

## **WORK INTENSIFICATION: Lessons Learned From School Leaders in the Dominican Republic**

There is tendency to consider work intensification and its negative impacts on school leaders as a global issue. The purpose of this paper is to broaden the conversation to include perspectives on and responses to work intensification from a “developing” country’s perspective. This ethnographic qualitative study evolved over a 2-year period among three school leaders in the Dominican Republic. The data collection included semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and autoethnographic reflexivity. The findings demonstrate that work intensification is apparent among these leaders, but the ways in which they conceptualise the phenomenon represent a departure from the literature on school leaders in developed countries such as North America, the United Kingdom, Europe, and Australia. The reasons include external factors such as sociocultural norms and the internalisation of workplace expectations. Although the scope of this study is small, it represents an important avenue for future, larger studies examining the phenomenon of work intensification in developing countries.

### **Introduction**

Studies on school leaders conducted in developed countries such as North America, the United Kingdom, Europe, and Australia have found that work intensification is negatively impacting school leaders’ ability to balance their work and personal lives and, by extension, live well (La Placa et al., 2013; Pollock, 2014, 2015, 2016; Pollock et al., 2015; Riley, 2016, 2017, 2019). These findings have triggered a global wave of discussions on how school leaders can live and be well within the context of their increasingly demanding work life. Missing from these discussions, however, are important perspectives from other contexts such as non-Eurocentric, non-Western environments and specific to this study developing countries. More specifically, the literature is lacking insights from developing countries, and how these contexts may be directly or indirectly impacting the internalisation of work intensification outcomes. For example, a cursory search on Google Scholar for school leaders’ work intensification in developing contexts yields no results. This means that there are significant questions that remain unexplored: Is the type of work intensification found in developed countries apparent in different contexts? Does work intensification manifest itself in different ways among school leaders in the developing world contexts? Is school leaders’

wellness similarly affected in every context? If not, then can work intensification be considered a global phenomenon? Or is work intensification simply a developed world phenomenon, perceived and perpetuated by the neoliberal agendas? Are school leaders' positive or negative responses to work intensification driven by external factors such as political, societal, cultural, or sociopolitical issues? I do not pose these questions because I have the answers; rather, I do so to suggest that we, as scholars and researchers, must widen our perspectives on work intensification to include perspectives from developing countries so that we can nuance our discussions and explore the importance of context.

In this paper, I present my findings from a two-year ethnographic study in three schools in the Dominican Republic (DR) combined specifically with the focus of work intensification among three school leaders. It is important to note that I use *school leader* rather than *school principal* throughout this paper to capture multiple school leadership positions. The study consisted of two years of frequent observations and informal discussions in three schools with staff and school leaders, cumulating in one-to-one interviews to discuss work intensification and well-being with the three school leaders. Although the focused data sample is modest, my intentions in writing this paper are: (a) to provide an alternative lens for thinking about work intensification as a global phenomenon; (b) to begin broadening understandings and discussions in meaningful ways about possible external factors that are creating work intensification in developing countries; and (c) to establish the need for more comprehensive research on work intensification in developing countries as means to learn from them and not about them, which is often not the case in developed countries knowledge production.

### **Positionality**

It is important in any qualitative research study—especially an ethnography—that the researcher makes their own positionality clear to the reader and how it may impact the research (Berger, 2015). It would be irresponsible of me to write an article and make claims based on my experiences and observations without revealing my positionality and past experiences with the school communities under study and in the DR more broadly. I offer my positionality as a way of letting readers know how I have framed my findings, interpreted my experiences, and analysed my participants' perspectives on work intensification and well-being in their leadership roles.

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I am a White woman with privileges. I was acculturated in the dominant culture in North America and have unearned social and cultural capital that enable me to easily navigate institutional systems. One example is having access to and funding from multiple education institutions. I grew up and was educated in the Western hemisphere and a developed country. My involvement in the Puerto Plata region of the DR began nine years ago. I started volunteering at a non-profit school that served Haitian immigrant children. My intentions were of a service nature and included the objective of improving the quality of the teachers and their teaching and supporting the school's operational practices (for example, putting student recordkeeping in place, scheduling). In the last 5 years, I increased my time and visits in the community, which involved staying for longer periods (6 to 8 weeks) more frequently each year. I subsequently expanded my volunteer services to the local government schools. In this role, I support teachers, students, parents, and surrounding community members in their education process. Over the last 9 years, I have immersed myself in Dominican living and have become well-known in the community for my work with the schools and my expressed desire to support the community through education efforts. I have built many strong relationships and have gained the trust and respect of community members. This ethnographic study officially began 2 years ago as a pilot research project for improving teacher quality in the three schools.

