

The Principal's Role in Transition: Instructional Leadership Ain't What It Used To Be, 5(13)

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Abstract

With the changes in education, the principal's role as experienced no longer matches the role advocated by instructional leadership theories. These changes shifted the orientation of the principal's work toward managerial tasks away from curriculum and instruction. Through an analysis of in-depth interviews with 13 in-school and school board administrators, this paper examines how principals perceive and experience their role. The data reveal that: principals are agents of accountability, are involved with social service agencies, are concerned with the safety and security of students; and have extended their day through participation on parent advisory councils and with other community groups.

Introduction

With the mass centralization of Canadian and international public education systems ([Levin 1999](#)), teachers and administrators are being mandated to do more with much less to fulfill government-mandated change. With these changes that impact on how schools function, several questions arise: Who are the instructional leaders? Who is responsible and for what are they responsible? Since before the 1980s, the principal has been held to be the most important person impacting on school-wide instruction. We have suggested elsewhere that this is not possible ([Macmillan, Meyer, & Sherman, 2001](#)). In his extensive study of American high schools, [Goodlad \(1984\)](#) provides credence to this belief, but then states that:

it is naïve and arrogant to assume that principals, who may or may not have been effective teachers, can acquire and maintain a higher level of teacher expertise than teachers engaged in teaching as a full-time occupation. (p. 303)

With further encroaching political and community pressures on school boards, and ultimately on school administrators, principals are increasingly caught in battles of power and control over decisions based on educational issues influenced by externally driven agendas. [Meyer and Rowan \(1983\)](#) suggest that the encroachment on educational decisions by people outside of education has resulted in administrators having to "compromise further and must further lose purely professional authority by acknowledging their compromised role. They do not have tenure and their survival is dependent on lay persons in the community, not professionals" (p. 87).

Several models have been elaborated to explain what principals actually do. While some concentrate on the range of leadership styles (e.g., [Leithwood & Montgomery, 1986](#)), others have attempted to describe what principals ought to do (e.g., [Achilles, 1987](#); [Peterson, 1987](#)). Behind these models is the concept of instructional leadership, which [Greenfield \(1987\)](#) describes as follows:

Instructional leadership refers to actions undertaken with the intention of developing a productive and satisfying working environment for teachers and desirable learning conditions and outcomes for children. (p. 60)

However, as cited above, instructional leadership is embedded in an environment which influences the internal operations of the school. In a recent attempt to reflect the changing reality of school administrators, the [Council of Chief State School Officers \(1997\)](#) accepted the "Standards for School Leaders" protocols. Representatives from 24 American states and from various educational organizations created six standards that they called *The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC): Standards for School Leaders*. These standards attempt to preserve the centrality of the principal in the educational enterprise and to reinforce the concept of leadership in areas of instruction, but in only one standard (number 4) is the external environment mentioned.

These standards are the result of an evolution started with the effective schools movement. They culminate with a broadened view of instructional leadership that now includes all the community, cultural, ethics, morality, and legal additions to present-day society's interests. In Canada, the federal system has entrenched these items within the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which has in turn influenced provincial education acts.

In today's world of ever changing, external influences promulgated by media, conservative-minded legislatures and an increasingly litigious population, school principals are expected to be a combination of bureaucrat, educational leader, community pillar, role model, surrogate parent, and moral agent as they respond to all of the school's constituents. Further, with the current round of school and school system restructuring, principals are an integral part of government's policies enacting fiscal restraint and accountability. Whether by design or default, the school leader's role has also been transformed in practice, if not in definition ([Castle, Mitchell, & Gupta, 2001](#)). Others have suggested that the nature of schools also has or must change to accommodate the new conceptualizations of what schools ought to be. For example, [Marsh \(2000\)](#) suggests that now, more than ever, a school principal must work towards transforming all

the members of a school organization into a reconstructed teaching and learning agency to fulfill the needs of the various communities. Educational leadership, in all its manifestations, is evolving to meet with the changes to the educational environment brought on by escalating external pressures from various quarters. As with teachers' work, then, the work of administrators has also intensified ([Apple & Jungck, 1992](#)).

