

**Leading Remotely:  
Exploring the Experiences of Principals in  
Rural and Remote School Communities in Jamaica**

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**Abstract**

School leadership is an exciting although challenging job. Principals of schools located in rural and remote communities, particular small schools, experience and encounter many challenges that their counterparts in suburban and urban areas do not experience. Concerns over staffing, the quality and availability of materials, facilities, infrastructure and physical access to the school plant are but few of the more readily known challenges. But there are other challenges too such as lack of electricity, workload, feelings of professional isolation, all of which can have an impact of how principals see themselves. This qualitative case study uses a form of grounded theory research to make meaning of the experiences of four small school primary principals in rural Jamaica. The main conclusions are that: principals feel staff and students in their schools are resilient; they enjoy their jobs but feel a sense of professional isolation; and the changing socio-economic policy contexts has led to work intensification.

### **Introduction & Conceptualisation**

A number of studies on rural and remote education include a definition of these terms, although each differ, based on the author's perspective and the focus of the research (Starr & White, 2008; Smith & Smith, 2009). According to Cobbold (2006), this has resulted in "atmosphere of conceptual chaos" (p. 455). In their simplest forms, "rural" and "remote" are used to describe geographical areas that are not urban. Several characteristics such as population density, distance from other centers, community size and the degree of isolation from an urban center have been used to try to provide a reliable method of defining "rural" and "remote" (McShane & Walton, 1990). Accordingly, UNESCO (n.d.), provides that "Rural areas comprise human settlements of less than 10,000 people and the rural space is dominated by farms, forests, water, mountains and/or desert" (p. 1). However, the mostly widely used variable for defining "rural" is population density: an area is rural if population density is below 150 inhabitants per square kilometre (OECD, 1994). d'Plesse (1993) contended "the correlation between distance and evidence of remoteness of populations is not necessarily linear" (p. 2) whereas Howley, Theobald, and Howley (2005) proposed that "the rural in rural is not most significantly the boundary around it, but the meanings inherent in rural lives, wherever lived" (p. 1).

For many students in rural and remote communities, the nature of their isolation has changed and continues to change. Fitzpatrick (1983) suggested that, in the past they had few opportunities to go down to town and interact with other people. More recently, and nowadays, however, with modern technology, students may not have a variety of contact with life and others in their communities as they once did. In other words, due to improvements in transport and communications infrastructure, there are increased opportunities for students to communicate with individuals outside of their immediate home and community environments. As a result of this shift, several researchers (Moriarity, Donaher, & Donaher, 2003; Cobbold, 2006; Hardré, 2007; Wallace & Boylan, 2009) recommended flexibility in conceptualising terms such as "rural", "remote" and "isolated", versus sticking to fixed definitions, in recognition that rural environments are constantly changing.

### **Literature Review**

There is some literature which cautions against conceptualizing rural as being lacking compared with urban (Moriarity, Donaher, & Donaher, 2003). This is sometimes called the 'rural deficit model' (Cobbold, 2006; Cornish, 2009). Evans described a flawed binary which frames rural as "the negative (poor, unsophisticated, underdeveloped) corollary of the urban (rich, sophisticated, developed)" (p. 170), arguing that this dualism is too sweeping. This, however, should not be taken to mean as there are no challenges to the educational provision for students in rural locations. Rather, that the situation is not simply clear cut. Wallace and Boylan (2009) and Christie (2008) pointed to the danger of assuming that improving educational opportunities for rural and remote students means providing them with an urban-based education, whereas Cornish (2009) and Khupe, Kean, and Cameron (2009) encouraged us to consider the context and needs of students. Despite this and despite widespread recognition of the value of preparing teachers for rural and remote experiences (Lock, 2008; Halsey, 2009), there is only limited evidence of progress in terms of addressing the needs of rural students, or in terms of preparing

teachers for the realities and needs of students in these schools (Boylan, 2004; Hardré, 2009), with only few teacher training institutions providing field experiences for trainee teachers that prepare them for the rural teaching experience (Lopes, O'Donoghue, & O'Neil, 2011).

