, Southworth, 1995; Townsend, 1996). The role of the school principal has undergone significant change as a consequence of devolutionary trends and principals are now required to deal with the dilemmas that autonomy, efficiency and accountability bring to the school setting (Levacic, 1998; Sackney & Dibski, 1994).

**THE NEED FOR RESEARCH**

There has been extensive research conducted into understanding the leadership role of the school principal (Chapman, 1986; Simpkins et al, 1987; Beck and Murphy, 1993; Hart & Bresdon, 1996; 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 (Boydell, 1990; Dunning, 1993; Pascal & Ribbons, 1998; Wilson & McPake, 1998). Gamage (1998: 39) identified that there was *"a big gap"* in Australian research regarding the complexities of the role of the teaching primary principal in devolved school systems. 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). All principals have experienced an increase in the complexity of their roles (Sackney & Dibski, 1994; Murphy, 1997). Workloads have increased without provision of adequate resources and training to meet the changing nature of their role (David, 1995; Dempster, 2000; Summers and Johnson, 1996). What impact have these changes had on the teaching principal? Research into what Southworth (1995: 7) terms the *"street realities"* of the teaching primary principalship, in devolving school systems, is needed to develop further understanding of this significant group of school leaders.

**International Research**

A search of the literature was mainly directed towards countries with a similar education structure to Australia - England, Wales, Scotland and New Zealand. Governments and education authorities in each of these countries have embarked on similar devolutionary processes to those in Australia.

In the United Kingdom several studies have investigated the viability and cost effectiveness of rural schooling during the period 1960 to 1990. The Gittins Report (1967) and the Plowden Report (1967) are two examples. Few of these studies paid much attention, however, to the unique role of the principal with teaching responsibilities (Dunning, 1993; Wilson & McPake, 1999. The move to Local School Management (LSM) in the United Kingdom commenced in the late 1980's. Changes in governance and management practices brought about by LSM precipitated studies into their impact on primary principals ( Boydell; 1990), Hellawell, 1991; McHugh & McMullan, 1995; Bullock & Thomas, 1994; Southworth, 1995). While teaching heads were often included in their samples, the emphasis was not the issues, challenges and concerns of this group of primary school leaders.

Research into the unique complexities of the role of the teaching head in the rapidly changing educational landscape in the United Kingdom gained some attention in the mid to late 1990's. While Bell & Morrison (1988) conducted research into the dual roles of the teaching head and identified that the focus of the head was clearly on their classroom responsibilities, later researchers such as Evans (1998), Jones, (1999), and Vulliamy & Webb, (1995) found that teaching heads were facing a growing array of challenges in meeting their management, governance and educational leadership roles. Consistently, teaching heads were finding it increasingly difficult to cope with additional management responsibilities while maintaining a focus on the classroom. Work overload and excessive stress levels were identified as major causes of concern.

One of the most extensive studies of the teaching head was a two-year study in Scotland funded by The Scottish Council for Research in Education. In this study by Wilson & McPake (1998), surveys were sent to all primary schools in Scotland with teaching heads and followed by case studies in eighteen small primary schools. A profile of small primary schools in Scotland, which represent 38% of all primary schools, was established and the characteristics of head teachers identified. Management issues in a rapidly changing educational context were identified and support structures for managing change initiatives were listed. Further, a situational management model was proposed for principals effecting change in small primary schools.

In New Zealand school based management emanated from the government's 1989 Education Reforms. Under the banner of 'Tomorrows Schools', devolution of management and governance responsibilities to Boards of Trustees occurred rapidly while a Education Review Office (ERO) was established to ensure that all schools were accountable for governments funds and were meeting their legislative requirements. Wylie (1997) conducted

research on behalf of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research regarding the impact of 'Tomorrows Schools' on educational stakeholders at the school site. A series of reports was generated, with the final report, 'Self-managing Schools Seven Years On: What Have We Learnt?' published in 1997. Reference is made to the unique challenges of teaching primary principals and the workload created by these challenges. However, the teaching principalship is only a minor focus in the report.