My long-term involvement makes my positionality somewhat complex: I am a researcher in a culture and community of which I am not a part; even though my long-time involvement and familiarity makes me more of an insider, I will always be an outsider. Many (for example, Morris et al., 1999) use terminology such as *emic* (as an insider) and *etic* (as an outsider) to describe these perspectives. I have attempted to make the two compatible and termed this as a *familiar outsider*. Witcher (2010) explored this phenomenon by asking the following:

Did my background make me an insider? I am also an outsider? Bearing the distinction between these two sets of perspectives, it appeared to me that I would be conducting research from an *emic* perspective; that is an "insider." After all I was proposing to collect data in an area in which I was very familiar and involved...Although it seemed plausible that I was an "insider" in certain aspects, I am an "outsider" in others as I am a foreigner to the community. (p. 126)

Over the span of this study and my time living in the DR, I have been continuously transforming my thinking, beliefs, and values through

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my daily experiences as well as critical self-examination. It is a dynamic process in which I am in a constant state of disequilibrium: uncomfortable with my thoughts, actions, and judgments as an outsider. As a researcher, I cannot solely rely on my observations to form conclusions. I must constantly ask questions and seek multiple perspectives to better understand how to interpret and think about certain actions and aspects within the school community. I must also critically reflect on the lens I am using to create meaning out of my observations; in my case, this is a privileged lens. In my view, deep, critical reflection as a researcher cannot happen during short-term visits—to believe otherwise is a grave mistake that can perpetuate colonial dynamics. Critical self-awareness and reflection and a constant sense of discomfort is mandatory for any researcher working as familiar outsider.

## **Background**

### **The Dominican Republic**

This study was conducted in three schools in the DR. Although the aim of this research is not a detailed review of the history or cultural norms of the DR, a brief overview of some of the expectations and etiquettes that characterise the DR is necessary to help to contextualise the social and cultural factors related to this preliminary study on work intensification, educational status, and school leaders.

First, the DR is considered a “developing” country<sup>1</sup> with an education system that, over the last decade, has struggled to improve. For example, in the last 2015 PISA test<sup>2</sup>, the DR scored the lowest of all 70 countries in reading, mathematics, and science (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018). However, these results do not reflect the intense work schedules in the DR that I have witnessed. Most people work long hours and multiple jobs. An assistant school leader—who works at one of the schools in this study and has been my confidante—explained to me that many school leaders work at the school in the day and teach at the local university at night. As well, many teachers go to the university at night as students. This makes the average workday for many from 7:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. The long hours seem to be the norm.

There are other generalisations about Dominican social and cultural habits that attribute to an ability to achieve work–life balance. I state the following with caution because there is limited available empirical evidence about Dominican culture specific to this study and

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using generalisable evidence is not meant to be universal (Polit & Beck, 2010). I have had to rely on mostly non-scholarly, popular publications (for example, tourist and history books, travel blogs, etc.); however, multiple sources have expressed similar perspectives.

Most authors who write about the people of the DR comment on their ability to keep a positive attitude in the face of adversity. For example, Mărginean (2019) suggested, “The overall attitude predominant in Dominican life and culture is relaxation and respect for leisure” (p. 51). Foley and Jermyn (2005) opined that “Dominicans manage to maintain an attitude of cheerful resignation in the face of extreme hardship...the quality of life often depends on how much they can share the burdens and resources with family and friends” (p. 67). In their book on Dominican culture and norms, Bedggod and Benady (2010) claimed that Dominicans’ lives seem to be perfectly balanced between work and relaxation. Brown (1995) explained that, according to his observations, Dominicans rarely make daily plans and tend to live for the day. Generally, they are happy, which is one of the things that contributes to a lack of stress and their relaxed demeanor. Dominicans consider relationships among people more important than schedules and being late for appointments, and people often spend time socialising rather than working. These relationships include strong connections with family and one’s community, which has historically been known to be a system of exchange of services and support (Vargas, 2014). In Dominican society, lunch (i.e., the midday eating time or *comida*) is the main meal of the day and typically lasts two hours. It is considered a time (and, among many, a sacred time) to stop and refresh your body with food and take a break. Taking breaks is viewed as important and is an *expected* cultural norm (Mărginean, 2019).