The National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education in Australia (HREOC, 2000) found “most teacher training does not adequately equip new recruits with the skills and knowledge needed for teaching in the rural and remote areas” (p. 43). Additionally, practicing teachers receive limited opportunities for professional development for teachers in rural and remote locations (Mulcahy, 2009; Pegg, 2009). Furthermore, where professional development opportunities are provided, teachers are not always able to take advantage of them due to the: (a) absence of relief staff; (b) distance to travel; and/ or (c) financial affordability (Lyons, Cooksey, Panizzon, Parnel, & Pegg, 2006; Cornish, 2009). In addition to these factors, a range of other factors have been identified as contributing to concerns for the educational needs, opportunities and outcomes of rural and remote students, including poor facilities and infrastructure (Hardré, 2009); inexperienced staff (Sharplin, 2009); limited curriculum choice (Stevens, 1994); lack of relevant curriculum choices (Bartholomaeus, 2006); and lack of access to public facilities such as libraries, art galleries and cinemas (Fitzpatrick, 1983).

### **The International Situation**

Globally, in both developed and developing countries, concerns have been raised about the quality of the educational opportunities afforded rural and remote students (Cobbold, 2006). In the United States of America (USA), the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (Hursch, 2004) was the catalyst for research into rural education (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, and Dean (2005), for example, reviewed literature on the K-12 education in the USA, noting, several challenges common to many schools, whether rural or urban. For example, an increasingly diverse student intake with diverse learning styles, needs, increased accountability, and competition for funding. They did however concede that rural schools face unique challenges such as geographic isolation and difficulties in attracting skilled teachers.

Barley and Beesley (2007), from their research on “success” in remote and rural schools identified: (a) a strong relationship with the community; and (b) high teacher retention rates and high expectations of students, as factors for their success. Yates (2001), from research in New Zealand, however cautioned that the nature of rural communities are changing with many becoming smaller and services becoming more restricted. Other changes in the structure of society and global priorities of several governments include a demonstrable shift in the focus of education to lifelong learning (Bensemann & Hall, 2010). In Canada (Barbour, 2007; Corbett, 2009; Mulcahy, 2009) and in the United Kingdom (Gray, Shaw, & Farrington, 2006) the challenges associated with rural education are the same as elsewhere (DEFRA/DCSF, 2009), perhaps prompting Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools, Sir Michael Wilshaw (2013), in a speech to launch the report, "Unseen children: access and achievement 20 years on" (Ofsted, 2013, p. 4), to describe some students in England as the "hidden poor", arguing the fact that based on their rural location, they were denied the best resources at school- sometimes, including teachers (p. 1). Lyon et al. (2009) pointed out similar challenges for rural and remote education especially in terms of providing educational facilities and appropriately qualified teachers.

## Context

In order to fully appreciate the challenges faced by small rural and remote principals in Jamaica, it is necessary to discuss contextual issues concerning the changing nature of the principalship, the issues that confront rural Jamaica at the current time and the distinctive characteristics of the principalship in rural settings. I summarise these in turn below.

### **Educational Restructure and Reform**

For nearly two decades, Jamaica's educational provision and administration has changed (and continue to change) through structural reforms introduced by the government. Structural reforms are concerned with restructuring of the purposes, nature and scope of government departments/ agencies, and reform of government policy and procedure, in line with free market and neo-liberal beliefs (Apple, 2006). Structural reforms are informed by neoliberal precepts of individualism, consumer choice, deregulation, the devolution of authority and the rolled back state, although simultaneously emphasizing efficiency and fiscal restraint (Levin, Belfield, Muenning, & Rouse, 2007).

Structural reforms in Jamaica are a response to globalization, particularly in areas such as international competitiveness in trade, workforce capacity, innovation, and educational outcomes (World Bank, 2012). Globalisation interrupts our view of the world, and, according to Bottery (2004), globalisation encompasses the "...processes which affect nation states and produce policy mediation, which in turn have a direct impact on the management and principalship of educational institutions" (p. 34).

In education, structural reforms have taken two distinct forms. The first form of restructuring concerns capacity and curriculum issues through, for example: the professionalisation of teachers through standardised training; principal preparation and development; increased accountability and better pastoral care. These, and other reform items, arose from recommendations in the report of the Taskforce on Education Report (2004) and the Child Care and Protection Act (2004) and are being delivered through the ambitious multi-sectoral Vision 2030- National Development Plan-Jamaica policy document which articulates a vision for Jamaica becoming a developed country by the year 2030 (PIOJ, 2010). The second set of restructuring reforms are those which have swept across Jamaica's public sector: corporatization, privatisation, outsourcing, re-engineering, and the removal and re-introduction of user fees- which have been driven by the 'structural adjustments' pre and existing conditions for receiving an International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan facility in May 2013 (*Gleaner*, 2013).

