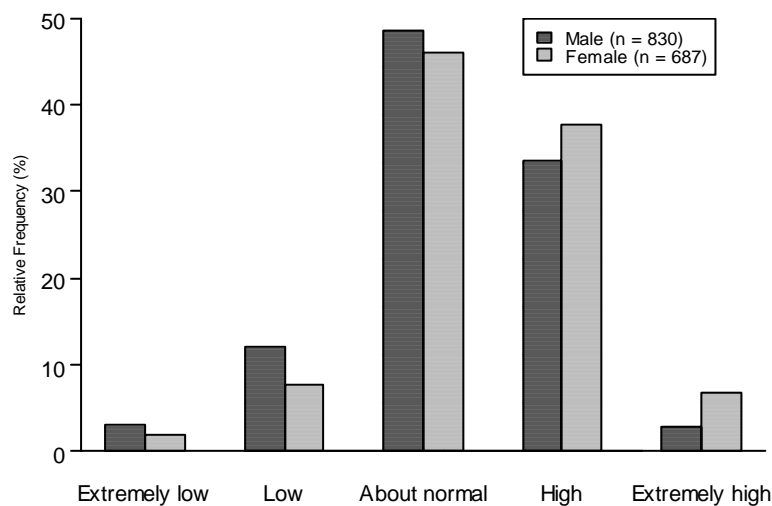


2. Stress patterns

Overall, 40 percent of the principals said their stress level over the previous week had been high or extremely high.¹ Male respondents were less likely to report being stressed – that is, having a high or extremely high stress level (36 percent) than females (44 percent).

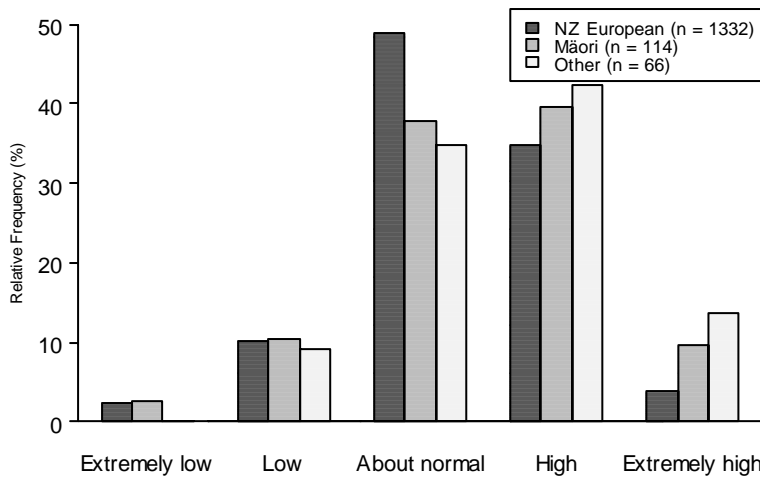
Figure 1 **Stress levels reported by respondents in the previous week, by gender**



Māori and other ethnicities were more likely to report being stressed (49 and 56 percent, respectively) than NZ Europeans (38 percent).

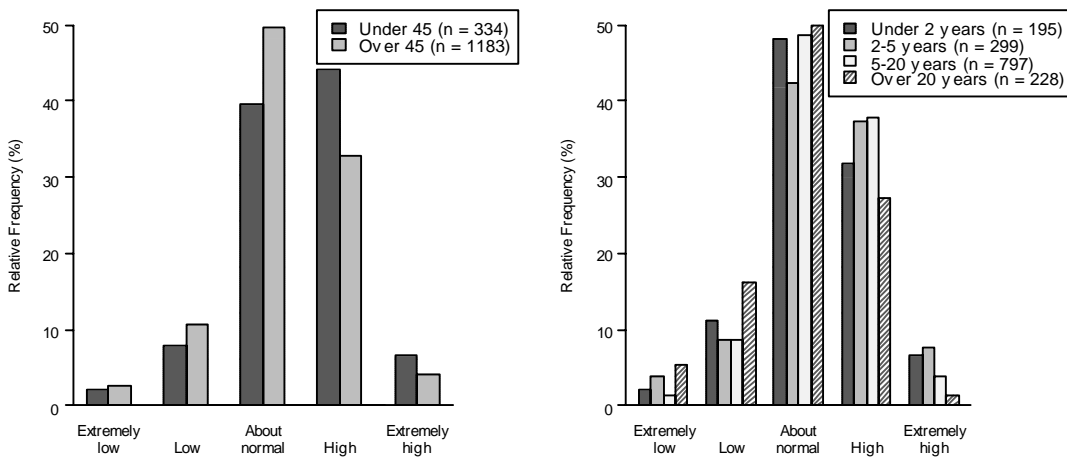
¹ The large Bristol *Stress and Health at Work* study found around 20 percent of their sample reported high or extremely high levels of stress at work. Teachers (presumably including principals), nurses, and managers had the greatest proportion of high stress among occupations (Smith, Brice, Collins, Matthews & McNamara 2000) A 2000 study of New Zealand GPs found a self-reported level of stress of over 50 percent (Dowell, Coster & Maffey 2002). This was related to ‘increasing burdens of administration and paperwork’ (as well as erosion of income, which does not apply to principals). As with principals, GPs also showed satisfaction with their job overall.