Within the Nova Scotia context in the past five years, several initiatives have affected how principals work. Since 1996, school advisory councils have been legislated, school boards have been amalgamated, inclusion policies have been implemented at all levels, multi-million dollar budgetary cutbacks have occurred, the deterioration of the physical plants have necessitated their replacement and consolidation, and many retirements in the teaching and administrative workforce have occurred and will continue to occur over the next five years.

Given the changes to education that have occurred over the past twenty years, we need to have a better sense of what principals actually do. For this reason, the research reported here attempts to address two key questions including: what are the areas of priority identified in principals' conversations about their work? and how do they experience instructional leadership as described in the literature?

Method

A series of interviews were conducted during May-August 2000 with 13 in-service administrators who had been or were principals in three Nova Scotia school boards. All interviewees are experienced school administrators. All except one were male. Six are senior central office administrators who had been in the principalship for many years; six are current principals (two of which have been in their positions for less than five years); and one is a vice-principal who had been principal for only three years. All of the participants are employed in suburban/rural amalgamated school boards. Of the interviewees, the senior administrators were targeted because of their instrumental role in selecting, preparing and supervising new in-school administrators. In this capacity, they influence the direction of the principalship in their systems.

The interview questions were open-ended and guided by a naturalistic inquiry paradigm ([Lincoln and Guba, 1985](#)) and were inspired by protocols and procedures designed by [Denzin \(1989\)](#) and [Seidman \(1991\)](#). Responses were not directed by the interviewer, but probes were used to encourage administrators to expand on their thoughts about administration and on their experiences within their past or present administrative roles. The study did not purposely lead the respondents to prioritize their day's activities. The pivotal question in the survey asked the respondents to reflect on the following question: "From your experience, can you describe some of the more challenging incidents you've ever had to either facilitate or arbitrate or rule on." The purpose of this question was to elicit responses that would lead to either areas of concern, to incidents or to other phenomena that would create a catalogue of descriptors of the principals' tasks. The responses to this question and the follow-up questions always took the interviewees onto different paths. The interviews were transcribed and coded using a simple qualitative separation. Responses were grouped into a non-prioritized issues catalogue, and a series of categories that subsumed the various identified aspects of principals' work were developed.

Results

The eight categories of principals' tasks are listed below in Table One. Under each category, a subset of specific aspects of the tasks is given as well as the number of instances that these specific tasks were mentioned.

Table One: Catalogue of Principals' Tasks

Tasks	Specific Aspects of the Tasks	Frequency
<i>1. Instructional leadership</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • curriculum and new program development • supervision • professional development • implementing inclusion • problems of externally mandated curriculum change • changing evaluation system 	26
<i>2. Administrative Tasks</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • providing direction • consultation • contextualizing plans and policies • working with vice-principals and school • administrivia 	21
<i>3. Working with Students/Student Issues</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • counseling students • web-site abuse by students • student-to-student sexual harassment • foster children and discipline problems • drug use and students who were narcotics pushers • safe grad • developing programs to improve student social interaction • smoking issues • student deaths • dress codes 	13
<i>4. Personnel Management/ Human Resources</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gender issues • teacher harassment/negotiation of conflict • teacher/student supervision/ abuse accusations • unprofessional conduct of teachers • teacher stress and its negative impact on teaching • substance abuse by teachers 	10
<i>5. Dealing with</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • politics 	9

<i>external agencies</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • union politics and manipulation • parents bypassing school to address issues 	
<i>6. Conflict Resolution</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teacher couple marital problem • amalgamation of school districts • reducing conflict between subject departments/factions • between administration and teacher 	5
<i>7. Resource Management</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • program cuts • changing school demographics and organization • site base management • fund raising 	4
<i>8. Working with Parents</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consulting with parents • parent-teacher conflicts (e.g., marks, dress code, personality conflict) 	2