As education bureaucracies downsize, re-focus and re-engineer, it is commonplace for work once undertaken centrally be delegated to individual site managers (Starr, 2000), although prescribed tasks are usually overseen centrally through standardised control and accountability mechanisms. The result of such structural reforms leads to deep changes in the principalship (Gronn, 2003). For example, Jamaica, through the National College for Educational Leadership (NCEL) is responsible for training and upgrading the nation's current and prospective stock of school principals. Similarly, the National Education Inspectorate (NEI) is responsible for quality assurance and monitoring of what goes on in schools. Both the NEI and NCEL emerged from

recommendations in the Taskforce on Education Reform (2004) and, in a sense, require principals to re-balance their work, more towards the core business of teaching and learning and away from managerial tasks.

As Bottery (2004) observed, governments have responded to globalisation with policy interventions which have different impact on schools. Like many other countries across the world, Jamaica's neo-liberal and neo-conservative policy agendas have been driven by economic restructuring and have been justified and legitimised through political rhetoric about crises in education, the erosion of social values, inefficiency in the public sector and the need for parental choice and voice in education (Pusey, 1991; Shapiro, 1990). Put differently, education is intertwined with the nation's economic necessities emanating from capitalist modes of production, and their maintenance and protection in a globalised deregulated marketplace. Outputs are expected to be produced at the lowest possible cost through fiscal restraint, although outcomes are expected to improve through policy coercion. As Apple (2006) suggested, crises within the political economy have influenced education policy agendas, with a deflecting of these crises downwards, from the economy through the state on to schools. Unfortunately for small rural and remote schools, globalisation has created additional challenges for the small rural school principal.

### **Changing Rural Communities**

The rural school communities at the focus of this study are experiencing various forms of social and economic decline. Drought has been sustained and widespread across Jamaica (Caribbean 360, 2014; *Gleaner*, 2014) and has taken a huge toll on economic livelihoods, especially in agricultural communities. Radical social and economic changes are also the result of world economic re-alignment. Global competition has encouraged many long-standing rural industries to close or relocate commercial activities in order to reduce labor costs (Caribbean Broadcasting Corporation, 2014). This phenomenon, coupled with the drought, has intensified unemployment and population migration to cities with dramatic effects on the viability and survival of local rural businesses and public services, including schools, and on families (*Jamaica Observer*, 2010).

### **The Small Rural Principalship**

A major difference between principals of small rural and remote schools and their principals in urban and sub-urban areas is that they spend more time teaching cross-age, multi-grade groups. This is also the case in Jamaica. There is little in the way of administrative support, with ancillary personnel such as receptionists, bursars, and grounds staff being part time employees (Starr & White, 2008). However, standardised compliance requirements issued by the education ministry require the same responses from all schools no matter their size and/or location. Principals of larger schools have more flexibility and capacity to delegate and to share management tasks, but this is a luxury not afforded to several of their colleagues in small rural and remote schools. In other words, the realities of life in small rural and remote communities create unconventional circumstances for school principals (Lopes et al., 2011).

The contextual differences encountered by principals of small, rural, and remote schools create either additional leadership challenges and/or exacerbate existing ones. Starr and White (2008) found “workload proliferation, educational equity issues, the re-defined principalship, escalating role multiplicity, and school survival” to be particularly problematic (p. 2). Furthermore, in Jamaica, just over 40% (from an estimated population of 2.6 million) of nationals live in small towns and/or rural districts often characterised by a lack of: electricity, clean running water, adequate sanitation facilities and good roads conditions (Carlson, 2002; STATIN/PIOJ, 2010). These challenges are recursively linked and exert significant influence on the lived experiences of principals in small rural schools (*Gleaner*, 2011; *Jamaica Observer*, 2014).

### **The Study**

This research arose out of my day-to-day work with principals on masters and doctoral programs of study in England and Jamaica, over a period of 5 years between 2009 and 2014. What is reported in this paper however, concerns only the Jamaican principals of whom I have also done *close* and *intense* monitoring and supervision of their professional work, defined in terms of regularly visits to their schools. This research positions the lived experiences of the principals and therefore adopts a socio-cultural approach. Epistemologically, I have drawn on two interconnected assumptions: first, and similar to Starr and White (2008) I assume large scale social structures constitute tangible realities (Mills et al, 2008); and second, personal and public aspects of life are fundamentally intertwined (Connell, 1996). According to Ball (1994), social structures cannot be separated from contextualised practice or even from the historicity of a period.

