

Stress and wellbeing among New Zealand principals

Report to the New Zealand Principals' Federation

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Summary

This report for the NZ Principals' Federation focuses on stress among New Zealand principals in state and state-integrated schools, and the factors associated with it. It uses their mid-2005 *Principals' Hauora-Wellbeing* electronic survey. The response rate for the survey was 61 percent of all New Zealand principals in these schools (n=1,523). Responses were representative of the national profile of schools in terms of socioeconomic decile and location. Primary principals were over-represented, and secondary principals, those of U7 and above schools, and kura kaupapa Māori principals, under-represented.

Forty percent of the respondents described their current stress level as high or extremely high. Stress levels were higher for principals who were women or Māori or not NZ European. There were no marked differences related to school characteristics. Stress levels were associated with many aspects of wellbeing and health, and with aspects of the role and workload of principals.

While principals appeared healthier on the whole than the general population (using age-weighted comparisons), with fewer risk behaviours, they exercised less. Less than a third followed the guidelines for good health in terms of physical activity of having at least three 30-minute periods of fitness activity a week. Just over half thought they would have difficulty running the length of a football field.

Lack of time may be the main reason why principals do not get enough exercise. Ninety percent worked 50 hours or more a week, and 42 percent worked 60 hours or more. Just under half experienced constant tiredness, and half reported problems with sleep.

Many principals experience some frustration, impatience or anger. However, 70 percent were optimistic about their life and job as a school principal. Most thought that their staff and board of trustees valued the work they did as a principal.

Notwithstanding long hours and stress from their role, the majority of principals do get great satisfaction from their work. Thirty-six percent strongly agreed with the statement *Your job gives you great satisfaction*, and 49 percent agreed with it. Ten percent felt neutral about this statement, and only 4 percent disagreed with it.

The main stressors for principals stemmed from balancing the teaching and managing aspects of their role, paperwork, and workload. Most principals thought they spent more time on management rather than leadership. These role-related pressures were felt more keenly by principals in small or rural schools.

The lack of time to focus on teaching and learning, and Ministry of Education initiatives, paperwork and other system demands were identified as having a high impact for over half the principals.

The next set of stressors for many principals included resourcing needs and ERO reviews, which had high impact for around 40 percent of the principals.

Principals of small schools, and rural schools, and also those whose rolls were fluctuating or declining, and to a lesser extent those of low socioeconomic decile schools, were more likely to find aspects of their role stressful.

However, most of the variance in principals' well-being can be accounted for by workload and role balance, not school or individual characteristics. Other main contributing factors to well-being were support from education sector organisations and government agencies, stressors from parents, stressors from staff, the principal's fitness level, and their participation in principal networks.

1. Introduction

The New Zealand Principals' Federation (NZPF) designed and hosted an on-line survey, the *Principals' Hauora-Wellbeing Survey*, and sent emailed invitations to participate to principals of all state and state-integrated schools in New Zealand in mid 2005. Some of the overall findings were then publically released. NZCER was asked to undertake further analysis with a focus on stress and the factors associated with it. The comprehensive nature of the survey meant that this analysis could include overall health status and perceptions of workload and work environment, as well as personal and school characteristics.

We start the report with an outline of the relationship between personal and school characteristics (e.g. whether more experienced principals were more likely to be found in urban schools), and an outline of stress levels in relation to personal, school, and other characteristics, and an outline of the sources of stress identified by principals. Next, we look at the relations between stress and health, and make some comparisons between the principals' health and physical activity levels, and the general population. Then we look more closely at the sources of stress, and see whether these varied according to personal or school characteristics, and overall stress and health levels. Next, we look at support and networking. Finally, we compare the relative importance of the variables that contribute most markedly to the well-being of principals, to gain understanding of what can be done to support their well-being, and ameliorate stress.

Approach to the data analysis

There were 1,523 responses that were sufficiently complete for use in the data analysis. This is a response rate of 61 percent. Primary principals are over-represented in the survey responses (92 percent c.f. 81 percent on the 2004 Ministry of Education school statistics), with under-representation from secondary principals (4 percent c.f. 13 percent), and correspondingly, U7 size schools and above (5 percent c.f. 10 percent), and kura kaupapa Māori principals (1 percent c.f. 3 percent). The responses are representative in terms of socioeconomic decile, and appear to be representative in terms of location.¹

The analysis of the relationships between stress and other factors that is reported in sections 2–5 this report is based mainly on chi-square tests of association.

