University of New England



Imperfect Principals – Leading through crisis

An Interpretative Phenomenological Study of School Principals' Professional Practices and Occupational Wellbeing in Rural and Regional Victoria

Melissa Elizabeth Gould

Graduate Certificate of Catholic Studies – Australian Catholic University 2024
Master of Education – Flinders University 2021
Graduate Diploma of Education – University of New England 2006
Bachelor of Commerce – Deakin University 2005

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of New England in 2026

School of Education

This research has been conducted with the support of the Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship/Destination Australia – an Australian Government Initiative

Abstract

This study aims to identify the professional practices principals enact to support, improve, and sustain the occupational wellbeing of their staff and principals themselves during and after crisis, and to examine how leading through crisis changes principals' perspectives on, and approaches to, leadership. The school principals that participated in the study are located in rural and regional Victoria, Australia. Recognising that principals frequently encounter significant crises, including natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic, the study identified the professional practices that sustain and enhance the occupational wellbeing of school staff and themselves during and after such events. Additionally, it explores how principals' leadership approaches evolve in response to crisis conditions.

Grounded in a constructivist and interpretivist paradigm, this qualitative research employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to capture the nuanced lived experiences of 26 school principals. The study is framed by the Theory of Practice Architectures (TPA), which conceptualises leadership practices as comprised of sayings (language and norms), doings (actions and skills), and relatings (relationships and social interactions), situated within cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements. This framework enables a rich contextual analysis of how principals' practices are both influenced by and actively shape their school environments in times of crisis.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, encouraging principals to reflect on their leadership philosophies, crisis impacts, and strategies supporting staff wellbeing. Reflexivity and ethical rigor were integral to the design, considering the sensitive nature of crisis leadership and the researcher's insider perspective as a former school principal. Findings reveal that crisis leadership catalyses significant transformations in principals' professional practices, promoting adaptability, relational leadership, and innovative responses that emphasise transparent communication, distributed leadership, and prioritisation of staff wellbeing. The study underscores the complex interaction between individual agency and contextual constraints, highlighting that sustainable leadership change requires addressing the enabling and limiting cultural, material, and social conditions within schools.

This thesis contributes a sophisticated understanding of educational leadership transformation amid crisis, emphasising the importance of reflective, context-sensitive leadership to foster resilience and wellbeing in school communities. It offers practical implications for policy and professional development, advocating for specialised crisis leadership training and enhanced systemic support tailored to the unique challenges of under-resourced rural and regional schools. Recognising the profound emotional labour experienced by principals, the thesis calls for coordinated efforts across policy, systems, and communities to sustain educational leadership as a resilient, rewarding, and impactful profession capable of navigating the complex crises of contemporary education.

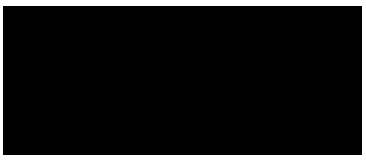
Declaration/Certification by Author

This thesis *is composed of my original work, and contains* no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. I have clearly stated the contribution by others to jointly-authored works that I have included in my thesis.

I have clearly stated the contribution of others to my thesis as a whole, including statistical assistance, survey design, data analysis, significant technical procedures, professional editorial advice, and any other original research work used or reported in my thesis. The content of my thesis is the result of work I have carried out since the commencement of my higher degree by research candidature and does not include a substantial part of work that has been submitted *to qualify for the award of any* other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution. I have clearly stated which parts of my thesis, if any, have been submitted to qualify for another award.

I acknowledge that an electronic copy of my thesis must be lodged with the University Library and, subject to the policy and procedures of the University of New England, the thesis be made available for research and study in accordance with the Copyright Act 1968 unless a period of embargo has been approved by the Dean of the Graduate Research School.

I acknowledge that copyright of all material contained in my thesis resides with the copyright holder(s) of that material. Where appropriate, I have obtained copyright permission from the copyright holder to reproduce material in this thesis.



09/03/2026

Candidate Name Date

Acknowledgement of Country

The University of New England respects and acknowledges that its people, courses and facilities are built on land, and surrounded by a sense of belonging, both ancient and contemporary, of the world's oldest living culture. In doing so, UNE values and respects Indigenous knowledge systems as a vital part of the knowledge capital of Australia.

We recognise the strength, resilience and capacity of the Aboriginal community and pay our respects to the Elders past, present and future.

Acknowledgements

I express my deepest gratitude to my late husband, Ben, whose unwavering love, support, and encouragement sustained me throughout this journey. His strength, kindness, and belief in me continue to inspire and guide me every day, and his memory remains a constant source of motivation.

To my three daughters, Kelly, Jess, and Charlotte, thank you for your patience, understanding, and for inspiring me to embrace new challenges. I am in awe of each of you and all that you do; it is a privilege to do life with you. I am excited for what the future holds for each of you - keep reaching for the stars. Your belief in me has been an enduring source of comfort and joy during the most challenging times.

I owe my heartfelt gratitude to my late parents, who instilled in me a strong work ethic, unwavering determination, and an appreciation for beauty in the world, even in its hardest moments. Their example shaped who I am, and I carry their lessons with me in everything I do. I hope this achievement honours the foundation they gave me.

I wish to acknowledge government school principals, particularly those who generously shared their experiences for this research. I thank you for your leadership, dedication, and steadfast commitment to public education. Working within complex and often resource-constrained systems, you navigate significant accountability demands while advocating for equity, inclusion, and the wellbeing of students and staff. Your role frequently requires personal sacrifice, resilience, and moral courage as you balance policy requirements, community expectations, and the everyday realities of school life. This research is undertaken with deep respect for the work you do and the critical contribution you make to government schools and the communities they serve.

I am profoundly grateful to my supervisors, Associate Professor Leonardo Veliz and Dr Kristy O'Neill, for their expert guidance, thoughtful feedback, and steadfast support throughout this research journey. Their mentorship has been invaluable in shaping both this thesis and my development as a scholar.

Table of Contents

Abstract ii
Declaration/Certification by Author iii
Acknowledgement of Country iv
Acknowledgements v
List of Figures x
List of Tables xi
Chapter 1 Introduction 1
1.1 Overview 1
1.2 The Importance of Quality Education 3
1.3 Principals and Other Stakeholders 5
1.4 Professional Practices of Principals 9
1.5 Leading through Crisis 11
1.6 Statement of the Problem 16
1.7 Position of the Researcher 18
1.8 Purpose of Study 19
1.9 Context of Study 21
1.10 Thesis Outline 23
Chapter 2 Literature Review 26
2.1 Current Research 27
2.2 Crisis Management and Crisis Leadership: A Framing Discussion 30
2.3 The Impact of Crisis in Schools and the Emotional Toll on Leaders 32
2.3.1 The Emotional Toll on School Leaders 35
2.4 Educational Leadership Models in Crisis Contexts 36
2.4.1 Authentic Leadership 37
2.4.2 Servant Leadership 38
2.4.3 Distributed Leadership 39
2.4.4 Transformational Leadership 40
2.4.5 Moral Leadership 41
2.4.6 Instructional Leadership 42
2.5 Educational Psychology and Crisis Leadership 44
2.6 Occupational Wellbeing 44
2.7 Conclusion 47

Chapter 3 Theoretical Framework 49
3.1 Introduction 49
3.2 Theory of Practice Architectures 50
3.2.1 Cultural-Discursive Arrangements: Sayings 53
3.2.2 Material-Economic Arrangements: Doings 54
3.2.3 Social-Political Arrangements: Relatings 54
3.2.4 Practical Applications to Crisis Leadership 55
3.3 Conclusion 56
Chapter 4 Research Design and Methodology 57
4.1 Overview 57
4.2 Research Paradigm and Onto-Epistemological Position 57
4.3 Researcher Positionality 59
4.4 Methodology 61
4.5 Research Design 62
4.6 Participant Selection 62
4. 6. 1 Participant and School Profile 63
4.7 Data Collection 69
4.8 Data Analysis 72
4.9 Reliability, Validity, Bias and Trustworthiness 80
4.10 Ethical Considerations 81
4.11 Conclusion 82
Chapter 5 Results 83
5.1 The Crises Experienced by Participants 83
5.1.1 COVID-19 Crisis 85
5.1.2 2022 Victorian Flood Crisis 86
5.1.3 Child Safety Breach Crisis 89
5.1.4 Death of Student(s) 89
5.1.5 Family Violence Crisis 91
5.1.6 Cost-of-Living Crisis 92
5.1.7 Impact of Negative Student Behaviours 92
5.1.8 Workforce Issues 93
5.1.9 Financial Mismanagement Crisis 94
5.1.10 Personal Attack via Social Media and Legal proceedings 94
5.1.11 Multiple, Overlapping Crises 95
5.2 Findings for Research Question 1: Professional Practices Supporting Occupational Wellbeing 96

5.2.1 Communication and Transparency 96
5.2.2 Structured Support Systems 98
5.2.3 Staff Occupational Wellbeing 100
5.2.4 Principal Occupational Wellbeing 102
5.2.5 Leadership and Empowerment as a Wellbeing Practice 104
5.2.6 Community Engagement as a Wellbeing Practice 105
5.2.7 Innovation as a Practice Response 107
5.2.8 Standards-Based Practice: A Pre-Crisis Baseline 109
5.3 Findings for Research Question 2: Change in Perspectives and Approaches to Leadership 116
5.3.1 Adaptive and Flexible Decision-Making 116
5.3.2 Leadership Agility and Equity 117
5.3.3 Evolving Leadership Styles and Moral Purpose 118
5.3.4 How Crisis Reshaped Everyday Practice 121
5.3.5 Training and Preparedness 124
5.4 Connection to the Theory of Practice Architectures 126
5.4.1 Sayings 126
5.4.2 Doings 127
5.4.3 Relatings 128
5.4.4 Synthesis 131
5.5 Conclusion 131
Chapter 6 Discussion 133
6.1 Overview 133
6.2 Discussion of Findings for Research Question One: Professional Practices Supporting Occupational Wellbeing 135
6.2.1 Communication and Transparency 136
6.2.2 Structured Support Systems 137
6.2.3 Staff and Principal Occupational Wellbeing 138
6.2.4 Leadership and Empowerment 140
6.2.5 Community Engagement 140
6.2.6 Innovation 143
6.2.7 Synthesis of the Theory of Practice Architectures in relation to Research Question One 145
6.3 Discussion of Findings for Research Question two: Change in Perspective and Approaches to Leadership 146
6.3.1 Adaptive and Flexible Decision Making 146
6.3.2 Leadership Agility and Equity 147

6.3.3 Evolving Leadership Styles and Moral Purpose 148
6.3.4 How Crisis Reshaped Everyday Practices 149
6.3.5 Training and Preparedness 150
6.3.6 Synthesis of the Theory of Practice Architectures in relation to Research Question Two 152
6.4 Conclusion 153
Chapter 7 Conclusion 155
7.1 Implications for Policy and Practice 155
7.1.1 Professional Development and Training for Crisis Leadership 155
7.1.2 Systemic and Policy Support 155
7.1.3 Trust, Delegation, and Distributed Leadership 156
7.1.4 Post-Crisis Debriefs and Organisational Learning 157
7.1.5 Summary of Implications 157
7.1.6 Practical Recommendations 158
7.2 Limitations 158
7.3 Future Research 160
7.4 Summary 161
References 164
Appendices 180
Appendix 1 – Information for Participants 180
Appendix 2 – Consent Form 182
Appendix 3 – Interview Questions 183
Appendix 4 – Introduction email 188
Appendix 5 – Research Data Management Plan 189
Appendix 6 – Department of Education Ethics Approval 196
Appendix 7 – UNE Human Research Ethics Committee Ethics Approval 199

List of Figures

Figure 1 - The Five Key Professional Practices Standards for Principals.....9
Figure 2 - The Intersection of Principal Practices and Staff Wellbeing and the Impact of Crisis.....12
Figure 3 - Flooded Area of Victoria, Australia as at 30 November 2022 22
Figure 4 - Composition of Practices 50
Figure 5 - The Theory of Practice Architectures 52
Figure 6 - Distribution of Socio-Educational Advantage (SEA) 66
Figure 7- Map of Local Government Areas where Schools in the Study are Located 67
Figure 8 - Years of Principal Experience.....68
Figure 9 - A Systematic Thematic Analysis Process 74
Figure 10 - Thematic Analysis of Data 76
Figure 11 - Emerging Themes 79
Figure 12 - Australian Professional Standards.....110
Figure 13 - Sayings, Doings, Relatings and Feelings of Principals.....130
Figure 14 – Practices through the lens of the Theory of Practice Architectures.....131

List of Tables

Table 1 – Profiles of each Principal and School Information 64
Table 2 – Types of Schools 65
Table 3 - Crisis Experienced by Principals 84

Key Words

AITSL – Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership

DOE – Department of Education

EAP – Employee Assistance Program

EBA – Enterprise Bargaining Agreement

IPA – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

SEIL – Senior Education Improvement Leader

TIL – Time In Lieu

TPA – Theory of Practice Architectures

Disclaimer

This document discusses various crises experienced within school communities, including but not limited to natural disasters (such as floods), pandemics, incidents involving student or staff deaths, family violence, suicide and suicidal ideation, child safety breaches, and traumatic events affecting students and staff. These topics may be distressing or triggering for some readers, particularly those who have experienced similar events or trauma.

Reader discretion is advised. If you find any content upsetting, consider seeking support from a trusted colleague, counsellor, or mental health professional. The intention of this document is to inform and support educational practice, not to cause distress.

Lifeline – 13 11 14

Beyond Blue – 1300 224 636

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Overview

Communities often hold high expectations for school principals, viewing them as steadfast leaders who must maintain order, safety, and academic excellence in all circumstances. This expectation of "perfection" is rooted in the principal's visible role as the face of the school, responsible not only for student learning but also for staff wellbeing and community engagement. During times of crisis, these expectations become even more pronounced, as the community looks to principals for reassurance, rapid decision-making, and protection of their children. However, crisis situations are unpredictable and complex, frequently forcing principals to make difficult choices with limited information and resources. The pressure to appear infallible can exacerbate the personal and professional strain principals experience, highlighting the gap between societal expectations and the realities of educational leadership during turbulent times.

Schools are learning organisations that are critical to the fabric of each community. They provide a safe and nurturing educational space that facilitates personal and social development and contributes to the overall wellbeing and growth of individuals and society. The role of schools extends beyond academic learning to encompass social, cultural, and economic aspects of life. Therefore, society needs effective schools and effective school leadership to thrive as they are essential for the overall wellbeing and progress of the population (Daniels, 2009). Effective schools build the social capital of communities, contributing to social cohesion, economic growth, innovation, and the development of responsible, engaged citizens (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014). Within this landscape, the principal's role is not only vital for fostering the growth and effectiveness of schools but also for safeguarding the wellbeing of the entire school community, especially in times of crisis. Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) emphasise that one of the principal's critical functions is to create a culture of collaboration and collective efficacy, building social capital within the school and the wider community (Avenell, 2021). The principal and their professional practices play a pivotal role in the effective functioning of a school. Schools are foundational to community progress, as they nurture the skills, dispositions, and values that enable students to become active and positive contributors to society. To achieve this, effective schools depend on strong, visionary leadership from principals and their leadership teams.

The importance of wellbeing in schools becomes even more pronounced during crises, such as natural disasters, pandemics, or other critical incidents. Schools are often the first point of contact and support for students, staff, and families experiencing distress, uncertainty, or trauma. Research demonstrates that effective school leadership during crisis situations is tightly linked to maintaining and promoting wellbeing across the school community (Dicke et al., 2024; Kanowski, 2022). Principals, as frontline leaders, are tasked

not only with managing operational responses but also with ensuring the emotional and psychological wellbeing of their communities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, the wellbeing of students, staff, and families became a primary concern for principals, who acted as caregivers and community leaders, coordinating support and resources to address emotional and practical needs (Anderson et al., 2020; Hayes et al., 2022; Hayes & Derrington, 2023).

Crises place immense pressure on principals, often amplifying stress and the risk of burnout. Their ability to maintain their own wellbeing is crucial to sustaining leadership effectiveness and supporting others (Hayes et al., 2022; Kanowski, 2022). Principals who foster cultures of care, empathy, and collaboration are better positioned to help their communities navigate adversity and emerge resilient (Anderson et al., 2020; Hayes & Derrington, 2023). When principals actively promote wellbeing, for themselves, their staff, and students, they create the conditions for schools to flourish, even in challenging times. This approach ensures schools remain safe, nurturing environments and enables learning and social development to continue despite disruptions. Effective leadership in crisis is directly linked to positive outcomes for individuals and the wider community, including improved mental health, community cohesion, and sustained educational progress (Kanowski, 2022; Striepe & Cunningham, 2022). The principal's leadership is essential not only for the academic and social effectiveness of schools, but also for the wellbeing and resilience of communities, especially in times of crisis. The capacity of schools to serve as safe, supportive hubs is reliant on strong leadership that prioritises wellbeing as a core principle, making it a central concern for educational policy and practice.

Schools need to meet the needs of their unique local communities, as well as a level of autonomy, in order to serve their communities effectively (Gurr et al., 2021). Although some procedures, processes, and practices can be addressed at a system level, schools may need to localise these to meet their own requirements. The allocation of decision-making authority in educational institutions often places considerable responsibility on the principal, who assumes a pivotal role in shaping the operational aspects of the school. Increased principal autonomy in schools, however, coincides with increased accountability; thus, intensifying the need to build relationships with key stakeholders and the wider community (Pont et al., 2008). Principals rely on personal knowledge of their local community, the relationships they have built with multiple stakeholders, and the community partnerships they have cultivated to make strategic decisions that benefit students and staff (FitzGerald & Quiñones, 2018). The principal's professional practices, leadership style, and traits can influence the school's culture and effectiveness.