The research is also to be seen as an exercise in grounded theory building, an approach developed by Glaser and Straus (1967), where theory emerges from the data gathered. In other words, theory is not derived deductively, but rather through an ongoing inductive process (Birks and Mills) where emerging insights are analysed and continually tested, producing further evidence and/or new theoretical insights (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

Data collection occurred through a series of conversations with principals (three females and one male), usually in their place of work. All four are primary school principals and my interaction with them was not geared towards generating research data, but rather, supporting their professional development and the advancement of their schools through the Practicum Module undertaken as part of their university studies in educational leadership and management. I visited each principal a minimum of two times, and each visited lasted for between 2-4 hours. There was no set research questions and principals only needed to demonstrate they were meeting the expected outcomes for their studies. Several conversations were however had, which were recorded as field notes and which when analysed, emergent themes have reflected ideas around “the experiences of principals in rural and remote communities”. As result, a guiding question for this paper therefore is, “What are the professional experiences of principals in small rural and remote schools in Jamaica?”

### **Key Experiences of the Rural and Remote Principal**

Principals shared many challenges and opportunities associated with leading a school in a rural and/or remote community. These ranged from location and school size, infrastructure and technology, policy implementation and educational reforms, staffing and workload. These are presented in turn below.

#### *Location and School Size*

Like any organisation, whether privately or publicly run, where it is located can be a key factor in its success or failure. The location helps with the supply of clients and staff, although the reverse is also true. Being able to learn with little distraction (even if without much facilities) due to both size and location is cited as a positive issue.

My school has just over 40 students and we are based in a deep rural (remote) community. We have good water supply that is trucked in by the authorities. Despite our location, we also have good electricity and Internet connections. Our location is a prime area for learning. It is rural so it has very little distraction. (Principal 1)

Some principals described other factors such as “the fresh air” and the “beauty of nature” as important incentives associated with schooling in a rural and/or remote community, alleging benefits associated with health and well-being.

In contrast, small and dwindling student numbers, social class issues, teacher recruitment and retention and the school’s and parents’ inability to provide students with a more *enriched* school experience, due mainly to funding, were identified as particular challenges.

As a school, we are challenged by several factors. First, we lack many basic facilities and amenities which make it much more difficult to attract and retain good teachers. Second, over the last few years, we have lost several students to neighbouring schools that are better equipped and somewhat less rural. Third, because most parents are farmers, their input at Parent's Day or towards homework is minimal as they tend to prioritise bread and butter issues. Fourth, because we cannot finance certain activities, such as trips and visits, our students do not get the kinds of practical exposure that we would like for them to have. (Principal 4)

Some principals also cited “poor road conditions”, with very “few staff owning a car” or “driving to work” compounded by the physical “distance from town centers and emergency services” as also problematic.

#### **Infrastructure and Technology**

The physical infrastructure of schools identified as a major problem. None of the four principals led schools that had “excellent” or even “good” facilities. Two schools, for example had flush toilets and two had old time ‘pit latrines’ that did not flush. Additionally, not all principals had ‘extra’ space due to lower or reduced numbers.

We have just over 75 students and because our space is so small we operate a multi-grade system. This is not ideal, but we do not have even space to teach



each year group separately. At the moment, we teach grades 1-2 together and grades 3-4 together, but we teach grades 5 and 6 separately. (Principal 3)

Another principal adds to this dilemma:

We do not have enough space and so our class sizes are slightly higher. We have up to 40 in some classes. This not good for students and teachers, but without more physical space, and with numbers of students increasing year on year- there is very little room to address this situation. This situation is not ideal and it puts significant pressure on the very limited resources the school has, from the books that are insufficient to the toilets that are also insufficient. (Principal 2)

In addition to infrastructural challenges, other challenges associated with technology were identified by principals. For example:

We do not have electricity in my school and this makes it difficult to do anything technologically related, unless we use battery operated radios (Principal 2)

Additionally:

We have a few computers and we do have electricity in our school but do not have Internet. I know the ministry is trying to work with a local company to get us free Internet, but for over a year now, all we keep hearing is *soon*. (Principal 4)

One principal however ‘rose to her challenge’ and attempted to solve the technological challenge that bedevilled her school.