The areas of instructional leadership and administrative tasks can be viewed in many ways as subsets of each other, depending on the interpretation. Within an organizational perspective, instructional leadership is one responsibility of a principal's mandate, one of many tasks in the school environment. Within an instructional leadership orientation, all administrative tasks strive to fulfill instructional needs and are viewed as a subset of instructional leadership. For our purposes here, we have separated the spectrum of tasks into two distinct areas. "Instructional leadership" refers to all activities concerned with the creation, delivery, and assessment of curriculum and pedagogy, whereas "administrative tasks" refers to all non-instructional leadership concerns. Practically, the listed aspects of this task area focus on the principal providing technical and directional support to operational, procedural, and administrative school needs.

1. Instructional Leadership

This category can be subdivided based on whether the tasks are the result of an internal decision or an externally mandated change. The first three, "curriculum and new program development," "supervision," and "professional development", were described by participants as being internally generated and as a means to improve instruction. The other set of tasks, including the "implementation of inclusion," "problems of externally mandated curriculum change," and "changing the evaluation system," are derived from government initiatives implemented with the passage of the [*Nova Scotia Education Act in 1995.*](#)

Instructional leadership was by far the most often cited group of activities. However, respondents talked about tasks in this category in very general and often theoretical terms; the focus of their attention appeared to lie in other areas. To illustrate, one administrator described his instructional leadership role as follows:

Teachers are always on edge when new programs are coming in, and we've had a steady, steady diet of change in curriculum and methodology and evaluation over the last five to seven years. So, that kind of a turmoil creates serious stress within the staff. We try to do our very best to lighten that burden for our staff by giving them a high degree of preparedness, by in-servicing them, by having our department heads work with staff so that they feel comfortable with changes, and by freeing up our staff to go to in-services that are related to these kinds of changes.

This principal translated instructional leadership as providing the context for others to take on a hands-on leadership role in helping teachers to implement new curricula and evaluation systems. While he delegated the responsibility to department heads, he thought of instructional leadership as implementation, not the creation of innovative new curricula, and, in his mind, he has met the criteria for "instructional leader."

The next principal seconded the first principal's statement by suggesting that teachers and department heads are the ones who are responsible for in-class instructional leadership:

Curriculum is implemented and monitored through our department heads, through the school, depending on administration. So, that's how we keep an eye on those kinds of implementations and it works very well for us here at the school.

According to this principal, his role as instructional leader is not one of being directly involved in classrooms but is one of being the overseer and being one-step removed from classroom instruction. A third administrator elaborated what a new definition of instructional leadership might be by suggesting that instructional leadership meant being a middle manager who carries out directives from the central office and the government:

You should definitely be an instructional leader... You're there to introduce new policies, new guidelines from the Department of Education, and new programs into the curriculum.

This principal looked on himself as the overall manager of curriculum and not the initiator of a new academic program or curriculum. This is not to say, however, that principals do not spend time on curriculum supervision, but they do often find themselves occupied with the practical issues surrounding curriculum implementation and the provision of resources. Administrators stated that there is not enough time in a day to complete all the curricular responsibilities, hence instructional leadership is placed on the back-burner.

Administration is a day full of interruptions, you don't control the agenda ... we have a lot of interruptions and, often times, it's [only] at the end of the day, the evening or the non-school hours that you can work on curriculum.

While instructional leadership is important, these principals suggest that immediacy of other, time-dependent issues often take precedence over and over-shadow the more complex, yet less immediate, issues associated with instructional leadership. Instructional leadership or planning for it takes place outside of the school day.

2. Administrative Tasks

As stated earlier, administrative tasks are related to, but not directly involved with, instruction and provide the environment in which instruction happens. One of the key administrative tasks that principals identified was the establishment of a clear direction for their schools. They described their ideas in specifics or in generalities. One principal described a specific vision that he held about early childhood education that influenced his administration. He stated, "My philosophy at that time was, and continues to be that the early elementary years of education are truly the foundation of children going through the school system." Others were more specific.