Concern for the welfare of teaching primary principals in New Zealand led to the New Zealand Education Institute Te Riu Roa, employing Chartwell Consultants to explore the workloads of primary teaching principals. A survey conducted by Livingstone (1999) provided valuable insights into the issues, challenges and concerns of teaching primary principals in New Zealand. Of particular note was the increasing workload faced by teaching principals, associated stress levels and impact on personal and family life.

**Australian Research**

Research by Dean (1988), Nolan (1997) and Lester (2001) highlighted the challenges faced by principals in one-teacher, P6 (enrolment of 1-25 pupils) schools. While their experience mirrors many of the challenges faced by P5 (enrolment of 26-159 pupils) teaching principals, the added responsibility of providing support and professional development for staff members is a dynamic missing in one-teacher schools.

Lyall (1993) explored the impact of school based management initiatives on New South Wales government primary and secondary principals and concluded that principals were facing an unreasonable rate of change and that they were losing touch with the classroom and instructional leadership as they found themselves pushed into more managerial and entrepreneurial roles. Case study research by Hatton (1995) explored the impact of school development planning - an aspect of school based management - on a teaching primary principal in an isolated, disadvantaged P5 government school principal in New South Wales. The data demonstrated that to make corporate managerialism work in small primary schools, a significant additional load is placed on the teaching principal which impacts on personal well being, family life and tenure.

Cross (1992) surveyed PP5/PP6 teaching primary principals on the North Coast region of New South Wales to ascertain levels of occupational stress experienced by teaching primary principals as they endeavoured to implement the Schools Renewal Strategy introduced in 1990. Major stressors were identified by Cross, (1992: 80-81) as the: *dual role of teacher/administrator, emphasis on documentation, responsibility of devolution, role overload, sufficient time to address administrative tasks, paperwork and surveys from Regional office, policy changes, interruptions during the working day, and curriculum development".* Further Cross found that 89 per cent of teaching principals in his study were either moderately stressed or extremely stressed primarily as a consequence of the additional workload and expectations accruing from the Schools Renewal Strategy, despite the fact that they viewed the changes associated with the strategy as *"necessary, challenging and exciting"* Cross (1992: 101).

Enever (1997) conducted a comparative study of stress and burnout levels of teaching and non- teaching government primary principals in three regions of New South Wales. Using the Maslach Burnout Inventory it was found that teaching primary principals experienced a higher degree of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation while experiencing a lower degree of personal accomplishment than their non-teaching counterparts. Stressors were identified : workload, time constraints, clerical work, catering for individual pupil needs, curriculum implementation, and multigrade classroom organization. At a system and community level, stressors also identified: perceived unrealistic expectations, lack of

promotional opportunities, lack of recognition, and lack of appropriate support and understanding.

The most recent Australian research into the teaching principalship was conducted by Gamage (1998) who conducted survey and interview research with fifty P5/P6 government primary schools in the Hunter Valley region of New South Wales regarding their problems and concerns. The catalyst for Gamage's research was personal experience with a deputy primary principal who shortly after assuming the duties of a PP5 government primary school principal withdrew from a Masters program and subsequently retired from the principalship position, within two years, on medical grounds. Teaching primary principals in this study identified the challenge of time management, inadequate principal release time, and unplanned interruptions while teaching as their most pressing concerns. Other problems noted included inadequate senior school assistant time, the need for unilateral decision making, lack of an executive group, difficulty organising staff development, the challenge of attracting and retaining competent staff, and limited promotional opportunities.

While the above research conducted by Cross, (1992), Enever (1997) and Gamage (1998) yielded valuable data into the issues, challenges and concerns of teaching primary principals, it did not to seek 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. Neither did the research differentiate between P5/P6 teaching principals with P5 principals having the additional dynamic of considerable staff support and professional development responsibilities.

