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Principals' work in public schools

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Introduction

This article explores what principals do using the lens of *work*. It not only considers what principals do but also why this work is changing, and the consequences of this changing work on principals themselves, such as the impact of work intensification. Scholars in educational administration and leadership have explored what principals do using several lenses: (a) role, (b) time on task, and (c) work. This article is organized into several sections. The first section presents some of the existing literature on the aforementioned lenses. The second section discusses what is known about principals' work, including (a) what they do and (b) the changing nature of their work in contemporary times. The third section discusses why knowing about principals' work is important.

Role

Getzels and Guba (1957) were the first scholars to prominently consider the concept of *role* in organizational systems. Since then, scholars have employed the concept of role in a number of ways (e.g., Goodwin et al., 2003; Hadjithoma-Garstka, 2011; Mitchell and Sackney, 2006; Whitaker, 2003). The problem with these studies, however, is that many of them tend to focus on a particular policy/issue or approach role through a narrow lens rather than recognizing that principals have multiple roles. A more serious shortcoming of using role to understand what principals do is that it is "unrealistic to assume, as most role theorists do, that the position that a person occupies will dictate what he or she does" (Ryan, 2007, p. 344). Examining what principals do solely through the lens of role erroneously assumes that principals exclusively engage in the actions associated with their assigned roles. Doing so fails to acknowledge that the work of principals may fall outside of their official roles, be shared with others, or be influenced by the unique contexts in which they work.

Time on tasks

Another lens explores what principals do using the concept of time spent on tasks. Time-on-task studies have existed over several decades (Lee, 2021). Although the majority of these studies avoid the issues of the role lens, they nevertheless have their own short-comings. Perhaps the most cited shortcoming for some of the seminal studies is the lack of attention given in time-on-task studies to the nature of the task itself (Gronn, 1982). Specifically, time-on-tasks studies in the past have generally failed to interrogate the meaning of the tasks or why administrators are engaged in them. For example, although they may meticulously document the frequency and duration of telephone conversations, few inquired into the nature of the conversations (e.g., negotiating with a school board employee, talking with a parent, seeking advice from a colleague, etc.). Other efforts have been made to try to inter-rogate the meaning of tasks and why administrators engage in them; methodological approaches have included the use of struc-tured observations and reflective interviews (Martinko and Gardner, 1990; Pollock and Hauseman, 2016) as well as self-report activity logs (Goldring et al., 2008; May and Supovitz, 2011). However, these methodological approaches have limitations as well. Rowan (2021) presents a list of assumptions that exist with this research, from conceptual, to scale construction, to gener-alizability. Lastly, there is an effort to move away from the use of clock time to help determine what principals do and why to consider a different theoretical approach instead, where rather than use clock time as the unit of analysis, to flip this notion on its head and analyze what it is that principals actually do in their work regardless of how much time it takes for the task to be completed (Eacott, 2018).

Work

The notion of work used in this article acknowledges the wide-ranging, diverse, and complex nature of what principals do. Work is defined as labor or effort expended to achieve a particular set of goals (Merriam Webster, n.d.). Work can be both paid and unpaid. It includes employment-related unpaid work but not other kinds of unpaid work such as volunteerism, household activities, or family responsibilities (Drago, 2007). This labor may be expended both within *and outside* position-related roles that principals enact. It is difficult in this day and age to erect clear boundaries around work efforts, just as it is to define organizational boundaries (Ryan, 1996). Work can take place on and off the school site. It can occur after the official opening and closing of the school day. Work also comprises particular experiential components such as physical, mental, and emotional aspects (Applebaum, 1992; Gamst, 1995). This article employs a lens that acknowledges the behavioral, cognitive, *and* emotional elements of work. In some existing research, the term workload is used interchangeably with *work* (See Oplatka, 2017).

What do we know about principals' work?