I got a group of people together and we took on that as a beginning. How could we make the school warmer, more welcoming, and if parents and others from the community walked in, would they be able to tell that something different was happening in the school? That was a success, because I had more comments, more phone calls. More people would come up to me and say, "Oh, gee. The school looks really nice. Why are you guys doing this different?" So then I knew that it was being noticed.

This principal appeared to realize that if parents and the community saw the school as welcoming, then they would have confidence in what the school was doing for their children. In effect, this individual saw the creation of a positive environment as being conducive to learning.

Another key aspect of administrative leadership was the support of teachers through the reinforcement of student behavioral codes of conduct. One principal illustrated his belief in supporting his faculty on school discipline issues. He stated that, as principal, he had to demonstrate that discipline issues would be dealt with in a judicious and effective manner.

Teachers have to feel that there is support and back up for them. And if you don't provide them with that, you're not providing them with anything. They have to know that when they send a child down to you or when they bring a child to your attention, that you're going to deal with it.

The provision of support gave teachers the confidence that what was done in their classroom would be reinforced by the administration.

Consultation and working with various individuals in the school were seen by administrators as being an essential part of how they carried out their work. Through the process of consultation, they clarified and discussed their ideas and used the process as a vehicle to communicate, to persuade, and to listen to reactions.

One of the greatest frustrations that administrators identified was what they termed "administrivia," work often directly related to the current move toward increased accountability of schools. Principals stated that they felt they were drowning in a sea of mounting, seemingly picayune tasks required by both central office and the provincial Department of Education. Increasingly, detailed documentation is being required for virtually everything, from ordering school supplies to maintaining detailed records concerning cases that were or could come before the courts. This administrivia often was associated with changes dictated from without, but which had to be addressed by principals. One former principal who was a central office administrator framed the problem this way:

We cut back our budgets on our administrators, so they're talking administrivia so much that I think that one of our big losses ... We've taken on so many changes, so fast that, that I think a normal day does not exist in a number of our buildings anymore. I think it's a long time since they've been normal.

3. Working with students/student issues

The many student-oriented issues that administrators mentioned and that consumed much of their time can be grouped into two broad areas. The first are those tasks that dealt with issues that impacted on individual student learning such as "counseling students," "foster children and discipline problems," "student-to-student sexual harassment," "web-site abuse by students," and "drug use and students who were narcotics pushers." The second group deals with issues associated with the student body including "safe grad," "developing programs to improve student social interaction," "smoking issues," "student deaths," and "dress codes."

For the first group of tasks, several principals related incidents regarding violence, abuse, and the consumption of prohibited tobacco, alcohol, and illegal drugs. In these cases, school administrators reported that the successful resolution of such incidents was always dependent on consistent application of related policies along with faculty consultation and on being consistent and unified with faculty on consequences.

However, student threats that may or may not have ended in violence also consumed tremendous amounts of time and resources. For example, with the current expansion of the electronic media and the degree of access to the Internet that students appear to have on a nearly unlimited basis, principals have had to wrestle with dealing with potentially explosive situations that their predecessors of twenty years ago did not have to face. One principal identified one incident related to students who created an electronic "hate site" that glorified Hitler and that gave graphic detail of planned events to duplicate in several schools the Littleton, Colorado killings.

We're talking about Hitler's birthday. We're talking about potential shootings in the school and all kinds of spin-offs that came. And there was absolutely an hysteria. I'll give you an example, we had one of our high schools, _____, on April 20th, with 58 students present. They, and the 58 students for the most part had parents attend the school for that day.... We had over \$10 000 expended by the local regional police in terms of investigation and security [guards] on that particular day. We had at least six other schools that were almost paralyzed by the fear the parents had about the safety of their children. And this was created by a web-site that a couple of boys put on there....