## **Literature Review**

### **Work Intensification and its Effects on School Leaders**

There is growing evidence of a global transformation in the roles and nature of school leaders’ work (OECD, 2008, 2018; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2009) that is shaped by global patterns of educational reform over the last decade (Edge, 2015; Evans, 2016; Fullan, 2008) and the increased role of information and communication technology (ICT) in the work and personal lives of educators and students (Dibbon & Pollock, 2007; Gurr, 2004; Pollock, 2015; Pollock & Hauseman, 2015). As well, the growing

diversity (and growing awareness of diversity) of student populations and student needs is influencing how school leaders carry out their work (Alberta Teachers' Association [ATA], 2014; Briscoe & Pollock, 2017; Pollock et al., 2015; Ryan, 2006). Cumulatively, this has led to what has been described as work intensification, a phenomenon that occurs in schools and many other work environments.

Work intensification has been reported in much of the literature on school leaders in the developed world (Fullan, 2008; Evans, 2016; Edge, 2015; Pollock, 2014, 2015, 2016; Pollock et al., 2015; Riley, 2016, 2017, 2019). Over the last decade, scholars have reported that school leaders are experiencing an increase in the volume and complexity of their daily tasks and responsibilities. Pollock and her colleagues have conducted extensive research on Canadian school leaders (Pollock, 2014, 2015, 2016; Pollock et al., 2019); they report that work intensification is generally grouped in five common areas: longer work hours, increased work pace, fewer resources, increased day-to-day tasks, and much more additional work. When these five factors are continually present and school leaders are unable to take breaks and have no downtime to catch up on work or to recover both physically and emotionally from daily work stress, this is known as work intensification; it involves managing condensed timelines and a simultaneous increase in the volume and complexity of tasks, activities, and other work demands (Pollock et al., 2019). Work intensification is impacting the roles and responsibilities of school leaders and global organisations are now commonly reporting on the phenomenon (for example, World Bank, OECD).

As mentioned previously, global patterns in education reform over the last 10 years (Edge 2015; Evans, 2016; Fullan, 2008) have also transformed the roles and nature of school leaders' work (OECD, 2008; UNESCO, 2009). Next to teachers, they have the most influence on student success (Leithwood et al., 2017) and therefore are experiencing increased pressure to create demonstrably high achievement levels in their schools (Pollock, 2014, 2015, 2016; Pollock et al., 2015). For example, school leaders in several jurisdictions around the globe are now reporting work hours between 50 and 65 hours a week (ATA, 2014; Bristow et al., 2007; Riley, 2016, 2017, 2019). According to a MetLife Foundation (2012) school leader survey, "75 percent of the respondents said that the job had become too complex, creating undue stress" (p. 3). Moreover, researchers have noted a steady decline in the number of candidates willing to take on the school leader role. The school principalship is an increasingly undesirable position for prospective *and* current administrators, creating issues of both recruitment and retention across

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systems (Leithwood & Azah, 2014a, 2014b). With the increasing demands, school leaders are often so committed to their jobs and the community they serve that they sacrifice their short-term happiness and well-being for those of their staff and students. Examples of this behaviour include routinely not taking a lunch, working long hours, and spending time at work instead of seeing friends and family. As a result, scholars and researchers are studying the effects of work intensification on school leaders to better understand the phenomenon and to influence positive changes and conceptualise solutions to mitigate their mounting roles and responsibilities.

In addition to considering the *what* and the *how*, it is equally important reflect on *why*. A point of inquiry that has been less studied in the literature is how context—our social and cultural interdependencies—affects the workplace, work demands, and the source of the growing demands in education. As Walker (2020) suggested, the few existing studies conducted in a Caribbean context do not address how school leaders deal with work-related stress and workload. The purpose of this study was to explore on a preliminary level—with the hope of expanding to a broader selection of participants from other Caribbean locations—three school leaders' perceptions of their own work intensification and work-life balance in the DR.

### **External Pressures on Education**

According to the current literature on external pressures in education, there are two identified highest contributors: political and sociocultural. In the political realm, educational goals are driven by high-stakes accountability and economic growth. Countries deemed to have the best education systems often correlatively have strong economies; one does not have to search for long to find headlines demonstrating the resulting global obsession with educational rankings. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) conducts a triennial international survey to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students who are nearing the end of their compulsory education. According to the OECD, the key objective of the evaluation is to inform and support education policy decision-making within countries to improve education (OECD, 2018). At the individual and economic levels, individuals with higher levels of education tend to experience higher employment rates and income levels (Murillo, 2019).