Interest in principals' work has existed for centuries (Ensign, 1923; Pierce, 1934; Rousmaniere, 2013). Scholars interested in this area have focused on topics such as:

- the growth of school systems in the 18th and 19th centuries and beyond (Kafka, 2009),
- the duties of principals (Davis, 1921; Bolton and Howard, 1925),
- the professionalization of school leadership (UNESCO, 2016),
- the roles of the principalship including the ongoing debate around leadership and management (Spillane, 2009),
- school improvement (Harris et al., 2013),
- recruitment and retention (Dite, 2020; Jackson, 2018),
- leadership frameworks (Gümüş et al., 2018; Leithwood et al., 2017),
- accountability (Andreyko, 2010),
- job satisfaction and motivation (Wang et al., 2018a,b),
- work and labor such as workload (Oplatka, 2017),
- intensification of work (Riley, 2014, 2019; Walker, 2021), and
- wellness (Richardson, 2020; Riley, 2019; Wang et al., 2018a,b).

Historically, time use studies have divided principals' work into four dimensions: (a) leadership, management, and administration; (b) external relations; (c) internal relations, and (d) principals' own professional development (Lee, 2021). However, these cate-gories are not necessarily discrete, as managing both internal and external relations often falls under the umbrella of leading and managing, for example. Given that it is impossible to comprehensively cover all four dimensions within a single article, I collapsed these four dimensions into two foci: (a) what contemporary principals' work entails, and (b) the changing nature of their work. These foci were selected because they provided a way to structure a manageable overview of the work that principals do across these four categories and how this work influences their wellness.

Leading curriculum

There are numerous purposes of K–12 education (Gutek, 2014). Regardless of which purposes are espoused, they all include the co-creation of understanding, knowledge, and skills with children who attend these K–12 education systems. Depending on the

geographical context, school principals are referred to as educational/educative leaders (Duignan and MacPherson, 1992) leaders of instruction (Hallinger, 2005), curriculum leaders (Glatthorn et al., 2018), pedagogical leaders (Macneil et al., 2005), leaders of learning (Hallinger, 2011), and leaders of student learning (Robinson, 2011). Their overall work is to lead, support, and facilitate at their work site (Pollock and Hauseman, 2015).

Managing the budget

Schools have always had budgets and leaders of schools have always had some kind of interaction with these budgets, from merely knowing what the fiscal amount is and where the funds are going to site-based management with full discretion on how to spend the annual budget (Pollock and Hauseman, 2015). However, it appears that with the onset of reform efforts and school improvement initiatives, "budgeting" has become more complex than previously experienced. In 2013, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) report ranked "inadequate school budget and resources" as the top barrier to principal effectiveness; in Alberta, Canada it was ranked second (OECD, 2013). This lack of financial resources is becoming a global reality (Caribbean Policy Research Institute [CaPRI], 2014; DeAngelis et al., 2018; Lupton and Thrupp, 2013; Mahoney, 2013; Martin et al., 2018; Semuels, 2016; OECD, 2012, 2017; World Bank, 2019; Zimmer, 2020). It is not only the lack of resources that is changing but also the demand to find creative ways to either secure these resources (OECD, 2017; Walker, 2021) or manage with less. In Ontario, a recent study indicated that nearly one-third of the 70 principals interviewed required additional professional learning to manage the school's budget or deal with other financial aspects of the position (Pollock et al., 2015). There is also growing interest in the work of fundraising for school principals and budgetary allocation (Poole and Fallon, 2015; Winton and Milani, 2017; Walker, 2021). For example, concerns around budgetary allocation have also heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic as educational policymakers and leaders face budgetary cuts (Al-Samarrai et al., 2020; Mitra, 2020) at a time when additional costs are incurred to not only keep students safe but also to address growing inequities (Allen et al., 2020; Daniela et al., 2021; Friedman et al., 2021; Sider, 2020).

Dealing with personnel

Managing personnel has always been a component of principals' work (Norton, 2008). Whom they manage and for what purposes also slightly vary depending on the organizational structure of the public schooling. For example, some school principals who work in schools that engage in site-based management have more decision-making power about who works at that site (Patrinos and Fasih, 2009; Rose, 2007; Whitaker, 2003; White, 1989; Wohlstetter and Mohrman, 1993), whereas school principals who find themselves in school systems that are very bureaucratic and centralized have limited control over hiring practices (Hanson, 1976; Maynes and Hatt, 2015; Oplatka, 2004; UNESCO, 2016). Some argue that managing personnel and leading teachers cannot be separated; although they are closely connected, the focus here is on the technical aspect of working with people that requires principals to be knowledgeable about labor contracts and possess skills such as conflict resolution, the ability to supervise multiple employee groups, and to address grievances (Castro, 2020; Engel and Curran, 2016; Matubatuba, 2008; Sorenson and Goldsmith, 2008).