Figure 2 **Stress levels reported by respondents in the previous week, by ethnicity**



Younger respondents, aged under 45 years, were more likely to report being stressed (51 percent), see Figure 3 below. Thirty-eight percent of those who had been a principal for less than two years reported being stressed, as did 45 percent of those who had between 2 and 5 years' experience, 41 percent of those with 5 and 20 years' experience, and 29 percent of those who had more than 20 years' experience.

Figure 3 **Stress levels reported by respondents in the previous week, by age (on the left) and length of experience (on the right)**



There were no marked differences in reported stress level by school size, type, decile, or location. It was also largely unrelated to changes in school roll, though 22 percent of those who reported their stress levels as extremely high had fluctuating rolls, compared with 13 percent overall.

Stress was associated with many health and wellbeing variables. Those who reported high or extremely high levels of stress were more likely than others to have poor general health, have trouble sleeping, to be tired, depressed, easily angered, to have experienced a measure of frustration in their job, to be relatively unhappy, to have felt impatient, to seldom feel optimistic, to have felt tense, to be over- or under-weight, to use antacids more than once a week, to take medication for tiredness, sleep problems, headaches, other pain, skin conditions, depression, sleep problems, anxiety, to be taking two or more of the listed medications, to not exercise, to be unfit (have difficulty running the length of a football field), to hardly ever get exercise (those who reported themselves less stressed were more likely to ensure that they always exercised several times a week), and to not have quality socializing outside of the work environment.

Not associated with stress were: the number of days at home because of health in the last month; cigarette use; the quantity of alcohol consumed; medication for cholesterol control, menopause, arthritis, heart conditions, blood pressure control, diabetes, osteoporosis, weight loss, or other conditions; highest tertiary qualification; living arrangements; the *number* of dependents in the household, and the number of domestic and support activities of the 15 listed² that they took part in that week.

High or extremely high stress levels were also associated with job satisfaction (the greater the stress, the less the satisfaction), a poor outcome of the school's last ERO review, greater concern about the possibility of being involved in a Network review, a poor relationship with the Board of Trustees, dealing more often with students with behavioural problems, having been part of the First Time Principals Programme (probably more to do with their length of experience than the programme itself), levels of stress in relation to the 25 sources of stress which are discussed further below, having a high percentage of their work orientated to management rather than leadership, working longer hours, perceiving that they had so much work to do they never seemed to get on top of it, having their work as a principal not valued by the staff, or not valued by the Board and community, not networking with other principals, and feeling poorly supported by the NZPF, NZ School Trustees' Association, or the Ministry of Education.

Sources of stress

The principals were asked to select which of 25 aspects of the job caused them the highest level of stress in their job³, and then to rate all of these aspects separately on a one to six scale for their

² These were: preparing a meal, grocery shopping, laundry, ironing, paying bills, fixing things around the home, cleaning the home, working outside around the home, car maintenance/cleaning, planning family life activities, getting children ready for bed, taking children/spouse to the doctor, spending quality time with children, spending quality time with partner/spouse, spending quality time for self.

³ The survey did not ask principals to identify any causes of stress in their personal lives.

impact for them as a source of stress, with one being breaking point and six being no impact at all. The first question gives some sense of what loomed largest for principals at the time they answered the survey; the second compares different sources of stress.

