Principal wellbeing & stress in 2007 – are we seeing any changes yet?

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Introduction

- 2006 NZCER presentation to first Hauora hui – the overall picture from 2005 study showed high stress levels for NZ principals. Material from that hui included robust evidence for high stress levels among principals cf. other occupational groups (other than GPs). The main sources of stress were: Ministry of Education initiatives, paperwork & other system demands, lack of time to focus on teaching & learning, accountability, more likely in rural and small schools, with low or fluctuating rolls, low socioeconomic decile.

- Model of wellbeing showed the importance of workload and role balance; then support from outside agencies, internal stressors to school, individual fitness level of principals, and their participation in networks

- Comparison with GPs was interesting – higher stress levels found in 2000, and a few years later, evidence of GP shortages.

- Two questions arose from the material and analysis:

    o should we be worried about principal stress levels and wellbeing?

        ▪ The answer was yes;

    o are the patterns something we can do something about?

        Again the answer was yes.

In 2008, I want to use current data to see what changes there have been.

Data from NZCER 8th national survey, undertaken in July/August 2007 ; data from NZPF 2nd Educational Trends survey – December 2007. Thanks to my colleagues Edith Hodgen, Sandie Schagen, Magdalene Lin for analysis that I'm using here today.

I've also gone back to make some comparisons with the 2003 NZCER national survey, and the 1st NZPF education trends survey, from 2004.

These all had pretty representative responses, i.e. we can take them as giving us a pretty sound picture of principals' views at a national level, though the numbers responding to these surveys – as with others – is dropping.

The responses may be more positive than if we had undertaken the same survey just after the recent budget, which disappointed many, but on the other hand, the responses came before the renegotiation of the collective contract that improved principals' salary.

What change did I expect before looking at the data?

Not a lot. There have been no big new policy initiatives since 2005 that have a direct impact on principals' work. It has been a time of some backroom work; working groups. There has been increased recognition of the value of principalship – the BES on leadership, and the Kiwi Leadership Framework in the wings. But the tension between educational leadership and school management that had been evident in earlier work was also evident in responses to the BES and then the Kiwi Leadership Framework – a nervousness about being asked to do too much, or to feel that a large part of the day-to-day job was being seen as less valued. Some bristling occurred at suggestions that some principals might be more comfortable with school management, 'admin', and need the personal buzz of being constantly in demand.

Added to that: there have been no changes in the expectations of principals and schools, and the affordability of those expectations. A small change in the communications flow from the Ministry of Education occurred, intended to reduce paperwork. The introduction of the new healthy eating framework attracted some resistance because it meant more work. – and might have seemed like mixed messages, one part of the Ministry of Education working to reduce workload (intensity), another adding a new dimension.

I'll start with outlining the patterns we see in 2007 related to stress, morale and workload, with some comparisons with previous surveys that throw up some interesting questions. Then I'll look at some findings related to principal careers, and then finish with some data about the environment of expectations that principals work within, and some thoughts to spark discussion.

2007 Stress, morale & workload patterns

Stress

No change: 38% of principals reported high stress levels, 4% extremely high stress levels, giving a total of 42% cf. 40% in 2005, though somewhat different questions. The question we asked in 2007 was 'How would you describe your typical stress level so far this year?' In the NZPF 2005 survey the question was "what was your stress level like in the previous week?". Each question had much the same 5 options.

Stress levels are associated with some key aspects of job satisfaction & morale: those with high stress are less likely to feel they are able to provide educational leadership; they find the size of the job too big – they can't balance work and personal life, and morale levels are low. But they are almost as likely to enjoy the job as others. These are associations – we can't tell the direction of causality or impact; and experiences of workload, morale, stress and ability to provide educational leadership are likely to be mutually reinforcing.