The effectiveness of school leadership during crises has become a critical field of investigation. The rapidly evolving landscape of education requires more leadership capable of addressing challenges and potential crisis events that may disrupt the school operations and affect the overall wellbeing of school community members. The crises, whether natural disasters, economic slowdowns, or global pandemics, constitute significant threats to the stability and functionality of educational establishments. The responses of school principals in these tumultuous times are essential because their decisions and actions directly affect the resilience and adaptability of their schools. Understanding the nuances of educational leadership in crisis situations is essential not only for the immediate survival of educational environments, but also for promoting long - term growth and development.

The aim of this study is to identify the professional practices principals enact to support, improve, and sustain the occupational wellbeing of their staff and themselves during and after crisis, and to examine how leading through crisis changes principals' perspectives on, and approaches to, leadership. By exploring the lived experiences, practices and decision-making processes of principals, this study develops a nuanced understanding of the relationship between leadership practice and occupational wellbeing, and elucidates how principals adapt and evolve their leadership in response to significant challenges. Ultimately, the findings provide empirical evidence to inform policy development, enhance support systems for principals, and guide the creation of procedures to minimise stress and promote resilience among school leaders, staff, and students when confronted with future crises, all of which contributes to quality education.

1.2 The Importance of Quality Education

Quality education is a multidimensional concept that incorporates a range of essential attributes, each contributing to both individual and collective advancement. Core elements include effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, satisfaction, equity, inclusiveness, rigorous assessment, wellbeing, and relational trust. In stable conditions these attributes are the ordinary business of school improvement; in crisis, they become the very terrain on which principal leadership is tested. Effectiveness ensures that educational practices lead to meaningful learning outcomes, supported by highly qualified teachers and sound instructional methods (Day & Gurr, 2024b). A standard that becomes harder to sustain, and more dependent on leadership, when normal routines are disrupted. Efficiency maximises the use of resources and time, protecting instructional integrity. Relevance makes learning meaningful to students' lives and future needs, while satisfaction reflects positive engagement and a supportive climate for all stakeholders, both are harder won when a school community is under strain (AITSL, 2019; Elliott & Hollingsworth, 2020). Equity and inclusiveness are fundamental, requiring schools to address disparities and foster a sense of belonging for every student. Crises tend to widen rather than narrow these disparities, sharpening the leadership demand to protect them.

Rigorous assessment provides reliable feedback for improvement, and wellbeing, strengthened by relational trust, creates the conditions for resilience and sustainable success (McCallum & Price, 2010). These attributes matter because they move the evaluation of education beyond simple academic metrics to a holistic understanding aligned with international best practice and policy standards (Day & Gurr, 2024b). It is this holistic view that crisis leadership must draw on when conventional metrics fall short. They underpin systems of improvement and accountability by fostering trust, collective responsibility, and continuous school enhancement (Sergiovanni, 2007). Qualities that are simultaneously most necessary and most fragile in periods of instability. Equity and inclusion address persistent educational gaps, ensuring all students benefit, especially those from marginalised backgrounds (Day, 2016). Teacher wellbeing, closely linked to retention and student outcomes, emphasises the necessity of supporting staff as central to overall school effectiveness (McCallum, 2021). Staff wellbeing is often the first casualty of prolonged crisis, making its protection a defining leadership responsibility. The importance of adaptability and resilience, especially during crises, demonstrates how quality education supports schools to respond and thrive amid challenges, building stronger educational communities (Thornton, 2021). It is principals, more than any policy document, who translate that adaptability into practice.

Schools are integral to the education systems within Australia, and it is principals who are charged with holding that role together under pressure. Effective schools, as noted by Senge (1997) are an effective learning organisation:

> *Learning organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together*. (p. 12)

This capacity for collective learning is not automatic; it is built and, in crisis, actively defended by leadership. Schools are diverse organisations that, despite sharing the same purpose, operate in many unique ways. Schools develop social, intellectual, professional, and academic capital that is generated by building strong relationships on a foundation of rituals, commitments, norms, obligations, and trust (Sergiovanni, 1998). Capital that crisis leadership must draw upon and continually replenish. Many factors shpae the priorities of each school and present distinct challenges, given that schools are dynamic environments (Pont et al., 2008). Crisis conditions amplify this dynamism into genuine unpredictability. Schools set strategic goals and develop a mission and vision addressing their communities needs. Furthermore, they provide safe spaces and connections for the most vulnerable young people in our communities (Gainey, 2009). This protective function that becomes most urgent, and most difficult to sustain, precisely when crises strikes. In this way, schools are important hubs within communities and principal leadership is what keeps that hub functioning when conditions are least favourable.

Quality education is important because it underpins the social, economic, and personal development of individuals and societies. It is not only about academic outcomes, but also about fostering social cohesion, innovation, economic growth, and the development of responsible, engaged citizens. Quality education helps build communities' social capital, promotes equity, and prepares students with the skills, traits, and values needed to contribute positively to society, all of which are placed under strain when disruption hits (Day & Gurr, 2024b). In rural and regional communities, schools play an even more critical role in meeting the needs of the most vulnerable young people, as services can be limited and allied health professionals are not accessible (Halsey, 2017). This means that in crisis, these communities have fewer external supports to fall back on, and school leadership carries proportionally more weight. Schools provide a foundation for personal development, social progress, and the overall advancement of society; they foster a well-rounded and enlightened citizenry (Keating, 2016). Education is essential to teach students the skills, traits, and values needed to become engaged, responsible citizens (Day & Gurr, 2024b). Schools play a critical role in linking all the key stakeholders who impact a student's development. A linking function that principals must actively maintain when crisis threatens to fracture it.

Principals play a pivotal role in school effectiveness by shaping vision, supporting staff wellbeing, and managing change, creating the conditions for quality teaching and learning that drive student and community success (Donohoo et al., 2018). Integrating these attributes offers a robust foundation for evaluating and advancing educational quality, ensuring recommendations are both actionable and capable of driving meaningful improvements across school communities (Cann et al., 2021). Principals' professional practices create the conditions for quality teaching and learning, and it is this same role that this study examines specifically under the pressure of crisis, when principals' practices are most consequential and most severely tested.

1.3 Principals and Other Stakeholders

School leadership can be defined as the practices, setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organisation, managing the instructional programs, shown across a substantial body of review literature to be second only to classroom instruction in influence on student learning, with impact greatest in schools most in need of it (Leithwood et al., 2020). Effective schools need strong and synergistic leadership and it is precisely this synergy that crisis conditions place under the greatest strain. To achieve synergy, schools must have a clear vision, a shared common purpose, and values that ensure alignment and allow key stakeholders to commit to the vision (Pont et al., 2008). Even though multiple stakeholders are involved in meeting the educational needs of students, the role of principals and leadership teams is vital in developing positive, respectful, and constructive relationships (Pont et al., 2008; Sergiovanni, 2007). Relationships that must hold together, or be rapidly rebuilt, when a school community is

disrupted. The key stakeholders in meeting students' educational needs include schools, leadership teams and teachers, the community, multiple interdisciplinary departments and organisations, families, guardians, and, of course, the students.

Through their professional practices, principals need to ensure all stakeholders work together towards a common goal by fostering and developing relational trust. Hargreaves and Fullan (2013) focus on professional capitalism as a key feature of organisational synergy to achieve the strategic goals of the school. The professional practices of principals create systems, processes, and the culture that increases the level of trust needed for school teams and key stakeholders to work as a team (Bukko et al., 2021). Systems that are tested most severely in the very moments they are most needed. Augustine et al., (2009) encourage schools to engage a broad coalition of stakeholders, noting that this requires time and resources, resources that are frequently scarcest during periods of crisis. The Department of Education, Victoria (2025a) department identifies the importance of principals engaging with key stakeholders, which forms one of the six criteria when applying of a principal role in Victoria. These relationships and the success of them is dependent on the work of individual principal, work that carries disproportionate weight when a school is navigating disruption rather than stability.

Principals and leadership teams create the culture and personality of a school and, in turn, influence the school's effectiveness. The principal's professional practices and personal leadership attributes influence their team. It is these same attributes, vision, trust-building, cultural stewardship, that this study argues are most exposed, and most consequential, during crisis. The role of the principal has rapidly changed and evolved over time, and their profile in their community has grown in importance. School principals are now tasked with demanding portfolios that include financial and human resource management (Pont et al., 2008). Portfolios that expand further still when crisis management is added to an already complex role. In the past, school principals were typically classroom teachers who were tasked with additional administrative duties (James, 2025). The changing role of principals has, however, been dictated and largely driven by the social, cultural, historical, political, and contextual factors that shape their practices. The Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership describe “the role of the principal of a school in the twenty-first century is one of the most exciting and significant undertaken by any person in our society. Principals help to create the future” (AITSL, 2019, p. 8). A future that, in crisis, principals must help their communities imagine even as they manage the present emergency.

Principals are key to creating a culture where people within their school communities feel supported yet challenged. This is key to creating effective learning organisations (Day, 2016) and achieving quality educational outcomes. Educational leaders are responsible for developing the culture of their school community and

developing strong relationships with students, staff, and the wider community (Daniel et al., 2021). Positive student outcomes are influenced directly and indirectly by the school principal (Coelli & Green, 2012). To have the greatest impact on student outcomes, principals must provide a positive and engaging workplace that prioritises the occupational wellbeing of their staff. A priority that becomes both more difficult to sustain and more critical to protect once crisis conditions take hold. Studies in the Asia-Pacific region have examined the contribution of school leadership to school improvement, concluding that effective leadership significantly influences staff performance and student learning (Odhiambo & Hii, 2012). Effective leadership in schools involves continuous evaluation of the impact of all school elements on student progress, using data to inform planning and improvement measures, and intervening promptly to correct poor performance (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2015). A cycle of evaluation and intervention that crisis compresses into much shorter and higher-stakes timeframes

Branch et al. (2013) found that highly effective principals had a significant impact on student outcomes, with one study indicating that the impact on achievement of a typical student of over two years of learning in one year. Principals cannot work alone and therefore need to be supported by a capable leadership team, alongside a system that is adaptable to personal and school needs. Adaptability that is precisely what crisis conditions demand and test most severely. Principals are responsible for creating the culture within each school, and their success in doing so is dependent upon their leadership skills and ability to build the capacity of the educators within their schools (FitzGerald & Quiñones, 2018; Nyatuka, 2017). Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) recognise that leadership takes courage; good leaders know who they are, their strengths and weaknesses, and are willing to learn from others whilst inspiring and motivating others. These qualities that come to the fore when principals must lead through uncertainty rather than routine. For principals to be effective, they need to build strong teams around them; this includes both within and outside the school. Strong relationships with leadership teams and key stakeholders support the creation of a culture designed for improving student outcomes for all students. This same capability, building and sustaining strong relationships with leadership teams and stakeholders, is precisely what is most tested when a school community is disrupted by crisis, as this study goes on to examine.

Research by Hattie (2009) and Hattie and Yates (2013) found that one of the most influential ‘in-school’ factors with the potential to have the largest impact on positive student outcomes is the quality of teachers. Teachers can only be at their best when their occupational wellbeing needs are met (Waters et al., 2021). Needs that crisis conditions place under immediate and often prolonged pressure. This requires principals to have high levels of responsibility to ensure that the occupational wellbeing of their staff is at the forefront of their professional practices. Accordingly, quality teachers and, therefore,

quality education can be maintained. Principals are responsible for creating an environment and culture that enhances positive occupational wellbeing.

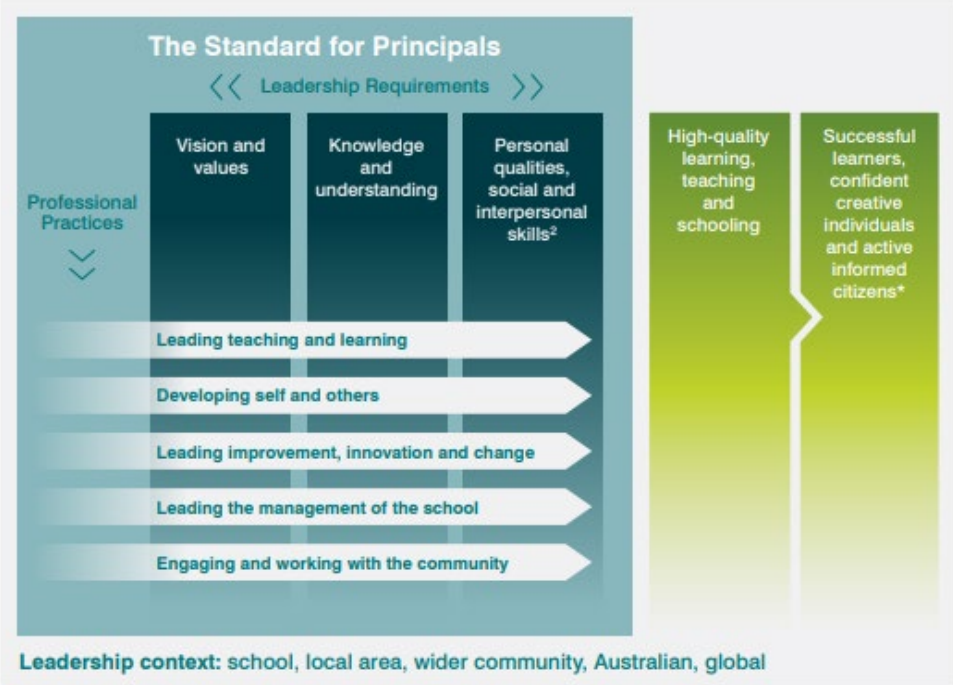
The occupational wellbeing of staff has become an important aspect of school leadership for several reasons. The principal's role in fostering a positive working relationship with staff is seen as vital for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning (Odhiambo & Hii, 2012). Happy and healthy staff are critical to effective schools to implement positive programs. A positive workplace culture further supports teacher retention, which is becoming increasingly important as we are facing a worldwide shortage of teachers (Cann et al., 2021; Quinlan, 2017; Slemp et al., 2017). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recognises a number of issues impacting on teacher retention, including class sizes, ageing workforce, dissatisfaction, lack of recognition, and burnout (OECD, 2019). All of which crisis conditions tend to intensify rather than relieve. These issues are compounded in rural and regional areas of Australia, with a lack of accommodation, a limited number of peers and an increasing educational divide between metropolitan and regional schools (Halsey, 2017). Compounding factors that leave rural and regional principals with fewer external supports precisely when crisis strikes. The specific context in which this study is situated, and one in which the pressures on principals and staff wellbeing described above are felt most acutely.

It is against this backdrop, principals sustaining relational trust, staff wellbeing, and organisational culture as the foundation of quality education, that crisis must be understood as the most severe test of all. The mental and physical health of principals and school staff are the most significant factors influencing students' positive outcomes. Schools face many challenges, and crises can occur at any time and in various forms. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, was a crisis with wide reach and impact. Anderson et al, (2020) found that principals faced significant stress from tasks such as closing schools, initiating online instruction, and ensuring student access to the internet; thus, blurring work-life boundaries. In October 2022, Victoria, Australia experience widespread flooding, with waters rising rapidly and forcing schools and towns to be evacuated to close due to damage, access, and safety issues (Elg et al., 2022). In addition, Year 12 exams were interrupted, with many students unable to access exam centres; thus, derived study scores were offered to students who were impacted (Heffernan & Carey, 2022). These two events, a global pandemic and a regional natural disaster, illustrate how differently crisis can present, and how consistently it demands the same underlying leadership capacities: relational trust, staff wellbeing, and cultural stewardship. With input from principal participants, this study identified the professional practices that principals believe had a positive impact on the wellbeing of their staff during and post-crisis.

1.4 Professional Practices of Principals

The professional practices of principals are informed by leadership styles and enacted with the intention of creating an effective learning organisation to facilitate positive educational outcomes for students (AITSL, 2019). Mahon et al. (2017) define professional practice as "socially and ethically informed practice" (p. 3). Practice is composed of cultural-discursive (sayings), material-economic (doings), and social-political (relatings) arrangements that "hang together" in a given site (Kemmis et al., 2014). The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) has developed national standards for teachers and principals, designing the Australian Professional Standard for Principals and the Leadership Profiles to create a common language and understanding for effective and high-impact school leadership (AITSL, 2019). The AITSL professional standards describe five professional practices integral to the role of the principal: Leading Teaching and Learning, Developing Self and Others, Leading Improvement, Innovation and Change, Leading the Management of the School, and Engaging and Working with the Community (AITSL, 2019). The practices of principals have a direct impact on their staff and therefore on their students; in turn, the professional practices of principals create a culture that contributes to the occupational wellbeing of staff.

Figure 1 - *The Five Key Professional Practices Standards for Principals*



Note. Model of behaviour change illustrating the stages principals undergo to improve leadership effectiveness. Reprinted from Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), *Australian professional standard for principals and the leadership profiles* (2014, https://www.aitsl.edu.au/leadership-profiles). Copyright 2014 by AITSL. Reprinted under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Principals enact their professional practices every day. The AITSL professional standards define principal practices as the operationalisation of the five professional practices and across the three leadership requirements outlined in the standards (AITSL, 2019). The AITSL professional standards describe five professional practices that are integral to the role of the principal, as viewed in Figure 1: Leading teaching and learning; Developing self and others; Leading improvement, innovation, and change; Leading the management of the school; and Engaging and working with the community (AITSL, 2019). The practices of principals have a direct impact on their staff and, therefore, on their students. The professional practices of principals create a culture that contributes to the occupational wellbeing of staff. This study breaks each of these practices into the doings, sayings, and relatings as identified by principals in the interviews.

Leading Teaching and Learning suggests that principals, through their daily practice, create the culture of the school; a positive culture built on trust enables effective teaching that promotes self-regulation, independence, and lifelong learning (AITSL, 2019). Developing Self and Others involves building a professional learning community focused on the continuous improvement of teaching and learning, with principals modelling a commitment to their own growth alongside that of their staff (AITSL, 2019; Avenell, 2015). Leading Improvement, Innovation and Change requires principals to ensure new initiatives are managed sustainably and communicated transparently to the school community (Boyce & Bowers, 2016; Breakspear et al., 2017). Leading the Management of the School requires principals to manage human and financial resources to ensure a safe learning environment, working collaboratively with school councils, governing bodies, and regional departments (AITSL, 2019; Ingvarson, 2013); research demonstrates this practice is strongly linked to school resilience during crisis specifically, given principals' role in interpreting complex incidents and facilitating collective sense-making under pressure (Gilbride et al., 2021; Soini et al., 2016). Engaging and Working with the Community requires principals to build authentic partnerships with families and community organisations, recognising these relationships as central to school improvement and, during crisis, as a source of social capital and mutual support (AITSL, 2019, 2020; Dinham & Crowther, 2011; Sanders & Sheldon, 2009).