Last year, I launched a six months fundraising campaign for the school. My aim was to get four computers so that students in grades five and six could get an Introduction to Computing before going to High School. They need this exposure. My school is located in a deep rural community and access to computers and Internet at home is rather limited. The fundraising campaign raised enough money to purchase three computers which I now use to teach the kids. I am not an ICT teacher but I do the best I can as we can’t afford to employ a Specialist ICT teacher. (Principal 1)

Some schools, however, had in place, good technological infrastructure, and were already seeing the difference in terms of teaching and learning, although some principals felt more computers and facilities could produce more and further reaching impacts. For example:

We have about 25 computers in a nice lab that has been supported by a local company. We are a rural school, but not remote and I think that has made a

difference. However, we would really like to get another fully fitted computer lab so more students and staff can get exposed to ICT and to the Internet. This is important for all of us and so far, the one lab that we have has made a huge difference to teaching and learning. (Principal 4)

It is clear the challenges associated with the quality of infrastructure and the availability of technology for rural and remote principals and schools are many and varied.

### **Policy Implementation and Educational Reforms**

Principals realised that recent and ongoing educational reforms in Jamaica means 'it cannot be business as usual' for them and their schools. They pointed to reforms as being like a 'double edged sword', carrying both opportunities and challenges. For example:

The government, through the National College for Educational Leadership (NECL) has begun a program of supporting principals and prospective principals through training in School Leadership. I have not put myself forward for this training as yet, but I would like to attend....however, I do not know who would be in charge of my school when I am away and that is a real worry. (Principal 10)

The National Education Inspectorate (NEI) came to visit my school recently. We didn't get an 'Excellent grade' but we got a 'good grade'. Fundamentally, I do not think the inspectors understand the dynamics of leading a school located in a deep rural (remote) community. Agreed, the NEI is about lifting standards, but the one-size-fits-all approach is not in line with our reality as a school..... (Principal 2)

All four principals reported doing some 'policy mediation' so as to make them more directly applicable at the point of school implementation.

We are very much guided by national policies, but we localise national policies to fit our school context. As a school, we are committed to the 'Every Child Must Learn' agenda but wholesale policy implementation cannot work at my school. We are a small school with 74 students and 5 teachers, including myself, located in a deep rural (remote) community. Majority of our parents are farmers or they are unemployed. As a school, we barely have enough money to cover day to day expenses let alone *extras*. Whereas policy interpretation may be the same for my school and the one located in an urban area, implementation will be very different- as is the case with my school. (Principal 1)

The tension between educational reforms, policy implementation and the practice of school leadership is not contrived and is noticeable in the views of principals.

## **Staffing**

There are a number of apparent paradoxes around staffing for rural and remote schools in Jamaica. For example:

We are somewhat challenged to recruit many good teachers as some will not travel so far into the rural areas to work and we lack many of the resources and facilities that schools in urban and sub-urban areas have. (Principal 1)

However:

We experience very low turnover of staff. You see, some staff has been at this school for up to 30 years. You know, as a young teacher, you move into a community and you get a job. You settle there and the rest is history. This has meant our staff team has been fairly stable, although we benefit from some 'fresh blood', some 'new ideas' coming in. But with our numbers so low, and with staff turnover also low, we have not got any room to take on new staff. (Principal 2)

Furthermore:

There are about two or three younger teachers on staff. They are originally from this community. I know they are not happy working here, and this is not because of staff room politics or such the like; but about the school size, location, distance from and travel to the nearest town, and of course- due to limited opportunities for growth. We are lucky to have them...they are well-qualified, but without better and more opportunities for career development and career progression, we may soon lose them. (Principal 3)

The professional development of staff in rural and remote schools was viewed as important by principals. However, due to financial constraints, professional development opportunities were few and much of which was offered were arranged and delivered by the principal. For many principals, no-one from their schools, including themselves, had attended a professional development workshop within the past 12 months that were cost bearing. However, some staff and principals had been able to access 'free seminars' hosted by the teaching association and the education ministry.

## **Workload**

Principals had particular concerns about role intensification and work pressures, on top of already heavy work diaries.

