THE AUSTRALIAN PRINCIPAL

HEALTH & WELLBEING SURVEY

2011 DATA FINAL EXECUTIVE SUMMARY REPORT

MONASH University

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HEALTH & WELLBEING SURVEY

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Executive Summary Final Report

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Executive Summary

Aims and Background

The role of school principal in many parts of the "first world" world is rapidly changing (Matthews, Moorman, & Nusche, 2007). This has increased the stress levels of an already highly stressed population. In the UK, where schools have been increasingly accountable for results via the publication of league tables, Phillips and Sen (2011) reported that, "work related stress was higher in education than across all other industries… with work-related mental ill-health… almost double the rate for all industry" (p. 177-8). A significant stressor has been the increased emphasis by governments on accountability for uniform curriculum delivery along with the devolution of administrative tasks from central to local control.

Significant changes to the principals' role are introduced regularly by the federal and state governments, such as the introduction of a national curriculum tied to national testing (NAPLAN) and public accountability via the My School website (ACARA, 2011). The work practices (role demands) imposed by these changes will further increase work volume and public accountability and decrease principals' decision latitude through externally imposed reporting deadlines. More than 100 "Whitehall I and II" studies found adverse health outcomes including decreased life expectancy results from high role demand and concurrent low decision latitude. More disturbing is that under these conditions younger people appear to be at greater risk of coronary heart disease than their older colleagues (Kuper & Marmot, 2003).

Principals' Australia Institute, estimates that as many as 70% of Australia's 10,000 school principals will reach retirement age within the next five years. They will be replaced with much younger, less experienced individuals, potentially more at risk of adverse health outcomes from undertaking the role.

The Survey

Comprehensive school demographic items drawn from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) (Williams et al., 2007), Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Thomson, Bortoli, Nicholas, Hillman, & Buckley, 2011), My School (ACARA, 2011) and International Confederation of Principals surveys are used to capture differences in OH&S associated with the diversity of Australian school settings and types. Principals' quality of life is measured with the Australian Quality of Life Survey (*AQoL-8D)* (Richardson et al., 2009) and psychosocial coping is investigated by the Copenhagen Psycho Social Coping Scale *(COPSOQ-II)* (Jan Hyld Pejtersen, Kristensen, Borg, & Bjorner, 2010). The combination of items from these instruments allows opportunities for comprehensive analysis of variation in both OH&S and wellbeing as a function of school type, state and sector differences and the personal attributes of the principals themselves.

Innovation

This research project is innovative at both the individual and the organizational level. The principals who complete the survey receive interactive feedback on 42 dimensions of their occupational health, safety and wellbeing, through a dedicated secure website. The project involved the design and implementation of new information access systems and feedback mechanisms (connected to sophisticated automatic analysis tools) for school leaders, affording them instant health and wellbeing checkups tailored to their specific work context, The instant benefit to individuals is likely to increase both participation rates and the veracity of the information they submit.

Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing

The occupational health and safety literature categorizes interventions to improve workplaces into three types: *primary, secondary* and *tertiary* (LaMontagne, Keegel, Louie, Ostry, & Lansbergis, 2007). *Primary interventions* are organizational, systematic approaches targeted toward prevention of exposure to stressors in the workplace. *Secondary interventions* are designed to help individuals better cope with the stressors they encounter, such as relaxation and mindfulness training. *Tertiary interventions* are designed to lessen the impact of stress related problems post occurrence through treatment or management of symptoms and rehabilitation. The *Australian principal health and wellbeing survey* and evidence-based interventions to reduce stress related disease will provide significant social and economic benefit to Australia. Psychosocial work conditions have a significant impact on health outcomes (Head et al., 2007; Kuper & Marmot, 2003; Marmot, 2006), while physical and psychological wellbeing have a significant effect on job performance (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005).