Maintaining the school site

Principals are responsible for maintaining school sites. It is, however, not an easy task. It can also take on many forms. In some jurisdictions, principals with limited financial freedom are only responsible for reporting building issues and providing information about buildings when asked by their system managers. Although this might seem to be a simple reporting procedure, the work can contribute to the growing paperwork and procedural work that school principals find themselves doing. Other principals with more decision-making power working in older schools are faced with difficult decisions about allocating resources; they must self-educate on what needs to be prioritized, and must oversee any renovations and/or repairs (Díaz-Vicario and Sallán, 2020; Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2017; Nhalpo, 2020; Preiss, 2014). However, it is not just older buildings that require principals' time and attention—new school development projects can be just as taxing on a school principal's time. New school buildings require an effective maintenance plan that includes meeting warranty deadlines and constant revisiting as the building ages (Chan, 2000). And yet, in decentralized schools in some regions, principals may find themselves literally having to source supplies, purchase them, and in some cases actually engage in the skilled labor work themselves. For example, in Jamaica, some school principals actually fundraise, purchase the lumber for additions, and then build the additions themselves (Walker, 2021). In more recent times, school principals now have the added layer of having to create safe learning and teaching spaces during the pandemic, where expectations of social distancing influence class size, structure of the school day, and so forth (World Health Organization, 2020).

Building and sustaining partnerships

Principals are often engaged in partnerships. In this article, a partnership is understood as a relationship with an outside organization or group (as opposed to relationships with individual parents or families). Many advocate that partnerships can be a way to support student achievement (Hands, 2010), and can be considered a part of instructional leadership. However, I have separated this category from instructional leadership as it does not facilitate principals' direct involvement in curriculum instruction in their

daily work. Schools are being encouraged to engage in outside partnerships for all sorts of reasons: to generate revenue, such as by renting out building space after school hours (Clandfield, 2010); to foster closer connections to services that the school cannot effectively provide, such as supplemental educational services (Koyama, 2011); or as a way of engaging ethnic, racial, and religious communities with the school and with student learning (Auerbach, 2010; Rogers et al., 2012). Effective partnerships require trusting relationships, a central purpose, and leadership to name but a few components (Best and Holmes, 2010). For many principals, engaging in partnerships at the school level requires engaging in partnership-building and maintenance tasks that can at times take them away from direct school functions. Notably, during the COVID-19 pandemic there have been calls for schools and school systems to work more closely with outside agencies, especially those in public health as concerns over student mental health and wellness have increased (Hertz and Barrios, 2021).

Processing paperwork and forms

Paperwork has always been a part of principals' work (Georgiades and Jones, 1989; Wang et al., 2018a,b; Williams, 1979). Before the recent advances in information communication technology (ICT), paperwork would have arrived on a principal's desk through the general post or through intercourier district mail bags dropped off at specific times at the school site, then eventually through fax correspondence in the office; now, principals are likely filling out PDF forms received via email either by smartphone, tablet, or laptop or through an interactive web platform where they electronically respond to requests and provide information to those requesting it. Paperwork can be understood as the medium for accountability mechanisms that principals are required to respond to on a daily basis. The majority of paperwork that contemporary principals respond to is generated from the accountability mechanisms entrenched in jurisdictional policies that they are to follow (Fitzgerald, 2009).

Changing nature of principals' work

Principals' work is always changing and both researchers and practitioners have documented these changes over the centuries (Alvoid and Black, 2014; Bredeson, 1989; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Day et al., 2000; Hallinger, 1992; Huber, 2004; Klein and Ninio, 2019; Pollock et al., 2015). The nature of principals' work continues to evolve in response to local and global contexts. Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, principals were responding to several global changes. A few are reported here, such as working with new advances in ICT; evolving understandings of equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization; program, policies and accountability initiatives; student wellness; and COVID-19 and occupational health and safety guidelines.