Table 1 **Primary principals' workload and job satisfaction, by stress level, 2007**

Stress level → Principals' views ↓	Extremely low/ low ($n = 20$) %	About average ($n = 89$) %	Extremely high/ high ($n = 83$) %
I enjoy my job	100	97	86
I get the support I need to do my job effectively	80	67	51
I can attract good teachers to this school	90	78	65
My work and personal life are balanced	65	31	19
I have enough time for the educational leadership part of my job	50	21	11
I can manage my workload	85	56	31
My morale level is very good	60	25	13

Other related factors:

Stress is often associated with sense of lack of control, powerlessness, and this may be particularly important for leaders. Some of the other factors that were associated with high stress levels show factors both within and without the principal's direct control.

Principals with high stress levels were more likely to report that their school had difficulty in finding suitable teachers (64 percent, compared with 48 percent of those with average stress levels and 40 percent of those with low stress). A small majority of all principals (55 percent) felt that school trustees were given too much responsibility, but the figure was higher for those with high stress levels (64 percent), and lower (45 percent) for those with low stress levels. Twenty-two percent of those with high stress levels said the chair had been the strongest voice on their board of trustees, cf. 5 percent of those with low stress levels – but this group also had among it principals who had to take the lead on their board of trustees – 32 percent said that they were the strongest voice, cf. 15 percent of those with low stress. Yet those with high stress levels did not report worse relationships with their board chair or with the board as a whole.

21 percent of the high stress group had either had real problems identified in their last ERO report, or returned to the normal ERO cycle, having had more frequent checks, cf. 5 percent of the low stress group, & 12 percent who put themselves in the 'average' stress group.

Principals with low stress were more likely to be members of an "Extending High Standards" cluster (30 percent, compared with 20 percent of those with average stress, and 11 percent of those with high stress). NB this association is probably related to the fact that being part of one of these clusters gives a sign of recognition, additional money for doing something interesting, the opportunity to work with others, so important experiences of both support and stretch, related to what is happening at one's own school.

More than a quarter (29 percent) of principals with high stress levels said they had not used any of the MOE-funded support programmes for principals, compared with 10 percent of those with low stress levels. However, there were no other differences in stress levels related to other kinds of support, networks with other principals etc, views of whether they had or wanted more Ministry of Education support, or views of their school's financial situation, sufficiency of staffing entitlement, competition with other schools, or whether they had room to take more students.

Nor were stress levels related to length of principal experience, or number of schools they have been principals of.

So – the patterns are pretty similar to 2005. A new principal is not going to necessarily be more stressed than an experienced one. However, those who use or get more support from outside their school and are somewhat more connected are somewhat less likely to be stressed.

Links to a core issue I have raised elsewhere: how do we frame our system so that support and connection are part of the everyday experience for principals, part of the culture, and not just left up to individuals? Something for the discussion.

Morale

Morale levels slipped somewhat between the 2003 and 2007 NZCER surveys: 34% of principals said their morale was very high in 2003, cf. 23% in 2007.

Table 2 **Morale as a Principal**

Morale	2007 (n = 196) %	2003 (n = 254) %
Very good	23	34
Good	44	41
Satisfactory	24	21
Poor	6	4

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100. The question asked was "please rate your morale as a principal", with the levels being very good, good, satisfactory, poor, very poor.

The associations we saw with stress are also evident with morale. Morale levels tend to be somewhat lower where principals have regular class teaching responsibilities, Those with very good morale were most likely to think they would continue as principal at their present school (73 percent cf. 27 percent of those with poor morale), and least likely to be thinking of changing to a different career altogether (4 percent cf. 91 percent of those with poor morale). Morale levels though were unrelated to whether principals thought they would change schools, or move to a different role in education.

Morale and stress levels are unrelated to school size (cf . the NZPF 2005 survey) or location (rural principals give much the same picture as urban principals).

One interesting difference related to school characteristics: principals in high decile schools (9-10) were less likely to describe their morale as very good (13 percent); though their stress levels were lower than others (only 27 percent high or very high), they felt much more able to attract and retain good teachers at their school, cf their colleagues in low decile schools, and their schools were much less likely to have places for all the students who wish to come to the school (56 percent).