**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, 1994). 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).



**Figure 1. Research design: teaching primary principals issues, challenges and concerns.**

Due to the dearth of research regarding the complexities of the role of the teaching principal in the smaller primary school in Australia, the first stage of the research process was designed to gain a broader understanding of these complexities. To achieve this goal qualitative methods of data collection were utilized (Creswell, 1994). General research questions guiding the first stage of the mixed research design were:

- *What does it feel like to be a teaching principal in a smaller primary school?*
- *What are the issues and challenges that teaching principals experience in their leadership and management roles in smaller primary schools?*
- *To what extent are teaching principals in smaller primary schools able to participate in school improvement initiatives?*
- *What professional support do teaching principals in smaller primary schools require in order to meet the demands of their role?*
- *What are the career aspirations of teaching principals in smaller primary schools?*

In-depth interviews were employed as the major qualitative research tool (Holstein, 1995; Kvale, 1996; Minichiello et al, 1995). Following an extensive review of relevant literature, a semi-structured interview guide was developed and piloted. Two in-depth interviews were conducted with a purposeful sample of three P5 teaching primary principals from three different school systems - NSW Department of Education and Training, NSW Catholic, and NSW Seventh-day Adventist. The purposeful sample was comprised of five male and four female teaching principals. Additional qualitative data to support the processes of triangulation and crystallization included: collection of documents, interviews with school secretaries, and administration of a work-log which the nine participating principals maintained for a full seven-day period. The NUD*IST Classic Version 4 software package was used to assist with the processes of coding, analysis and interpretation of interview data.

All of the teaching principals in the purposeful sample were categorised as PP5 principals. This New South Wales Department of Education and Training designation is given to teaching principals who administer schools with enrolments between 26 and 159 students. PP5 teaching principals maintain major classroom responsibilities with a set class of students while endeavouring to cover administration duties and educational leadership functions. While recognizing the significant challenges which one-teacher, PP6 principals face, they do not have responsibility for providing educational leadership and support for a team of teaching colleagues.

**RESEARCH FINDINGS**

**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 reflected in these comments:

*"I'm here because I feel I can make a difference and I enjoy that, I get job satisfaction from that" (SDA 1).*

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

*"We know all the children, we talk about all the children, we can target children easier, we can see how they're improving and it is easier then to provide help" (State 3).*

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 on class"(State 1).* Many full time principals regret having to leave the classroom behind (Lyall, 1993; McPake, 1998), whereas teaching principals feel that they have the best of both worlds. They 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 give to their class. This is a source of considerable frustration and concern as the following comments illustrate:

*"I'm compromising the classroom environment and I don't know what to do about it"(SDA 3).*

*"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 biggest factor that weighs on you is that you get called out of class so frequently and you're responsible for that class of children - an enormous worry" (Catholic 2).*

**Challenges of Managing the Dual Roles**

Teaching primary principals are finding that balancing the demands of teaching and management responsibilities difficult since the introduction of SBM 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 students 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 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).*

There a number of factors which impact upon teaching principals' ability to manage their dual roles, including teaching and administrative experience, amount of administrative release time allocated by the system, hours of clerical assistance allocated, and the number and experience of staff members (Wilson & McPake, 1998; Gamage, 1998). These factors are discussed in the following section.

1. **Teaching and Administrative Experience**

Principals interviewed all had considerable teaching experience prior to their appointment. Figure 2 indicates the years of principalship experience of each teaching principal interviewed. All Seventh-day Adventist principals were in the second year of their first teaching principalship while Catholic and State principals generally had considerable experience. As part of Stage one of the research design, each of the nine principals kept a workload journal at a predetermined time for a period of seven days. While the workload recorded by principals during this week may not necessarily be typical of their working lives, there appears to be a link between principalship experience and hours worked (See Figure 3). Comments by a Catholic and a Seventh-day Adventist teaching principal reflecting on their first year in the role offer an insight into the challenges faced by beginning teaching principals:

*"My first year that I was here, I was never going home before 11pm"(Catholic 1).*