Coupled with economic pressure and the increasing pressure for government public funding in education is a drive for accountability that affects all levels of education (for example, teacher performance evaluations, school and school board improvement plans, standardised student testing). In general terms, accountability is setting expectations and holding people to work toward and achieve said expectations. Although there is research evidence that increased accountability measures indeed contribute to improving the quality and outcomes of education, there are emotional costs that accrue when countries attempt to become or retain their spot among the top education systems in the world, and school leaders often bear the brunt of these costs.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Questioning the relationship between an individual and society is the starting point for many philosophical discussions, especially when probing why different contexts produce different reactions and phenomena among individuals (Hossain & Ali, 2014). My starting point in this study was observing the evidence of work intensification among the school leaders in the three schools in the DR, and how these school leaders dealt with the phenomenon differently compared to the leaders studied in North America, the United Kingdom, Europe, and Australia. According to a functionalist viewpoint, an individual is formed by society through the influence of institutions such as the family, school, and workplace. As Durkheim suggested, society is a collective consciousness that shows itself in the ways that social interactions, relationships, and ultimately society influence an individual's attitudes, ideas, and sentiments (Abrahamson, 1988). The intersection and interdependency of society and individuals' thoughts and behaviours are important in the ways in which members of specific societies might experience and understand the workplace differently (Atewologun, 2018; Atewologun et al., 2016). Consequently, a society is defined as an intersection and collection of individuals united by certain relations or modes of behaviour and the whole complex of social behaviour (Maryanski & Turner, 1992). Therefore, the intersection of the culture, society, work, and the individual in the DR is crucial to deeper understandings of work intensification and its effect on school leaders (Yuval-Davis, 2010). In my preliminary research, I aimed to determine if school leaders internalise, interpret, respond, and approach leadership differently in the face of work intensification. In this paper, I review the responses and actions of these three school leaders, and consider the intersection of society and cultural expectations (the school and their

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society) not only for a school leaders' perspective of work intensification, but also for understanding the forces shaping their actions and thoughts related to work intensification and wellbeing. Related to the framework of this research: Does the Dominican society and cultural positioning shape and internalise work intensification differently for these school leaders than those in the Global north and developed countries?

### **Methodology**

This research is a subset of a larger ethnography study on the overall education system, schooling, and education in the DR. According to Van Maanen (1979), A principal aim of ethnography is to “uncover and explicate the ways in which people in particular work settings account for, take action and otherwise manage their day-to-day situation” (p. 540). In addition, I have borrowed the concept of reflexivity from autoethnography to include my own experiences and first-person account. Ellis and Bochner (2000) defined this as “a genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 733). This paper presents a 2-year ethnographic qualitative study that took place in 2018–2019 in three school settings from one regional area of a school district in the DR. I visited the schools over the 2 years and was positioned as a curriculum leader as part of the school community. As I was immersed in all activities of the school, my position went beyond an observer or researcher. During this time, I simultaneously collaborated with all school members, including the school leaders. I observed the day-to-day school activities, as well as the leaders; their roles and responsibilities; their leadership styles; interactions with their staff, student; and community; and their overall demeanor at their schools.

Consistent with the intent of ethnography (Mills & Morton, 2013), my involvement with the education system and the community has allowed me to learn about another educational system and society over an extended period of time. I borrowed a method that is central to autoethnography, that is, reflexivity, to ensure I kept my positionality in mind (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In addition to my observations, I wanted to directly explore the thinking and experiences specific to the three school leaders. To do so, I conducted one-to-one interviews with them to discuss their ideas about work intensification and work–life balance.

### **The Location and School Sites**

This study took place in the DR, located in the Greater Antilles of the

Caribbean region. Education in the DR is regulated by the Ministry of Education with the country divided into school districts for various regions. The specific schools (A, B, and C) are in the Regional District 11 of Puerto Plata. The current number of schools in this regional district are 85 with a current student population of 36,813 students (Gobierno de la República Dominicana, 2020).

I conducted research observations in three primary schools, referred to as School A, B and C. School A and B have student populations of approximately 400 and 250 students, respectively. School C has a much smaller population of approximately 50 students. The schools were elementary schools with students from kindergarten (5 years old) to Grade 6 (11 years old). School A is in a small community 2 kilometers outside the city of Puerto Plata. School B is in an *urbanisation* (that is, a local term for residential area) within the city of Puerto Plata and the School C is in a small, rural area approximately 6 kilometers outside the city of Puerto Plata. Overall, all three schools operate on a similar daily schedule: They begin at 8:00 a.m. and end at 3:45 p.m.; lunch is provided, and all students eat at the school.