Being the principal of a small rural school means I am the ‘head cook and bottle washer’. In other words, I do everything. I teach, I cover lesson, I prepare lunches if the cook is absent, I sweep the classrooms if the cleaner is absent; I do everything and anything that needs doing in order to make the school run smoothly. (Principal 2)

Educational reforms have resulted in more work for the school principal. I now have more meetings outside school, more paperwork to complete and new financial and budget compliance procedures to follow. These are all very good for the system and for how principals lead, but all these new requirements are on top of my regular workload. Nothing has been taken off my plate! Besides, majority of small rural and remote primary schools in Jamaica (such as mine), do not have a Vice-Principal, so..... (Principal 1)

One principal pointed to another issue that impacted their work.

Living and working in the same community can be a good and a bad thing. When you are known to everyone, you get people turning up to your gate at all hours. They stop you on the streets, at church, in the supermarket, anywhere. So, your work is 24 hours, 7 days per week, 365 days per year and I don't think people realise how invasive that is. (Principal 4)

The four principals were agreed that their work was “steadily expanding” due to educational reforms and that due to their size and location and due to the fact, their schools did not have an established role for a Vice-Principal, their workload was quite high and very demanding.

## **Discussion**

What has emerged from these experiences are a range of ideas and issues that are important for different stakeholders who engage with, assess, and emulate the work of principals and schools located in rural and remote communities. Below, I discuss issues which have emerged from the data presented above.

### **Leadership Intensity**

The principals were all experienced individuals, committed to their work. An easily noticeable quality among them was the “intensity with which they lead”. Used here, 'intensity' means a positive value such as being focused, determined, passionate or highly motivated. They were driven, passionate, motivated, that despite the challenges of their work situations buoyed by an evolving and sometimes conflictual policy context, they wanted what was best for every single child in their school. This saw them taking on “extra” tasks and working longer than usual hours to get things moving. As Miller and Hutton (2014) pointed out intensity quickens in the face of adversity and uncertainty, is resilient, is determined and is persevering.

These principals did not mind working longer nights or weekends where necessary. For them, they were driven by a compelling moral purpose that was grounded in the belief that firstly, every child can learn and secondly, it was their responsibility to ensure that each child was given the best opportunity, despite limited resources. In other words, they took on extra work requirements into existing work lives, preferring to focus on what they could do for students - within the limits of their and their school's capacities rather than focusing on the broader economic and/or social contexts. This mirrors findings from Starr and White (2008) that principals in small rural, and remote schools in Australia "[A]re too busy just coping with the local, the everyday, the immediate, and have no time to participate in broader politics or contexts" (p. 4). In the face of the challenges experienced and constraints identified by the principals, it is their fixity of purpose that scaffolds their professional practice and provides the intensity which they lead.

### **Commitment and Resilience**

The issue of viability was common among principals but more so for the two whose school enrolment was 45 and 76 respectively. Are these numbers enough to run a fully functional school? If so, why not provide the appropriate levels and types of support required by staff and students? If these numbers are insufficient, why not close these schools? No principal suggested closing his/her school. The implications for that are clear. But, the viability and sustained viability of these institutions are important issues which the education ministry has to address; and any delay is not an acceptable solution.

Principals suggested they and their staff were able to effectively relate to students on a one-on-one basis, although they do not have the human resources to provide intensive individualised instruction. This is perhaps the antithesis of what happens in sub-urban and urban schools and takes an enormous amount of extra time and commitment from both principals and staff. Nevertheless, by implication, the education ministry could better fund these schools so their provision could be extended to neighbouring schools and or to "re-designate" some of these rural and remote schools, "specialised schools" that provide tuition for specific groups of students, led by existing teachers in partnership with others.

Principals were proud that despite limited and sometimes lack of well-needed resources, they and their staff were still able to make a contribution to the lives of students and to families. This underscores the fundamental importance of the work of a school in these communities, whilst simultaneously highlighting that the hope and dreams of families are built around, if not upon these schools. Indeed, as one principal reported, among her staff were teachers who had studied at that school as children. The paradoxes are clear. Nevertheless, what is also clear is that teachers and principals are passionate, and through creative approaches to teaching, leadership and community engagement, students in these rural and remote communities are achieving.