¹ The categories used in the NZPF survey differ somewhat from those used in the Ministry of Education schools database.

There were strong inter-relationships between the health variables, including stress, and between the variables measuring various aspects of the principal's role. In the final section, we model the relationship between well-being and these different aspects so that we can compare them in terms of their influence on well-being. More detail is given on the chi square tests and this model in the Appendix.

Personal & school characteristics of principals responding to the survey

In this section, we focus on the relationship between personal and school characteristics, that is, what differences were there in the type of individual principal working in the different types of school?

Gender

Overall, 45 percent of the respondents were female. Smaller (U1 and U2) schools were more likely to have female principals (64 percent were female), while all larger schools were more likely to have male principals (72 percent of U7 and above principals were male, for example). Principals of schools in provincial cities or large rural towns were more likely to be male (65 percent), and those in the rural areas to be female (53 percent).

Secondary schools were more likely to have male principals (72 percent were male), and kura were more likely to have female principals (73 percent were female). Just over half the principals of other schools were male.

Male principals were more likely to be at schools with a stable roll (61 percent of principals at these schools were male), and female principals were more likely to be at schools where the roll fluctuated (62 percent).²

Ethnicity

Most principals responding were NZ European (88 percent). Eight percent of the respondents gave their ethnicity as Māori. Just less than one percent reported they were Pacific peoples, and 4 percent noted other ethnicities. We report on the Māori principals separately, and report all Pacific peoples and those of other ethnicities as "Other". Māori principals were more likely to work in smaller schools, those with low decile, and those in rural areas. Eighty-six percent of Māori principals worked in U1–U4 schools, particularly in area schools and kura. Sixty-eight percent of Māori principals worked in decile 1–4 schools, and 62 percent worked in small towns, or rural areas.

² Overall, 31 percent of the principals responding said their school roll over the last two years had been stable, 22 percent that it had declined, 34 percent that it had risen, and 13 percent that it had fluctuated.

Age

Most of the respondents were between 45 and 64 years old, and all were over 25; 22 percent were under 45, and one percent were over 65. Younger principals tended to work in smaller U1–U2 schools (33 percent of the principals were under 45), and older principals tended to work in larger schools (88 percent of U5 and above principals were 45 years or older); and correspondingly older principals tended to be over-represented in city schools (83 percent of those working in large or provincial city schools were 45 years or older), and younger principals in rural schools (29 percent of principals of schools in small rural towns and areas were less than 45 years old). Age however made less of a difference than gender and ethnicity in terms of the distribution of principals.

Experience

Most of the respondents had been a principal for at least five years. Thirteen percent had been a principal for under five years, a fifth had between two and five years' experience, just over a half had between 5 and 20 years' experience, and 15 percent had been a principal for more than 20 years. The distribution of more and less experienced principals is similar to that of younger and older principals: over 40 percent of those with under five years' experience worked in U1 or U2 schools while over half of those with 20 years or more experience worked in U5 or larger schools. Principals with more than 20 years experience were more likely to be in primary schools (96 percent of principals with 20 or more years' experience worked in primary schools, compared with 87 percent of those with under 5 years' experience), while those with less experience were more likely to be in secondary schools, area schools, or kura. Longer experienced principals were more likely to be in city schools (52 percent of those with more than 20 years' experience were in schools in large or provincial cities), those with less experience to be in a rural school (46 percent of those with under 2 years' experience were in rural schools).

Twenty-seven percent of the principals have been involved in the First Time Principals' programme. This is a voluntary programme funded by the Ministry of Education for first-time principals that has been available since 2002.³

Qualifications

Principals with teaching certificates or diplomas were more likely to be in smaller, often rural, and mainly primary schools; those with post-graduate qualifications to be in larger, city, mainly secondary schools.

³ More information about this programme is available on www.firstprincipals.ac.nz. The 2003 programme evaluation (Cameron, Lovett, Baker & Waiti 2004) analyses the gains from this programme in terms of school leadership, and provides useful description of the diversity of previous experience of first time principals; about a third of the evaluation sample "had been appointed to principals' positions without the background to begin their work with confidence" (p. xi).

Sixteen percent of principals reported that they were doing further study.

Families

Most principals were married or lived in a permanent relationship (85 percent): and 35 percent of these were also teachers (including 5 percent who were also principals themselves). Eight percent of the principals' partners also worked in schools, though they were not teachers. Thus education was a live part of the home life for a substantial minority of principals. Forty-six percent of the principals also had dependents (both those aged under 20 and elderly) living with them.