### Participants

I used a purposeful sampling method to select the three school leaders because I was currently doing volunteer work at these three schools. There were two female participants and one male participant all in the same age range of 40 to 50 years old. Even though one of the female school leader participants travels to work at seven other very small rural schools within the area, she primarily works in school C. Each participant is presented below to give a brief overview of their demeanor in their respective schools. I have used pseudonyms to protect their identities.

**Maria:** Maria is 40 years old and is the head school leader of a school with approximately 400 students in a small town near Puerto Plata, DR. She has lived in the community all her life. She has been the head school leader at this school for 8 years and, prior to her promotion she was a teacher at the school for 6 years. She has 30 teachers on her staff as well as an assistant school leader. The school serves a diverse community of Dominicans, naturalised Dominicans, and Haitian immigrants with no citizenship. As the assistant school leader described her: “Everyone knows her to be a kind-hearted, passionate leader... She is magical... You see angry parents come to the school and they speak with her and leave with smiles on their faces.”

**Franco:** Franco is 45 years old and has been the head school leader at his school for 12 years. His school is in a division of Puerto Plata

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on the outskirts of the city. At Franco's school, there are approximately 235 students and 12 teachers. He does not have an assistant school leader. Franco also lives in the community where his school is located and has lived there most of his life. From speaking with his staff, they agree that everyone in the community knows him very well. Franco is easy going and he has always been willing to help me in any way during my visits to his school. One teacher explained that he always appears calm, "even in the midst of chaos during lunchtime in the cafeteria with over 150 hungry students (the first half of the school population)". Another of his teachers expressed to me: "I have never seen Franco angry, and no parent could ever be angry with him. He is calm, so you are calm."

***Benedicta:*** Benedicta is 50 years old and holds a unique leadership position. She is a school leader, coordinator, and liaison in the Puerto Plata District who travels to very small, populated schools. Her position is best described as a travelling school leader or advisor. She does not have an official designated school or office; however, her main school location is School C, where she spends a minimum of two and a half days a week. On the other days she travels around Puerto Plata region to eight different rural schools that are considered "country" schools with small student populations (that is, 30–50 students). Her furthest school is one hour from the city of Puerto Plata, and she travels sometimes 5 hours per day in the countryside on extremely bumpy roads (paths) to get to her schools. In each of the assigned schools, she supervises approximately two to four teachers and works in partnership with the designated lead teacher at the school. Most days she leaves her home at 6 a.m. and returns at 7 p.m. when she completes paperwork. She has been doing this role for almost 10 years. Benedicta is highly respected among her colleagues, and they greet her in each school warmly with hugs and a welcome tea. She is commonly referred to by her colleagues as "Mama B," because of her caring nature and her demeanor, which makes everyone feel as if you were her family.

### **Data Collection**

I collected data over the 2-year period through observations and field notes. In addition, I conducted three specific and formal interviews with the three respective school leaders on work intensification and wellness. My intention was to highlight the participant voices and experiences related to living well and their perspectives on work intensification; however, collecting data exclusively from school administrators limits the

types of claims that can be made and does not reveal the experience of other educational stakeholders.

### **Observation and Field Notes**

Over a 2-year period, I visited the three schools approximately five to six times during each school year for one or two days, and up to two weeks in School A. During my time in the schools, I conducted professional learning for the teachers, observed activities in the school, did classroom visitations and worked closely with the school leaders on program organisation, implementation, and teacher professional development. Based on my observations, I made field notes to capture daily school activities, and key points from the numerous informal discussions with the entire school community. Seeking to contextualise and expand on the meanings to some of my observations and the interviews with my three participants, I had continuous informal discussions with the assistant school leader of School A. His involvement can be viewed as the role of a critical friend and was a vital part of this study for deepening my understanding.

Specific to leadership, I observed the day-to-day leadership roles and responsibilities; their leadership styles; interactions with their staff, students and community; and their overall demeanor at school. As well, there were many informal conversations with the three school leaders to understand their leadership approach and the source of any work intensification they were experiencing in their schools and communities. I specifically kept and reviewed field notes based on their work and work intensification. This data captured and added further meaning to the personal stories collected in the semi structured interviews. Each leader's school context and stories are similar but represent their unique situations and experiences.