The survey was conducted between the end of August and end of October 2011. All principal professional organisations were consulted prior to the survey being undertaken and each agreed to take part. Principal organisations sent email invitations to their members inviting them to participate. The following information is presented to create a picture of principal health and wellbeing across Australia in 2011. The survey was repeated in 2012 and will run again in 2013. Current respondents are able to update their information with a follow-up survey while principals who did not undertake the survey in 2011 or 2012 can commence in 2013.

Research Questions

1. Can recognizable occupational health, safety and wellbeing subgroups of principals be identified through the survey? These groups may be inferred from a number of criteria including: State; Sector (Government, Catholic, Independent); Location (Urban, Suburban, Large Town, Rural, Remote); Type (Primary, Secondary, Special, Early Childhood, P-12); Background (Family of Origin, School Education); Person Factors (Gender, Family of Procreation, Social Support, Educational Level); Role Factors (Hours worked, number and type of teachers, students and parents, resources, professional support); Occupational Constraints.

2. Do(es) any group(s) thrive in the role?

3. Do(es) any group(s) only just survive in the role?

4. Do(es) any group(s) show signs of adverse health, safety, and wellbeing outcomes.

5. Do(es) any factors affect these group(s), and in what ways?

Results Overview

The results paint a complex picture showing a diversity of settings and experiences of Australia's school principals. Data was obtained from every sector, state and region across the country. The group who responded to the survey put in very long hours at work, both during term time and during holiday periods. The number of hours worked appears to have no relation to salary: these people appear dedicated to the task of running schools as effectively as possible for its own intrinsic reward. The details of the personal costs of their work, their occupational health, safety and wellbeing are equally complex: from many who thrive in the job to those who are perhaps just surviving. These are reported in the bulk of the report by section.

Australia's School Principals: A Snapshot

- Responses from 2005 principals are reported. This represents a highly representative sample of principals from every state and territory and every educational sector.
  - Representativeness is determined by the closeness of the survey to the ACARA median ICSEA number. ACARA=1000 with a Standard Deviation of 100; This survey=1002 with a Standard Deviation of 94.5 (see http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/_resources/Guide_to_understanding_2012_ICSEA_values.pdf)
- 56% female and 44% males
- Average age 51.3 years
- Most had been in their current role for five years and leadership roles for 12 years, following 12 more years in teaching.
- Approximately 80% work upwards of 46 hours a week during term with just over one quarter working upwards of 61 hours per week. During school holidays, more than half work upwards of 25 hours per week.
- Annual salaries range from <$50,000 - >$160,00 per annum.
- 84% rate personal achievement as very important or higher.
- 97.3% rate personal relationships with family and friends as very important or higher.
- 83.2% are in a partner relationship, and 82% report that their greatest source of support comes from their partner. Almost half of their partners also work in the education sector.
- Approximately half have children living at home.
- Approximately one quarter of the principals have a family member with a long-term health condition, with serious impact on the family in 28% of the sample.
- They appear to come from stable backgrounds and have been upwardly mobile and value education for themselves as well as others: 87.9% were living with a mother and father at age 14. The families of origin appear to be largely working class with about one quarter of parents qualified with a university degree, whereas 34% of the principals have a masters degree or above, mostly in formal leadership courses.
- 46% volunteer their time for community support outside of their role, and approximately the same number are active members of a formal community or sporting association.
- Approximately one third of the sample conducts regular spiritual practice.
- There are large differences in their self-reported maintenance of healthy levels of exercise, diet and weight control.
- Only 82% of respondents rate their own happiness as very important or higher.

- They are generally positive about their job with only 2.6% becoming frequently depressed about it.
- 49% are taking prescription medication for a diagnosed condition.
- 43.4% report a diagnosed medical condition.
- Most maintain a healthy alcohol intake, and do not use it to manage stress.
- Principals experience nearly five times the incidence of threats of violence and six times the incidence of actual physical violence at work than other population groups measured on the COPSOQ-II. Government school principals working in large towns and rural locations appear most at risk.
- Overall levels of mental health range from very good to very poor. Principals overall score just less than the general population.