Advances in information communication technology and social media

Because school principals spend a considerable amount of time communicating, they have always capitalized on the various modes of communication available to them beyond face-to-face interaction. In the past, this could have involved writing handwritten letters, making telephone calls, and sending faxes. With advances in ICT and now social media, principals are faced with an entire new suite of communication media. The Internet, email, texting, smartphones/mobile technology, and social media platforms and programs have profoundly impacted the work environments of a number of professions. The education sector, specifically the school principalship, has been and continues to be highly affected (Anderson and Dexter, 2005; Cho, 2016; Cho and Jimerson, 2017; Davies, 2010; Fancera, 2020; Fullan, 2014; Liu et al., 2018; Omar and Ismail, 2020; Pollock and Hauseman, 2018; Sheninger, 2014; Uğur and Koç, 2019). Many scholars have purported that technology makes work easier, increases efficiency, reduces paperwork, and promotes work–life balance (Fullan, 2014; Sheninger, 2014). My own research has indicated that the use of email can lead to fast and efficient communication with various stakeholders, assist school principals in managing their workload by allowing them to complete tasks faster, while emails leave an accountability trail through recording communication and an accurate trail of tasks and activities (Pollock and Hauseman, 2018). But there is also a flipside to the use of ICT as well. Emerging evidence has demonstrated that how school principals manage the changes resulting from increased use of email in the workplace is not uniformly positive. Principals also report high volumes of email, longer workdays, increased workload, increased expectations of shorter response times, and the blurring of boundaries between work and home—all of which contribute to the intensification of work (Pollock and Hauseman, 2018).

Equity, diversity, inclusion and decolonization (EDID)

Systemic inequity exists globally. These inequities—for example, social, racial, religious, socioeconomic, gender-based—prevent some groups of students from receiving the same quality education as students from other groups. Over time there has been a growing movement to reach and support *all* groups of students. Although not universal, most democratic countries are striving for this goal through policy changes and program modifications (OECD, 2020, 2012; UNESCO, 2015), embracing diversity with the populations they serve and the workforces they employ (Hewins-Maroney and Williams, 2013; Pollock and Briscoe, 2019), engaging in inclusive and equitable practices (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Gümüş et al., 2021; Ryan, 2014), and working

toward decolonizing the systems they work within (Hohepa, 2013; Munroe et al., 2013; Stewart and Warn, 2017). Efforts to enact EDID often require school principals to challenge their own biases, change their mindsets around their assumptions and beliefs, and engage in their work in a different manner.

Policies, programs and accountability initiatives

Principals' work is influenced by policies. Reform movements and accountability initiatives have used policies as tools to initiate and support educational change. For this article, policy is understood as a way to change practice through official formal legislation, mandates, government initiatives, and board regulations. Policies can act to promote, regulate, constrain, and/or monitor actions and outcomes. Recent studies in Canada indicate that policies are playing a more significant role in principals' work than in the past. Many school principals feel that their role is constrained by the number of initiatives imposed on a school (Alberta Teachers' Association and Canadian Association of Principals, 2014; Blakesley, 2012). Not only do principals in Ontario feel constrained by formal policy initiatives, but multiple policy initiatives within short time periods have also influenced how they do their work (Pinto, 2015; Wang et al., 2018a,b). The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) report ranked "government regulation and policy" as third on its list of barriers to principal effectiveness (OECD, 2013).

Student wellness

Principals spend time promoting student wellness. In North America, student wellness has become a focus in public education. Some practitioners have indicated that they deal with increasing incidences of issues relating to the mental health and well-being of students and staff (Pollock, 2016). There appears to be no consensus on why these incidents are increasing (Olfson et al., 2015; Whitaker, 2010). Some argue that the number of incidences is not increasing, but rather it is awareness of mental health issues that has increased (Whitaker, 2010). Principals are not ignoring the health and well-being of students and teachers. For this reason, they often find themselves seeking out additional community services and resources for students and families, engaging in informal counseling and information-sharing sessions, and providing support for teacher professional learning—activities in which they would not have been involved in the past.