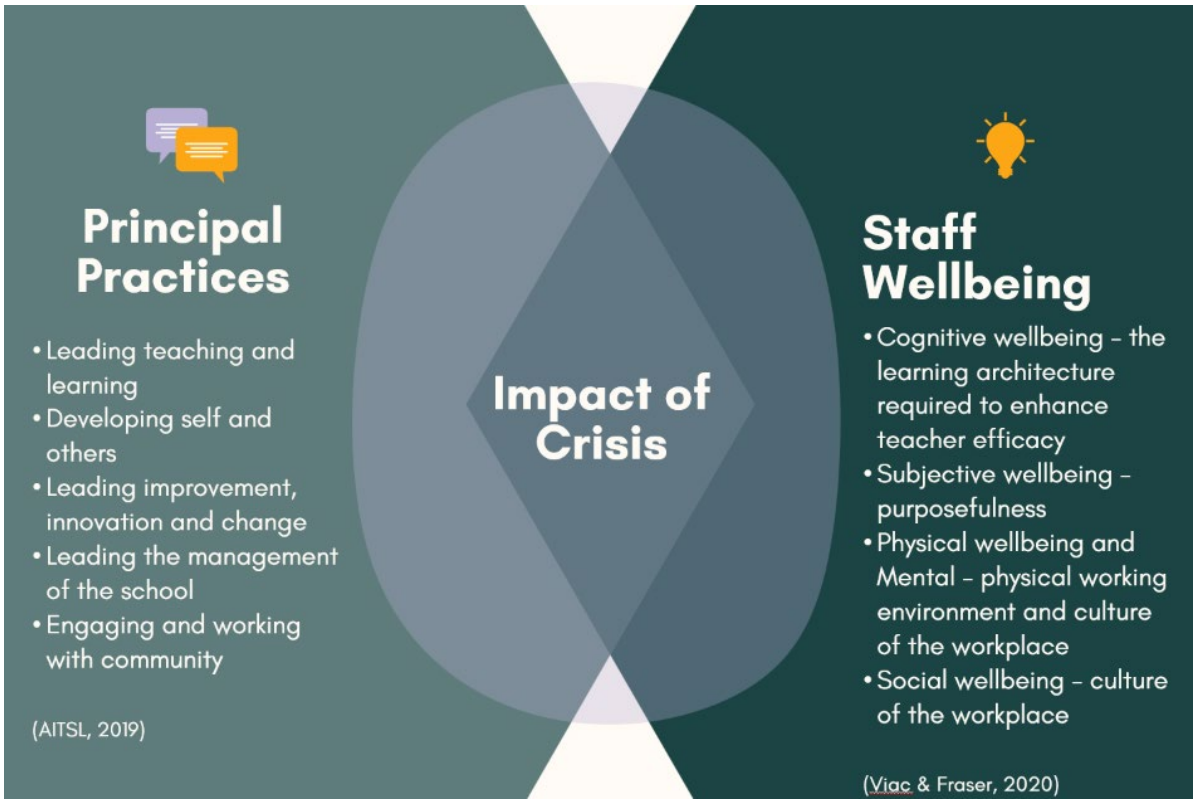
Notably absent from this literature is any empirical account of whether, or how, principals' enactment of these five standards-based practices shifts specifically under crisis conditions, as distinct from their general, everyday application. The professional-standards literature describes what each practice involves in principle, but does not examine whether principals' relative emphasis across the five practices, or their manner of enacting them, changes once a school moves from stable operation into crisis. This is a genuine gap this study is positioned to speak to, though, as discussed in Chapter 5, the interview data collected here establish only the standards-based practices principals valued as a general baseline, and cannot themselves confirm whether or how that baseline shifted under the specific crises participants described leaving this a gap this study identifies precisely, rather than one it closes, and one flagged directly for future research in Chapter 7.

Irrespective of the depth and breadth of the impact of the crisis in schools, the consequences and ramifications of these events are absorbed by all key school stakeholders, namely, principals and teachers. The professional practices of principals including preparation, focusing on wellbeing, effective communication, facilitating collaboration, and making the most of all opportunities, have a direct impact on staff wellbeing (Thornton, 2021). Crisis can produce varying levels of trauma, whereby its impacts can vary in length, severity, and the unique ways in which individual students, staff, and the school community may be affected. Principals need to be able to support people in each of these domains through the crisis and its aftermath. Principals need to be cognisant of teacher wellbeing, whilst recognising that stressed teachers managing classes of traumatised students are problematic and need specific strategies to ensure that teaching practices are effective (Fletcher & Nicholas, 2016). McCallum and Price (2010) suggested that principals and leadership teams need to revise and design policies and procedures that integrate "physical and cognitive wellbeing dimensions with intellectual demands" (p. 29) to fully support the occupational wellbeing of staff and the wellbeing of students.

1.5 Leading through Crisis

Nevertheless, various aspects of an effective learning organisation may be disrupted and challenged by sudden and unexpected episodes of crisis for example natural disasters, individual tragedies, and pandemics. Figure 2 is a visual representation of the intersection between principals' professional practices and staff wellbeing. When a crisis strikes, it is this intersection that is largely affected, and the influence of principal practices upon staff wellbeing becomes magnified. Indeed, it is almost inevitable that school principals will be faced with a crisis during their tenure, as location, reputation, status, or school size does not protect a school from crisis (Gainey, 2009). Crisis are becoming more likely given the changing weather conditions, socio-political, societal pressures on families, the increase in violence in our communities, crisis both natural and those caused by humans are increasing in severity and frequency (Gainey, 2009; Karasavidou & Alexopoulos, 2019).

Figure 2 - *The Intersection of Principal Practices and Staff Wellbeing and the Impact of Crisis*



The professional practices of the principal's pre-, during, and post-crisis are critical. This is to ensure quality education is maintained or, if interrupted, reinstated with urgency despite the conditions faced by the school. Principals operate with students at the centre of their decision-making processes, and supporting students requires teachers to experience positive occupational wellbeing. The professional practices of principals during a crisis extend well beyond routine leadership responsibilities. While traditional school leadership emphasises academic achievement and operational management, crisis conditions demand heightened adaptability, transparency, and empathy. Principals must navigate the immediacy and uncertainty of unfolding events, making swift decisions often with incomplete information, while simultaneously fostering a sense of safety and stability for all stakeholders (Hayes & Derrington, 2023; Qadach, 2024).

Throughout times of crisis, principals are often conflicted by the demands and expectations of systems and other stakeholders who may not be fully aware of the enormity or full impact of the crisis. It is in these moments that principals' ability to communicate clearly, demonstrate care, provide support, and adapt organisational routines becomes most critical. Building trust, ensuring open communication, and engaging the wider community are essential elements that underpin successful crisis management (Anderson et al., 2020). System leaders, like Senior Education Improvement Leaders, Area Executive Director, Regional Director, or Deputy Secretary, may demand a focus on academic growth and meeting curriculum standards, which inadvertently and

directly increases the anxiety in an already stressed staff (McCallum & Price, 2010). The relationship between leadership and school climate is becoming increasingly relevant in times of crisis. Effective leaders must promote collaboration, maintain transparency, and encourage open communication within their schools to strengthen stakeholders' confidence and support. Leaders who approach crises with a strategic and inclusive approach not only alleviate immediate tensions but also contribute to a school and support school environment. The evidence suggests that the emotional and psychological wellbeing of educators and students is considerably influenced by the practices of school leaders in times of adversity (Floman et al., 2024).

Crises of this kind have themselves been a catalyst for change in how leadership is understood. The world has become volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA), a phenomenon exacerbated in schools during times of crisis (Mazurkiewicz, 2021a; Sum, 2022). Crises present themselves in many forms, ranging from long-standing debates about teacher capacity and teacher workforce, to events which are harder to predict, such as pandemics, bushfires, floods, earthquakes, and school shootings. These are some of the many manifestations of crisis that have impacted schools. A crisis is an event or circumstance that causes considerable psychological distress and can potentially interfere with people's ability to go about their normal lives (Whitla, 2003). It needs to be noted that while the length, nature, and scope of each 'crisis' event vary from context to context, the depth and breadth of its impact can be dependent on preparedness. Crisis situations highlight the importance of emotional intelligence, collaborative leadership, and a strong understanding of the unique needs of the school community (Hayes & Derrington, 2023). Principals are called upon to prioritise wellbeing, both their own and that of their staff and students, recognising that resilience and recovery depend on a supportive and adaptive school culture.

The level of preparedness of a school can vary according to the level of experience, skills, and knowledge of the principal and their competency, which can influence their leadership style (Alene, 2022). Schools may have several policies and procedures to guide responses to crises or emergencies. However, each event can have unique characteristics, and the principal's leadership skills are critical to the effectiveness of supporting the school community through and post-crisis. Principals know their students and their staff and have a strong understanding of how a single event can have different impacts on people, resulting in varying levels of trauma within the school community (Whitla, 2003). During times of crisis, principals need to make decisions relating to emergency management and the wellbeing of their students and staff, and they may feel ill-prepared as leaders (Mutch, 2015b).

Leadership styles have been extensively studied (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2012; Robinson et al., 2008). Educational leaders draw on many of these styles, but often, in times of crisis, there is no single leadership style that is most appropriate. Leaders are often forced to draw upon the attributes of many different styles. The professional

practices of principals during a crisis therefore encompass a dynamic blend of leadership styles and attributes tailored to the context and needs of the moment. These practices not only guide schools through immediate challenges but also shape the long-term culture and resilience of educational communities. This study explored in depth how the attributes of Authentic leadership, Servant leadership, Distributed leadership, Transformational leadership, and Moral leadership can inform principals' practices during episodes of crisis, especially in supporting their staff's wellbeing.

Crises are unpredictable, fast-evolving, and often lack clear precedents or playbooks. Leaders must make rapid decisions with incomplete or conflicting information, often in situations they have never faced before (Atkinson, 2022). The 2024 Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey conducted by the Australian Catholic University Institute for Positive Psychology and Education revealed that 73.7% of principals surveyed had experienced a critical incident during 2024 (Dicke et al., 2025). A critical incident, in this context, refers to a discrete, sudden, and unexpected event, distinct from the broader and often more prolonged category of crisis discussed throughout this thesis. A critical incident creates significant risk of harm to the safety or wellbeing of students, staff, or the wider school community, and typically demands an immediate rather than sustained leadership response (Dicke et al., 2025). This distinction matters for the present study, since several of the eleven crisis types identified in Chapter 5, such as the sudden death of a student or a child safety breach, could more accurately described as critical incidents in this bounded sense, while others, such as the multi-year disruption of COVID-19, better fit the broader definition of crisis developed in Section 2.3. This study recognises that a crisis can take many forms, and what impacts one school and its community may have a different impact in another school, with different leadership.

A critical incident can become a crisis when several conditions compound. The impact spreads, affecting larger numbers of people emotionally, physically, or operationally; the situation becomes prolonged, with uncertainty or ongoing developments extending the disruption; communication breaks down, leading to confusion, rumours, or inconsistent messaging (Coombs, 2007). Stakeholder expectations increase, with families, staff, governing bodies, media, and the wider community demanding answers and action. The incident can cause organisational capacity to become overwhelmed, meaning existing policies, personnel, or resources are no longer sufficient to respond effectively (Boin et al., 2017). Reputational risk can intensify, particularly through social media or extensive media coverage (Coombs, 2007). Hence, leadership decisions become highly consequential, where delays, poor coordination, or inadequate responses amplify the consequences (Boin et al., 2017). In this way, the critical incident is the triggering event, while the crisis is the state of organisational disruption that emerges when the event exceeds routine coping mechanisms (Boin et al., 2017; Dicke et al., 2024).

From a leadership perspective, scholars such as Mitroff (2004)and Boin (2017) argue that a crisis is characterised not simply by the severity of an event but by three

interconnected features: a serious threat to core values or operations, significant uncertainty about what is happening and what to do next, and the need for urgent decision-making under pressure. For schools, this distinction is important. Not every critical incident becomes a crisis. Effective preparation, clear communication, coordinated leadership, and strong relationships with stakeholders can contain an incident before it escalates (James & Wooten, 2010). Conversely, even a relatively contained event can become a crisis if resources are not available, communication is limited, or it is amplified by external attention (Coombs, 2007). The study also recognizes that what may constitute a critical incident in one school could create a crisis in another setting. This research is needed as it focuses on all types of crises not just extreme or unique disasters. Crisis can not only affect individual wellbeing, but the impact it can have on a school and its community can be all-consuming (Karasavidou & Alexopoulos, 2019). A crisis can be a defining moment or a combination of moments for a principal, and how they lead through this time will shape their future selves.

Crisis amplifies the role of the principal as a community leader, and their practices directly impact their staff, students, and wider school community. The role of a principal as a trusted community leader comes to the forefront during these periods, with community-based relationships built on trust and respect being critical when leading through crisis (Mutch, 2015a). It is important to differentiate between crisis management and crisis leadership. The former is more operational: diagnosis, decision making, and resource mobilisation, whilst the latter refers to oversight of crisis management with the big picture in mind (Porche, 2009). The COVID-19 pandemic increased the profiles of school principals as the community looked to them to lead, protect, and educate their children; the social demands related to the school community increased exponentially (Upadyaya et al., 2021).

As schools face crises, the leadership of the school community, students, staff and parents, relies mostly on the principal. Boin et al. (2010b) identify a number of aspects of effective crisis leadership, the initial recognition of the emerging threat, an effort to mitigate the threat and respond to the consequences. Then, after the event, returning the organisation to normal or as close as possible as soon as can be achieved. Principals are also responsible for the wellbeing and safety of their students and staff during crises, whilst simultaneously ensuring that their school community is supported to return to normal activities. To achieve this, principals need to use a wide range of leadership skills and attributes to meet the needs of their school communities. Leaders themselves, as well as staff and communities, experience anxiety, uncertainty, and sometimes trauma (Dasborough & Scandura, 2022; Wittmer & Hopkins, 2022). Leaders must handle immediate crisis management (ensuring safety, logistics) while also keeping sight of the big picture and future recovery (Rains, 2024). Even when a crisis is overwhelmingly consuming, principals still need to operate an effective school and cater to students' academic needs, whilst prioritising the wellbeing of students and staff.

The importance of this research subject is highlighted by the literature, which envisages the intersection of leadership practices and crisis management. In particular, Sørengaard & Langvik (2022) stresses that effective leadership is a protective factor that can alleviate the negative effects of crises on educational results. This affirmation is still reinforced by Le Fevre and Sinnema (2024), which provides empirical evidence showing that schools led by adaptive and responsive leaders have greater stability and continuity during crises than those led by more reactive or rigid leadership styles. These results underline the urgency of understanding the dynamics of leadership practices, under stress, to inform education leaders and political decision-makers in promoting environments conducive to resilience.

This study explores the impact of several crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022 Victorian floods, as examples of localised crises that impacted the practices of principals in regional Victoria, Australia. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the resilience of schools and the crucial role of principals in managing organisational change under challenging conditions (Kaul et al., 2022). A crisis can happen without warning, and preparation is not always possible. Principals together with regions and the governing departments, need to be able to adapt, adjust, and respond within a timely manner. Crisis leadership is different from everyday leadership practices due to the "immediacy, complexity, uncertainty, and constantly changing circumstances" (Mutch, 2015a, p. 43). Principals need a team of leaders to support the response, and the response needs to be calm as they are leading a large workforce that relies on their decision-making. To enhance the capacity of those around them, principals need to create viable systems and routines (Cox & Mullen, 2023). The organisational culture and team synergy has a significant impact on the effectiveness of the response. Principals have the additional responsibility of the student body who depends on the decisions made by their leaders. Every moment of the working day, principals' practices impact those around them. Identifying the doings, sayings and how principals relate to others, is critical to understanding the impact the practice of a principal have on their staff and community. This reinforces the critical need for transparency, visibility, and honesty in daily actions (Sanzo et al., 2011).

1.6 Statement of the Problem

Crises in schools present many challenges and require principals to explore a range of leadership practices to support their staff and students. During the COVID-19 pandemic, staff and student wellbeing became a priority for principals. Communication was challenging, and traditional leadership practices lost their effectiveness. Koehn (2020) and Thornton (2021) identified that principals and leaders need to adjust and improvise, recognising that a crisis will cause disorder, and that the lack of timely information can lead to ambiguity. Mutch (2015b) and Thornton (2021) identified that principals are required to

change their practices to focus more on adaptability and flexibility to truly understand the context of each situation.

This study is significant as crises are inevitable, through pandemic, flooding, bushfires, earthquakes, school shootings, death of a student or staff member, significant staff shortages, academic performance, and other accountability measures imposed by a system that reinforces an 'audit' culture. The professional practices of principals are critical in supporting schools and communities throughout crises and post-crisis. A crisis may be chronic, lasting months or years, or comparatively acute and one-off circumstances. Regardless of the category of crisis, the recovery and trauma induced by these events was varied across settings. A major focus for principals is to ensure their staff feel supported, because "when teachers are at their best, students are at their best" (Northern Territory Government, 2021, p. 3). Traditionally, systems have focused on student learning; however, the multi-year length of the COVID-19 pandemic and its widespread impact resulted in wellbeing becoming an equal priority for principals and schools. This study identified the professional practices that principals have employed to support staff and the school community throughout and post-crisis and identified how principals can best support and improve the occupational wellbeing of staff and their own occupational wellbeing, and therefore have a positive impact on student outcomes.

