Work Intensification and the Secondary Vice-Principal Role

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Abstract

Work intensification has increased the workload and complexity of work performed by principals and vice-principals. This case narrative provides an account of work intensification on the secondary vice-principal role. The vice-principal role consists of administrating to various school operations and instructional leadership duties as assigned by the principal. In particular, the role has evolved into "juggling" reactive and urgent school operations tasks with important instructional leadership duties to improve student learning and achievement. The teaching notes address three tensions of the vice-principal role: (a) developing and strengthening personal leadership resources, (b) prioritizing school operations and instructional leadership duties, and (c) striving for work-life balance.

Keywords: vice-principal, school operations, instructional leadership, personal leadership resources, work-life balance

Case Narrative

It is 4:30 in the afternoon and Daniel is sitting in his office, feeling exhausted, and reflecting on how quickly the school day has gone by. He remembers arriving at 8:00 in the morning and turning on his laptop computer to see how many new e-mails have arrived. He replies to several e-mails and then works on a memo to staff about an upcoming assembly. His secretary interrupts, asking if he is available to meet with Samantha and her parents who have shown up without an appointment. Daniel agrees and learns that Samantha is being cyberbullied by a group of students in her grade. This urgent issue becomes his immediate task for the day. He has an open door policy and often stays in his office for hours. He deals with reactive, time consuming, and non-stop student conflict; meets with parents/caregivers both with and without appointment(s); supports staff with student attendance and engagement, and handles other issues that arise during the school day. Daniel wishes that the backlog of people waiting for him outside his office would slow down. Whenever he can leave his office, he is visible in the hallways, cafeteria, and classrooms, as he wants the school to be a safe, inclusive, and positive learning environment. He carries a walkie-talkie and can return to the main office at a moment's notice. He remembers being apprenticed into the role of vice-principal when his mentor told him, "Your number one responsibility is developing relationships. Visibility, visibility, visibility." Daniel takes the time to speak with students about how their day is going and knows the names of a third of the student population. He believes being *out there* is proactive and prevents incidents from occurring, and he can sense when a student's baseline behaviour has escalated and requires intervention. Daniel enjoys attending evening events such as school plays and musical performances since these allow him to see students in a venue outside of their regular academic environment.

Currently in his seventh year as a secondary vice-principal, Daniel believes the work has gradually become more complex. He finds satisfaction in providing *customer service* to students, staff, and parents/

caregivers: he treats them with respect, is an empathetic listener, and gives them his time and full attention. He experiences fulfillment when students, staff, and parents/caregivers thank him for helping them. However, he believes he lacks the skills to support the mental health and well-being of his students and staff. Daniel is surprised by the number of students unable to attend school regularly due to social anxiety and/or depression. He is frustrated with the obstacles to get school supports, as he needs consent from both the student and their parents/caregivers before he can move forward with referrals to the school social worker and school community partnerships. He has seen students' overall stress levels rise during his years as vice-principal since post-secondary institution admission requirements continue to escalate. He gets discouraged when his interventions do not result in behavioural change. He is grateful to work with a principal who is consultative, makes collaborative decisions, and wants administration to meet as a team with difficult parents/caregivers or staff. Daniel sees himself wearing many *hats*, including those of guidance counsellor, social worker, police officer, teacher, and parent as he supports others to the best of his abilities. He does not subscribe to the traditional belief of vice-principal as school disciplinarian since he advocates for students' social, emotional, and academic needs while supporting teachers with the important work they do. He complies with the Ontario Ministry of Education Safe Schools policy and uses progressive discipline as a learning opportunity; even suspensions are viewed as a chance for learning and reflection rather than a punitive measure. He always attempts to work with parents/caregivers so that the school consequences, such as suspension(s), are not challenged.

Daniel also believes the duties required of school operation have multiplied. He spends an inordinate amount of time on occupational health and safety; addressing staff concerns with the head caretaker promptly; updating school emergency procedures including evacuation, lock-down, and hold-and-secure; and ensuring procedures are in place and implemented for students and staff with life-threatening allergies. Daniel also spends a lot of time on teacher hiring. The Ontario Ministry of Education hiring policy stipulates that the five most senior teachers who apply for contract or long-term occasional vacancies in schools must be interviewed. Daniel does not like this policy because the teachers who seem like they may be a match for his school cannot be interviewed if they are not high enough on the seniority list. The hiring policy requirement may result in him, and his principal, spending a significant investment of time supporting, and instructing, the successful applicant.