COVID-19 pandemic and occupational health and safety guidelines

Principals play a pivotal role in creating a healthy school community. This work has been especially critical during the COVID-19 pandemic. Principals are legally responsible for this through various labor laws, public health laws, and education laws. Many of these responsibilities are connected to employee and public safety through labor laws or through public health and education legislation that focuses on students' well-being, health, and safety. These responsibilities and tasks have always existed and vary between jurisdictions but generally include being legally responsible for the health and safety of all students within the school. For example, in some jurisdictions principals are required to implement school-wide antibullying or antiviolence policies and plans. Other jurisdictions expect principals to connect with representatives from other government agencies such as public health in an effort to better meet student needs or provide student support services. Some principals are also explicitly expected to report any child welfare concerns to their superintendent and appropriate government officials (Pollock and Hauseman, 2015). Last but not least, principals have been charged with the responsibility to notify the appropriate authorities of any outbreaks of infectious or contagious diseases. It is precisely this last responsibility that has recently influenced the nature of public school principals' lives. Because of the pandemic, educators, including school principals, have been subjected to drastic changes in how public education has been delivered. All jurisdictions around the world have been impacted by the pandemic. The majority of school systems have engaged in a series of practices from full school system shutdown to full online learning to various hybrid versions of learning (Netolicky, 2020; Pont, 2020).

Work intensification

It is one thing to document the ever-changing nature of principals' work; it is another to also explore the influence of these changes on school principals. Some researchers explore the impact of student performance and system success, others consider the impact on the health and wellness of individuals in the school principal role and yet others consider the labor impact of school principals. The intensification of work can be found in several work sectors such as engineering, nursing, and medicine (Brannon, 1994; Willis et al., 2015; Wong et al., 2019). Principals also experience work intensification (Alberta Teachers' Association and Canadian Principals Association, 2014; Armstrong, 2015; Leithwood and Azah, 2014). The remainder of the article argues that the changing nature of principals' work is leading to work intensification.

Working long hours

Principals work long hours. There is a global trend of long work hours culture (Chatzitheochari and Arber, 2009; Kodz et al., 1998; Pencavel, 2018; Waheed, 2010). Principal workforces are no different. Time-on-task studies provide various quotes on hours worked per week. For example, in 2019, in a regular work week in Ontario, principals worked an average of 57.3 h. Almost all participating principals (97.5%) worked more than the normal 40 h work week; almost half of the participants reported

(47.3%) working between 50 and 60 h per week. In addition, 21.4% worked more than 60 h per week. This is approximately 16 h per week more than Canadian occupational managers (Statistics Canada, 2020) who work 40.9 h per week. The trend toward long work hours is not isolated to Canada, however. In Australia, it appears that school principals spend on average 51–60 h per week during regular school time (Riley et al., 2020). It would be a statistical feat to compare these time-on-task studies as not all studies are exact replicas of each other (Rowan, 2021). However, cumulative statistical findings and qualitative studies indicate that most school principals around the world work long hours. Although working long hours can reap benefits and/or pose disadvantages, most employed people experience periods of long work hours. Working long hours may be considered part of intense work situations, but by itself it does not constitute work intensification, especially given that we do not know whether principals have always worked these long hours. However, working long hours can be an intermediary factor that, combined with other factors, can lead to work intensification.

Increased volume of similar work

Work volume is often referred to as the amount of work or number of tasks that an employee is to do within a specified period of time. Recent studies have discovered that school principals are reporting an increased volume of similar work. Specifically, they describe doing more of the same types of work. One example is paperwork. The principalship has always required some amount of paperwork; over the past decade, principals have reported engaging in increased amounts of paperwork (Alberta Teachers' Association and Canadian Principals Association, 2014; Hancock et al., 2019). An increase in work volume means more work, which may not pose issues for employees if they are allowed to delegate other work tasks or are able to work additional hours until the additional work is completed. However, in most situations, the volume increases without any ability for principals to delegate other work and the expected time to complete this additional work has not changed but remained the same. For those in the principalship who experience work intensification, they work longer hours to attend to both an increased volume of work and to additional different kinds of work.