Principals are often on the front line for communities when a crisis impacts their school or town. When faced with these extraordinary circumstances, principals often must pivot, reinvent, and respond to challenges in a very short time frame. When a crisis prevents schools from gathering and being together as a community, the social, emotional, and mental health of the entire school is tested. Principals and their staff support many people, and this can only be achieved if they are physically and mentally healthy, and their wellbeing is prioritised. The practices and actions of principals can have a major impact on the professional wellbeing of their staff, and this, in turn, on individual students and their families. Policy and procedures may not provide the appropriate recommendations or actions for leaders to adequately support their schools and communities. Emergency management planning can identify some processes and procedures, but it is not possible to predict all the variables involved in the impact of natural disasters and specific crisis situations. Each Victorian school and early childhood learning centre has an emergency management plan that clearly outlines responsibilities, roles, procedures, and actions; however, they cannot account for all possibilities (Victorian Government, 2023). Principals need to be agile and responsive to the needs of their students, staff, and community, and may need to deviate from previously prepared procedures and policies.

The impact of a crisis may shift principals' perspectives on and approaches to leadership, as well as their professional practices. Practices that were effective prior to the crisis may not be effective during or post the crisis. A crisis can change the way colleagues and communities communicate and relate to one another. Principals, as educational leaders, play a vital role in creating the conditions to support students, staff, and

communities. The study aimed to break down practices into actionable items that can be transferable to other school contexts. The practices could be implemented by communities and principals when faced with a crisis, with particular emphasis on categorising these practices into sayings, doings, and relatings as aligns with the Theory of Practice Architectures.

1.7 Position of the Researcher

My unique experiences as an educator motivated me to conduct this research. I have worked in education for 20 years, 18 of which were with the Department of Education in Victoria and two with the Victorian Catholic Education Authority. I began my career as a classroom teacher, teaching mathematics, accounting and IT, I became a leading teacher in my second year of teaching and held this position for five years before taking on the role as assistant principal. I was assistant principal at a large regional secondary school, for seven years, including several terms as acting principal. In 2018, I was appointed principal at regional secondary college, also in Northwest Victoria, Australia, where I was principal for five years. I recently moved to Southwest Victoria and am now a Deputy Principal at a large new Catholic Secondary School. I was the principal at a secondary college when I experienced two significant crises, COVID-19 and a major flood event firsthand. This background provided me with the deep, lived experience relevant to the study, enabling rapport and trust with participants, many of whom are professional colleagues. My motivation for the research was based on my reflections that principals are constantly experiencing significant crises in their schools. Although many of these events are unique to the situation, as a system we are not learning how to better support our leaders and their staff.

I was concerned that, when speaking to Dr Peter Rob Gordon OAM, a prominent Australian clinical psychologist and pioneer in disaster recovery, he expressed disappointment that my recount of events suggested that systems to support principals and leaders after natural disasters had changed within the Victorian Department of Education. Dr Gordon worked with schools post the Victorian Black Summer bushfires in 2019-2020. He relayed that my experiences and feelings were a replica of the principals he worked with whose schools had been devastated by fire. This was the driving force for me to begin my research in the hopes of making a difference and influencing decision makers when introducing system changes to support principals and leaders in the future. My experiences of two significant crises had a lasting impact on me, my practices, and my approach to leadership, and I believe we need to share our experiences and learnings to support others.

Throughout the research, I am reflexive and transparent, and I continually examine my own biases, assumptions, and influence on the research process. I made a conscious effort to avoid projecting personal experiences onto participants, and I encouraged authentic sharing. I adopted a constructivist and interpretivist paradigm, viewing knowledge and

reality as co-constructed through social interaction and context. The relativist ontology underpinning the study assumes multiple realities, each shaped by individual and social perspectives. I positioned myself as an active participant in the production of knowledge, rather than a detached observer. I kept detailed journals during times of crisis throughout my principalship, and these were referenced through an ethnographic narrative to increase the authenticity of the study.

The phenomenological methodology and use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) are congruent with my position. These approaches value subjective, lived experience and acknowledge the researcher's role in interpreting and making meaning of participant accounts. I am attentive to ethical considerations and ensure that I have safeguarded participant confidentiality, whilst guaranteeing emotional safety, given the sensitive nature of crisis events. The established relationships with participants support a conversational, respectful interview style. I occupy a dual role as both an insider with lived experience and an interpretive analyst. My position is overtly subjective and reflexive, embracing the complexities and nuances of human experience as central to the research. My aim is to co-create meaning with participants, leveraging my own background to enrich understanding while maintaining transparency about the influence of my positionality on the study.

1.8 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to critically examine how principals' perspectives may evolve during and in the aftermath of a crisis, with particular attention to the enduring effects such events have on leadership styles and professional practices. Additionally, the study seeks to develop a nuanced understanding of the long-term impacts of crises on principals, focusing on their leadership approaches and the professional practices they adopt. Central to this investigation is an exploration of how principals conceptualise the relationship between their professional practices and the occupational wellbeing of their staff. By deepening understanding of principals' actions and decision-making processes during critical incidents, this research aims to elucidate how school leaders can most effectively support both staff and students when confronted with future crises. Furthermore, the study intends to provide empirical evidence to inform policy development, system supports and guide the creation of procedures aimed at minimising stress for principals, staff, and students.

Findings from this study may inform the education and support provided to principals to lead through and post-crisis. The study does not focus on disaster risk reduction but rather on the roles played by school principals during and post-crisis, and the impact of their practices on the occupational wellbeing of their staff and on student learning. A potential benefit for school settings and the wider community is the development of a strength-based approach to leadership that may well inform leaders' professional practices during crises. The staff are the most important resource in any organisation, and this

research identified the professional practices of principals that can enhance staff wellbeing, thereby improving student outcomes and teacher retention.

The research findings, as a thematic base, were applicable across a wide variety of crises. The implications and applications of insights gleaned from the study may influence and assist the development of a better or more nuanced understanding of the support needed for principals in times of crisis. The benefits of the study may include, but are not limited to, providing opportunities for professional development for leaders, research-informed guidelines on which areas of professional development may be needed for principals in times of crisis, and an increased awareness of best leadership practices.

The implications of effective educational leadership during times of crisis extend well beyond immediate organisational survival; they encompass cultivating resilient school environments capable of thriving in the face of ongoing adversity. As such, the intersection of leadership practices and crisis management constitutes a crucial area of inquiry for advancing the effectiveness of educational leadership in navigating future challenges (Hayes & Derrington, 2023). This study specifically aimed to clarify the intersection between the professional practices principals enact during periods of crisis and their subsequent impact on the occupational wellbeing of staff and principals themselves. Findings from this research have the potential to inform and contribute to a model of best practice that can support both the professional development of school leaders and the structures necessary for principals to lead effectively during and following crises.

Importantly, the study does not focus on disaster risk reduction per se, but rather on the roles school principals assume during and after crises and the impact of their professional practices on staff wellbeing. In doing so, the study identified and dissected the specific professional practices that principals have found to be impactful during and post-crisis, categorising them according to the framework of sayings, doings, and relatings. This study examined how leading through crisis can change and impact school principals' perspectives on their approaches to leadership in the short to long term. It also examines the professional practices of principals that support, improve, and sustain the occupational wellbeing of principals and their staff during and after crisis. This study used qualitative interviews to collect data within a phenomenological framework to address the following two research questions:

Question 1 – What professional practices do principals enact to support, improve, and sustain the occupational wellbeing of their staff and themselves during and after crisis?

Question 2 – *How does leading through a crisis change principals' perspectives on and approaches to leadership?*

1.9 Context of Study

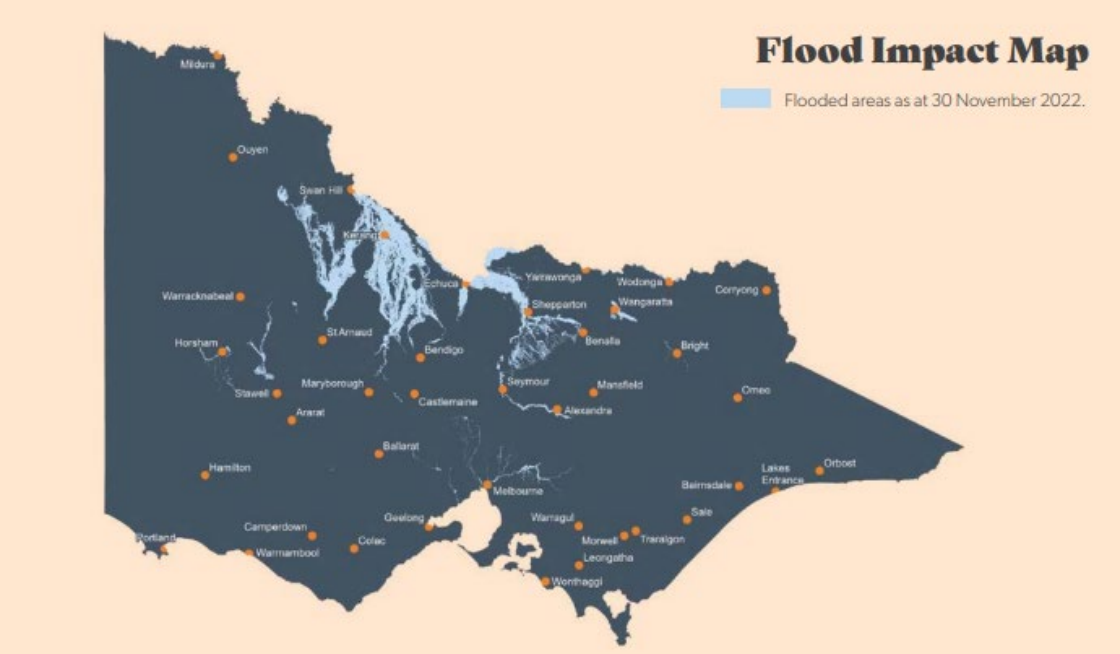
The context of this study centres on the experience of school principals in regional Victoria, Australia, who have led their schools through significant crises. The study focuses on the professional practices of principals during and after crisis and with considerations of implications for future practices. This study references many different crises, but two significant events feature prominently throughout the study. The two main crisis events that are scrutinised and discussed are the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022 regional flood in Victoria, Australia. Indeed, the pandemic crisis was more complex, given the duration and unknown widespread global health implications (Rajabifard et al., 2021). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic proved even more challenging due to its unique characteristics, unprecedented in terms of its global impact and dissimilar to any crisis experienced previously (Jedynak & Bąk, 2021). As a consequence, what started out as a health crisis rapidly grew to become a socio-economic and environmental crisis that spread to every country and jurisdiction (Rajabifard et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic commenced in Australia in early 2020, and the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared it globally on 11 March 2020. By the end of March 2020, schools in Victoria were closed, and the state was put into lockdown (WHO, 2020). Principals had to be flexible and adaptable as they supported their schools and communities through an unprecedented time. Principals faced the challenge of rapidly adapting to remote teaching, managing the wellbeing of staff and students, and responding to evolving government guidelines with little notice. Schools were required to introduce remote and flexible learning through online platforms. The situation was VUCA with many unknowns, sparse information, and people were scared.

The state of Victoria was placed into lockdown six times for a total of 262 days across 2020 and 2021 (Platinum Accounting, 2021). Lockdown instructions from the state government arrived with little notice or time to prepare. Students, families, and the community relied on school principals to make the right decisions. Principals, as leaders of schools, were considered community leaders, especially in rural and regional areas (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the most prolonged crises to affect schools and communities, impacting people worldwide. Similarly, floods struck regional Victoria in October 2022 devastating communities while closing three schools for a prolonged period. Two of the damaged schools were required to relocate to another town and eventually operate out of transportable classrooms. I was the principal at one of these schools during that period. The study is situated within the broader context of rural and regional Victorian schools facing significant adversity and highlights the amplified leadership role principals assume during times of crisis.

The second crisis event that initially influenced this study was the 2022 Victorian floods in Victoria, Australia. These floods were devastating, with 320 schools impacted by flood water entering school grounds or blocking access roads to schools. The impacted areas can be seen in the map in Figure 3 Rochester is located 25 kilometres southwest of

Echuca and 63 kilometres northeast of Bendigo, both Echuca and Bendigo can be seen on Figure 3. Rochester has a population of approximately 3000 people with a median age of 49 living in approximately 1529 houses. Rochester relies on primary industries, an agricultural community centred around dairying, tomato growing and meat production (Shire of Campaspe, 2025) The Campapse River runs through the town, dividing it into two, with only one main bridge. Only four schools, however were completely inundated with every classroom and space damaged by contaminated flood water (Ward, 2022). The three schools in Rochester, where I was principal, were so severely damaged that they were closed and unable to be accessed for a Term and did not reopen until Term 1 2023, almost 15 weeks after the event (Hutchins, 2023).

Figure 3 - *Flooded Area of Victoria, Australia as at 30 November 2022*



Note. Flood Impact Map illustrating flooded areas in Victoria as of 30 November 2022. Adapted from "Victorian Floods 2022," by Victoria State Emergency Service, 2022, *Community Matters*, *Summer 2022 Edition 21*, p. 4 (https://www.ses.vic.gov.au/documents/8655930/8656662/VICSES+Community+Matters+edition+21+Summer+2022.pdf/73ee0869-213d-d0f4-c64a-0955b93ecc12?t=1670976478201). Copyright 2022 by the State of Victoria, Victoria State Emergency Service. Reprinted with permission.

Communication and accurate information became a challenge during COVID-19, which was often exacerbated by the state government and media releasing information before schools were officially informed. This put principals and schools in a difficult situation, as the community learned information before the school principal could act on key information and guidelines, thus causing several issues to arise. This situation highlighted that “in a time of crisis, leaders must act swiftly and with foresight, but also with careful

consideration of options, consequences, and side effects of actions taken" (Harris, 2020, p. 322). During the flood event in Victoria, 90% of homes in the township of Rochester were inundated with water in the affected communities, which led to increasing communication challenges as we experienced electricity outages that severely impacted communication (Hynninen et al., 2023).

The principals and leadership teams of the local schools were affected, both directly and indirectly, with many facing their own personal crisis during this time. The principals lived in the towns and were active members of the community. For a period of time, it was difficult to determine where many community members were relocated to. I was forced to evacuate to Bendigo for safety and did not have a vehicle that could allow me access to my school. I was separated from my daughter as we could not obtain accommodation for us both in the same place. Principals and leadership teams were forced to be agile, act quickly, and make decisions, at times without all the necessary information, as "leading through a crisis is inherently imperfect" (Harris, 2020, p. 322).

1.10 Thesis Outline

The thesis examines how school principals' leadership perspectives and professional practices are shaped and transformed by crisis events and how these practices sustain the professional wellbeing of staff. The study is structured around two central research questions: first, to identify which professional practices of principals improve and sustain staff's occupational wellbeing; second, it explores how leading through crisis changes principals' approaches and perspectives on leadership. The research is motivated by the recognition that principals' actions, words, and relationships play a significant role in shaping school culture, particularly during times of crisis, and that understanding these dynamics is vital for supporting both staff wellbeing and effective student outcomes.

In Chapter one, the thesis begins with an Introduction that establishes the importance of quality education, outlines the key stakeholders involved, and situates the study within the context of recent significant crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022 Victorian floods. The thesis does encompass several other significant crises that impact schools. Chapter two provides an extensive Literature Review on educational leadership models, the impact of crisis, crisis management, educational psychology, wellbeing, student outcomes and social capital.

Chapter three explores the Theoretical Framework underpinning the study, the Theory of Practice Architectures (TPA) was developed primarily by Kemmis and colleagues in 2008 (Kemmis & Smith, 2008). This framework is central to the research design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation, and it shapes the entire thesis in significant ways. The framework guided the development of research questions and interview protocols. The study explicitly sought to understand the sayings, doings, and relatings of principals during and after crisis, and how these practices impacted staff wellbeing and leadership evolution.

The theory allowed the researcher to situate principals' practices within the broader cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political context of each school. The TPA was not only a framework for analysis but also a guide for the entire research process. It shaped the research questions, data collection, and the interpretation of findings. The use of this framework allowed for a deep, context-sensitive exploration of principal leadership, focusing on the interplay between individual actions, language, relationships, and the enabling/constraining conditions of the school context.

Chapter four, Research Design and Methodology provides a comprehensive account of the qualitative, phenomenological methodology employed to investigate how principals in rural and regional Victoria experienced and interpreted the process of leading through crisis. The chapter details the use of semi-structured interviews, the researcher's positionality, associated ethical considerations, and the analytic procedures adopted, including Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and thematic analysis. IPA, as a method designed to capture and interpret lived experience, provides an appropriate framework for examining the complex, subjective, and context-dependent realities of principals' leadership during and following crisis events. The study sought to interrogate not only the actions undertaken by principals, but also the meanings they attributed to these actions and the sense-making processes that shaped their professional practice. Particular attention was given to principals' sayings, doings, and relatings, recognising their significant influence on staff and students. A review of the relevant literature on educational leadership, encompassing leadership types, traits, and attributes, guided the evaluation of leadership styles and the identification of associated practices, which were subsequently examined through the lens of sayings, doings, and relatings to inform future leadership development. Given that much of the existing scholarship on educational leadership in crisis contexts focuses predominantly on immediate response phases, the literature underscores the need for longitudinal research to explore how crises inform the ongoing evolution of principals' professional practices and their approaches to supporting staff occupational wellbeing. Responding to this gap, the study examined whether and how crisis events reshaped principals' perspectives, practices, and relational approaches, and the extent to which these shifts influenced their capacity to cultivate and sustain the occupational wellbeing of their staff.