*"I am not keeping on top of all areas of the school at the moment, I can see that, but I am making headway and I am working from six in the morning till ten at night regularly" (SDA 3).*
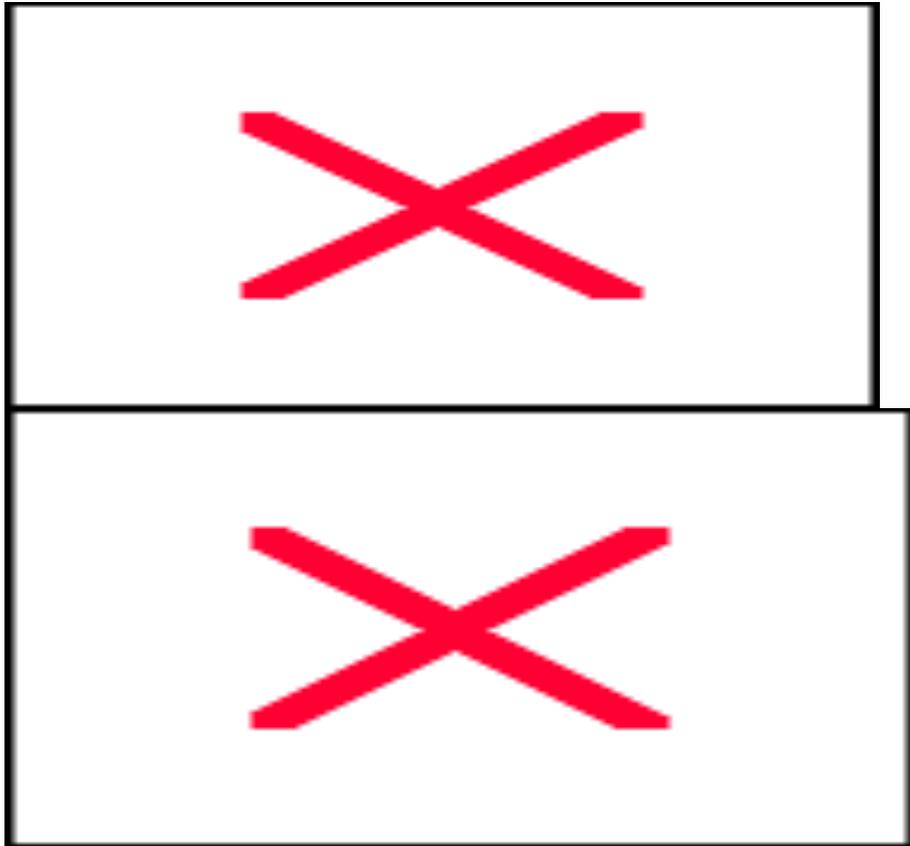


**Figure 2. Years of experience as a teaching principal**

**Figure 3. Comparison of teaching principals' experience and hours worked**

Of interest in the current study, however, is the finding that all teaching principals, regardless of their experience, were finding it a major challenge to do justice to their dual roles resulting in considerable feelings of guilt and frustration:

*"I actually feel guilty that I haven't done lots of things (Catholic 3).*

*"Being a teaching principal creates a little frustration regarding your classroom
performance and I actually think that it doesn't do your self confidence any
good"(State 2).*

*"The longer that you have been a teaching principal the more likely you are to end up
stressed at the end and I think the system really has got to do something"(Catholic
2).*

Prolonged feelings of guilt and frustration are recipes 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 comments are
indicative:

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

*"For the sake of my health I have got to look at some options regarding my future"
(SDA 3).*

*"I hate to say it but I think that I am getting into burnout" (State 3).*

Stress and burnout have impact upon family life, personal relations and social
involvement. Livingstone (1999) found that four out of every five teaching principals
in his New Zealand study felt that their family life was suffering. Hatton (1995: 30) in
a study of a teaching principal in a small rural New South Wales town found
that *efficiency and effectiveness are being achieved at considerable personal
cost".* Teaching primary principals interviewed in the current study agree:

*"It takes its toll on family when it is difficult to leave work at school"(SDA 3).*

*"In the first couple of years I don't think I saw my family of a weekend"(Catholic 1).*

*"You need an understanding family because often they don't see you a lot" (State 2).*

## 2.  Amount of Administrative Release Time

Levels of administrative release time varied considerably across the three school
systems (See Table 1). Catholic and Seventh-day Adventist teaching principals
receive release time based on a sliding enrolment scale. Both systems have
increased the levels of administrative release time recently. Their State counterparts
receive a fixed 28 days per year for administrative duties. A significant number of
these days are taken by the system for mandatory training programs or District
Principals meetings. Often they are left with less than 20 days per year for
administrative release. This equates to half a day a week. Finding relief teachers
prepared to make a regular commitment to such limited hours are difficult. As a
consequence administration functions are sandwiched into the school day or done
before or after school or on weekends rather than at a regular weekly time.