### **Semi structured Interviews**

The information the participants shared during their interviews enabled me to create a structure for their narratives (Ewick & Silbey, 2003). Within the semistructured qualitative interviews, I used four guiding prompts and questions:

1. Tell me about your job and your school.
2. Is your job stressful?
3. How do you stay positive in your role and handle job demands and challenges?
4. How do you balance your work and outside life?

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### **Data Analysis**

The researcher is responsible for the story structure by locating central themes, sequencing life events, and organising the timespan (Maines, 1993). The interviews, observations, and field notes were powerful data that revealed both personal stories and representations of cultural norms and beliefs. The data analysis was completed as a content and theme-based four-step approach (Kumar, 2018). This involved (i) multiple readings of the data identifying content and main themes; (ii) assigning codes to the themes; (iii) classifying responses under the main content and themes using “analytical bracketing: a procedure that “amounts to alternately bracketing the *whats*, then the *hows* (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 119, emphasis added). This process located underlying intersections of meaning to the themes (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) for a more complete picture of the data related to societal and cultural norms and expectations; (iv) integrating themes and responses into the overall findings (Kumar, 2018). The combination of a four-step data analysis process with analytical bracketing allowed me to combine reflectivity of my own experiences and first-person accounts with the qualitative data to generate a deeper data analysis beyond theme identification.

### **Findings**

Over the 2 years of this study, I observed many day-to-day routines and practices in the schools. I present these experiences combined with the school leaders’ responses from the semi structured interviews. I have chosen specific observations that highlight the intersection of societal and cultural expectations that influence work intensification for these school leaders.

#### **Work Intensification**

The school leaders in this study are in their school for long hours (a typical workday for them is 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.); often, their personal and professional lives blend. Sometimes these school leaders have responsibilities at the school on weekends or are required to travel up to 3 hours for professional development; they have added tasks due to Ministry-initiated changes (that is, conducting teacher classroom observations) and, in many cases, are implementing them with very little training or support. Over the past two years, for example, these school leaders have been introducing many new initiatives and increased

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accountability practices in their schools—such as extending the school day—largely as a result of the Ministry of Education (MINERD) in the DR securing two separate large sums of funding in 2015 and 2018 from the World Bank (2015, 2018). These increased work demands trickled down to the district level and then to the workload of school leaders—in most cases with minimal training. One example of a new practice is teacher evaluations, which is creating a lot of additional electronic paperwork for both the teacher and the school leaders. Because my observations began in 2019, I was seeing these leaders conducting these additional tasks and reckoning with the steep learning curve of carrying out these evaluations.

According to the criteria named in the literature—longer work hours, increased work pace, fewer resources, increased day-to-day tasks, inability to take breaks, and much more additional work (Pollock, 2014, 2015, 2016; Pollock & Hauseman, 2015; Pollock, Hauseman, & Wang, 2019; Pollock, Wang, & Hauseman, 2015), my observations indicate that the school leaders in this study are experiencing work intensification. When I asked the three leaders specifically about work intensification and its effects, all three participants agreed that their roles and responsibilities have been increasing every year. According to Maria,

*We have many demands upon us. We are asked to do many things in our schools by the district. Now, the district is implementing many new policies and changes to our school operations. So, I am learning to do many new things and organise people to help me.*

Franco agreed with this assessment and added that, as the head school leader, he does many things in his school: “Yes, there is a lot of work and responsibility. I am responsible for many things that other head school leaders are not.” For example, on the day of our interview, he was later arriving to school because he had to go and pick up a printer and there was traffic getting back to school. He explained, “I don’t have an assistant school leader or assistant to help spread out the daily tasks and I can’t ask my teachers; I have to do everything. I worry when I have to attend district school meetings in the city—typically once or twice a month—because there is no one at the school to do these tasks, and when I return there is even more work to do.” Benedicta explained that, for her, she must do a lot of traveling in her role:

*I love to travel around and see many people. However, most people would find this difficult and stressful from all the travel. Sometimes the roads are very bad and dangerous after a hard rain, but I am fine with it. For me, I like seeing many people and helping them, but it this takes*

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*up my time from all the paperwork tasks.*

Broadly speaking, these statements signify work intensification. However, my observations and compared to my experience with leaders in Canada and United States, I noticed their responses for dealing with work intensification are strikingly different: they appear relaxed, not anxious, they are not rushing about from one task to another, and they always take time to speak with people, especially the students.