Chapter five presents the Results of the study, exploring how leading through crisis influences school principals' perspectives and approaches to leadership, and examines the professional practices that sustain staff wellbeing during and after crisis events. Chapter six provides a Discussion of the research findings in relation to the reviewed literature, focusing on how school principals lead during crises and how these experiences influence their leadership approaches over time. This chapter uses the TPA to analyse how principals' crisis leadership practices are enabled or constrained by material-economic, social-political, and cultural-discursive arrangements within their school environments. It provides insights into adaptive leadership structures and suggests future research

directions to better understand the complexities of educational leadership in crisis contexts. Chapter seven provides a Conclusion for the thesis by synthesising the key insights gained from the study on how leading through crisis has transformed Victorian school principals' perspectives and professional practices. It reflects on the significance of these findings for educational leadership during times of crisis and offers recommendations for policy, practice, and future research. The chapter emphasises the ongoing importance of reflective, context-sensitive leadership in sustaining the wellbeing of school communities through and beyond periods of crisis.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters, social unrest, and many others, disrupt the educational environment, challenging principals to adapt quickly while ensuring continuity and stability for their school communities (Brion, 2021; Mutch, 2015b; Thornton, 2021). Principals are thrust into complex roles, balancing organisational demands with emotional and social support for staff and students (Da'as et al., 2025; Virella & Woulfin, 2023). These disruptions exacerbate stressors on school staff, contributing to heightened burnout, anxiety, and intentions to leave the profession (Dicke et al., 2025; Floman et al., 2024). Studies reveal increasing workloads and emotional labour among principals, reflecting a systemic issue affecting the wellbeing of the entire school community (Campbell, 2024; Kanowski, 2022). Evidence from various international contexts highlights that principals' leadership during crises involves adaptive strategies, empathetic communication, and collaborative decision-making that are qualitatively different from "normal" times (Brion, 2021; Cahapay, 2022; Da'as et al., 2025). These studies, however, primarily focus on principals' experiences or theoretical frameworks rather than detailed, empirically grounded accounts of how principal practices specifically influence staff wellbeing.

The dominant body of literature has primarily examined principal leadership through the lens of instructional and transformational leadership models (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2020). These studies often employ quantitative designs, focusing on measurable outcomes such as student achievement or teacher retention rates (Leithwood et al., 2020; Van der Vyver et al., 2020). There is also a growing interest in distributed leadership and its role in enhancing teacher collaboration and wellbeing (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Kaul et al., 2022). Kaul et al. (2022) highlight how principals rely on preexisting organisational structures and district guidance to navigate crises, which indirectly supports staff wellbeing by stabilising instructional leadership during turbulent times.

It is important to distinguish crisis management from crisis leadership, but first it is necessary to first separate crisis itself from the broader category of challenge from which it is carved out. Schools face a constant stream of difficulty, staffing shortfalls, budget pressures, behavioural incidents, and shifting policy requirements, that principals absorb as part of routine practice rather than as crisis; a recent scoping review of 153 studies spanning 17 years identified such challenges as falling into recurring categories relating to management complexity, learning, and interactions with staff, students, families, and educational authorities (Tintoré et al., 2022), while a systematic review of 169 further studies similarly catalogued the great majority of principals' day-to-day difficulties as arising from institutional, socio-cultural, and stakeholder-related contextual pressures rather than from singular, threshold-crossing events (Tamadoni et al., 2024). A comprehensive interdisciplinary review of the crisis leadership literature makes clear that a

further distinction matters beyond frequency or difficulty: crises are characterised not merely by hardship but by their scale, unpredictability, and threat to organisational survival, a low-probability, high-impact event whose cause, effect, and means of resolution remain genuinely ambiguous, in contrast to the routine, "run-of-the-mill" challenges that occupy the ordinary business of school leadership (Collins et al., 2023). A challenge, in this sense, is difficulty for which a school's existing practices, structures, and precedents remain adequate; a crisis is difficulty that overwhelms them, interrupting routine to the point that established practice can no longer straightforwardly apply and principals are compelled to make sense of what is happening as they respond (De Voto et al., 2023). This distinction is not merely semantic. Where a challenge can typically be met by drawing on established professional practice, a crisis, by definition, requires principals to depart from routine, improvising new practice under conditions of genuine uncertainty, precisely the shift from predictability toward the turbulence increasingly characteristic of the principal's role (Harris & Jones, 2025). This sharpens a gap identified, much of the existing literature discusses crisis leadership as a settled competency to be developed, yet this framing risks collapsing the very distinction that makes crisis analytically and practically significant, treating what is properly understood as a departure from routine as simply a more demanding version of everyday challenge. This study takes the distinction seriously, examining specifically those events participants themselves identified as exceeding the challenges of ordinary practice.

2.1 Current Research

The wellbeing of staff in educational contexts has garnered increasing attention, particularly in the wake of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Research consistently demonstrates that staff wellbeing is not only crucial for individual educators, but also for the broader educational ecosystem, influencing student achievement, teacher retention, and overall institutional effectiveness (Cann et al., 2021; Dicke et al., 2020; McCallum, 2021). During times of crisis, stress, anxiety, and burnout among educators tend to be exacerbated, making it imperative for school principals to exercise informed and intentional leadership practices that actively support staff wellbeing (Hayes et al., 2022; Striepe & Cunningham, 2022).

Qualitative phenomenological studies have begun to explore the lived experiences of principals regarding their wellbeing and leadership practices, particularly under conditions of stress and crisis (Da'as et al., 2025; Kanowski, 2022). Kanowski (2022) offers an ontological inquiry into principal wellbeing that transcends individual traits, focusing instead on relational and organisational factors that shape principals' experiences. Similarly, Da'as et al. (2025) examine metaphors used by principals during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing the emotional and organisational complexities principals face and their adaptive leadership responses. There is a lack of holistic, system-level understanding of how principal actions shape collective wellbeing, especially as schools recover from acute crises. Most studies either focus on teacher wellbeing as an individual phenomenon or principal wellbeing in isolation (Day & Gurr, 2024b; McCallum, 2021). A separation this study addresses directly by examining principal's practices in relation to both their staff's occupational wellbeing and their own, within a single, integrated inquiry rather than as two distinct research traditions.

A growing body of literature highlights the fundamental role of school principals as both leaders and facilitators in navigating the challenges posed by crisis situations. Chatzipanagiotou and Katsaou (2023) found that principals' actions and behaviors directly impact staff morale and mental health, particularly during disruptive periods. Their research, along with others, underscores that in times of upheaval, staff members look to principals for guidance, reassurance, and strategic direction (Da'as et al., 2025; Smith & Riley, 2012). Effective crisis leadership is marked by transparent communication, emotional support, and the fostering of a collaborative culture, practices that have been shown to mitigate the negative impacts of crises on staff wellbeing (Cann et al., 2021; Hayes et al., 2021; Wittmer & Hopkins, 2022).

Recent research on school leadership during crises has underscored the pivotal role of principals and educational leaders in ensuring organisational resilience, instructional continuity, and stakeholder wellbeing. A systematic review by Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023) highlight that while crisis management is well-theorised in organisational literature, its sustained and empirical examination within educational leadership remains limited, especially regarding the specific crisis management practices employed by school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023). Similarly, Rørstad Welle and Gunnulfsen (2025) identify that most peer-reviewed literature focuses on immediate leadership actions rather than the inherent dilemmas and decision-making complexities principals face in schools, especially during rapid, disruptive events. Additionally, Hadad et al. (2025) extend the conversation to teacher preparation programs, noting a gap in studies that examine how policy architects and institutional leaders operationalise crisis-resilient principles in program design, with most research emphasising conceptual frameworks over the lived experiences and adaptive strategies of leaders.

Despite these advances, several gaps persist in the literature. There is a notable scarcity of empirical studies examining the mental health impacts of crises on school stakeholders and the specific leadership actions that foster resilience, as highlighted in

Ertem (2024), who calls for further investigation into how school leaders support mental health during crises using both student and school-level predictors. Furthermore, while transformational and distributed leadership styles are often discussed, less attention has been given to the nuanced, context-dependent interplay between crisis leadership dilemmas, stakeholder collaboration, and the translation of policy rhetoric into actionable strategies (Sheena et al., 2025). This gap underscores the critical need for principals to not only adopt diverse leadership styles but also to exercise emotional intelligence and accessibility to effectively navigate the complexities of crisis leadership and foster staff wellbeing.

A further, largely unremarked gap runs through almost all the literature reviewed above: the near-total concentration on a single crisis type. The great majority of empirical crisis-leadership studies, including many cited in this review, examine the COVID-19 pandemic specifically, with only occasional attention to a single alternative event such as an earthquake or a school shooting (Marshall & Clark, 2023; Mutch, 2015a). This concentration leaves open whether findings about principal practice generalise across different kinds of crisis, or whether a prolonged, globally-shared disruption such as a pandemic calls for meaningfully different practices than a sudden, localised, or recurring event such as a flood, a death, or an act of violence. This study addresses this gap directly by examining principals' practices and perspectives across eleven distinct crisis types, including pandemic, flood, child safety breach, death of student(s), family violence, and several further categories. Allowing claims about crisis leadership to be grounded in, and where relevant distinguished by, the specific character of the crisis concerned, rather than treated as a single undifferentiated phenomenon.

Principals who embody emotional intelligence and accessibility are particularly well-positioned to build strong, trusting relationships with their staff, resulting in higher morale and improved wellbeing during tumultuous periods (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022; Urick et al., 2021). As evidenced by studies during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders who prioritised empathy, openness, and collective problem-solving were able to support teachers' emotional health, reduce stress, and foster resilience (Gorrell et al., 2021; Thornton, 2021). These findings indicate that crisis leadership should not be viewed merely as a procedural or administrative response. Rather, it represents an opportunity for principals to reinforce their commitment to staff welfare through transparency, consistent communication, and the building of a supportive school culture (Hayes et al., 2022; Wittmer & Hopkins, 2022).However, despite the growing recognition of the principal's influence on staff wellbeing, there remain significant gaps in the literature regarding the specific styles and strategies that are most effective in crisis contexts. While scholars like Chatzipanagiotou and Katsaou (2023) and Cann et al. (2021) advocate for empathic and principal-centered leadership, there is limited empirical work on the methodologies, training, or frameworks that support principals in adopting such practices during or after crises. Furthermore, much of the existing research focuses on immediate crisis responses, often neglecting the importance of ongoing adaptation and support during the aftermath, a period when residual trauma or stress among staff may persist (Hayes et al., 2022; Striepe & Cunningham, 2022).

A pattern worth naming explicitly runs beneath much of this literature: crisis leadership is generally discussed, whether through emotional intelligence, resilience, or adaptability, as a settled competency that an effective principal either possesses or must be helped to develop. Even studies sympathetic to the difficulty of the role tend to describe successful crisis leadership in these terms, framing uncertainty and improvisation as obstacles to be overcome on the way to competent practice, rather than as a defining feature of what leading through genuine crisis actually involves. Few studies take principals' own acknowledged uncertainty and imperfection during crisis as the phenomenon worth understanding in its own right, rather than as noise surrounding an underlying, idealised competency. This study's focus on 'imperfect principals' responds to this largely unexamined assumption directly, and this thread is returned to in the conclusion of this chapter.

2.2 Crisis Management and Crisis Leadership: A Framing Discussion

Before reviewing the wider literature on educational leadership, it is necessary to establish a distinction that frames the remainder of this review: the difference between crisis management and crisis leadership. The literature on organisational response to adverse events delineates a critical distinction between the two, a differentiation that bears significant implications for educational leadership, particularly in the context of schools navigating unprecedented challenges and crises. Crisis management traditionally focuses on the design and implementation of strategies to guide organisations back to a state of normalcy following a disruptive and risky event. This operational perspective emphasises processes such as goal development, environmental analysis, risk assessment, and the evaluation and control of strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of crises (Urick et al., 2021). The primary objective of crisis management is to restore stability rather than to instigate transformational change (Boin et al., 2010b; Urick et al., 2021). Moreover, crisis management often involves reactive mechanisms triggered by internal mishaps or external threats, with a strong orientation toward risk reduction and organisational continuity (McConnell & Drennan, 2006; Urick et al., 2021). Communication in crisis management is typically structured to provide clear, cohesive messaging at critical moments to prevent confusion and maintain stakeholder confidence (Atkinson, 2022).

In contrast, leading through crisis encompasses a broader, more aspirational set of practices that extend beyond the operational scope of crisis management to include the emotional, relational, and ethical dimensions of leadership amid turmoil. Leadership during crises requires adaptability, creativity, and decisiveness under conditions of ambiguity and heightened stress, where leaders must make rapid, complex decisions with incomplete information while managing the psychological and social wellbeing of stakeholders (Mutch, 2014; Smith & Riley, 2012; Thornton, 2021). Effective crisis leadership is characterised by ongoing sensemaking, meaning-making to motivate others, coordination of implementation efforts, and accountability through learning from the crisis experience (Boin et al., 2010a; Urick et al., 2021). It also involves fostering resilience within the community and embracing distributed leadership to mobilise diverse expertise (Bishop et al., 2015; Mutch, 2014; Urick et al., 2021).

Educational leadership scholarship further illuminates this distinction by underscoring how crisis leadership in schools demands an extraordinary level of pastoral care, responsiveness, and ethical engagement that transcends routine leadership competencies (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022). Unlike crisis management's emphasis on returning to the status quo, crisis leadership acknowledges the unique, unpredictable nature of crises and the necessity for leaders to navigate ongoing uncertainty with flexibility and empathy (Smith & Riley, 2012; Thornton & Rodley, 2021). This leadership approach prioritises wellbeing, fosters trust through transparent two-way communication, and encourages collective decision-making, reflecting a shift from control to collaboration (Thornton & Rodley, 2021). While crisis management provides the operational framework necessary for organisational recovery, leading through crisis encapsulates the holistic, dynamic leadership practices essential for navigating the complexities and human dimensions of crises. This distinction is particularly salient in educational contexts, where leaders must simultaneously manage logistical challenges and attend to the social-emotional needs of their communities during times of crisis.

Crisis management is usually studied through the lens of response to a traumatic event (Virella, 2024). Anderson et al. (2020) and Sutherland (2017) examined how school leaders navigated crisis, supporting others with compassion whilst advocating for their communities. Other studies, including McLeod and Dulsky (2021), Urick (2021) and Virella (2022) also examined school leadership during crisis, yet these studies have not explored how the practices of principals influence the wellbeing of staff, or the longer-term impact on how the crisis affected how principals approached their leadership.

More than five years on from the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Harris and Jones (2025) argue the field must now shift its attention from how school leaders navigated that specific crisis toward whether crisis leadership is being embedded as a durable, ongoing capability, or whether the professional learning available to school leaders remains oriented toward predictability, routine, and certainty rather than the turbulence increasingly characteristic of the role. Turbulence, drawing on Gross's (2020) widely applied theory, is understood here as a graduated construct rather than a single state: light turbulence, common and easily managed, arising from issues such as regional isolation or minor communication limitations; moderate turbulence, more widespread and requiring sustained organisational attention but still manageable with focused effort; and severe turbulence, which threatens the viability of initiatives altogether and renders principals' typical leadership practices insufficient, demanding genuinely new approaches (Urick et al., 2021). This graduated understanding of turbulence is a useful lens for the present study's own findings, since the eleven crisis types identified in Chapter 5 plausibly sit at different points along this spectrum, from a single flood event at one school to the sustained, multi-year severe turbulence of the COVID-19 pandemic, a distinction returned to in the discussion in Chapter 6. This argument reinforces the rationale for the present study directly: understanding the professional practices principals actually drew upon, and how those practices and their broader perspective on leadership changed as a result, provides an empirical basis for the kind of embedded, ongoing crisis-leadership capability Harris and Jones (2025) argue is now required. This study is positioned within this second body of

work: it examines leading through crisis specifically, rather than the operational mechanics of crisis management, and it is this distinction that underpins the remainder of this literature review.

It is worth noting that while the conceptual distinction between crisis management and crisis leadership set out above is well established theoretically (Boin et al., 2010a; Urick et al., 2021), it is rarely applied empirically within the studies that examine school leadership during crisis. Studies such as McLeod and Dulsky (2021), Urick (2021), and Virella (2022) describe what principals did during crisis without explicitly separating operational crisis-management activity from the broader relational, ethical, and wellbeing-oriented work this thesis's distinction identifies as crisis leadership proper. This study addresses that gap by using the distinction as an organising principle throughout its findings and discussion, examining separately what principals did to restore operational stability and what they did to sustain the wellbeing and moral purpose of their school community, rather than treating crisis leadership as a single undifferentiated set of actions.

2.3 The Impact of Crisis in Schools and the Emotional Toll on Leaders

Having established the distinction between crisis management and crisis leadership, this section turns to what is known about the impact of crisis on schools specifically, and on the leaders within them. A crisis can take many forms and can be caused by nature or humans. It is not defined by a length of time or set intensity, a crisis is a low-probability, high-impact event that threatens organisational or individual survival, characterised by ambiguity of cause, effect, and resolution (Pearson & Clair, 1998). Any crisis or traumatic event impacting a school community can threaten students' optimal mental health and therefore learning outcomes (Sokol et al., 2021). Crises can be disorienting, overwhelming and unwieldy events. While crises can be complicated and chaotic they can become a crucible experience for leaders and organisations, which may lead to the creation of something new or transformation of the 'old' (Gigliotti, 2020).

Educational crises are disruptive at various levels. While some crisis events may severely affect, for instance, the structural apparatus of school infrastructure, all crises, irrespective of type, nature or length, have a social and emotional impact on educational stakeholders such as principals and staff. To determine the level of social disruption caused by a crisis, school principals need to understand normality before the crisis (Whitla, 2003). This is important as it allows principals to ascertain the extent of disruption and the ways in which the school community has been affected. A foundation Pauchant and Mitroff (1993) develop further by defining crisis as a disruption that impacts a system as a whole, thus describing it as a threat to the core of the organisation. More recent systematic review evidence confirms this same disruption is felt acutely within school leadership specifically, requiring principals to first understand normality before the crisis in order to gauge its true extent (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023). The impact of a crisis on individual schools is influenced by the actions of school leadership; leadership needs to be

adaptable and flexible (Thornton, 2021). A point extended by Kettle, Heimans and Dargusch's (2024) account of rural principal leadership as a situated ecology of practices, shaped by the specific social, economic, and spatial particularities of the rural school in which it occurs, a framing closely aligned with this study's own use of the Theory of Practice Architectures in Chapter 3.