Although Daniel spends most of the school day on school operations, he is also expected to demonstrate instructional leadership. His principal assigns portfolio duties, which entail both school operations and instructional leadership duties. Daniel has had four principals during his seven years as a vice-principal and knows there is role ambiguity as each principal has had different expectations of him. Instructionally, he is responsible for supporting the literacy teacher with preparing students for the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test as a graduation requirement in Ontario. He is also responsible for facilitating the assessment and evaluation of the equity committees. Daniel also leads the mental health initiative, which informs a major part of the school improvement plan. When meeting with teacher leaders, Daniel is often interrupted with urgent school operations matters. He wishes he could spend more time working with teachers struggling in their classrooms to meet the needs of their diverse learners (e.g., Special Education, English Language Learners).

Daniel struggles with finding the time to demonstrate instructional leadership when most of–if not the entire–day is spent on school operations. He has adapted by approaching school operational tasks with an instructional lens. He believes that every interaction with students, staff, and parents/caregivers can be instructional. A good example of instructional leadership is when two students get into a physical fight or verbal confrontation; Daniel's primary goal is to teach them alternative ways of dealing with conflict. He engages students in reflective, restorative approach questions to repair the relationship (and there may be school consequences as mandated by the Ontario Ministry of Education Safe Schools policy). Additionally, he often finds that students sent to the main office by their teachers are disengaged, and then supports teachers with meeting individual student needs through their planning, instruction, and assessment practices. In a third example of instructional leadership, Daniel strategically places courses when creating the school master timetable to optimize student achievement; for instance, locally developed and applied core courses are scheduled only in the morning.

Daniel and his principal feel the pressure of potential student achievement in an age of accountability. The Fraser Institute, a Canadian think tank, releases an annual report on Ontario school rankings based solely on provincial ninth grade mathematics and Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test results to the

media. Parents/caregivers express concerns to school administration if the school's ranking drops. However, Daniel knows that school rankings correlate strongly with socio-economic status. Daniel is also responsible for analyzing marks distribution for each section of a course and works with teachers when there is a concern in this area. He can offer instructional and assessment support(s) and is careful not to blame teachers, so they are receptive to changing practices to meet the individual needs of their students.

As Daniel continues to reflect on the growing work complexity, and increased workload of being a secondary vice-principal, he cannot ignore the fact that he neglects taking care of his own well-being. He yearns to take a 30-minute lunch break in the staff room, rather than eat lunch in his office while multi-tasking. His mental health committee led mindfulness activities to staff earlier in the school year, and he wishes he could practice the strategies demonstrated more regularly. He has accepted that being a school administrator means working long hours that continue into the evenings and the weekends. Daniel does not believe the work is getting easier, or more routine, even after seven years as a secondary vice-principal. Overall, he has no regrets about becoming a vice-principal, as he has broadened the impact he had on his classroom and department to apply to the school as a whole. He maintains a photo *legacy wall* of students taken at graduation as a reminder of the unique journey each student takes to graduate–some very challenging and requiring extensive school supports.

Daniel spends the next hour wrapping up the day's work. He documents and files his notes from his meetings with students, staff, and parents/caregivers. He also sends a few e-mails to staff requesting interventions for particular students. Additionally, he includes the student's guidance counsellor, special education resource teacher, or student success teacher in these e-mail communications because he believes in a team approach. He organizes his office, which looks like a mess from the day's occurrences. He goes through the three dozen e-mails in his inbox, which he feels is a losing battle: e-mails from staff regarding student concerns, e-mails from parents/caregivers seeking support, e-mails from his principal requesting action, and an e-mail from the board office containing the agenda for next week's area school administrators' meeting. He checks his online calendar for tomorrow's schedule, which includes: a teacher performance appraisal pre-observation meeting, a follow-up meeting with a parent/caregiver who believes her child is not receiving instructional and assessment accommodations in science class, a weekly administration meeting to connect and discuss issues and concerns, and sitting in on a meeting with his principal and union representative to gather information from a teacher that could result in teacher disciplinary action. He returns to writing the assembly memo to staff, that he started at the beginning of the day, only to be interrupted, again, this time by a knock on the main office door. He sees Jonathan, a grade 11 student, with his dad. Daniel notices that Jonathan has been in a physical fight and realizes today will be another late evening. Daniel anticipates this will take at least an hour as he will need to start an investigation which begins with hearing from Jonathan, instructing both Jonathan and the other student involved (via parents/caregivers) that there shall be no further interaction between the two (including on social media), checking school security cameras, and requesting a meeting with the other student before school starts tomorrow. Daniel is ready to react to these urgent tasks, which takes precedence over other important tasks, occurring unexpectedly at any moment before, during, or after school. Daniel believes the work intensification, through increased workload and the growing complexity of the work, have negatively impacted his effectiveness as a vice-principal.