Clearly this incident demanded a tremendous output of resources in order to keep order within both the school and school district and to reduce the fear of both students and parents. After the participants were apprehended, many more hours and resources were expended in terms of legal proceedings, crisis counseling, and public relations damage control.

Another aspect of dealing with individual students also gaining in importance is the involvement in schools by outside agencies such as social welfare services. One such incident involved a principal having to contain a foster child diagnosed as psychotic and who refused to stop threatening students in her school. When asked to leave the school with the social services personnel, she refused to do so. This incident was only resolved after the principal intervened as

a negotiator between the foster child, the social services representative, and the police. The follow-up to this incident took some weeks. The principal was responsible for coordinating meetings, schoolwork, and all interested parties to bring short- and long-term interventions and resolution to this issue.

Unlike the task discussed above on which the principal took a significant or sole lead role in handling, the other tasks in this category affected the whole student body and had an advantage for the principal of spreading the responsibility to others. For example, in such an unfortunate crisis as the death of a student on ski trip, the principal has an intervention team to provide support. One such incident is described below:

I was here. The vice-principal and parents had gone along on the trip. And to get that call at 5 o'clock in the evening, telling me that it looked bad. And then, the vice-principal, of course, did a fantastic job on, on handling things. But, then it was to deal with the staff. You know to have to come to the school and meet. We had our crisis team put in place and in the next morning, while everyone shared their tears and shared their, their sadness, and then to have to lead 600 students that morning, you know, through that whole process....

4. Personnel Management/Human Resources

The maintenance of healthy school personnel relations is a large administrative responsibility for the school principal and extends beyond simply translating the various personnel contracts. Ultimately, much time is expended by principals in creating an atmosphere of trust with the teachers and support personnel. This is not always easy and, in many instances, the principal must take direct action in sustaining a positive working and professional environment. If not handled appropriately, issues can quickly lead to a confrontation. One principal suggested that:

I think as a principal, you have to realize that you're not going to please everyone all of the time, you may not even please some staff any of the time. But you have to live with your morals and your values and your efforts. And, there are teachers that I know and did not, who would not love me, but there were many other teachers who were very positive.

The above deals with the conduct of the group. Other issues are individual personnel problems not related to the whole staff, although these problems do impact on the atmosphere of the staff room. The administrators discussed two such issues, one related to alcoholism and the need to have the teacher come to grips with his addiction. In this case, the process took over an entire year to resolve, during which time the principal met with the teacher and with concerned colleagues and students. The second issue identified had to do with marital issues of a teaching couple, which also occupied the principal regularly over the period of the marriage breakdown. Both issues could not be ignored as they affected teacher relations and students.

5. Dealing with external agencies

There are many external agencies to the school that come into contact with the principal. Such agencies can include the school board, municipal or provincial government agencies, social service department, businesses, or private citizens. These agencies can significantly influence the operation of the school, often through political means. One administrator related his dismay over

individuals attempting to marginalize and subvert certain hiring procedures and the involvement of the principal in the process by obtaining assistance from non-school personnel:

When I was in human resources – and what precipitated me leaving there – is when politics gets involved with hiring people.... In actual fact they're not playing on a level playing field. That's the worst situation I've ever felt.... It could manifest itself by people getting a list of names from a board member to make sure they'll get an interview.

Principals are caught in this web of outside political agendas that can confound initiatives, but which must be considered. These "political dynamics," to which the principal alludes below, are part of the complexity of the role with which principals have to deal:

There's politics at every level and there's politics between. But there's a political dynamic in the school; there are politics in a community; there's a political dynamic in the region; and there's a provincial political dynamic and we ran up against all those.