Schools are impacted by other events that are also considered crises, for example, the death of a student or staff member, staff shortages, and bushfires. Although both the Victorian flood event and the COVID-19 pandemic are forms of crisis, they contain key differences in that the former was localised and the latter had global implications, highlighting that the impact of these events and a school community's ability to recover can be varied (Wombacher et al., 2018). Localised crises can cause devastation that is not widely understood, but can be overwhelming and all-consuming for those involved, as is the case in the Victorian floods. Foreseeable or unexpected, a crisis tests the preparedness of systems, their ability to cope and adapt, as systems need to be agile and support leaders to meet the needs of the wider community (Karasavidou & Alexopoulos, 2019; Mutch, 2014; Striepe & Cunningham, 2022). Global crises are characterised by their unpredictability, large scale, rapid onset, and profound impacts across multiple countries, affecting social, economic, and institutional systems simultaneously (Mazurkiewicz, 2021a; Waters et al., 2021). Unlike local incidents, global crises such as pandemics, financial collapses, or climate emergencies generate widespread uncertainty and require coordinated responses that transcend individual communities or regions.

The COVID-19 crisis will be remembered as a colossal “supernova” that changed the way we live and interact on a local, national, and international level (Azorín, 2020, p. 381). The impact of the pandemic on schools and communities was unprecedented and challenged traditional models of leadership. Striepe and Cunningham (2022) defined crisis as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organisation’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (p. 134). Canyon (2020) considers crisis from many perspectives and concludes that it can be defined as “an uncertain situation possessing latent risks and opportunities that must be resolved within a given timeframe” (p. 6). Many studies have been undertaken on educational leadership practices, but few have explored the ongoing impact of crisis on the professional practices of principals and how these practices impact the wellbeing of their staff. Marshall and Clark (2023) conducted a study related to school shootings, identifying that educational leadership perspectives were missing from much of the related literature, but did not connect principal practices as a factor influencing staff wellbeing. Hayes, Flowers, and Williams (2021) explored the importance of communication with a focus on rural principals during the global pandemic, but did not research other principal practices. Mazurkiewicz (2021a) proposed that the prevalence of crisis in the current environment requires a change in paradigm around our approach to education leadership, but did not discuss effective professional practices of principals.

Mutch (2015b) draws on experiences of principals from the 2010/2011 earthquakes in New Zealand to identify how the crisis changed the role of the principal. This study did not specify the link to staff wellbeing and how the practices of principals ultimately impacted student outcomes. Ramos-Pla, Tintore and del Arco (2021), found that the age and experience of the principal, alongside the type of school was not as influential during times of crisis as they were prior to the COVID-19 crisis. Their study focused on personal leadership resources and referred to the personal qualities held by leaders but did not outline practices that can be used to lead through and after a crisis. The impact of crisis in schools is profound, affecting not only the operational continuity of educational institutions but also the wellbeing of students, staff, and the broader school community. Crises, whether natural disasters, pandemics, violence, or sudden traumatic events, disrupt the normal educational process, often leading to heightened anxiety, uncertainty, and significant emotional and psychological distress among stakeholders (Da'as et al., 2025; Hayes et al., 2022; Striepe & Cunningham, 2022).

Research shows that such events can result in a decline in academic achievement, increased absenteeism, and a deterioration in school climate and trust (McCallum, 2021; Waters et al., 2021). The literature highlights that the negative effects of crises are especially pronounced for vulnerable students and staff, who may lack adequate support systems (Dicke et al., 2024). Moreover, school leaders and teachers often experience increased stress, burnout, and feelings of isolation as they are required to respond rapidly to evolving situations, frequently with little prior training or guidance (Anderson et al., 2020). The cumulative effect of repeated or severe crises can lead to long-term psychosocial consequences, such as trauma, decreased job satisfaction, higher turnover, and even intentions to leave the profession (Dicke et al., 2024). These findings capitalise on the necessity of robust crisis preparedness, systemic support, and the cultivation of resilient school cultures to mitigate the adverse impacts of crisis events on educational communities.

Thornton (2021) conducted a small-scale study which highlighted five effective leadership practices that principals employed during the COVID-19 crisis; however, the study did not explore if these changed or were impacted by the crisis. Studies by Hayes and Derrington (Hayes & Derrington, 2023), Striepe and Cunningham (2022), and Fletcher and Nicholas (2016), all reported that the leadership qualities of principals did not develop during a crisis but were enhanced by the situation. In these studies participants self-identified as servant leaders and/or transformational leaders. Much of the literature relating to educational leadership and crisis focuses on the time of the crisis, which suggests that more research of a longitudinal nature is required to explore the link between crisis and how the professional practices of principals can evolve to support the changing needs of their schools and communities. The current study explored how the professional practices of principals, their perspectives and approaches changed or

impacted by crisis and how this has influenced how they support the occupational wellbeing of their staff.

2.3.1 The Emotional Toll on School Leaders

The psychological and emotional toll experienced by school leaders during crises has attracted increasing scholarly attention, with research consistently highlighting the intertwined relationship between principals' wellbeing and their capacity to effectively support staff (Hayes et al., 2022; Kanowski, 2022; Wittmer & Hopkins, 2022). Hayes et al. (2022) found that the overwhelming responsibilities faced by principals during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as making rapid decisions about safety and wellbeing, often led to chronic emotional distress and diminished leadership efficacy (Hayes et al., 2022). Similarly, recent findings from the Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety, and Wellbeing Survey (2025) indicate that persistent stress and burnout among school leaders directly impact their ability to foster supportive climates for teachers, which in turn affects staff morale and wellbeing (Dicke et al., 2025). This premise is further supported by Striepe and Cunningham (2022), who stress that leaders' mental health cannot be viewed in isolation, but rather must be understood as integral to the broader school environment. When principals experience high levels of stress or emotional exhaustion, their capacity to model and promote positive, supportive climates for teachers is undermined, triggering a cascade effect that negatively influences the entire school community (Da'as et al., 2025; Hayes et al., 2022; Striepe & Cunningham, 2022). This study investigates leadership wellbeing, communication, and sustainable support strategies to ensure the flourishing of both educators and students.

By discussing the emotional burden experienced by school leaders, it is also essential to consider the implications of role-related isolation. As Striepe and Cunningham (2022) highlight, principals often face unique tensions and demands in their positions, which can contribute to pronounced feelings of isolation, particularly during times of crisis. This is echoed by Kanowski (2022), who notes that principals' work is inherently relational, yet the singular nature of their role often leaves them without peers to confide in, thus intensifying their sense of professional loneliness (Kanowski, 2022). Additionally, Gorrell et al. (2021) emphasise that principals may receive substantially less upward support from staff compared to the support they themselves provide, further exacerbating their isolation (Gorrell et al., 2021). This isolation is often aggravated in crisis situations, when traditional support networks are strained or disrupted (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022). Consequently, these circumstances underscore the urgent need for robust, contextually relevant mental health supports specifically tailored for school leaders, as standard interventions may not sufficiently address the unique stressors and emotional challenges faced by those in educational leadership roles (Campbell, 2024; Hayes et al., 2022).

The role of school principals as educational leaders has been extensively studied, with a predominant focus on their impact on student outcomes and school effectiveness (Day, 2016; Day & Gurr, 2024b; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). However, emerging research has revealed that principals' leadership practices significantly influence the wellbeing of their staff, which in turn affects teacher retention, motivation, and ultimately, student learning

(Abrahamsen et al., 2024; Van der Vyver et al., 2020). Despite this recognition, there remains a paucity of comprehensive research exploring the specific principal behaviours and leadership practices that underpin staff wellbeing.

A directly relevant and recent contribution to this gap comes from Striepe et al. (2025), whose comparative study of principals across Australia, Fiji, and New Zealand examined the longer-term impacts of leading through compounding crises. Their analysis found that principals adopted a three-pronged leadership approach as crises unfolded, moving from an initial directive stance toward a more collaborative one that drew on the distributed expertise of others, with a consistent focus on wellbeing and relationship-building across all three national contexts, even as context-specific differences emerged according to crisis type, school characteristics, and location. Notably, Striepe et al. (2025) also found that principals' self-perception and professional priorities continued to evolve even after the acute demands of a crisis diminished, as leaders reflected on and reconsidered their role,a finding directly relevant to this study's own interest in how crisis reshapes principals' perspectives over time, and one of the few studies to examine this longer-term, post-acute period specifically rather than the crisis event itself. This comparative, cross-national study represents a valuable and recent counterpart to the present study's single-country, single-region focus, and it's finding that wellbeing and relationship-building were consistent priorities across three distinct national contexts lends weight to the possibility that the practices identified in Chapter 5 of this thesis may extend beyond rural and regional Victoria specifically.

This literature review synthesises current research on principal leadership and staff wellbeing during and post-crisis, and identifies key gaps in the literature, establishing the urgent need for a more nuanced, context-sensitive inquiry into the practices of principals that sustain and promote staff wellbeing in crisis and recovery phases, the inquiry this study undertakes. Despite the compelling evidence underscoring the importance of these leadership practices, significant gaps remain in the literature. There is a particular need for research that unpacks the nuanced influence of contextual factors, such as school size, community demographics, and institutional culture, on the design and effectiveness of principal-led wellbeing strategies (Dicke et al., 2024; Elliott & Hollingsworth, 2020; Hayes & Derrington, 2023a). Furthermore, much of the current literature focuses on immediate responses to crises, whereas investigations into the long-term impact of these practices on post-crisis staff wellbeing are comparatively rare (Dicke et al., 2024; Kanowski, 2022; McCallum, 2021), and there are very few studies that reflect on the evolving nature of principal–staff interactions over extended periods, moving beyond the acute crisis phase and into longer-term recovery and adaptation (Dicke et al., 2024; Striepe & Cunningham, 2022; Urick et al., 2021).

2.4 Educational Leadership Models in Crisis Contexts

Having established the impact crisis has on schools and their leaders, this section turns to the leadership models most commonly drawn upon to understand how principals respond. Research consistently affirms that school leadership is second only to classroom teaching

in influencing student achievement (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005), with a comprehensive 2021 synthesis of 219 studies since 2000 confirming and likely understating this effect given more sophisticated longitudinal data now available (Grissom et al., 2021). The leadership practices of principals' shape school culture, teacher motivation, and work conditions, all of which are critical determinants of teacher wellbeing and retention (Abrahamsen et al., 2024; Day, 2016). Van der Vyver and colleagues (2020) found that transformational and transactional leadership behaviours positively contribute to teachers' professional wellbeing, which is associated with higher teacher retention rates. Similarly, Abrahamsen et al. (2024) emphasise the interdependency among principal leadership, teacher wellbeing, and academic achievement, underlining how principals' capacity to build trusting relationships and promote a culture of wellbeing leads to more sustainable school success.

The COVID-19 crisis and the Victorian floods challenged traditional leadership models, prompting principals and leaders to draw upon a range of attributes from different models. Much of the research into leadership during crisis affirms that crisis leadership is different from ordinary circumstances (Hemmer & Elliff, 2020; Smith & Riley, 2012; Striepe & Cunningham, 2022, p. 143). Traditional research on educational leadership focuses on several models. The models that most closely align to crisis leadership include authentic leadership, servant leadership, distributed leadership, transformational leadership, moral leadership, and instructional leadership. Truly effective leadership is indeed a combination of many of the traits from these models and requires a focus on both the wellbeing of members within the organisation and their performance and classroom instruction (Day et al., 2016; Robinson, 2011).

2.4.1 Authentic Leadership

Many principals refer to themselves as authentic leaders and many of the traits are appropriate for use during a crisis. Authentic leadership can be defined as leader behaviour that "fosters great self-awareness, an internalised moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development" (Walumbwa et al., 2008, p. 94). Authentic leaders can be characterised by their desire to serve others and make a difference (Celik et al., 2016). The position of principal in a school is, by its nature, one created to serve the school community. Most people enter the field of education wanting to make a difference to the lives of young people, and this continues to be the to be the case when educators transition into positions of leadership (Celik et al., 2016).

Authenticity can be observed in all leadership styles, and although leaders may use different practices to lead, they can still be described as authentic. The four traits attributed to authentic leadership through much research are "balanced processing, internalised more perspective, relational transparency and self-awareness" (Celik et al., 2016, p. 203). Authentic leadership offers a framework that can be combined with other leadership styles to lead school communities throughout and after crisis. Authentic

leadership has emerged as a significant model within contemporary leadership theory, especially in educational contexts. While the roots of authenticity can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy's focus on the "true self, " and through twentieth-century modernism's emphasis on trustworthiness and consistency, the concept has become increasingly relevant in the postmodern era, which questions whether authenticity can exist amid multiple selves and values (Arar et al., 2022). Authenticity is commonly associated with genuineness, reliability, integrity, and honesty, contrasted against manipulation or phoniness.

In educational leadership, authentic leadership is characterised by a combination of self-knowledge, values-informed decision-making, and transparent, reflective practice (Begley, 2006). Begley (2006) describes authentic leadership as "professionally effective, ethically sound, and consciously reflective practices in educational administration", asserting that it transcends procedural management by embracing open-ended, visionary responses to social circumstances. Scholars have advanced several definitions of authentic leadership. Walumbwa et al. (2008) define it as "a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalised moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development" (Arar et al., 2022, p. 140). Avolio et al. (2004) emphasise leaders' deep self-awareness and their awareness of others' values and strengths. Authentic leadership offers a compelling model for educational leaders, emphasising self-awareness, ethical conduct, and relational transparency. Its effectiveness is well-supported by empirical research, though its practice must be sensitive to cultural, contextual, and individual differences.

2.4.2 Servant Leadership

Servant leadership positions the wellbeing and development of team members as a foundational leadership principle (Greenleaf, 2002), a stance evident in leaders who commit to supportive behaviours, personalised mentoring, and facilitating professional growth for those they lead. This relationship has since been supported empirically at scale: a meta-analysis of the servant leadership literature found a consistent positive relationship with follower organisational commitment (Zhang et al., 2021), while a study of 703 employees in public-sector organisations a closer structural analogy to schools than private-sector samples found servant leadership behaviours predicted measured follower resilience specifically (Peng et al., 2022). This model is directly relevant to crisis leadership given its explicit prioritisation of follower welfare over organisational output during periods when staff are under acute strain.

The COVID-19 pandemic required many principals to be critically reflective of their approach, redirecting their attention and skillset toward this model specifically. Servant leaders need the ability to refocus and adjust their own attitude: they must keep the school's vision in mind while recognising that the traditional path toward it would be

interrupted by the crisis, requiring leaders to invest time and energy in listening and hearing from staff and students directly (Boone & Makhani, 2012). Recruitment and investing personal time and energy into staff is a critical component of this style of leadership, empowering staff to achieve success and recognising their efforts supports this model. Essentially, a servant leader works to help staff grow and empowers staff, facilitating their needs so they can achieve their goals. One of the main challenges for schools during the COVID-19 crisis was the feeling amongst leadership teams and staff of helplessness. Empowering staff, celebrating their achievements and the positive impact their efforts were having on students and families became an important role of the principal. This approach to leadership, when implemented and done correctly can create a very positive work environment and help increase staff retention and commitment to the organisational goals (Jaramillo et al., 2009). Servant leadership has emerged as an influential and well-researched leadership model, especially in educational contexts, due to its emphasis on service, empowerment, and ethical practice. Its effectiveness is supported by empirical evidence demonstrating benefits for individuals and organisations, though continued research is needed to address definitional challenges and contextual variations (Arar et al., 2022; Nissinen et al., 2024). To be a servant leader, principals need to be brave enough and exercise interpersonal courage to divert from tradition and postpone or delay proposed work towards the school's vision.

2.4.3 Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership emphasises the sharing of leadership responsibility across a school community rather than its concentration in a single individual and has attracted growing interest for its role in enhancing teacher collaboration and wellbeing (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Kaul et al., 2022a). Kaul et al. (2022a) highlight how principals rely on pre-existing organisational structures and distributed decision-making to navigate crises, stabilising instructional leadership during turbulent times and, in doing so, indirectly supporting staff wellbeing.

Multiple people within a school influence improvement, including middle leaders and leadership teams, and distributed leadership recognises the contribution of everyone to school improvement (Harris & Spillane, 2008). This model challenges traditional leadership roles and moves to a more decentralised model as leadership is distributed to leading teachers, teachers, and support staff, utilising their expertise where appropriate (Harris, 2020). Distributed leadership focuses on the interactions between people and the impact they have on an organisation. It is a system that binds the organisation, it relies on relationships, keeps individuals accountable, and reduces the workload for the school principal (Alene, 2022). Distributed leadership has emerged as a prominent model in educational leadership research, offering an alternative to traditional, hierarchical conceptions of school leadership. Rather than focusing solely on the actions and characteristics of individual leaders (such as principals), distributed leadership emphasises the collective, shared, and collaborative nature of leadership practice within schools.

During the COVID-19 crisis, while schools were dispersed and required to pivot to remote and flexible learning, distributed leadership became a necessity for many principals. In order to reach and support all students and staff, principals need to utilise the skills of each member of their leadership team, and teams were also expanded to ensure everyone was supported. Distributed leadership is defined as "multiple sources of guidance and direction, following the contours of expertise in an organisation, made coherent through a common culture" (Harris, 2003, p. 11). This model distinguishes leadership from formal leadership roles or titles and instead focuses on the distribution of responsibility, power-sharing, teamwork, and emergent collective responsibility (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016; Woods, 2016).

Principals needed to recognise the skillsets within their staff and use their expertise to support the school community (Göksoy, 2015). Distributed leadership is a style that was practical during the COVID-19 crisis given that it upskills others and makes schools less vulnerable when key personnel move on (Robinson, 2008). In practice, this means encouraging leadership actions at every level of the school, not just among those with formal authority. With pressure on the workforce and a shortage of teachers, distributed leadership supports succession planning and enables principals to identify and recognise skills and attributes in staff members. Principals who foster distributed leadership and shared responsibility among staff are more likely to sustain improvements and adapt to complex challenges (Day & Gurr, 2024a). Principals can then reward them with leadership responsibility thereby improving retention and having a positive impact on the organisation.