Recommendations

The recommendations that directly result from this research are presented below. Each is designed to help policy makers, (including: government; employer groups; principal professional associations and unions; school boards/councils) improve both working conditions for the paid work force and learning conditions for students, as the two are inseparable (Leithwood, 2006). The recommendations are grouped under headings that emerged from the evidence gathered for this report. While there are particular challenges to the occupational health, safety and wellbeing of principals which result from contextual and geographical determinates, the recommendations below, relate to occupational conditions found in every state and territory across the country and every school sector (Government, Catholic and Independent). Recommendation A is the most urgent: the need to look for the causes, and reduce the levels, of adult-to-adult bullying, threats and actual violence. If governments and other employer groups are committed to improving the quality of education in schools this issue needs immediate attention and is also likely to produce significant educational gains for students (Phillips & Sen, 2011). Previous research has shown that the most effective way to prevent or diminish bullying and violence is via a whole school approach (Antonio & Salzfass, 2007; Dake et al., 2003; de Wet, 2010; Espelage et al., 2013; Twemlow, Fonagy, & Sacco, 2001). The research presented in this report suggests a system-wide approach is needed. Recommendations B and C are less urgent, but are most likely interrelated with Recommendation A and may be most efficiently addressed in combination.

Recommendation A: Bullying and Violence
1. Each state and territory should establish an independent task force to investigate adult-adult bullying and violence in schools. Alternatively, a single federal task force might be established. The critical aspect of the task force structure should be its independence from all stakeholder groups in schools and government authorities.
    a. The task force should investigate each system separately (Government, Catholic, Independent) to determine differences in the occupational risk of the principal, and whether/how the risk also extends to teachers and students.
    b. Governance structures, information flow between adults, and external influences on school functioning should form part of the investigation, with the aim of determining best practice to reduce offensive behavior in schools between all stakeholders.
    c. The task force should have powers to interview teachers, parents and students to determine their findings.
    d. The consequences of offensive behavior in schools are likely to become costly for employer groups, through time lost to ill health, OH&S claims

against employers for not providing a safe working environment and reduced functioning while at work as a result of the high levels of offensive behavior in the workplace. Therefore the investment in such a taskforce may prove to be the least expensive option in relation to this issue.

Recommendation B: Emotional Labour, Emotion Regulation

Principals and teachers deal daily with parents' greatest hopes and deepest fears: the lives and potential futures of their children. While this is recognized in the law of *loco parentis,* the emotional aspects of this condition remain under-researched (Hargreaves, 2013; Woolfolk Hoy, 2013)*.* This means high levels of emotion are attached to many aspects of school functioning, and principals have to learn how to deal with this on the job, rather than through systematic preparation. This can be particularly difficult for principals who must communicate the way education policy is both developed and practiced to parents, in emotionally charged situations. The difficulties between the adult stakeholders in schools that have been identified in the current research needs to be acknowledged and dealt with on a more systematic basis. The evidence from this report show:

1. More systematic attention needs to be paid to the professional learning of principals, and presumably teachers, in the emotional aspects of their roles and the emotional investment of parents in their children.
    a. In-service provision of education on the emotional aspects of teaching, learning, organizational function, emotional labour, dealing with difficulties and conflicts in the workplace, employee assistance programs, debriefing self and others. This recommendation extends the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership professional standard: *Developing Self and Others* (AITSL, 2011).

Recommendation C. Professional Support

The evidence from this study clearly points to the benefits of professional support for all principals. Those who receive the least have the greatest challenges to maintain their mental health. The cluster groups identified as coping least well with the daily tasks had the lowest levels of professional support from colleagues and superiors while those who coped the best reported the highest levels of professional support. This is an area of improvement that would be relatively easy for education systems to improve.

1. Provide opportunities for principals to engage in professional support networks.
    a. Networks would need to be determined locally and contextually.
    b. A provision of time for principals to build and maintain professional support networks would be needed.
    c. This can be augmented by regional authorities visiting schools (particularly in remote parts of Australia) to provide support in the form of professional conversations ("agenda-less" meetings) that allow school principals to discuss the day-to-day functioning of his or her school with a sympathetic, experienced colleague.