Forty-two percent of the principals found the range of their job, or work without a direct association with teaching, to be the sources of stress that stood out most for them. These are the first three items in Table 1.

Table 1 Source of principals' highest stress levels

| Source of stress | Percentage of respondents (<i>n</i> = 1520) |
|--|---|
| Multi-tasking nature of the job | 17 |
| Ministry initiatives, paperwork and other system demands | 13 |
| Lack of time to focus on teaching and learning | 12 |
| Behavioural/violence problem pupils | 8 |
| Staff competency | 7 |
| Resourcing needs | 6 |
| ERO reviews | 5 |
| Interpersonal conflicts at school | 5 |
| Staff resistance to change | 4 |
| Aggressive behaviour from parents | 4 |
| Compliances | 3 |

The sources of stress that were mentioned by under three percent of the principals as their single highest cause of stress, in decreasing order, were: employment issues in relation to staff, parental expectations, poorly performing senior management, Board of Trustees involvement in management of school, Board of Trustees competence, critical incidents, lack of ICT support, complaints management, finding competent relievers, network review, employment issues in relation to the principal and Board, occupational and safety regulations, child protection issues, and low teacher/staff morale. We shall see that these could still get high ratings in terms of their impact on principals.

There were some differences associated with school and personal characteristics. These largely reflect the distribution of principals: more younger, female, and with less experience in smaller and rural schools, who were more likely to be teaching principals, and experience more difficulty with the width of their role.

A quarter of U1 or U2 school principals, the teaching principals, singled out the multi-tasking nature of the job and a lack of time to focus on teaching and learning (15 percent). More U3–U6 school principals mentioned resourcing needs (9 percent), and U7 and above school principals, ERO reviews (9 percent).

Rural school principals were also more likely to single out the multi-tasking nature of the job, lack of time to focus on teaching and learning (15 percent), and Ministry initiatives & paperwork etc. Town school principals were more likely to mention staff competency (13 percent), resourcing needs (8 percent), but were less likely to mention the multi-tasking nature of the job (14 percent) or Ministry initiatives & paperwork etc (9 percent).

Decile 1–2 school principals mentioned staff competency (11 percent); decile 9–10 school principals put more weight on parental expectations (7 percent), and 22 percent said the multitasking nature of the job was most stressful.

Women were slightly more likely than men to rate lack of time to focus on teaching and learning (15 percent) as their highest source of stress.

Younger principals (aged 25–44 years) were more likely to mention staff competency (11 percent), but less likely to mention Ministry initiatives, paperwork and other system demands (9 percent).

Similarly, principals with under two years' experience mentioned lack of time to focus on teaching and learning more, and Ministry initiatives, paperwork and other system demands less (15 and 9 percent, respectively). They also made less mention of behavioural/violence problem pupils (5 percent). Those with over 20 years' experience were more likely to mention Ministry initiatives, paperwork and other system demands (19 percent), or ERO reviews (9 percent).

Those who reported low or very low levels of stress were more likely to mention Ministry initiatives, paperwork and other system demands (18 percent), or interpersonal conflicts at school (8 percent).