Otherwise decile patterns are similar in relation to questions about workload, support for the work, relations with others etc. But one further interesting difference is in relation to the role of boards: principals in high decile schools were more likely to report that their board regularly scrutinised school performance and were less likely to struggle to contribute – but these principals were more likely to be experiencing problems with their board – 17 percent major and 21 percent minor, a total of 38 percent, cf. 22 percent in decile 1-2 schools.

Workload

The number of hours worked per week has not changed between 2003 and 2007. Basically, the principal's job is unlikely to be done in less than 50 hours a week – only 7 percent reported that they worked less than 50 hours a week in 2007. Fifty-six percent report working between 51-60 hours, 29 percent between 61 and 70 hours, and 5 percent, more than 71 hours a week. Work hours are unrelated to school size or location or decile: ie. The principal's role is very difficult to do in less than 50 hours - intrinsic to role itself. Variations above that reflect particular things happening at individual schools, challenges, as well as individual principals' approaches.

The hours worked per se is not the aspect of workload that looms largest for principals when they consider changes that would improve their job. It's the **balance of activities** within the work that seems to be more important. Reasonably similar patterns are evident in both 2003 and 2007 in relation to getting that balance, but with some greater interest shown in educational leadership, sabbaticals, contact beyond one's own school, and more sense of what would be needed in the way of other people at the school being able to take on some of the school leadership and

management workload. Actual proportions differ because we let principals choose as many options as they wanted in 2007, cf. asking them to choose only up to three options in 2003.

Table 3 **Primary principals' desired changes to their work**

Desired change	2007 (n = 196) %	2003 (n = 254) %
More time to reflect/read/be innovative	75	43
Reduce admin/paperwork	66	42
More time for educational leadership	60	24
A more balanced life	54	25
More support staff	53	14
More teachers I could delegate to	52	
Reduce external agencies' demands	50	17
Reduce workload	44	19
Sabbatical leave	37	13
Higher salary	30	6
More contact with other schools	26	4
Reduce BOT demands on me	7	
Increase BOT's ability to usefully challenge me	5	

Morale and stress levels are on the whole unrelated to these changes that principals would like, though those with poor morale or high stress are particularly interested in having a more balanced life and reducing their board's demand on them.

Principals do try to manage their workload. They do share leadership responsibilities; they try to keep the school focused (hence the response to new policies, e.g. Healthy Schools), and they try to keep things steady, so that there are fewer unexpected events, e.g. by working on student behaviour. But they are less likely to hire extra administrative support, probably because they cannot afford to; or to close their door. These patterns raise interesting questions about the perception of the principal as 'the spider at the centre of the web': the importance of relationships in school leadership, of showing interest in individuals: students, staff, parents, and of problem-solving, or being the ultimate back-up – as we shall see when we look at principals' teaching patterns. But this often means that principals have no non-interruptible time at the school for the thinking that is needed for educational leadership. That means that they must often use their own time for this thinking.

Table 4 **Primary principals' tactics to manage their workload**

Tactic	2007 (n = 196) %
Delegate or distributed leadership	79
Limit the number of initiatives at any one time	72
Try to reduce size of issues (eg build up positive student behaviour)	60
Hire extra admin support	16
Limit time principal's door is open	13

Why isn't distributed leadership universal? It is harder to delegate if you're in a small school (58%). Larger schools were more likely to hire extra admin support (28 percent).

On the whole, there was little difference between the most and least stressed principals, or those with the highest and lowest morale levels, in reports that they used these approaches, though there may well be differences in *how* they were used.

Teaching responsibilities

Only 26 percent of the principals said they did no teaching at all; 25% have daily class teaching responsibilities (12 percent for 1-2 hours a day, 8 percent for 2-3.5 hours a day, 5% for 3.5+ hours a day). The most common pattern was for principals to provide relief for absent teachers or to release teachers (45 percent). Seventeen percent modelled lessons, and 27% did things like GATE/extension classes, small group work, teaching a specific curriculum area, taking reading groups or reading recovery, on a regular basis.