2.4.4 Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership behaviours have been positively linked to teachers' professional wellbeing and retention (Van der Vyver et al., 2020). This model emphasises inspiring and motivating followers toward a shared vision, a function that becomes particularly salient during crisis, when a school community's sense of shared purpose can be disrupted. Transformational leadership is considered to have four main dimensions, namely charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Principals and leaders displaying charisma are generally more able to build relationships with staff, relational trust, and thereby inspire people to work towards common goals and the shared organisational vision. Transformational leaders inspire and motivate staff, who are then more encouraged to work together and create a better work environment (Celik et al., 2016). These leaders care about their staff and colleagues. They aim to ensure that all staff feel important and valued, which can empower staff to build a learning climate that involves them in the decision-making process (Celik et al., 2016; Ghasabeh et al., 2015). Principals were challenged during the COVID-19 crisis, and relationships with staff were identified as a critical aspect for keeping the school community connected and students supported. With videoconferencing and phone calls as the main options for communication, it was critical that principals openly displayed compassion and empathy for staff to ensure that they felt

valued. Given the medium of communication, it was important that leaders and principals understood their own emotions as well as that of their teams to build relational trust with staff (Nakamura & Milner, 2023).

Transformational leadership was appropriate during the COVID-19 crisis as it has an emphasis on intrinsic motivation and on the positive development of followers (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The remote nature of schooling during the COVID-19 crisis left people desperately needing connection, and transformational leaders were able to support staff more on an individual level to address this need. Principals and leaders can help their staff and the wider community by portraying a leader who is emotionally resilient as each presentation and communication with staff and community needs to display a calmness, and a level of control, transparency, and decisiveness (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Even during times of great uncertainty, when information release was delayed, decisions still needed to be made. Not all decisions were correct, and often in times of crisis, leaders need to make decisions without all the necessary information. At such times, transformative leaders are able to present decisions with confidence and reasoning to help the community build trust in them (Munby, 2019). Mazurkiewicz (2021a), however cautions that transformational leadership may not be the most suitable leadership style post crisis. This is due to charisma which potentially produces negative outcomes if the leaders become accustomed to positive feedback.

2.4.5 Moral Leadership

Moral leadership foregrounds the ethical and values-driven dimension of leadership practice, requiring principals to make decisions grounded in a clear sense of the school's core purpose even under the pressure and ambiguity crisis conditions create. Leadership is so much more than telling people what to do and how to do it. It is about embracing and enacting moral responsibility for their own practices and actions and for their school communities. Moral leadership is about being, and through that being helping others to want to be better (Pellicer & Deal, 2008). A leader displaying moral leadership traits knows what they value and care about and these values serve as a moral compass for the leader (Pellicer & Deal, 2008). Moral leadership is often defined as leadership that is grounded in ethical principles, values, and a commitment to justice, care, and critique (Shapiro & Gross, 2008; Starratt, 2004). Begley (2006) argues that authentic leadership in schools is inseparable from moral leadership, emphasising self-knowledge, moral reasoning, and sensitivity to the value orientations of others as prerequisites for effective and ethical leadership (Begley, 2006). Sergiovanni (1992) stated that intuition, emotion and reflective practice are critical aspects of moral leadership and these can be influenced by experience and culture.

Starratt (2004) highlight that moral leadership is distinct from other leadership models in its focus on ethical action, interpersonal relationships, and the pursuit of the common good, rather than solely on organisational efficiency or personal success. The ethical dimension of leadership is viewed as a dynamic interplay between the leader's personal values and the broader social, cultural, and organisational context (Arar et al., 2022). Moral

leadership can complement other leadership styles, and principals may display aspects of moral leadership whilst practicing other styles as well. The COVID-19 pandemic presented many challenges, and although principals wanted to make others better, the isolation and issues with communication contributed to making this more difficult than in a face-to-face school setting. Principals may use various attributes from the different styles of leadership, and these will be visible through their professional practices.

2.4.6 Instructional Leadership

Instructional leaders are teachers of teachers and mentors who build the capacity of others through collaboration and by evaluating the impact of teaching on learning (Campbell et al., 2019) . Hattie (2015) describes instructional leaders as having a focus on students, who utilise classroom observations, professional development, and communication of high expectations to facilitate a school environment that is conducive to learning. Instructional leadership has emerged as a foundational concept in educational leadership, especially since the 1980s, when research on effective schools began to highlight the principal's role in shaping instructional quality and school effectiveness (Hallinger, 2011). At its core, instructional leadership emphasises the principal's responsibility for the academic progress of students by focusing on teaching and learning processes within the school. The instructional leader in a school does not have to be the principal; however, principals are regularly referred to as instructional leaders. Principals can identify instructional leaders within their schools and facilitate the time, procedures and processes required for the leaders to support staff (Campbell et al., 2019; Lambert, 2002). Respectful relationships between the instructional leaders and teaching staff are critical for this model to be effective. For principals to be effective leaders, they must partner with teachers and have the capacity to accept they will not have all the answers. It is important that teachers feel appreciated and believe their principal understands the challenges and frustrations they face in their roles (Hoerr, 2008).

Effective instructional leadership occurs when there is an alignment of the schools vision and its structures and process, leaders can influence the quality of outcomes through accountability and consistency of practice (Hallinger, 2005). The core business of an instructional leader is to focus on the enhancement of effective teaching and learning (Robinson, 2011). A seminal model by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) identifies three major dimensions of instructional leadership: (1) Defining the school's mission, through establishing clear, measurable, and time-based goals focused on student achievement; (2) Managing the instructional program, which includes supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating the curriculum, and monitoring student progress; and (3) Promoting a positive school learning climate, which encompasses fostering high teacher expectations, developing a safe and orderly environment, and supporting continuous professional development (Arar et al., 2022). This model assumes that leaders' primary focus should be on influencing teacher behaviours that directly affect student growth.

Instructional leadership remains a central and well-researched model in educational leadership, with strong evidence supporting its role in improving teaching quality and student learning outcomes (Arar et al., 2022; Bogler, 2001; Gkolia et al., 2018; Ross & Gray, 2006). The most influential of these findings comes from Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe's (2008) meta-analysis of 27 studies, which found instructional leadership's effect on student outcomes was three to four times greater than that of transformational leadership. This finding is widely cited, but Robinson's own later work (2010) cautions that the gap may partly reflect how instructional-leadership studies measured leadership using indicators closely aligned with the outcome variables themselves, rather than a straightforward difference in effectiveness between the two leadership styles a methodological nuance worth holding onto, particularly since later meta-analyses have consistently found transformational leadership's average effect size to be small in absolute terms (Robinson et al., 2008; Sun & Leithwood, 2012), rather than transformational leadership being ineffective in itself. With the recent push towards instructional leadership in Victorian schools specifically, it is important to consider how this model was affected by crisis and which of its attributes proved transferable when principals were required to prioritise staff and community wellbeing over instructional continuity.

Empirical research supports the positive impact of instructional leadership on a range of school outcomes. Studies have found significant relationships between effective instructional leadership and higher levels of teacher job satisfaction, commitment, professional growth, and student achievement (Arar et al., 2022; Bogler, 2001; Gkolia et al., 2018; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Ross & Gray, 2006). Robinson et al. (2008) reported that the direct effect of instructional leadership on student performance was three to four times greater than that of transformational leadership, especially when the leadership practices focused on classroom teaching and learning climate (Arar et al., 2022). Instructional leadership remains a central and well-researched model in educational leadership, with strong evidence supporting its role in improving teaching quality and student learning outcomes. The model continues to evolve as schools adapt to new challenges, emphasising the importance of context, collaboration, and the development of professional learning communities. Qualitative studies reveal that principals engage in diverse adaptive practices during crises, including informal self-assessment, peer support, and context-sensitive decision making, drawing flexibly across each of these models rather than adhering to any single one (Cahapay, 2022; Da'as et al., 2025; Rinehart, 2021). However, these practices are underreported and underexplored, particularly regarding their influence on staff wellbeing specifically the gap this study addresses directly.

To build upon this comprehensive overview of educational leadership models, it is essential to consider the professional practices through which principals enact these leadership styles in real-world settings. Principals' professional practices encompass the concrete actions, decisions, and behaviours that translate leadership theories into effective school leadership. These practices include setting clear visions and goals, fostering

collaborative cultures, supporting teacher development, managing resources strategically, and responding adaptively to the unique contexts and challenges their schools face (Hallinger, 2016; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Robinson et al., 2007). Understanding these practices is crucial because it is what principals do daily that directly impacts teaching quality, staff wellbeing, and ultimately student outcomes. Moreover, during times of crisis, principals' professional practices become even more pivotal as they navigate uncertainty, foster resilience, and maintain instructional continuity (Da'as et al., 2025; Day & Gurr, 2024b). The following sections will therefore explore these professional practices in depth, highlighting how principals operationalise their leadership to promote both educational excellence and wellbeing within their school communities.

2.5 Educational Psychology and Crisis Leadership

Just as teachers need to understand how students learn, principals need to understand their staff and how best to support them. In times of crisis principals are required to make decisions and be agile in their practices, however they must be mindful at all times of how each dcision may impact staff. Crises place extraordinary psychological demands on school leaders, requiring them to balance operational management with emotional support for their communities. Principals are often tasked with "leading organisational change under historically challenging conditions" and "maintaining stability while delivering change" (Kaul et al., 2022, p. 1). The psychological strain is intensified by resource constraints, conflicting stakeholder needs, and the unpredictability of crises (Horwood et al., 2021).

Research finds that "harmonious passion" for the work is associated with job satisfaction, while "obsessive passion" can lead to burnout (Horwood et al., 2021, p. 1); high job demands, emotional labour, and the expectation to serve as both operational and emotional leaders contribute to elevated stress and attrition among principals. Leadership during crisis also demands courage and a strong ethical orientation, with principals often called upon to make difficult decisions and advocate for equity in the face of adversity (Robinson, 2020), and responsible leadership including moral and social responsibility is increasingly seen as essential for sustainable crisis response (Müller et al., 2020). Effective leaders draw on critical hope, passion, resilience, flourishing, advanced sense-making, and ethical courage to support their schools, fostering organisational conditions such as trust, collaboration, and distributed leadership that buffer against burnout and enable adaptive, equitable responses.

2.6 Occupational Wellbeing

Having reviewed the leadership models and professional practices principals draw on, and the psychological demands crisis places on them, this section turns to occupational wellbeing directly, the central construct this study investigates. To understand how the practices of principals can impact, improve and sustain the occupational wellbeing of staff, we need a clear understanding of occupational wellbeing. Viac and Fraser (2020) define occupational wellbeing around "four key dimensions: cognitive wellbeing, subjective

wellbeing, physical and mental wellbeing, and social wellbeing" (p. 2). Numerous factors can influence the occupational wellbeing of staff, but the practices and decisions made by principals can play a significant role when creating a culture that is supportive and values positive occupational wellbeing. Recent research recognises that principal leadership significantly influences school culture, teacher morale, and ultimately student outcomes (Day & Gurr, 2024a; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). Principals who demonstrate transformational and transactional leadership behaviours tend to foster positive professional wellbeing among teachers, reducing stress and burnout while enhancing job satisfaction and retention (Van der Vyver et al., 2020). Van der Vyver, Kok, and Conley's (2020) quantitative study in South Africa found a positive correlation between transformational leadership and teachers' professional wellbeing, suggesting leadership styles are critical factors in shaping staff experiences. Moreover, the role of emotional intelligence and emotional regulation in school leadership has gained empirical support for its role in promoting educator wellbeing (Floman et al., 2024). Emotionally intelligent leadership is associated with greater emotional support to staff, which buffers the negative emotional impacts of crises and supports staff resilience.

Much of the literature on principal leadership emphasises student outcomes, organisational effectiveness, or principals' own wellbeing, with less direct attention to how specific principal practices affect staff wellbeing (Abrahamsen et al., 2024; Van der Vyver et al., 2020). While the link between leadership and teacher retention is acknowledged, few studies explicitly investigate the mechanisms by which principal behaviours promote or hinder staff psychological, emotional, and professional wellbeing. Staff wellbeing influences teacher retention, teaching quality and student outcomes (Day & Gurr, 2024a; Van der Vyver et al., 2020). Inadequate support during crisis can lead to burnout and attrition (Dicke et al., 2025). This study forms part of the research that identifies effective leadership practices to protect and promote staff wellbeing to inform interventions and policy.

When considering the cognitive wellbeing of staff, many factors influence how principals can support staff, from the physical spaces provided, to the amount of time staff are allocated for tasks, and the supports available. The learning architecture, processes, policies, and procedures all contribute to removing barriers and distractions so teachers can focus on teaching and learning (McCallum, 2021). Creating an environment that enhances teacher efficacy, encourages collaboration, and values the work of teachers and support staff can influence cognitive wellbeing (Abdulaziz et al., 2024). The subjective wellbeing element can be thought of as "purposefulness" (Viac & Fraser, 2020, p. 25). This is why teachers need to feel valued and that their work is recognised and has a purpose. Principals play a key role in recognising the work of staff and providing clear direction (Dicke et al., 2020). In turn, staff are more likely to work harder and feel more valued when they have a sense of purpose and know that they are contributing to the improvement cycle of a school (Cann et al., 2021; McCallum, 2021).

The physical and mental wellbeing element refers to the physical working environment as well as the culture of the school. Physical spaces need to be welcoming and workable spaces, which are able to accommodate the physical needs of the staff (McCallum & Price, 2010). This can vary substantially given the domain areas or roles of the staff. Flexible spaces that encourage collaboration as well as an opportunity to work independently, are required; these features are linked to both cognitive and social wellbeing (Kanowski, 2022). The mental wellbeing of staff is not as visually obvious, and the practices of principals can have major impacts in a very short amount of time. Principals need to create an environment that nurtures acts of kindness, sharing of appreciations, and space to care for others (Turner et al., 2022). The principal is responsible for monitoring the intellectual demands of processes, policies, and professional interactions through the lens of the physical and cognitive wellbeing dimensions (McCallum & Price, 2010).

Occupational wellbeing is an essential element to supporting the wellbeing of students. Principals who listen effectively and demonstrate empathy are more effective at making teachers feel valued and thereby improving the overall culture of the organisation (Cann et al., 2021). There is considerable evidence to show that the professional practices of principals have a direct impact on the work environment and culture of schools, which is the critical element to improving and sustaining the wellbeing of teachers in the workplace (Abdulaziz et al., 2024; Adams, 2017; Anyon et al., 2016; Liu & Hallinger, 2018; Zheng, 2017). A principal's own emotional and cognitive wellbeing affects their leadership capacity (Kanowski, 2022; Wang, 2025). By integrating principals' self-knowledge, resilience and professional learning with their practices supporting staff, this research may illuminate pathways for holistic leadership development.

When teachers feel valued and heard, the culture of the school creates positive occupational wellbeing for staff, which is likely to have a direct impact on how staff communicate with and support students. This effect is amplified when teachers experience collective efficacy and are made aware that they are having a positive impact on student outcomes (Elliott & Hollingsworth, 2020; Waters et al., 2021). Teacher collective efficacy improves the occupational wellbeing of staff, and staff working positively with colleagues in a collaborative manner improves staff morale and has a positive impact on all students (Elliott & Hollingsworth, 2020). Principals who can successfully promote self-efficacy will ensure that learning will continue to happen through positive interactions (Schleicher, 2020). Viac and Fraser (2020) identified self-efficacy as an ability and skill that helps improve cognitive wellbeing and is a critical factor impacting general teacher wellbeing (Cann et al., 2021; McCallum & Price, 2010). When teachers experience positive occupational wellbeing, they can build strong and positive relationships with students.

Most studies emphasise overall principal wellbeing or principal leadership styles in general (Kanowski, 2022; Wang, 2025). While the impact of leadership on student outcomes is well documented, less attention is given to how specific principal behaviours

and practices influence staff wellbeing during and post crises (Day & Gurr, 2024b; Leithwood et al., 2020). While Floman et al. (2024) highlight the role of emotional intelligence in promoting educator wellbeing, such studies are sparse and predominantly conducted outside crisis contexts. The wellbeing of principals is also an important factor to consider in school leadership before, during, and after a crisis. While the emotional labour and cognitive stress experienced by principals have been recognised, less is known about how these demands translate into leadership behaviours and practices that affect staff wellbeing (Campbell, 2024; Wang, 2025). The hidden emotional work of principals, such as navigating conflict, supporting distressed staff, and managing crises, is an "invisible element" often overlooked in leadership research (Campbell, 2024). Furthermore, the cognitive overload principals face can impair their ability to provide effective support to staff (Wang, 2025).

Research often generalises findings across diverse school contexts without adequately considering how factors such as school size, rurality, socioeconomic status, and cultural settings influence principal practices and staff wellbeing (Hardwick-Franco, 2019; Kaul et al., 2022). Hardwick-Franco (2019) underscores that rural school principals face unique challenges and require differentiated professional development to support their staff effectively. Similarly, Wang (2025) highlights that cognitive wellbeing of principals varies significantly between urban and rural settings, influenced by resource availability and community demands, a gap this study, situated specifically in rural and regional Victoria, is positioned to address.

2.7 Conclusion

In summary, the existing literature highlights the importance of principal leadership in influencing staff wellbeing, especially during crises. However, there remain significant gaps, including limited focus on staff wellbeing as a distinct outcome, lack of longitudinal and qualitative research, insufficient attention to contextual factors, and inadequate integration of principals' self-knowledge with their leadership practices. Existing studies tend to overlook the variation in leadership practices and crisis responses based on unique school contexts – such as size, community demographics, resource availability, and institutional culture – which can significantly influence the effectiveness of leadership strategies (Urick et al., 2021). There is also a gap in the literature regarding the examination of intersectionality of staff experiences, including how factors such as previous trauma, socioeconomic background or diversity, equity and inclusion issues interact with and influence leadership practices during crisis. This research addressed some of these gaps through comprehensive, context-sensitive, and qualitative research that is crucial to develop evidence-based leadership practices that sustain staff wellbeing during and after crises, ensuring the resilience and effectiveness of schools in challenging times.