### **CPD Support**

Principals reported that staff did not always have access to Continuing Professional Development opportunities and activities due mainly to economic costs, unavailability of someone to cover lessons and due to distance from city/town centres. This has several

implications for the quality of teaching and learning and for staff morale and needs to be examined further. It suffices to say however, principals were consistent in their views that, with the “little” that they had, they were making an impact. Nevertheless, reforms in Jamaica (or elsewhere), premised on the national policy, “Every child can learn...every child must learn”, should adequately account for the continued professional development of teachers. Without a suitably qualified, skilled and up-to-date cadre of teachers in place, reforms in education will fall flat. This view mirrors research by Starr and White (2008) among rural and remote principals in Australia who found, “[A] sense that the system is not set up to assist schools or principals but rather to mandate, appraise, control and admonish, when expectation were not met” (p. 5).

Many principals also described a lack of professional contact or support for themselves. Indeed, some felt disconnected and alienated from debates about policy making since “the ministry (of education) has not bothered to ask for our views...we don’t matter as much as the principals in urban areas such as Kingston and Montego Bay”. They also felt ignored by regional offices of the education ministry and that, although, according to one principal, her education officer was “fully aware of the issues facing my school, she was powerless in helping to effect any change”. The implications of this are worth further investigations. Nevertheless, all four principals were unanimous in their view that “some of those on the inside have very little understanding of rural school life and of the challenges faced by principals, staff and students”. The “othering” and this perceived lack of contextual understanding also needs further examination.

### **Workload and Policy Context**

Principals were agreed that recent and current educational reforms had increased and were increasing their workload. More and more, they were straddling a line between administration, teaching and leadership, often with limited understanding of what needed to be done or an unrealistic expectation of what was achievable in their specific context. As Starr and White (2008) found, “workload proliferation, educational equity issues, the re-defined principalship, escalating role multiplicity, and school survival” (p. 3) had significantly altered the way principals did their jobs. This was also true in this study.

The shifting demands did not adequately support their work patterns and new responsibilities with two principals lamenting the fact they did not have private offices and therefore could not readily deal with sometimes urgent and/or confidential issues in a timely manner. The lack of space was compounded by a weak communication infrastructure where, for three of four, mobile telephone access was not good, and for one principal, she had to stand outside under a tree in order to get a mobile signal. Health and safety implications are clear and require urgent attention.

Principals saw their main role as instructional leaders, but suggested they did not have enough time to “role model good teaching” and generally to “support teaching and learning”, exacerbated by lack of administrative support, such as not having a Secretary and/or a Vice-Principal. Workload pressures also affected their private and family lives, something for which the policy context did not seem to account.

Principals were forced to filter policies and to choose which they felt they could implement given the particular characteristics of their school. This is not unheard of (Ball et al., 2008). Nevertheless, what appears problematic for principals in this study is the fact that policies tend to be separated from “the reality of life in a rural school” and in many cases they felt they

were having to implement policies they considered irrelevant or inappropriate to the needs of small rural schools. Policy filtering by principals is supported by Riley (2000) who provided that school leaders "...do not learn how to do leadership. They are often rule breakers and are willing to change in response to new sets of circumstances" (p. 47). In the case of these principals, wholesale, evangelistic implementation that 'toed the line' was countered with a practical view of what was realistic and possible.

### **Conclusions**

Education is an important tool in personal and social transformation, and by implication, there more persons who have it, the better for society. Nevertheless, the realities of life are far from being that simple. Similarly, school leadership is not black and white, and this is arguably no-where more manifest than in the working lives of the rural and/or remote school. There may not be severe disciplinary issues. There may not be problems of getting parents to attend meetings even. But there are other challenges, such as getting parents who actually attend meetings to be enabled to contribute effectively to their children's homework and/or to other aspects of schooling.

Similarly, being cut off from 'the outside', students and parents rely heavily on teachers to 'relay' to them a view of life 'outside' their village; a view which can be skewed, depending on a teacher's experience of this world outside the village. Yet, such a voice is important. Such a voice is important in helping to raise consciousness, hope and aspiration among students, and such a voice is also important in helping to strengthen the resolve of principals in these contexts. Starr and White (2008) are correct in that, "much of a principal's work is hidden from view" (p. 3), but the principals operating in the remote and rural school contexts also want to be noticed, to have a say, for they too want to be in the best possible position to make a contribution to the lives of all students, and not only those in their schools and school communities. The experiences of principals, staff and students in rural and remote communities in Jamaica should force all those involved in Jamaican education system, and all Jamaicans regardless, to have a second look at recent and current policy initiatives, against the realities of schooling in these school contexts and collectively seek answers to the question, "What kind of future do we want for society?"

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