6. Conflict Resolution

Conflict is part of school life, especially when there are competing visions of what ought to be and when there is the potential for an inequitable distribution of resources ([Hargreaves & Macmillan, 1995](#)). In these cases, internal school politics between various constituencies must be addressed by the principal in order to maintain a healthy working climate and a positive school culture. Conflicts between personnel and at times between departments, have the potential to cause great rifts in faculty harmony. One of the key catalysts for such conflict is the introduction of change that could affect significantly the way teachers do their work. As the following principal lamented, some personnel had a very difficult time accepting change:

I've never seen people more concerned about protecting their turf than high school departments.... Those things are very, very difficult to change. They've got their own agenda.... Because they have a very set kind of a curriculum, a very set way of evaluating, and it's very hard for them to make those kinds of quantum leaps to do other types of evaluation, to teach with other methodologies that include more people. It's very difficult for them to do that when they are so conservative and so staid in the way that they have approached teaching and learning in high schools.

Principals can not ignore such conflict, otherwise, it may cause other initiatives to be waylaid and affect student learning. The problem is identifying and addressing the conflict within the time constraints.

7. Resource Management

All administrators commented that, with the consistent government and school board mantra of "do less with more," they faced the difficult struggle of maintaining educational and non-educational resources, including ensuring the physical plant was habitable. In some cases, this meant negotiating among less desirable alternatives or trading resources with teachers to get agreement.

The best solution was to go down into the lower level of the school, where we had a large drama room, and a teacher who had that room for many, many years, and we asked him to vacate that space, because it was the only area in the school we could run a music program. The teacher

didn't like the move.... What we promised him was that we would provide him a space upstairs and that we would develop it as he wanted it developed.

In other cases, principals have been involved in activities far beyond what one would normally consider as their role in managing resources. For example, one principal related that, while his school was going through a long-term renovation to address building health concerns, the school district downloaded to the principal all decision making about the renovations and the positive or negative reactions to these decisions. He was responsible for maintaining some semblance of school life within the many construction zones, even while noise and safety issues resulted in much class disruption. Faculty's, students' and parents' tolerance levels were low and unstable. While this project virtually consumed all of this principal's time, he also had to develop the skills of a political mediator.

8. Working with Parents

Governments have legislated parental involvement by instituting school advisory councils in many jurisdictions ([Levin,1999](#)). For this and other reasons, parents are becoming more vocal and involved in their children's schools. The problem with this involvement, however, is that parents may come to believe that they can dictate school policy to a principal for the direct benefit of their child. To avoid this, one principal gave the following solution:

I think the first group of people that you must always have in your mind when you are making decisions about children are their parents. Because if you don't have the parents on line with you, and if they do not trust you, then it doesn't matter what decision you make, they will never believe that the school is valuable. They'll never believe that what's happening to their child in that school is honest. So I really believe in, whether it's phone calls, whether it is appearing at public or whatever is happening in your communities, I think you should be visible.

When communication and negotiation fail, principals may have to be more directive with parents, and "stand their ground." As the principal below suggested, this is not often easy: I stood my ground, but, you know, it was unbelievable the slander that went on by this parent towards me. And what was also unbelievable was at one point the superintendent came to me and said, "Hold your ground on this because this lady is organizing a boycott of graduation because of the fact that you are not allowing her son to graduate because he's short of credit."

Discussion and Conclusions

The study cited above has attempted to provide a snapshot of how these principals experienced administration on a daily basis and to begin to develop a better idea of what a different definition of instructional leadership might entail. To begin to formulate this definition, we will return to the questions we posed earlier and use them to organize this discussion.

1. What are the areas of priority identified in principals' conversations about their work?

Much of what principals identified as their work centred around tasks related to the resolution of immediate issues. These tasks were often not directly related to issues of instruction or of instructional improvement but did influence the context in which instruction would take place.

The discussions revolved more around the resolution of short-term, non-instructional problems and less around the longer-term instructional issues.

The focus on non-instructional problems could be due to a variety of factors. One of the most important might be the immediacy of the issues addressed and the contingent psychic rewards for the principal when the problems have been resolved or the castigation when the problems are not addressed. Further, principals cannot ignore crises as they occur but can delay dealing with instructional issues that might require weeks or months of involvement.