Engaging in new work demands

As mentioned previously, the work of principals is dictated by the local context and global trends. In many cases, this means that how they go about their work has changed. For example, principals have always been responsible for communicating with parents. How they go about doing that today has changed. In the past, principals may have met parents in face-to-face meetings; they most likely still do meet face-to-face, but they also communicate through paper notices, electronic newsletter, and by email. The end goal is the same but the mode and medium are quite different. In some cases, this also means that the very nature of their work has changed. Over the past decade, many countries have experienced a concentration on student mental health and wellness. As mentioned earlier, there has been a shift in supporting student mental health and wellness. This concern has also extended to teacher mental health and wellness, especially given that there is increasing evidence that teacher wellness may influence student wellness and school success (Harding et al., 2019). This means that principals are engaged in additional support-seeking for not just student wellness but also teacher wellness, something that in the past was not always a consideration. Moreover, since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has seen yet again additional work for school principals such as extending the notion of care to preventing school breakouts, containing breakouts, working toward continued student learning through physical school closures and multiple modes of curriculum delivery, and concentrating on being a technology leader (Osmond-Johnson et al., 2020; Pollock, 2020).

New work demands do not directly lead to work intensification. In many organizations, when an employee or team is provided with new tasks, other work is reassigned, put on pause, or additional staff are hired; however, in the public education system, this is not the case. School principals often find themselves continuing to juggle the increased work that they already have with the new expectations and tasks assigned to them while little is removed from their workload. Many principals are also finding that the pace of their work has also increased.

Increased pace of work

Principals must deal with an increased pace of work. This pace of work is sometimes determined by policies and procedures that stimulate timelines and deadlines; other times it is because of bureaucratic decisions made elsewhere. Principals may not experience work intensification through working long hours with additional work and new tasks if the expectations for completion are flexible and there can be extensions. In reality, however, not only is the time of return less flexible, principals have indicated over the past decade that the expectation for completion or responses to requests has shortened, which increases the pace of their work. The increased pace of work coupled with increased work and additional roles can result in principals finding their work challenging at times. Working in these conditions when there is constant pressure over perceived or limited resources contributes to work intensification.

Perceived limited resources

In some jurisdictions, there are limited resources and financing for public schools to successfully function (Walker, 2021); in other jurisdictions, there may be plenty of funding for public schooling but that funding might be ear-marked for specific initiatives and can only be spent in particular ways (Pollock et al., 2015). This is an issue for principals and can contribute to work intensification. For example, in other sectors, departments and organizations often have control over their budget and can hire more staff or professionals to share work volume and additional tasks to meet the quicker turn-around times. In public education, some principals may

be fortunate enough to reassign some of their work to other administrative staff such as the vice-principal and/or other administrative assistants but in some cases this then creates other consequences such as the downloading of work to vice-principals or assistant principals (Leithwood and Azah, 2014; Lim and Pollock, 2019; Pollock et al., 2017; Swain, 2021). In some site-based management arrangements, a principal may be able to hire additional administrative support but these situations are uncommon. Many principals not only have little control over their budget in terms of hiring staff but many also have found themselves with less administrative and staff support over the past few decades (Beausaert et al., 2016; Friedman, 2002). Limited resources alone does not mean work intensification; however, being asked to do more under increased pressure and pace with less increases the chances that a school principal will experience work intensification. The key however is whether principals working in this environment have the opportunity for any downtime.

No downtime

Principals have little downtime. Of all the key components of work intensification, downtime is the most influential. The notion of downtime was originally used in relation to innate networks and machinery systems in production plants during the mid-1900s. When a piece of machinery was out of service, either planned or unplanned, the production process was experiencing downtime (Online Etymology Dictionary n.d.). The use of the concept was not applied to social and production practices of individuals until the early 1980s; in these cases, downtime was an employee's time away from paid work or for individuals it can mean time away from paid work where the employee experiences a state of physical relaxation and psychological detachment from paid work (Dugan and Barnes-Farrell, 2017).

People who work in fast-paced environments with incredible amounts of work to be accomplished within a short time frame by working long hours with limited resources or work accommodations may experience work intensification; however, if these intense periods of work are followed by periods where employees or workers are rewarded with additional time off and/or the work environment converts to a slower pace with reduced workload expectations and reduced hours of work, then these employees are not necessarily experiencing work intensification. Work patterns where employees can recharge, regroup, and recover from the intense work are not experiencing work intensification. They may have experienced a period of intensified work but work intensification is the ongoing intense work environment that has no downtime. Downtime, or more accurately, little to no downtime, is usually the deciding factor on whether or not a workplace is experiencing work intensification. No downtime usually leads to all sorts of unintended consequences such as lost days of work for the employer, burnout, and other occupational wellness issues for the employee (Giurge et al., 2020; Lei et al., 2019; Shattell, 2018).