Teaching Notes

This case narrative portrays the work and workload of a secondary vice-principal in Ontario. The author strived to depict Daniel's work and workload based on his own experiences as a current secondary vice-principal in Ontario, as well as through the results of his doctoral dissertation. The author interviewed 13 Ontario secondary principals on their understanding of the secondary vice-principal role (Lim, 2016). Hopefully, this case narrative will provide prospective secondary vice-principals with an account of the realities of the secondary vice-principal role, and invite current secondary principals and vice-principals to reflect on the growing complexity and increased workload of the position investigated here.

Work intensification of principals and vice-principals is a growing field active with current research. An Ontario study found that vice-principals work an average of 54.5 hours a week, preoccupied with school operations tasks, with only 2.4 hours a week devoted to curriculum and instructional leadership (Pollock, Wang, & Hauseman, 2017). Another Ontario study viewed vice-principals as an *extension* of principals and found workload increased due to implementation(s) of numerous Ministry of Education

policies, expectations of district school boards, and an emphasis on school improvement plans (Leithwood & Azah, 2014). These studies and others in Canada (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2014; Cattonar et al., 2007; Pollock, Wang, & Hauseman, 2014) found that principals' and vice-principals' school operational duties have become more challenging due to the growing complexity of meeting students' diverse social, emotional, and academic needs. It is therefore important to note that the Ontario Education Act lists the vice-principal role as (a) performing duties assigned by the principal, and (b) performing the duties of the principal when the principal is absent from the school (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1990). Thus, the vice-principal role has been referred to as "poorly defined" (Rintoul & Goulais, 2010) due to role ambiguity and role overload as principals delegate more school operations and instructional duties to their vice-principals.

Having described the case narrative of Daniel (the *what*), this section describes three activities designed to strengthen particular skills needed in the vice-principal role (the *how*). Specifically, the rest of this article focuses on (a) developing and strengthening personal leadership resources (cognitive, social, and psychological), (b) prioritizing school operations and instructional leadership duties, and (c) striving for work-life balance. The activities presented below can be used by instructors in the Principal Qualification Program (PQP) for teachers working towards becoming school administrators. The activities are also applicable to instructors in graduate educational leadership and educational administration courses to help bridge theory and practice. Current principals and vice-principals constitute another audience/readership who can use these activities to strengthen particular skills needed in their respective roles.

Activity 1: Developing and Strengthening Personal Leadership Resources

The Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) is a research-based policy document used in Ontario to describe effective leadership practices. Specific to the school level, the OLF consists of five domains (the *what*): (1) setting direction, (2) building relationships and developing people, (3) developing the organization to support desired practices, (4) improving the instructional program, and (5) securing accountability (The Institute for Education Leadership, 2013). The second part of the OLF consists of three personal leadership resources to describe the interpersonal skills or approach(s) for effective leadership practices (the *how*): (1) cognitive resources (problem-solving expertise, role-specific knowledge, systems thinking), (2) social resources (perceiving and managing emotions, acting in appropriate ways), and (3) psychological resources (optimism, self-efficacy, resilience, proactivity) (The Institute for Education Leadership, 2013). Developing and strengthening personal leadership resources are important since vice-principals spend a significant amount of time working with and supporting students, staff, and parents/caregivers (Lim, 2016; Rintoul & Kennelly, 2014).

Note to instructor. Please ask your students to read pages 44 to 52 of <u>*The Ontario Leadership Framework 2012 with a Discussion of the Research Foundations*</u> by Leithwood (2012) available in the hyperlink. Students can complete a graphic organizer (available on the internet) to record key learning and identify questions. A class discussion should commence, facilitated by the instructor, to ensure everyone has an understanding of the personal leadership resources available.

Another applicable resource is to read habit five of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Covey (2013): seek first to understand, then to be understood. In this section, readers are reminded that we tend to listen to reply instead of to understand, and tend to focus on ourselves instead of the other person (Covey, 2013). Covey suggests that we practice empathetic listening based on listening with eyes (i.e., noting nonverbal cues expressed through body language), listening with heart (noting others' tone, voice, feelings), and listening with ears (listening to the actual words used). He suggests using rephrasing (e.g., It sounds like…, Let me make sure I understand…,) and asking questions to clarify understanding (Covey, 2013).

The instructor can lead a cooperative learning think-pair-share activity to evaluate Daniel's personal leadership resources and ask students to explain the reasoning behind their evaluations after reading the relevant material from Leithwood (2012) and Covey (2013). The activity is done individually, then shared with an elbow partner. Two pairs can form a group of four to share further. The instructor can then bring the class together for a class discussion and for consolidation to unpack the case narrative using the lens of personal leadership resources and empathetic listening.