Another factor might be the prescriptive nature of the curriculum set by the Department of Education, which, for principals, may be perceived as neither allowing for nor requiring only minimal involvement. For these reasons, the principals in this study appeared to be less instructional leaders than instructional facilitators, a role that may also have been influenced through various means such as tightly prescribed implementation protocols, approved texts, guidelines, and centrally devised assessment vehicles. These protocols relieve principals of having to spearhead curriculum development and of having to develop innovative instructional strategies. In effect, principals seem to consider themselves as reactive facilitators to externally driven mandates and not as pro-active leaders creating curricula and working closely with teachers in the classroom.

Non-instructional tasks and issues do not have such clear resolution protocols and, as a result, appear to present more difficulties for principals when problems arise. In many instances, principals may have to develop strategies based on a "crisis management" approach that requires significant amounts of immediate time, focus, energy, and resources, and these are the issues that often occupy their energies and their thinking.

2. How do they experience instructional leadership as described in the literature?

The literature on instructional leadership is often theoretical in nature and does not often reflect the messiness of what principals do on a day-to-day basis. Arguably, instructional leadership is a key component of what in-school administrators do ([Leithwood, 1992](#)). However, with the changes to education and its organization, administrators have had additional responsibilities and expectations placed on them, which have had the effect of increasing the managerial function and of removing administrators from an intimate ongoing involvement with classrooms (see, for example, [Brown, 1990](#)). We suggest that, given what the administrators have told us, the effective schools movement's thrust, which generated much of the instructional leadership direction, is highly unlikely to reflect the work of today's principals. Whether due to encroaching external mandates, stringent accountability of educational objectives within budgetary cutbacks, and school board centralization that devolves decision making to the school level, principals do not appear to have the luxury to relate all problems or actions back to their role as the instructional leader.

Toward a Definition of Instructional Leadership

We suggest that principals are not engaged in the hands-on, curriculum-expert style of instructional leadership as envisioned in the 1980s. For this reason, we second [Greenfield's](#)

(1987) statement cited earlier and also suggest at least two additions or clarifications. First, instructional leadership must be reconceptualized to describe the act or process of creating and sustaining an environment in which teachers can carry on their highly complex socially-textured task of instruction. Second, the definition must also recognize and encompass the continuously expanding role that principals are assuming. More than ever, tasks other than curriculum supervision and for which principals were also previously responsible are now assuming greater prominence. Some of these are listed below.

- a. Principals serve as accountability agents for an increasingly centralized system of education. Centralization has often been accompanied by budgetary constraints in central office, which has downloaded much of central office's information-gathering responsibilities and accountability for this data onto the principal.
- b. Principals are more involved in social-service-related issues within their schools than before. As in the example above, schools are having to work closely with external community agencies such as departments of health, welfare, and justice.
- c. Principals are legally responsible for the safety and security of a school's population, which is becoming increasingly problematic due to the changing nature of families and the public's perception of what constitutes safety.
- d. Principals are mandated to work closely with parent advisory councils and other such community or interest groups (school affiliated or not). While being charged with increasing stakeholder involvement with schools, they must do so at a time when government policies and regulations restrict the number and scope of the areas in which schools can make decisions.

Recommendations for Further Research

At this stage, we do not have a sufficient grasp of the complexity of principals' daily lives to be able to use this information to develop a different definition of instructional leadership that more accurately reflects what current in-school administrators do. In this we agree with [Gronn and Ribbins \(1996\)](#) in the need to examine further the lives of principals. Some areas for exploration might be:

- Determine how the principal's role has changed since the 1980s and in which specific areas. This might be done with the responses from a sample of newly appointed principals (under 5 years of experience) compared with the descriptions of the role in the literature from the 1980s.
- Examine how principals adapt to increasing responsibilities.
- Investigate how principals are restructuring and redefining their role. Specifically, are principals creating environments that encourage others to assume leadership in instruction and in other areas?
- Explore what skills and knowledge principals perceive to be valuable in the execution of their duties.

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