

6. The big picture

In this final chapter, we look at the big picture. We brought together the wide ranging variables discussed in the previous chapters to identify underlying patterns. We defined groups of questions that were answered similarly (typically sets of questions about similar aspects of the principals' lives or jobs) using factor analysis, and we used regression analysis to evaluate the relative importance of these aspects of principals' roles, in terms of their contribution to the well-being of the principals.

The creation of the factors, and the items that went into them, are given in the appendix. The factors were:

Well-being (this includes overall stress levels)
Fitness
Workload and role balance
Stressors related to paperwork, resources, and compliance
Stressors related to staff
Stressors related to students
Stressors related to parents
Relation with board of trustees
Support
Participation
Being valued
Network review

Contributions to principals' well-being

On the whole the principals had relatively good ratings on the well-being scale, but a quarter of them had moderate to low ratings.

The well-being scale had a lowest score of 1.5, and a highest score of 10 (one or more people gave themselves a "perfect score" on all the items in the scale). Half the respondents had scores between 5.75 and 7.33, and the mean score was 6.5.

The model we fitted looked at how much of this variation in well-being could be explained by each of the factors. We also checked to see if any of the variables not used to make scale variables

(general health, school size, type, decile, roll change, outcome of the school's last ERO review), age, gender, experience, or qualifications helped to explain the variation in well-being. Only the outcome of the school's last ERO review did, in conjunction with differences in the relationship with the board of trustees.

We found that 46 percent of the variability in the well-being score was explained by a combination of: workload & role balance, general health, being valued, support, relationship with the Board of Trustees, stressors from parents, fitness, stressors from staff, outcome of the last ERO review, and participation in networks (these are in approximate order of importance).

The other variables did not add significantly to this model. This does not mean that they do not contribute to well-being, but that they not contribute different information about well-being than the variables included in the model. This is because of the associations between these variables and those included in the model. We have aimed to fit a model that accounts for the most variability using the fewest variables.

What does the model tell us about the relative importance of these aspects, when we look at principals as a whole? Table 2 gives the amount by which our 1–10 scale for well-being will increase, for each increase of a point on the workload, being valued, etc. scales. This amount gives an idea of the relative importance of each of the explanatory scales.

Table 1 **Modelled amount of increase in well-being, for each unit increase on other scales**

Explanatory variables	Estimated increase in well-being	Standard Error
Workload & role balance	0.31	0.02
Support	0.09	0.02
Stressors from parents	0.06	0.02
Stressors from staff	0.05	0.02
Fitness	0.05	0.01
Participation in networks	0.03	0.01
<i>Interactions</i>		
Being valued if exceptionally healthy	0.41	0.27
Being valued if very healthy	0.09	0.25
Being valued if generally healthy	0.15	0.25
Being valued if health is really not good	0.06	0.26
Relationship with Board of Trustees if ERO review was excellent	0.05	0.13
Relationship with Board of Trustees if ERO review was generally good	0.05	0.13
Relationship with Board of Trustees if ERO review showed some real problems	0.20	0.14
Relationship with Board of Trustees if ERO review showed serious concerns	0.34	0.14

This model gives an interesting perspective on principals' well-being. It can be most improved by improving their workload and role balance. Feeling supported by outside agencies and organisations is next important. It plays more of a role than their physical fitness, though they need to be fit enough to have the energy, physical and mental, to tackle the multiple challenges of their role. Stressors from parents and staff contribute more to levels of well-being (or lack of them) than stressors from students (which do not add significantly to the model). Participation in principals' networks offers some support for well-being.

The interactions are a little more challenging to understand, and their meaning is not clear. Being valued made the greatest increase in well-being to principals who rated their health as being better. For the principals whose health was really not good, those who were not valued were almost as likely to have a high well-being score as a low one, and those who had a high score for being valued had a similar spread of well-being scores. On average though, the well-being score increased slightly with the being valued score.

How strongly the relationship with the Board of Trustees related to well-being depended on the outcome of the school's most recent ERO review. Where the review showed serious concerns, there was a strong association between the relationship with the Board and well-being, indicating that this relationship becomes more critical where a school faces concerns. Where the review was

more favourable, this relationship was less strong and there were more principals who had a low score for the relationship with the Board and a relatively high score for well-being, or who had a high score for the relationship with the Board and a relatively low score for well-being.

Discussion

Stress can be hard to define (Wilson 2002), since it is difficult to separate it from its effects, and it involves a relationship between pressures and individual responses. Originally, the concept was developed in physiology to refer to responses to demands placed on the human body, and demands that could stimulate as well as threaten. Generally, however, stress is understood and commonly used in terms of negative demand or pressure. Individuals vary in their ability to adjust or live with these demands or pressures.

Wilson (2002) in her overview of research on teacher stress, points to workload (quantity, quality and time pressures) and dealing with people as the prime causes of stress at work. She also mentions 'problematic' change, including lack of support from central government, constant change, lack of information about how change is to be implemented, increased amounts of time on non-teaching (direct teaching), tension related to school inspections, and school mergers.

Work-related stress is now acknowledged in New Zealand's health and safety legislation. The English approach is not based on legislation, but focuses on providing tools for organisations to reduce stress. Seven stressor areas were identified (Mackay, Cousins, Kelly, Lee, & McCaig 2004).

- Demands (including workload, work patterns, and the work environment)
- Control (how much say the person has in the way they do their work)
- Support (which includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues)
- Relationships at work (which includes promoting positive working practices to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour)
- Role (whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the person does not have conflicting roles)
- Change (how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation)
- Culture (the way in which organisations demonstrate management commitment and have procedures which are fair and open).

Workload and role emerge from the analysis of this data from principals as key stressors for principals – who are the managers of their organisations. Workload issues are not simply the long hours worked, but the nature of the principal's role. The tension between educational leadership and management or administration implicit in self-managing schools has been evident for some time (Livingstone 1999, Wylie 1997). There is also inherent tension between school self-management, and the reality of also being part of a national system. A study of teacher workload

in English schools (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2001) found that principals had more intensive and greater workloads than other managers and professionals. This study identified the importance of 'finding the right balance between accountability and trust', and of reducing workload 'to ensure sustainable school improvement'.

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. Inasmuch as women and Māori principals were more likely to be heading small or rural schools, they were also more likely to identify these sources of stress. The issues facing rural schools have been identified for some time, with a range of different solutions proposed (some more palatable than others to rural communities) (Collins 2004). Questions have also been raised about the different pathways to and through the principalship for women and men (Brooking 2005). In recent years, there has been more attention paid to supporting principals, particularly first-time principals.

The analysis in this report shows that these are not the only principals who experience stress, and who find some aspects of their work stressful. The challenge is now to see if we can find some creative ways to provide more balance in the role of the principal, and to find ways to create common ground between the needs of individual schools and the government agencies that fund, support, and review them.