**Table 1 Comparison of administrative release time of NSW school systems'
teaching primary principals**

|  | Catholic | DET | SDA |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Enrolment/Principal**<br><br>**Release** | 1-100 = 0.4 release<br><br>101-125 = 0.5 release<br><br>126-150 = 0.6 release | 26-159 = 0.1 approx release<br><br>(28 days per year) | 0-50 = 0.2 release<br><br>51-75 = 0.35 release<br><br>76-100 = 0.55 release<br><br>101- 125 = 0.7 release<br><br>126-150 = 0.85 release |

No teaching principal found the amount of release time allocated by his or her
system adequate. Interestingly the three Catholic principals interviewed had
managed to 'arrange' their role so that they no longer had responsibility for a set
class. These arrangements had commenced at the beginning of 2001, just prior to
the time of interviews. The rationale for this creative approach was simple, *"nobody
can service two masters. You can't work in a classroom for the simple fact that there
is too much administration to do" (Catholic 3).*

Administrative responsibilities have increased significantly due to the complex
demands of both devolved management functions and the increase in system
accountability requirements. Curriculum documentation, basic skills testing,
paperwork, school development plans, annual school reports and the growing range
of legal issues that schools must attend to have all added to the teaching principal's
load. Increases in human resource support to cope with these expectations have
been slow in coming and generally insufficient to lighten workload significantly.

In the New Zealand context, Wylie (1997) found that teaching principals were
working, on average, 60.2 hours per week, while their non-teaching counterparts
were working 58.7 hours per week. Livingstone (1999) found, in his New Zealand
study, that teaching primary principals were working an average of 65 hours per
week. The New South Wales Teachers Federation, found that teaching primary
principals were working 60.8 hours per week. Analysis of the work-logs of the nine
teaching principals interviewed indicates that Seventh-day Adventist principals were
working 64 hours per week, Catholic principals 59 hours per week, and State
principals 55 hours per week in the designated week.

Teaching principals feel that they are required to cover all the same administrative responsibilities of a full time principal. As a State principal put it, *"they are giving us as much work as every other principal but we have got no extra time" (State 2).* The volume of management tasks has increased under devolution and so has its complexity. However, teaching principals, particularly in State schools do not feel that they are being listened to as illustrated by the following comment:

*"There seems to be little understanding of what small schools are having difficulty with - the amount of administrative tasks, mail, faxes, email overload. Small school principals have no time to fully prepare policies, units and programs unless you work all weekend" (State 1).*

### 3. Clerical Assistance

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 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 following comments illustrate teaching principals' perceptions of their clerical assistant:

*"If you have the right person it is excellent. It makes a big difference"(State 2).*

*"I have a fabulous secretary. I have got her working half time flat out. She is superb. If she left I would quit"(SDA 2).*

*"My clerical assistant could do this interview for me. She knows everything. With our school budget she is just brilliant" (Catholic 1).*

The amount of time allocated for a clerical assistant impacted significantly on their ability to support their principal. Table 2 outlines the amount of release time allocated by school systems for clerical support. State principals with more than fifty students have a full time secretary, which enables them to shield the principal form many unnecessary interruptions and to share many administrative roles.

**Table 2. Comparison of school clerical assistant hours across school systems**

| SCHOOL SYSTEM | ENROLMENTS | SCHOOL ASSISTANT HOURS |
|---|---|---|
| Catholic | 1 - 100 | 18 |
| | 101 - 200 | 24 |
| D.E.T. | 1 - 49 | 12 |

| | 50 - 159 | 30 |
|---|---|---|
| **\*S.D.A.** | 1-75 | 4 |
| | 76 - 150 | 8 |
| | 151 - 200 | 16 |

\* Note: School Boards may increase school assistant hours by fifty percent.