Impact of sources of stress

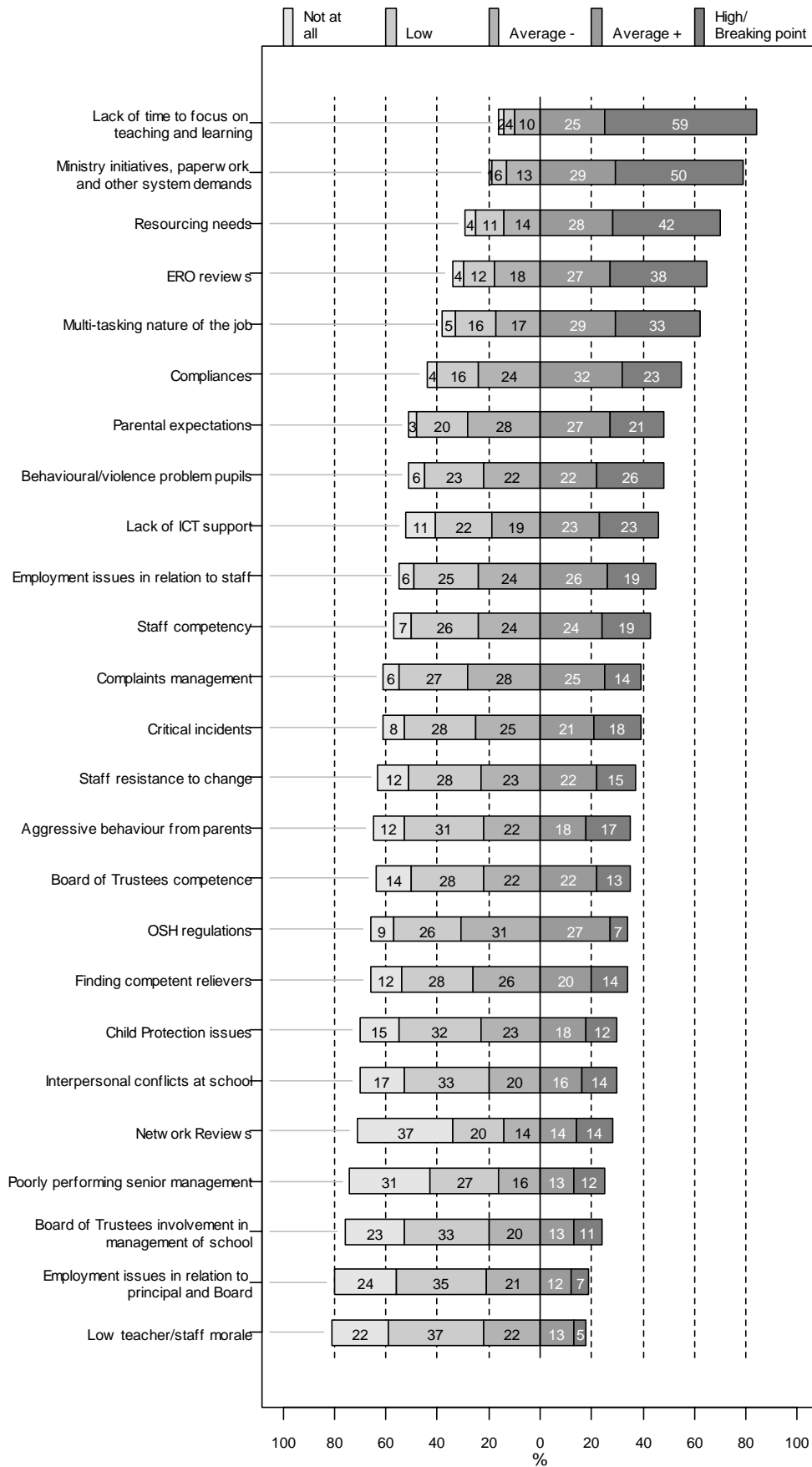
Figure 1 shows the extent to which principals thought these individual sources of stress impacted on them. The 25 sources fall into a number of groups.

Two sources of stress had higher than average impact for most of the principals: lack of time to focus on teaching and learning, and Ministry of Education initiatives, paperwork and other system demands. These stem from the very nature of the principal's role in self-managing schools, which has more of a management weight than previously, and the positioning of individual schools in relation to national systems. The next group also relate to that role, including accountability for public money. They include resourcing needs, ERO reviews, the multi-tasking nature of the job, and compliances. They were identified as having above average impact for between 55 to 70 percent of the principals.

The next group of sources of stress were more related to individual school communities and handling individuals. They included parental expectations, behavioural/violence problem pupils, staff employment issues, and staff competency, and were rated as having more than average impact on principals by between 39 to 48 percent. The other issues had average or more impact

for between 18 to 37 percent of the principals, with low teacher/staff morale and employment issues between principal and Board having the least impact in terms of stress.

Figure 4 Impact of sources of stress



The inter-relationships between measures of stress and other variables are discussed in detail in the sections that follow: the inter-relationships with other health variables in section 3, *Health*, and those with variables to do with work in section 4, *Workload, role, and relationships*. Section 5 looks at sources of support and networking. Section 6 builds on the detailed picture developed through sections 3–5 to see which aspects are most important in understanding what matters in terms of principals’ well-being.