### **Taking Breaks**

Although these school leaders appear to be experiencing the five criteria of work intensification, there is a set time allotted and taken for the lunch break (*comida*) during the school day. In other research on school leaders, many participants stated that they felt overwhelmed by the number of responsibilities and tasks they must complete on a day-to-day basis; often, they do not feel they have time to take breaks to eat (Pollock, 2016). However, these three school leaders always take time to sit in the cafeteria with the students and their staff to eat, followed by at least a 30-minute break outside. I also observed all three school leaders on multiple occasions eat their meal before serving the meal to the students. The time for *comida* is a cultural custom: Generally speaking, there are no interruptions unless there is a medical emergency.

Based on this lunch break practice, I probed deeper to determine whether these school leaders thought about balancing their work with their life outside of school, which is consistently reported as a negative consequence of work intensification (Edge, 2015; Evans, 2016; Pollock, 2014, 2015, 2016; Pollock et al., 2015; Riley, 2016, 2017, 2019). This question required some explanation on my part, because the participants felt that there was no separation between the two. Maria elaborated:

*There is no separation. I live in the community and everyone from the school and community knows where I live. For example, if there is a rainstorm and parents aren't sure if there will be school, they come to my fence at 7 a.m. and shout in, "Hey Directora! Is there school today?" This does not bother me because it is my role, and this is what I should do. Sometimes they come to my home to talk with me, and I have things to do, but I listen because it is important to me that I respect them. I make this my goal every day to show respect to my school community—everyone. It is a part of who I am and what I do. I cannot separate my life from my work because it is not important to me.*

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Franco laughed at the question and said: “Since I have taken this role, I have not taken a vacation.” When asked if this bothered him, he replied, “Not at all! But my family, especially my wife, gets upset with me. So, I have to make sure that we go places together on Sunday.” He also jokingly added, “My wife told me that she was going to leave me if I didn’t spend more time with the family.” Franco went on to explain that he does not mind working: “I am always on call and my family understands.” Benedicta, on the other hand, simply stated: “I don’t know. I love my job. It is my life. I can’t say that it is a balance thing for me. I feel physically tired a lot, but my mind loves what I do, so I am good.” She then added, “I do a lot of paperwork at home, but I see this as part of my life.” Separating their work from personal life did not appear to be an issue for them; rather, they regarded their work as part of their life. Moreover, I found this attitude was also reflected in their professional and personal demeanor and their openly caring relationships with their staff that I witnessed over the 2 years.

During our interviews, I asked the participants to explain how they stay positive in their role and handle their job demands and challenges. They all simply replied that they love their job. Franco explained:

*I love my job. If I did not love it, then I would not be here today. I would do something else. I think everyone should be this way. Do not work in a job that you do not like or love.*

Maria had a similar response:

*I am very passionate about my work. I see the good that I do for the students, and this motivates me and keeps me going every day. I feel good being with people. If you do not love your work, then leave. I love my job and very passionate about it.*

Benedicta added, “I stay positive because I love my job. I am committed to my role and because of that I don’t see it as a challenge.”

All three participants suggested that they are passionate about their jobs and spoke about their desire to help others. These leaders do not appear to be overly concerned or affected with their increased workload demands, responsibilities, and do not report to have difficulty achieving work–life balance. These leaders do not seem to try to separate the two. They enjoy a high level of respect from their teachers and staff. Most student disciplinary problems are dealt with directly by the teachers; even though the school leaders still have the final say, it was more to keep them informed than to seek approval. Teachers also take responsibility for daily activities, planning and carrying out school events, and so forth.

## **Discussion**

Based on my observations, field notes, and interview data, these three school leaders appear to experience work intensification. Compared to other studies on school leaders' work intensification (ATA, 2014; Evans, 2016; Edge, 2015; Pollock, 2014, 2015, 2016; Pollock et al., 2015; Riley, 2016, 2017, 2019), these leaders internalise, interpret, and manage work intensification differently. For example, the school leaders did not demonstrate negative outcomes stemming from their work as found in numerous studies that report a connection between work intensification and negative job satisfaction that leads to excessive work-related stress, burnout, reduced self-efficacy and personal accomplishment, physical and mental health issues (Darmody & Smyth, 2016; Drago-Severson, 2012; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Pollock, Wang, & Hauseman, 2014), and eventually developing negative feelings toward the profession (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Drummond & Halsey, 2013; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012). The school leaders have a genuine passion for their work and role as a school leader, which is consistent with Pollock's (2014) findings: She found that, in Ontario, 81% of the participating school leaders felt their roles remained rewarding and 91% of these school leaders believed their school is a good place to work, and that 91.8% believed "their job makes a meaningful difference in the school community" (Pollock, 2014, p. 27). For the three school leaders in this study, the difference seems to be how they sustain this passion in the face of work intensification and how they internalise—or rather, do not internalise—the quest for job satisfaction and work–life balance to achieve wellness. My findings are similar to a recent study by Walker (2020), who reported Jamaican secondary head school leaders are experiencing work intensification and use spiritual coping strategies to promote their own well-being and resist internalising work intensification leading to negative job satisfaction and well-being.