In schools where secretaries are part-time they are sorely missed on the days when they are not present in the school. As a Catholic 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 staffmembers are required to answer phones, care for sick children, contact parents, follow up parental requests and deal with visiting sales personnel. The fragmentation of the workday and its associated frustrations are illustrated by the following observation from a State principal:

*"But when you are at school that release, as far as administration goes, is pretty well useless because the phone rings and you can't get onto any real administration - policy, decision, programming tasks - your day is interrupted constantly by the phone, people coming to see you, kids walking through the office to the storeroom"(State 1).*

Interviews with school clerical assistants revealed that they viewed themselves as gate-keepers. Three levels of gate keeping were identified. At the first level clerical assistants guard the principal from interruptions by handling phone calls, e-mails, mail, teacher and students requests and visitors to the school. At the second level the clerical assistant filters information and requests from parents and in turn passes information about school events and classroom activities back to parents. At this gate keeping level they are able to 'test the wind' and inform the principal of possible issues and concerns and also allay parental concerns regarding problems their child may have encountered. The highest level of gate keeping attended to by the clerical assistant was endeavouring to protect the principal from work overload on any given day. This was achieved by being aware of the principal's current workload and using timing and tact in adding to the existing 'to do' list.

'Gate keeping' was governed by the time provided for a clerical assistant and their experience. Many part-time clerical assistants were working many additional hours voluntarily to support the principal and staff. However, they were frustrated that they were not able to offer the degree of support that they felt was needed to enable teaching and learning to be the highest priority. Full time clerical assistants found that they were able to move towards higher levels of gate keeping and reduce the overall workload of principals.

### 4. Size and Experience of Staff Team

A key premise of school-based management is that it promotes participatory decision-making at the local level. Participatory decision-making is perceived to be the key to creating a democratic, collaborative and collegial school culture (Cuckle, 1998; David, 1995; Hellawell, 1991). Interestingly, smaller primary schools have traditionally been perceived as sites where cohesive staff teams operate. Principals are perceived by their staff as both the leader and as a professional colleague by virtue of their substantial classroom commitments (Wilson & McPake, 1998). The school 'team' is actively involved in planning and implementing all aspects of new initiatives. Such involvement enhances an understanding of the issues and engenders a greater commitment to decision making.

The challenge for small school principals is that accountability processes associated with devolution have increased the range of issues that require consultation - school development plans, rapid curriculum changes, assessment and reporting procedures, extensive policy development. This additional 'consultation' has been counter-productive in that it has intensified the workload of teaching principals and staff members (Dempster, 2000; Wylie, 1997) to the point where they feel that their classroom responsibilities are suffering (Hatton, 1995; Mulford & Hogan, 1999).

Limited staff numbers and no executive staff means that there are very few to whom one can to delegate the load of meeting new accountability requirements. As a Catholic principal interviewed pointed out, *"in a bigger school you could lob that off to another member of the executive team but there isn't anyone so you do it"(Catholic 2).* Teaching principals in their own way are gatekeepers of their teachers' sanity. They see their role as protecting teachers from tasks that will divert their attention from the classroom, yet at the same time they are required to meet system accountability expectations. Invariably the additional load falls on the teaching principal. The challenge for teaching principals is often heightened by young, inexperienced teachers being sent to small schools.

The lack of executive team, restricted opportunities to delegate, and inexperienced staff add significantly to the challenges teaching principals face in managing their dual roles. In addition it must be recognized that one "rogue" individual can easily undermine teamwork in a small school. One informant in the current study recounted, *"if someone does not want to be a part of that culture they can break a small school"(State 2).*

**Instructional Leadership Challenges**

Instructional leadership is a key aspect of a principal's role (Hallinger, 1992; 1996; Murphy, 1990). 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 and Galton, 1998; Vulliamy and Webb, 1995; Wildy & Dimmock, 1993). Their credibility as a classroom teacher strengthens their position as an instructional leader (Wylie, 1997). As one informant 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 on 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, on the positive side, 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 informant

observed, *"we have a really good staff here but we find it very difficult to get everything done" (State 3).* 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 comments by teaching principals are worthy of reflection:

*"I think the thing that really suffers is instructional leadership as well as your own class" (State 2).*

*"I simply can't find the time really to know what is happening in every class and that I think is an important part of any leader's job - to know what is happening in the school" (Catholic 2).*

*"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).*

**Professional Training and Support**

Traditionally small rural schools have been used as training grounds for educational leaders. Promotion to a teaching principalship was, and remains, primarily based on excellence in teaching. Demonstrated experience in some aspect of educational leadership was desired, but classroom performance dominated the criteria for advancement. Once in a teaching principalship, the school principal learnt to manage and lead through experience or through trial and error.