Readers will then role-play one of the following scenarios with a partner. The intent is to develop and strengthen cognitive, social, and psychological resources, and to use empathetic listening. One person

plays the role of vice-principal, while the other person plays a role specific to the scenario (e.g., teacher, parent/caregiver). After the role-play, each partner is to evaluate how the personal leadership resources were enacted, how empathic listening was used, and to reflect on one's strengths and potential areas of growth. Partners then switch roles and can choose the same or a different scenario to role-play.

Scenario one. A parent meets with you (the vice-principal), upset that an English teacher has discouraged her child to the point where she no longer wants to attend school. The parent shares inappropriate comments made by the teacher in front of the class, directed at her child: "Why don't you know that?"; "Don't you listen in class?"; and "Summer school awaits you." Furthermore, the parent angrily states that when her child reacted by crying, the teacher saw her and said nothing, while classmates consoled her. The parent demands that her child be transferred to another English teacher's class immediately.

Scenario two. An upset parent meets with you (the vice-principal) and believes a mathematics teacher is making the tests too difficult, long, and includes material not taught in class. The parent is very concerned as her child does all her homework, seeks extra help from the teacher during and outside of class, is ready for the tests, and is losing interest and confidence in mathematics. The parent has spoken with the teacher but sees no change. The parent threatens to call the superintendent if there is no change after the next test.

Scenario three. A teacher meets with you (the vice-principal) upset that a student, Mary, continues to get into verbal conflicts and physical fights with other students in the class, and disrupts the lesson by talking with other students, and yelling out comments such as "This is so boring," and "This is useless." The teacher is frustrated that every time Mary is sent to the office, she returns to the next class with no change in her behaviour. Today, Mary kicked a desk occupied by a student and stormed out of class. The teacher firmly states to you that if Mary is not permanently removed from the class she will refuse to teach that class, as it is unsafe.

Suggested and additional reading:

Golman, D. (2005). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ.* New York, NY: Bantam Dell.

Gray, D. (2009). *Emotional intelligence and school leadership.* Retrieved from https://files.eric. ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1071402.pdf

Patterson, J. L., & Kelleher, P. (2005). *Resilient school leaders: Strategies for turning adversity into achievement.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Tschannen-Moran, M., & Gareis, C. R. (2004). Principals' sense of efficacy: Assessing a promising construct. *Journal of Educational Administration, 42*(5), 573-585.

Activity 2: Prioritizing Duties

A vice-principal is responsible for completing a multitude of school operations and instructional leadership tasks assigned by their principal, as depicted in Daniel's case narrative. The work hours are long, and duties are completed to meet deadlines. The goal of this activity is for the student to self-reflect and be clear about their personal image of themselves as leaders. Then, students will engage in an activity to prioritize Daniel's portfolio duties as assigned by his principal.

Note to instructor. Please ask your students to read the article *Is Your School Better Because You Lead It?* by Kafele (2017). The following questions are to be answered individually, based on current leadership roles, and not to be shared with others to encourage honest self-reflection in a safe environment. The questions here will provide clarity on "who you are, what you're about, why you're about it, and where you are going" (Kafele, 2017, p. 14).

1. (a) Answer Kafele's open-ended question: "Is my school a better school because I lead it?" Why do you think that?
   (b) Would students, staff, and parents/caregivers share the same view?
2. (a) What is your leadership identity? I.e., who are you as a leader?
   (b) Respond to Kafele's question: "Does your leadership identity affect the climate, culture, and achievement in your school?" Why do you think that?
3. Respond to Kafele's questions: "What's the one thing you feel you must absolutely accomplish?

What drives you above all else and keeps you up at night? What is your leadership mission?" I.e., "What are you about?"

4. What is your leadership purpose? I.e., "Why do you do it?"
5. What is your leadership vision? I.e., "Where are you going?"

Having self-reflected, the following activity asks students to prioritize the school operations and instructional leadership duties assigned to Daniel by his principal. Although we must prioritize work that is urgent and important (i.e., crises, pressing problems, meet deadlines), our time needs to be spent on what is important and not urgent (i.e., relationship building, prevention, planning) (Covey, 2013). Students are asked to keep their responses to the Kafele (2017) article in mind when completing the following activity.

