

## INFORMATION SHEET

Australian Research Council [ARC] Discovery grant: *Invisible labour: Principals' emotional labour in volatile times (2023-2025)*

### Team of investigators

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### Brief description of the study

Government schools in particular face a major principal recruitment and retention crisis due to intensified workloads and the emotional labour of managing diverse communities. This project aims to improve leadership preparation and development for school principals to help them manage complex emotional workload demands.

The project expects to generate new knowledge about principal workforce development and to create a framework for policymakers that identifies the knowledge and practices required to develop leaders' emotional skills and build bridges across diverse communities. Anticipated benefits include reduced principal turnover, improved teacher retention, improved student outcomes and greater social cohesion.

### Background context

#### What do we mean by 'emotional labour'?

Emotional labour refers to the task of managing one's emotions and that of others. It is a crucial aspect of principals' work but there is still a lot that is not known about it.

What we do know is that it demands a range of more 'invisible' skills, such as managing competing demands between students, teachers, parents, the broader education system and community. It demands the emotional capacity to switch seamlessly between stakeholder interactions (teachers, students etc), whilst simultaneously impression managing. One principal describes it as being like a duck, it looks like you're gliding seamlessly along the water but underneath your feet are working as hard as possible.

The demands on principals when it comes to this form of labour can impact on health and wellbeing, e.g., chronic stress, feelings of burn out and lowered job satisfaction levels. Much of this is documented in Phil Riley et al's annual longitudinal study of principal occupational health, safety and wellbeing study.

## **So what's different about this study?**

First, we're concentrating on government school principals only.

This is because the increasing fragmentation of society is demanding new relational skills for principals, particularly in government school contexts where students of widely diverse backgrounds are gathered. It is demanding trauma-informed leadership, community building and the emotional management capacities to connect across diverse demographics in holistic and socially just ways.

Secondly our study has an explicit activist aim. We want to work with education associations to bring about real change, beyond documenting what is happening in schools (crucial though that is). So how can these aspects of government school principals' jobs be captured in ways that educate the public, the media and policy makers? How can we work with education stakeholder groups to draw attention to the complexity of principals' work and bring about the necessary change? That brings us to the third point of difference about our research.

## **What are we proposing to do?**

We're beginning with a principal survey, but **this is not your typical survey**.

We want to collect government school principals' stories about the more invisible but crucial relational aspects of their work - their emotional labour.

The main thing we will be asking principals to do in this survey is tell a significant story about a critical incident that they have experienced in their work as a principal. We think these stories are crucial to collect to capture the extent and diversity of this invisible work and expand public understandings about the complex nature of the principal's role.

We are asking principals to choose to share a story that is comfortable for them. They are not expected to share anything that would cause significant distress. The survey will be open for the life of the project (2023-2025)

We will then curate some of the most compelling stories, anonymise them so people and schools can't be identified and put them on a publicly facing website for the duration of the study (2023-2025). The idea is to build a public and media conversation that raises awareness of principals' work and the job they do. Most importantly, we want it to start a conversation collaborating with education associations about what needs to change and how.

In 2024, we will be doing case study of government schools in Victoria and NSW to capture in more detail these aspects of emotional labour.

In 2024-25, we will be running stakeholder industry forums – including with teacher unions, principal associations and departmental stakeholders - to share our initial findings and gain feedback. Part of these forums will include sharing a draft guiding framework including rich, evidence-informed cases and testimonials that will be publicly available on our website.

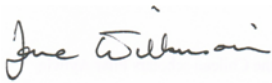
### What can principals' associations do?

- Help us to distribute the survey through your networks, newsletters, social media etc. This will be happening in the next few weeks, when you think would be the best time to get it out through your networks.
- Be part of key stakeholders' focus groups/interviews where we ask you about your insights and expertise when it comes to the more invisible, relational aspects of government school principals' jobs and what is currently happening for principals – these will be happening in the second half of 2023.
- Invite us to present about our study to your key forums to build interest and buy in.
- Continue to work with us throughout the life of the study. For example, once we have some salient stories (anonymised) to share we can come and talk with you all about our findings. We'd be keen to hear what your members have to say, for eg, at stakeholder forums that you run.
- Have a representative from the principals' association to be part of an expert industry advisory group that we are establishing to advise us throughout the life of the project.

There may be other areas where we can collaborate that you're more aware of.

Look forward to your advice and hopefully working with you.

Very happy to meet and talk further.



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