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 needs 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"* as one Catholic principal put it (Catholic 2).

Once in the role the degree of support varied considerably across systems. Seventh- day Adventist teaching principals appreciated the support that their Education Directors provided on the limited number of occasions that they were able to spend at the school. However, they recognized that their Director was the only person in the region designated to cover all educational issues for both primary and secondary schools, and this left the teaching principal in an isolated position regarding professional support.

State principals felt particularly cut adrift with few support structures to assist them. The final report of the External Council of Review: Schools Renewal Program, (1994: 19) noted the original concept of small clusters of schools had been slowly "*eroded"* to the point where the District Director is unable to maintain the expected degree of involvement with all the schools now in their District. One State principal interviewed said he had not had the District Director visit his school in the five years of his principalship and it was generally felt that the District Directors role was now *"political and with a lot of time being spent putting out bush fires" (State 3).* Another State principal felt that "*as far as support from the District office, there is nothing, absolutely nothing" (State 2).* These perspectives may be tempered by the fact that the three State principals were in urban fringe areas where the focus of the District office may have been on the needs of larger schools. The situation may not be as dismal in rural areas.

Principals interviewed in the Catholic school system spoke positively of the support and understanding that came from both their Diocesan Directors and regional consultants. The support of their consultant who has the specific role of offering professional support and guidance to a small cluster of principals was much appreciated. The positive mood of Catholic teaching principals is well summed up by this comment, *"at the District office there is any kind of support we need"* (Catholic 1).

Factors restricting the ability of teaching principals to participate in professional support and development 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 that there were very limited opportunities provided by their system. 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).

Professional support structures that teaching primary principals found most valuable were mentoring relationships, peer support and professional associations. Such supports are largely absent for Seventh-day Adventist principals, however they are vital support mechanisms for principals in the other systems. Ways of improving professional support included funding and formalizing mentoring relationships, offering professional support targeting small schools and providing a periodic sabbatical to enable the teaching principal to catch up with curriculum and administrative policy development and to seek professional renewal.

**Community Involvement and Expectations**

Communities served by the teaching principals interviewed varied considerably with four being on the urban fringe, three in small country towns, one in a large country coastal centre, and one in an urban area. Principals felt that parents were supportive and willing to be involved in school activities. There was a strong sense of ownership of each school and Parents and Citizen Councils played an active role in raising much-needed funds for school resources.

Seventh-day Adventist and Catholic teaching principals found that they were more strongly involved in their communities by virtue of their strong links with the local parish. These principals often found that a significant portion of their weekend was taken in community involvement, adding to the complexity of their roles. Comments from these principals are illustrative:

*"I think this is because the school is one of the hubs of the community so there is more expected of us"* (Catholic 2).

*"If you are going to be in a small school, you're got to have a strong concept of community service"* (Catholic 3).

*"The expectation is that you will get involved in everything with your local church"* (SDA 1).

All principals noted that parental expectations of quality learning outcomes for their child/children were of prime importance. While they felt parents were prepared to cut the teaching principal a 'bit of slack', they were wary of spending too much time out of their class

covering other issues. In a small community a great deal is expected of principals (Hill, 1993; Stevens, 1994) and they are as what one informant put it, *"under the observational channel all the time" (Catholic 2).* Parents are consumers who have learned to expect quality and this places the teaching principal who is endeavouring to cover their dual roles under considerable pressure. An added pressure that several principals noted was a trend towards being sought out by parents to offer support on student and personal welfare issues.

In the small schools studied parental involvement in school governance was limited. Catholic schools did not have School Councils while in State schools it is optional. Seventh-day Adventist schools have School Boards which have slowly been given increased discretionary powers over finance, and human and physical resources. The New South Wales External Council of Review (1994) noted community participation in State schools under Schools Renewal Strategies had been excellent with 1450 out of 2200 schools having formed School Councils.