Table 1
Daniel's Portfolio Duties

Anaphylaxis	Assemblies	Assessment and Evaluation
Course Offerings Calendar	Equity and Inclusion	Field Trips
Grade 9 Transitions	Health and Safety	Literacy Team (including Ontario Secondary School Literacy test)
Mark Reporting (mid-term and end-of-semester) and mark analysis	Mental Health and Well-Being	Morning Announcements
On-call coverage, supply teachers, teacher absence	Parents' Night	Photos – student card, graduation
Professional Learning (shared)	Public Health/ Immunization	Safe and Supportive Schools (evacuation, lockdown, hold-and-secure)
School Improvement Plan (shared)	School Sign	School Timetabling
Semester Start-Up	Staff Meeting Agenda	Students: L-Z (attendance, conduct, registration, team meetings)
Teacher Performance Appraisals (shared)	Weekly Staff Bulletin	Department Supervision: English, Family Studies, Geography, Guidance, History, Moderns, Special Education

Work in pairs to prioritize Daniel's portfolio duties as assigned by his principal:
1. Categorize each duty as school operations or instructional leadership.
2. Determine the time of school year each duty would be performed (some are on-going).
3. (a) Which duties are important and urgent? Which duties take precedence over other duties? (b) Which duties are important and *not* urgent?
4. If you are not performing any work that is urgent, describe what your day as a vice-principal could look like. Take into account your leadership identity, mission, purpose, and vision.
5. (a) Based on the case narrative, what do you think is Daniel's leadership identity? Leadership mission? Leadership purpose? Leadership vision? (b) Do you think that Daniel effectively prioritizes his duties and responsibilities? Why do you think that?

Suggested and additional readings:

Baeder, J. (2018). *Now we're talking! 21 days to high-performance instructional leadership.* Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

Horng, E. L., Klasik, D., & Loeb, S. (2010). Principal's time use and school effectiveness. *American Journal of Education, 116*(4), 491-523.

Marshall, K. (2008). The big rocks: Priority management for principals. *Principal Leadership, 8*(7), 16-22.

Sorenson, R. D., Goldsmith, L. M., & DeMatthews, D. E. (2016). *The principal's guide to time management: Instructional leadership in the digital age.* Thousand Islands, CA: Corwin.

Activity 3: Striving for Work-Life Balance

A consequence of work intensification has been the challenge for school administrators to balance their professional and personal lives. Recent research on Ontario vice-principals described how often vice-principals reported work-life balance was being achieved: all the time (1.7%), often (13.9%), sometimes (41.5%), rarely (30.4%), and never (12.5%) (Pollock et al., 2017). Furthermore, 95.9% of the Ontario vice-principals surveyed stated that their work life infringes on their home life, and 92.0% reported missing something at home due to work responsibilities (Pollock et al., 2017). As the work gets more complex, with additional work to be done, school administrators need to perform their duties efficiently and with the ability to manage their professional and personal time.

Note to instructor. Students should now engage in a cooperative learning jigsaw activity consisting of expert and home groups. Divide your class into thirds, so one-third of your class reads *Balancing Passion and Priorities: An Investigation of Health and Wellness Practices of Secondary School Principals* by Beisser, Peters, and Thacker (2014), another third reads *Healthy Principals, Healthy Schools* by Pollock (2017), and the final third reads *Principal Well-Being and Resilience: Mindfulness as a Means to That End* by Wells and Klocko (2018). In expert groups, students read their assigned article and discuss key points. Then, the expert groups dismantle and students join their home group; the home group will consist of three students, each having read and discussed a different article in their expert group. In their home group, each student takes their turn summarizing key learnings from the article they read. As a whole class, the instructor facilitates a discussion and records students' suggestions on how to promote a healthy work-life balance. Which of these suggestions could help Daniel have better control of his professional and personal lives?

Wells (2017), in *The Ripple Effect*, speaks of the interrconnectedness of sleep, diet, exercise, and mental health to promote healthy living. As a self-reflection activity, each student is to create an action plan describing how they will promote their physical, mental, and emotional well-being to strive for a work-life balance. Students can also identify any professional learning(s) they need (e.g., resilience, mindfulness, emotional intelligence). Participants are encouraged to keep a personal journal to document their successes, struggles, reflections, and their next steps as they strive towards work-life balance.

Suggested and additional reading:

Brown, V., & Olson, K. (2015). *The mindful school leader: Practices to transform your leadership and school.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Groysberg, B., & Abrahams, R. (2014). Manage your work, manage your life. *Harvard Business Review, 92*(3), 58-66.

Wells, C. M. (2015). *Conceptualizing mindful leadership in schools: How the practice of mindfulness informs the practice of leading.* Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ EJ1105711.pdf

Williamson, R., & Johnston, H. (2014). *Balancing personal and professional responsibilities.* Retrieved from https://oregongearup.org/sites/oregongearup.org/files/research-briefs/balancepersonalprofessional.pdf

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