Career patterns

We asked the principals in the NZCER survey where they expected to be in 5 years time. I've compared these answers to a similar question we asked in 2003, and in 1999, about whether they expected to be principal of the same school in 5 years time. Principals could give more than one answer in 2007, and that may account for some of the differences we see: in 2007, more than twice as many expecting to remain at their school; and almost a quarter looking at retirement. Twice as many were also looking at a different career. So we are looking at what may be a somewhat greater loss from the role in the next 5 years than we have experienced in the past 5 years – depending probably on the overall economic situation, since few principals were only looking at one option. For example, almost half of those looking at retirement were also looking at staying in their current school, as were almost half of those looking at changing to a different career. So these figures are not a firm basis for planning – what they do indicate compared to previous years is that principals are thinking of more options than before, and that these options are more likely to include leaving the role altogether.

Table 5 **Primary principals' career plans for the next 5 years**

Career plan	2007 (n = 196) %	2003 (n = 254) %	1999 (n = 262) %
Continue as principal at this school	59	26	19
Retire	23	14	18
Change to leading another school	30	30	31
Apply for a study award/sabbatical	30		
Change to a different role in education	14		4
Return to classroom teaching	5		
Change to a different career	18	8	10
Not sure	11	18	22

I thought that the difference in people looking to stay at their school might be because principals responding were older on the whole in 2007 than in 2003 – reflecting our "greying" workforce. In 2007 (with very similar proportions in both NZCER and NZPF surveys) 9% of the principals responding were aged less than 40, 25% were aged 40-49, 56% were aged 50-59 (cf 44 % in 2003), and 10% were aged 60 or more, cf 7% in 2003.) Note that there were not a great many more aged 60+, which suggests that principals are not hanging on past 60.

In 2007, we had responses from fewer principals with less than two years' experience: 13% cf. 21% in 2003, and more from those with more than 15 years experience: 36% cf. 22% in 2003. However, there didn't seem to be much difference in career plans by how many years of experience a principal had.

Principals aged under 50 were more likely to be thinking of changing to lead another school, and those under 40, were the ones most interested in getting study awards or taking sabbaticals (47 percent, cf. a third of the 40-60 age group). NB interest is higher than the number of opportunities at present.

Another factor that I thought might be relevant to account for the difference between 2003 and 2007 responses about remaining in the same school was if principals in 2007 had been at their current school for less time. Well, we certainly had more principals who had been at their school for between 3-5 years (32% in 2007 cf. 20% in 2003), but on the other hand, fewer who had been there less than 2 years (21% in 2007 cf. 36% in 2003), and more who had been there for 15 years or more (14% in 2007 cf. 4% in 2003). When we compare with 1999 figures, there does seem to be an overall trend for principals to be moving on either after 5 years, or else staying put for longer, though our figures are only for the length of time principals had spent at their school when they answered the survey, and not for the length of time between appointment and leaving the school.

Table 6 **Primary principal years at their school**

Number of years at the school at time of survey	2007 (n = 196) %	2003 (n = 254) %	1999 (n=262) %
< 2 years	21	36	26
3-5 years	32	20	29
6-10 years	16	22	31
11-15 years	16	17	11
15+ years	14	4	3

When we look at trends in the number of principals the schools have had in the previous 10 years, comparing 1999, 2003 and 2007 data, it looks as if we might have more stability overall.

Table 7 **Number of principals in primary schools over last 10 years**

Number of principals at the school	2007 (n = 196) %	2003 (n = 254) %	1999 (n=262) %
1	35	25	25
2	40	34	34
3	12	23	19
4+	12	16	22

So some of the questions these patterns throw up for me, when we look at likely issues of retention and recruitment of principals:

a) what are the patterns of how long principals stay at any one school? What implications do they have for the kind of support they might need as school leaders and as people making a career?

b) are these patterns changing? Have we got the right mix of supports for mobility as well as stability? (for both principals and schools).

c) we need to ensure we have sufficient support and refreshment for existing principals as well as thinking about the incoming principals.