In the current study all Seventh-day Adventist schools had School Boards and one State primary school had a School Council. While all principals appreciated the interest and involvement of parents involved in school governance, they found that generally they were left to carry the lion's share of the load, serving to intensify their workload. Such findings are similar to those for school governance patterns overseas (Evans, 1998; Wilson & Mc Pake, 1998; Wylie, 1997). The two State principals who, in consultation with their local communities, opted not to have School Councils believed that they were only a duplication of the role played by the Parent and Community Association and there wasn't enough energy in the school to run both bodies. As one State teaching principal put it, *"the parents have the opportunity to raise issues at the P&C meetings" (State 3).*

**Career Directions**

Traditionally time spent in the principalship of a smaller primary school was a recognised way to gain promotional points and climb the ladder to a full time principalship (Dunning, 1993, Lester, 2001). With the introduction of merit selection procedures, teaching principals are finding the traditional pattern being challenged with many feeling that they may well end up trapped in a small primary school (Gamage, 1998). Seventh-day Adventist and Catholic principals interviewed were less concerned about this circumstance than their State counterparts. One State principal put it plainly *"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" (State 2).*

Teaching principals interviewed had mixed feelings about the time they were spending in a small primary school. Most felt that the grounding they received in a small school was excellent preparation for a more senior role, but that this was not recognized when it came to promotional interviews. A Catholic principal aired a common view that, *"there is a snobbery attached to the size of the school" (Catholic 3)*, and that deputies and assistant principals who had spent time in large schools were being given preference. Some were also annoyed at the lower level of remuneration teaching principals received, feeling that the complexities of their roles were not rewarded.

Wilson and McPake (1998) identified two groups of teaching principals - ambitious and satisfied. Ambitious principals viewed their time in a small school as a route to 'bigger' things and were prepared to tolerate heavy workloads and high stress levels in order to achieve this goal. Five principals interviewed for this study could be included in this category and their frustration at not gaining recognition was evident, as the following comments illustrate:

*"They are loathe to move you because they know they can't get the same caliber of person to replace you" (Catholic 3).*

*"The teaching principalship is just not a realistic thing long term" (SDA 3).*

Four of the principals interviewed could be viewed as 'satisfied'. They were in smaller primary schools for a number of reasons - by personal choice to work in small schools, family reasons, or being at a stage of their career where they felt that opportunity for promotion had passed them by. One expressed that he would probably seek early retirement before he was burnt out while others wondered if they would be able to keep up the pace and as a consequence, *"opted for a goal post set a lot less and were prepared to work at a level that wasn't peak form" (Catholic 2).* This raises issues of support for mid to late career teaching principals.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study suggests that teaching primary principals endeavour to maintain a strong classroom focus. They enjoy teaching and the strong sense of community found in small schools. Administrative and accountability requirements associated with devolutionary trends in New South Wales have intensified their workloads as they endeavour to manage their dual roles. Guilt, frustration and heavy workloads have created an environment where teaching principals' health, family and relationships are suffering. The ability of teaching primary principals' to cope with their dual roles were impacted by levels of teaching and administrative experience, the amount of administrative release time, the quantity and quality of clerical assistance time, and the size of the teaching team. Instructional leadership practices have suffered as a consequence of additional managerial roles raising questions regarding the impact of school-based management on student learning. Professional preparation and support were perceived to be lacking, with the Catholic system the notable exception. Communities placed high expectations on teaching principals, with Catholic and Seventh-day Adventist principals facing additional parish expectations. Concern was expressed regarding career advancement since the introduction of merit selection processes.

Limitations of the qualitative stage of the research design revolve around the purposeful sample of only three principals from each school system. Perceptions of the nine teaching principals may not be representative of issues, challenges and concerns faced in a broader range of school sizes and locations in the P5 school community. In addition, the work-log journals kept by the nine teaching principals could be administered to a broader group to gain a more accurate picture of the major dimensions of their role and the time that they commit to each dimension. The quantitative stage of the research design, currently in motion, has involved the development of a questionnaire based on the insights gained into the teaching principalship. Seven attitude scales have been developed to further explore dimensions of the teaching principalship role. The questionnaire also includes biographical details and a weekly workload journal. Data collected from a parallel sample of teaching primary principals in New South Wales are currently being analysed.

**References**