In my attempt to understand my participants' attitudes toward their job satisfaction and work intensification, I considered Maryanski and Turner's (1992) suggestion that social behaviour is defined by society. The findings of this study point to other sociocultural influences and norms in the participants' lives. More specifically, their attitudes are informed by their specific sociocultural context. To use an illustrative example, I could walk into their respective schools or offices and speak to my participants at any time without an appointment. As Brown (1995) posited, Dominicans consider relationships among people more important than schedules; I have found this to continually be true. Generally speaking, they prioritise taking time for people, and therefore are more likely to

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engage in social interactions and let work-related tasks wait; my three participants were no different. The two main points of departure from the existing literature are (a) that work intensification leads to negative job satisfaction and problems with work–life balance and wellness, and (b) the sanctity of taking breaks and the lack of concern over work–life balance. Arguably, both can be attributed to the sociocultural context of the Dominican Republic.

### **Implications**

In aims and scope, this study was modest; however, my findings point to some interesting conclusions and future research opportunities. Most of the current research on school leaders' work intensification includes suggestions for alleviating the negative effects. Typically, these suggestions are rooted in developed countries' understandings of work intensification and as such are either structural—for example, what school boards can do to support leaders—or based in self-care routines (Bristow et al., 2007; Fullan, 2008; Pollock & Wang, 2020; Pollock et al., 2015; Riley, 2019). If, as scholars, we are considering work intensification to be a global phenomenon, then our research and solutions should be informed by global perspectives, which should include those from developing countries. Although this ethnographic study is small, the attitudes represented in my participants' responses and their daily practices demonstrate that, although the criteria of work intensification are potentially generalisable on a global scale, the ways in which the effects are internalised and perceived are not.

### **Future Research**

Although I have attempted to present an alternative point of view in this small-scale study, I acknowledge that I have created more questions than answers. These questions, however, represent exciting avenues for future research. First, increasing the sample size and reaching beyond one region and country to multiple countries and regions in the global south could help determine whether the results are consistent. Second, incorporating the perceptions of other school stakeholders could shed light not only on school administrators' leadership work demands and well-being, but also on overall school climate, school culture, academic demands, and any social and emotional outcomes for the whole school community. Data from these sources would offer opportunities for triangulation, thus adding to the credibility of the findings. Third, a comparative study could yield a detailed comparative analysis: Collecting data from various regions and

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areas in the world with similar and contrasting education systems could help researchers understand how to reduce work intensification and help school leaders achieve work–life balance and live and be well. Fourth, it could be fruitful to specifically study how the external influence of social and cultural norms—which include issues of high accountability or political influences, for example—is affecting the internalisation of workplace expectations and work intensification among school leaders, as well as their ability to live and be well. Most importantly, conducting research in a broader range of developing countries will ensure that the research on work intensification is truly global in nature.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, I have presented some ethnographic research on how three school leaders understand and internalise work intensification in the DR. In doing so, I have attempted to provide a perspective from a developing country located in the Western world on work intensification. Although the results are not generalisable in their current form, they do point to an important and under-researched area in the academic literature on work intensification - whether it is indeed a global phenomenon or simply that of developed countries, and how sociocultural context shapes understandings of work intensification. Perspectives from developing countries have the potential to inform global solutions that ensure all school leaders can live and be well.

### **End Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The World Bank divides national economies into four groups: low, lower middle, upper middle, and high (World Bank, n.d.). Although there is no established convention for the designation of “developed” and “developing” countries or areas in the United Nations system, in common practice, Japan, Canada, the United States, and New Zealand, and many European countries are considered “developed” regions.

<sup>2</sup> Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a global assessment created by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The assessment tests 15-year-old students in reading, mathematics, and science. In 2018, 79 countries participated in the PISA test, totalling approximately 600,000 students who represented about 32 million 15-year-olds (OECD, n.d.)

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