A fifth of principals said they had not used any Ministry of Education funded support that we asked about. 59% used Leadspace; 30% had been on the First time principals' programme; 25 percent had used the principals' development planning centre.

In 2007, mindful of analysis done by Keren Brooking on different pathways to the principalship, we asked questions about how principals had came to their role. Almost half stepped up from a

deputy principalship. But we still have around a fifth who had to take on the complex role of the principal without any management experience, including curriculum management. However, cross-tabulating against principal years of experience, shows that this is more true of those appointed 11 or more years ago (35%); among those first appointed in the last 5 years, the proportion who did not have any management experience is only 6 percent. So this is a positive sign for the readiness of the current generation of new principals for the role.

Table 8 **Last position before becoming a primary principal**

Number	2007 (n = 196) %
Deputy principal	47
Scale A teacher without management units	21
Scale A teacher with management units	12
Assistant principal	8
Senior teacher/HoD	6
Education adviser	3
RTLB	1

Just over half started their careers as principals in U1 or U2 schools, with 24% starting in U3 or U4 schools, and 15% in U5+ schools. About half of those who had had two or more principalships remained in U1 or U2 schools, with the rest taking positions in larger schools.

Most principals have gone from one principalship to another (71 percent). Thirteen percent went from a principalship to a management role in a larger school, 6 percent were advisers, 2 percent each went to ERO or the Ministry of Education; and 2 percent were scale A teachers. 9 percent took on other roles, probably outside education, including parenting.

Teachers' interest in management roles and the principalship

Only 31 percent of teachers responding to the NZCER 2007 survey thought that career progression was available in their school; a further 36 percent were neutral or unsure. Of those who were currently in school management roles, 16 percent were interested in becoming a principal, with a further 15 percent unsure. Of those who were not in management roles, 9 % were interested, with a further 16% unsure. Taken overall, the level of definite interest in the principalship is 13%, the same as in 2003, with slightly more unsure than in 2003.

So can we regard that as progress? – that although we are having difficulty attracting people to middle management positions, and despite talk of principal work-hours etc, interest in becoming a principal has not deteriorated.

I think we need some more modelling work on the likely loss of principals from the role over the next 5 years. We need to do further analysis of interest in relation to age, as well as the age at

which people first become principals, to do some modelling around the size of the pipeline in relation to the number of principalships likely to become vacant due to retirement or exiting education over the next 5-10 years.

The suggestions from these data are that we need to put real effort into ensuring that we maintain the middle management pipeline, use the aspiring principals programme etc, and work on improving principal morale – addressing the imbalance in the workload - to be able to fill the likely vacancies ahead, even with what may be greater stability in principals remaining at one school.

Meeting Expectations – 2004 & 2007 NZPF surveys compared

These surveys give us some sense of the context in which principals are operating in tems of managing their resources to meet expectations at the school, and of the school.

Resourcing – the school as a whole

In 2007, principals continued to report under-resourcing of their schools to meet student needs: figures are close to those for 2004, with some deterioration for affordance of professional development (down from 27%). If the survey was run again at the end of this year, I think we might see some further deterioration.

- 6% thought the school's operational grant was enough to meet their school's needs.
- 6% thought they could afford to use ICT for student learning in the way they wanted to
- 10% thought they could afford the administrative staff hours they needed.
- 12% thought their school's entitlement staffing was enough to meet the needs of their school.
- 14% thought their school's 5-year property funding was enough to meet the needs of their school.
- 22% thought they could afford the professional development the school's staff needed.

Resourcing – students with special needs

Principals also continued to report difficulty in meeting the needs of students with special needs, and their answers here showed more slippage.