Some skeptics of work intensification in the public education workforce argue that educators and principals receive downtime on weekends, statutory holidays, and school system summer holidays. Although structurally this can appear to be the case, emerging time-on-task data and qualitative studies indicate that these scheduled downtimes are in reality the times during which many principals work additional hours to catch up on unfinished work or work that demands uninterrupted concentration on specific tasks. A recent Australian study, for example, reported school principals spend 25–30 h working per week during holiday periods (Riley et al., 2020). In many jurisdictions, school principals are responsible for continued professional learning, yet this expected learning is rarely scheduled in a principal's work day and therefore is fulfilled during time periods that would be considered downtime.

Why this is important to know

Work intensification, if left unchecked, can lead to all sorts of consequences for those individuals experiencing it. Work intensification places greater demand on workers' cognitive, psychological, and physical abilities (Fournier et al., 2011); it is associated with numerous psychological hazards such as "chronic stress, anxiety, depression, psychosomatic disorders, psychological decompensation mechanisms, work addiction (workaholism) and burnout" (Legault and Belarbi-Basbous, 2006, p. 26). A 2010 report by the World Health Organization highlighted these types of psychosocial hazards as an emerging trend in occupational health and safety: "Work overload would appear to constitute one of the main psychosocial risk factors leading to psychological distress at work" (Fournier et al., 2011, p. 4). Some of the consequences of work intensification include poor employee performance, increased job stress, low morale, burnout, poor occupational mental health and wellness, negative repercussions for leisure, and personal and familial issues (Burchielli et al., 2006; Caudroit et al., 2011; Canadian Center for Occupational Health and Safety [CCOHS], 2012).

Principals in public education appear to be exhibiting signs of unwellness. Concerns regarding stress, burnout, coping strategies, workload, and the general health and wellness of school principals and administrators have proliferated since the 1970s. According to Poirel et al. (2012), between 1966 and 1988, more than 1300 articles were published concerning principals and stress. Many of these studies point directly to school principals' work and workloads as directly associated with their health and wellness concerns (Whitaker, 1995). Presently, much academic research and practice has focused on the well-being of students and teachers, with limited focus on school principals (Hendriks and Scheerens, 2013; Pollock et al., 2015).

Some parents, policymakers, and researchers might ask why principal wellness is such an issue in the public education sector—especially when a body of research clearly demonstrates that in schools, teachers have the most influence on student learning (Leithwood and Louis, 2012). Even though teachers have direct influence on student learning and there are more teachers than principals, principals play an important part in student and school success and system change as well. It has been established from

decades of research that principals indirectly affect student success (Hallinger and Heck, 1998; Leithwood et al., 2004); what is less commonly known is that principals also directly impact student success as well (Lee, 2021). Emerging research indicates that school principals do interact with students more than originally thought and that these interactions are significant both in terms of time on task but also impactful for students and their school success (Lee et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2011). How are students expected to receive quality education from school principals when many are struggling with their wellness and work intensification?

Principals play a key role in supporting students and teachers; they are critical for school and school system success. However, work intensification must be addressed for three main reasons: (a) work intensification is contributing to principal unwellness (Earley, 2020; Heffernan and Pierpoint, 2020; Wang et al., 2018a,b; Whitaker, 2003; Xiao and Newton, 2020); (b) unwell principals cannot support student success as effectively as well principals (Whitaker, 2003; Wang et al., 2018a,b); and (c) the job is becoming less desirable and there are growing recruitment and retention issues for the principal workforce in many countries as a result (Earley, 2020; Heffernan and Pierpoint, 2020; Whitaker, 2003; Wang et al., 2018a,b; Xiao and Newton, 2020).

Conclusion

This article explored what principals do using a work lens. It provided examples of some of the work that school principals do and a snapshot of some of the local and external influences on the nature of principals' work. The article concluded that many principals around the world find themselves experiencing work intensification. Because principals are the middle managers of public education school systems (Flessa, 2012; Kaul et al., 2021), the work they do will always be crucial. They champion new initiatives and system changes, are key supporters of students and teachers and pivotal change agents. It is crucial that politicians, policymakers, administrators, educators, and parents find ways to support principals in the important work they do.

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