- 6% said they could afford the teacher-aide hours required to meet the needs of their non-ORRS funded students with special needs

- 16% said they had the external advice and support required to meet the needs of their students with special behavioural needs – down from 27% in 2004

- 16% said they had the external advice and support required to meet the needs of their students with other special needs - down from 26% in 2004.

Two new 2007 questions on the RTLB service, run through schools, show mixed views on its efficacy:

- 39% said their RTLB service had improved or stayed at a high level since the publication of the Ministry of Education RTLB guidelines.
- 41% said their RTLB service met the needs of students in their school.

In 2007, more principals had ORRS funded students (61% cf. 50 % in 2004), and there was much less agreement that they could afford the teacher aide hours required to meet these students' needs (46% of those with ORRS funded students, cf. 26% in 2004).

Principals' work

In 2007, principals continued to show high levels of job enjoyment. There were some gains in confidence about their careers.

- 39% agree that there is career progression available for aspiring principals – slightly up from 35% in 2004

- 54% think they could move to the principalship of a larger school if they wanted to, up from 46% in 2004

But they also continue to report that they do not have enough time for the educational leadership part of their job and an imbalance of work and personal life, and these views show some decline since 2004.

- Only 17% think they have enough time for the educational leadership part of their job, slightly down from 22% in 2004

- 24% report that their work and personal life are balanced, slightly down from 27% in 2004

There was also some decline in confidence around recruiting and retaining good teachers.

- 59% thought they could recruit good teachers to their school, down from 68 % in 2004.

- 70% said they could retain good teachers in their school, down from 77% in 2004.

Views of Government agencies

These views indicate that principals' expectations of the government agencies continue to be unmet: the 2007 views are much the same as they were in 2004.

- 11% thought that CYFS did a good job
- 31% thought that the Ministry of Education did a good job, and

- 40% thought that ERO did a good job.

So, while there are a few positive changes in confidence about the career of principals, these are unmatched by perceptions of being able to meet needs with existing resources and support – and these perceptions would have a bearing on morale.

Thoughts for discussion

I look at these patterns and I see some things that please me: that most principals do enjoy their work, and find it worthwhile. They do think they are able to see results for their hard work. But I think the stress level is not acceptable. Warning bells go off for me when I see that slippage in morale.

There also seem to be some warning bells about the number of vacancies we might have to fill in the next 5 years: we need to ensure that we have sufficient people coming through with the right experience to take on this complex role.

I wonder what the trend towards some principals staying longer at a school means – it's not necessarily good or bad, but it does mean thinking about what our system offers in the way of career, flexibility, and support.

I'm not a cynic, so I can't just shrug my shoulders at these patterns and say, well, principals will never be satisfied, or "of course it's a demanding job, but so are others". I worry at the real difficulties principals experience in getting the balance of their jobs right to provide educational leadership – and again, I'm not convinced by those who say well, people in other businesses find the thinking etc time hard to make too. The standard we should be measuring against is not the cynics', but what we are asking principals to do – the "urgency" to raise student achievement, close gaps, particularly for Maori and Pacific students, and to work with staff and parents to map out the school's own path in our new curriculum. We have got a system with lots of challenges given to principals, but I doubt if the support matches the depth of those challenges – thinking of Richard Elmore's powerful conclusion that for every unit of challenge or pressure it asked, an education system should match it with an equal unit of support.

I've raised several issues:

   a) how do we provide proper support for principals, in different situations?

   b) Should we be worried by what looks like a trend for greater stability in principalships?

   c) Have we got things in place to ensure that we will be able to fill the vacancies coming up in the next 5 years with people ready for the job?

I'd like to add two others:

   1. Some principals show confidence in their ability to exercise educational leadership without it undermining their wellbeing. Are they individual exceptions, or can we learn

from them things that we could use to improve the situation for the majority of principals?

2. How can we improve relations between principals and the government agencies? What might this mean in the way of any changes in roles?