As foreshadowed earlier in this chapter, running through this literature is a largely unexamined assumption: that effective crisis leadership resembles a settled, fully-formed competency, either present or absent in a given principal. The literature reviewed above documents leaders who are resilient, emotionally intelligent, and adaptive, but rarely

documents the uncertainty, improvisation, and acknowledged imperfection principals themselves describe when leading through genuine crisis. This study's focus on ‘imperfect principals’ responds directly to this gap: rather than measuring principals against an idealised standard of crisis leadership competency, it takes seriously principals' own accounts of leading imperfectly, under incomplete information and genuine uncertainty, as the phenomenon worth understanding in its own right. Read through the Theory of Practice Architectures, introduced in Chapter 3, this reframing matters because it shifts the object of study from an idealised individual trait to the situated, constrained, and often improvised practice architectures within which real principals actually lead through real crises.

Taken together, the literature reviewed in this chapter shares a largely unexamined assumption: that effective crisis leadership is a settled competency, one a principal either possesses or can be trained into, with uncertainty and improvisation treated as obstacles on the way to competent practice rather than as defining features of leading through genuine crisis. Even the most sympathetic accounts of the emotional toll crisis takes on school leaders (Section 2.3) tend to describe successful responses in these idealised terms, and the leadership models reviewed in Section 2.4, whether authentic, servant, distributed, transformational, or moral, are each framed around traits and behaviours a leader either demonstrates or does not, largely independent of the practice architectures, cultural, material, and social, within which that leadership is actually enacted. This is the gap the present study is positioned to address. Rather than measuring principals against an idealised standard of crisis leadership, this thesis takes principals' own acknowledged uncertainty, imperfection, and situated improvisation as the phenomenon worth understanding in its own right. The notion of "imperfect principals" that gives this thesis its title is not, therefore, a rhetorical flourish but a direct response to this literature: it names what the TPA makes visible and the leadership-trait literature does not, namely that principals' practices during crisis are enabled and constrained by the sayings, doings, and relatings of their particular school context, and that the resulting practice is necessarily situated, contingent, and imperfect rather than a deviation from some achievable ideal.

This research addresses these gaps through comprehensive, context-sensitive, and qualitative research that is crucial to developing evidence-based leadership practices that sustain staff wellbeing during and after crises, ensuring the resilience and effectiveness of schools in challenging times. Chapter three introduces the theoretical framework of the study, focusing on the TPA developed by Stephen Kemmis and colleagues (Mahon et al., 2017). This framework provides a comprehensive lens to understand the professional practices of school principals by examining the interconnected elements of sayings, doings, and relatings within specific cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements. Building on the literature review in this chapter, which has examined crisis leadership specifically, educational leadership models, professional practice, and occupational wellbeing, Chapter Three situates these concepts within the TPA framework, allowing for a deeper analysis of how principals' leadership practices are shaped by, and in turn shape, their contexts, especially during crisis situations.

Chapter 3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Introduction

The Theory of Practice Architectures (TPA) has been chosen as the theoretical framework for this study. The TPA, developed by Stephen Kemmis and Peter Grootenboer (2013), provides a robust framework for understanding practices, including leadership practices. It situates practices as activities that are socially established and shaped by specific arrangements within a site (Kemmis et al., 2014). This theory is particularly suited to studying leadership because it shifts the focus from individuals as isolated actors to the broader conditions, arrangement and possibilities that enable or constrain their practices. The TPA offers a robust structure to understand the dynamic intricate of practices in educational environments. In essence, this theory postulates that educational practices are deeply incorporated into specific contexts shaped by social-political, material-economic and cultural-discursive arrangements (Mahon et al., 2017). These arrangements comprise three interconnected elements: the 'relatings', which explain social relationships and interactions among participants; the 'doings', which belong to physical resources and environmental factors that influence the practice; and the 'sayings' element which include language, norms and values that guide actions and shape identities in educational environments (Mahon et al., 2017). This theory provided the researcher with the framework to go beyond describing what people do, it allowed the researcher to uncover why they do it and how the context influences it. By examining these elements, educational leaders can obtain information on how practices are promulgated and experienced, thus allowing a more subtle understanding of the realities faced by employees and students.

The TPA is particularly well-suited for studying leadership practices during crisis because it offers a comprehensive framework that captures the complex, situated, and relational nature of leadership in turbulent contexts. Unlike traditional leadership theories that often focus on individual traits or generalised behaviours, TPA foregrounds the interplay of sayings (language and discourse), doings (actions and routines), and relatings (relationships and power dynamics) within specific cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements (Kemmis, 2022; Kemmis et al., 2014). Crisis situations fundamentally disrupt these arrangements, creating rapidly changing conditions that require leaders to adapt their practices in real-time, negotiate new meanings, and reconfigure relationships to respond effectively. The politicised and moral dimensions of TPA emphasise how leadership during crisis is not merely technical management but involves critical engagement with power structures, ethical dilemmas, and social justice concerns that become heightened in crisis contexts (Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2015; Salamon et al., 2016). Moreover, TPA's focus on praxis, as action informed by reflection and contextual awareness, aligns with the need for leaders to continuously interpret and re-interpret evolving crises, making it a dynamic and responsive lens (Mahon et al., 2017). This situates leadership as a collective and emergent practice rather than an isolated function, which is essential for understanding how principals navigate the

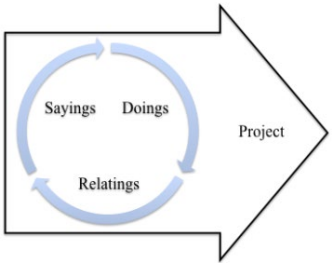
complexity and uncertainty inherent in crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022 Victorian floods. Therefore, TPA provides the analytical tools necessary to explore how crisis shapes leadership practices in ways that are embedded in and transformative of the specific conditions of each school context, addressing the unique challenges and opportunities that arise during crisis leadership.

3.2 Theory of Practice Architectures

This study utilises the TPA to explore and understand the beliefs and practices of principals leading through crisis, as well as examine the conditions that have influenced the emergence of these practices (Salamon et al., 2016). The theory addresses the two central aims of this study: identifying the professional practices principals enact to support, improve, and sustain the occupational wellbeing of their staff and themselves during and after crisis, and examining how leading through crisis changes principals' perspectives on, and approaches to, leadership. The TPA provides the framework to identify the elements of practice that constrain and enable praxis during crisis (Salamon et al., 2016). This theory holds that practices are a social phenomenon and therefore occur in a site, in this study, the site is the crisis-affected school, where the physical space-time, semantics and history are influential (Mahon et al., 2017).

The TPA breaks practice down into three elements, namely doings (or the actions of humans), sayings (or what people actually say) and relatings (or the relationships people share and the way they relate to other people and situations) (Kemmis, 2019). When combined sayings, doings, and relatings, form a practice, as is illustrated in Figure 6:1) sayings, constitute forms of understanding that can be referred to as cognitive knowledge, 2) doings compromise, modes of actions, often described as skills and capabilities and 3) relatings involve, the way people relate to each other and the world, the norms and values displayed by people (Kemmis et al., 2013). This is directly relevant to the present study, which explores the professional practices principals enact throughout crisis through this same three-part lens.

Figure 4 *- Composition of Practices*



Note. Practices are composed of sayings, doings, and relatings that hang together in projects. From Changing practices, changing education (p.33), by S. Kemmis, J. Wilkinson, C. Edwards-Groves, I. Hardy, & P. Grootenboer, 2014, Springer Science+Business Media Singapore. Copyright 2014 by Springer Science+Business Media Singapore.

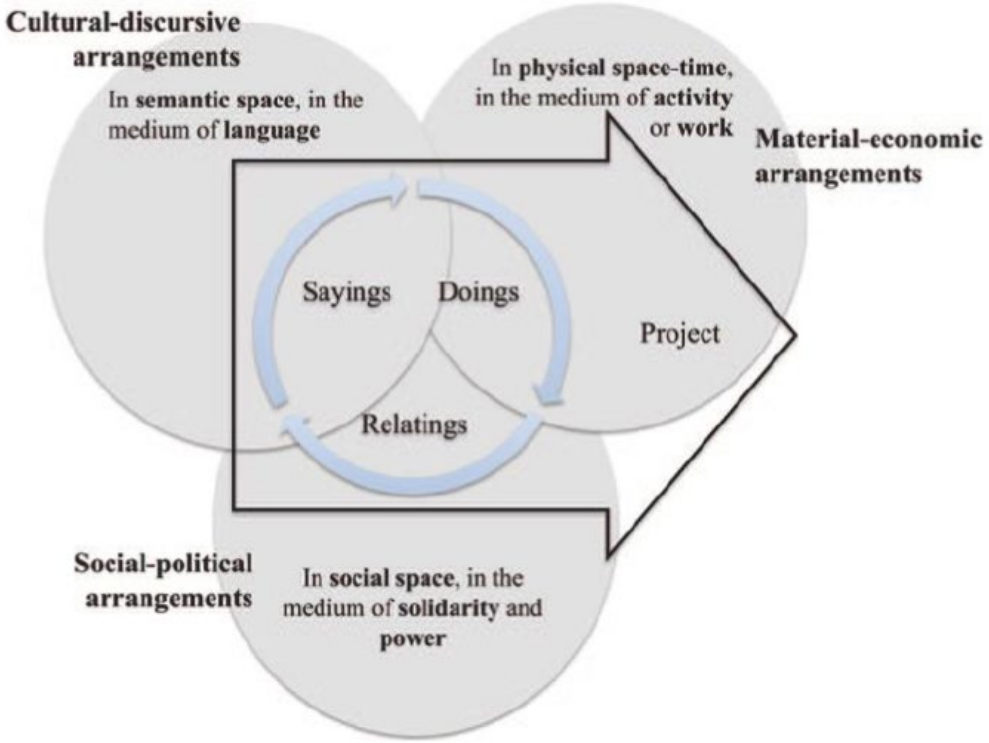
Edwards-Groves et al. (2015) show how leadership in schools is influenced by cultural-discursive norms (e.g., educational ideologies), material-economic conditions (e.g., funding and resources), and social-political dynamics (e.g., power relations between teachers and principals). Applying the theory to this study's data allowed interrogation of the discursive, material and social influences that shape, and are shaped by, principal practices during crisis (Salamon et al., 2016). Kemmis (2013) describes the theory of practice architecture provides the framework to express the relationship between practitioners and their practice:

> a relationship in which the participant speaks the language characteristic of the practice (*sayings*), engages in the activities of the practice in the set-ups characteristic of the practice (*doings*), and enters relationships with other people and objects characteristic of the practice (*relatings*) (Kemmis et al., 2013, p. 31).

Viewing the sayings, doings, and relatings of practice in isolation from the site or conditions where they occur, in this case, a school in crisis, would be overly simplistic.

The TPA stands out from other practice theories by providing a distinct ontological perspective on practice (Mahon et al., 2017). Approaching practice ontologically, allows a focus on the specific content and actions of practice, as well as the arrangements that enable it, including the time, space, and site of occurrence (Schatzki, 2003). During crisis, the compression of time and disruption of normal arrangements make this ontological lens especially salient. Figure 5 illustrates how the TPA is described as "an account of what practices are composed of and how practices shape, and are shaped, by the arrangements in which they are enmeshed in a site of practice (Mahon et al., 2017, p. 6). The TPA is underpinned by the conceptual importance of 'educational praxis' as a particular kind of 'human and collective action', by which 'good individuals and good societies are formed and transformed' (Kemmis, 2010; Salamon et al., 2016). A formulation that resonates directly with the moral weight principals describe carrying during crisis decision.

Figure 5 - The Theory of Practice Architectures



Note. The media and space in which sayings, doings, and relatings exist. From *Changing practices, changing education* (p. 34), by S. Kemmis, J. Wilkinson, C. Edwards-Groves, I. Hardy, & P. Grootenboer, 2014, Springer Science+Business Media Singapore. Copyright 2014 by Springer Science+Business Media Singapore.

The TPA offers a conceptual framing that illustrates the relationship between practice and the site in which it occurs, capturing the multidirectional flow between the two. The TPA is underpinned by the conceptual importance of 'educational praxis' as a particular kind of 'human and collective action', by which 'good individuals and good societies are formed and transformed' (Kemmis, 2010; Salamon et al., 2016). The TPA framework helps illuminate how leadership is not just an individual activity, but a collective and situated practice shaped by broader conditions. The theory recognises that past personal experiences influence practices and therefore shape current practices (Salamon et al., 2016). The TPA provides a concept that illustrates the relationship between practice and the site of the practice, displaying the multidirectional flow between the two and how the influence they have on each other. Schatki (2005, p. 467) notes that "human coexistence is inherently tied to a kind of context in which it transpires". Reference to site does not infer actual location, rather "the practice is itself a social site organising what happens; the practice is a site that meshes together a semantic space, a place existing in physical space-time and a social space" (Kemmis et al., 2013, p. 36). This is central to studying crisis leadership, since a crisis event reconfigures the site itself, its semantic, physical and social dimensions all shift together, and principal's practices shift with them.

The TPA recognises that past personal experience shapes current practices, which is particularly relevant to a study of principals drawing on prior crisis experience (for example, a preceding pandemic response) when navigating a subsequent one (Salamon et al., 2016). The TPA shifts the focus in leadership studies away from individual traits and behaviours and towards leadership as collaborative and distributed practice. Reich and Lizier (2023, pp. 6-9) argue that TPA reframes leadership as "leading as practice," emphasising the interconnected webs of sayings, doings, and relatings within an organisation. This reframing is well suited to crisis contexts, where leadership is necessarily distributed across a compressed and often improvised web of staff, community members and external agencies.

The TPA embeds a moral dimension in leadership by framing it as praxis, action informed by moral, social, and political goals. Leaders are seen as agents of change who must critically engage with the constraints of practice architectures to enable transformative practices (Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2015; Salamon et al., 2016). During crisis, principals may need to challenge or reshape inequitable policies or practices within the cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements of their sites (Kemmis et al., 2014). By decentering the individual leader and foregrounding the relational and systemic conditions of leadership, TPA offers a lens for understanding how crisis leadership is enabled and constrained by conditions largely outside any one principal's control. And therefore, how principals can act to reshape those conditions to protect their own and their staff's occupational wellbeing.

3.2.1 Cultural-Discursive Arrangements: Sayings

Cultural-discursive arrangements refer to the resources in the broad sense (e.g., language, specialist discourses, and shared understandings) that prefigure and enable particular sayings within a practice (Mahon et al., 2016). These arrangements exist in semantic space and can both constrain and enable what is relevant and appropriate to say, think, describe, interpret, or justify when performing a practice. Essentially, shaping the language and meaning-making processes of that practice. In education, much of this language and knowledge is passed on from predecessors and more experienced educators, and is further shaped by schools, regional, and government influences on the discursive and relational conditions surrounding principals' sayings (Hemmings et al., 2013).

Policies, guidelines and directives can both enable and constrain principals' practices. During crisis, how information is communicated has significant implications for staff morale and collective agency. Principals are responsible not only for disseminating information, but for framing problems to empower rather than overwhelm their staff. Adopting a narrative that emphasises resilience, adaptability and collective strength can shift educators' perspectives enabling them to navigate crises with renewed agency. Transparent, deliberately chosen language is therefore a vital component of robust leadership in crisis, directly shaping staff occupational wellbeing. Cultural-discursive

arrangements are dynamic and can change as practices evolve over time including through the deliberate intervention of a principal responding to crisis(Kemmis et al., 2014).

3.2.2 Material-Economic Arrangements: Doings

The material-economic arrangements of the theory relate to the physical and economic arrangements that can enable and constrain practices (Kemmis et al., 2013). They encompass the tangible elements, such as infrastructure, tools, funding, and organisational setups, as well as the temporal and logistical aspects that determine how, when, and where practices can unfold. Whilst principals have an element of autonomy with school budgets, much of this is governed by state and federal funding models and initiatives. The socio-economic status of students and families within the school community, available resources including staffing are major influences on principals' practices, with budgets a major factor in enabling or constraining practices (Salamon et al., 2016). A constraint that intensifies sharply during crisis, when demand for resources spikes while supply often does not.

In rural schools, principals often face material-economic constraints due to limited resources and infrastructure. This affects their ability to support students and teachers effectively. For example, differences in funding models and proximity to larger towns create disparities in resource availability (Olney & Wood, 2023). During crises, adequate resources become essential, access to mental health support services can considerably strengthen staff occupational wellbeing. The material-economic arrangement of TPA implies that principals must critically assess and advocate for the resources needed to effectively support their staff through crisis. In addition, rethinking the use of existing resources can generate innovative practices that meet the immediate needs of staff under crisis-induced stress. These arrangements include both human agents (e.g., teachers, staff) and non-human entities (e.g., tools, technologies), interacting to shape the "doings" of practice (Tai et al., 2023).

Material-economic arrangements can enable practice, for example, funding for professional development strengthens principals' and staff's capacity to respond to crisis. However, they can equally constrain it, as when poor infrastructure or insufficient budgets limit crisis response options. Practitioners need to critically assess whether current material-economic conditions are equitable and productive, and to explore possibilities for rearranging them, a task made more urgent not less during crisis (Tai et al., 2023).

3.2.3 Social-Political Arrangements: Relatings

The social-political arrangements present perhaps the greatest challenge for principals during crisis, encompassing relationships withstudents, parents, staff community members, colleagues, superiors and governing bodies, as well as relationships with non-human resources. These arrangements determine access to and consideration of, ideas and are realised through the solidarity and power dynamics of practitionersrelatings. These

arrangements prefigure and shape how people relate to one another, to non-human objects, and to institutional structures (Kemmis et al., 2014).

In the context of educational leadership during crises, principals are positioned as key social actors whose decisions can exacerbate or improve the pressures encountered by staff. Social-political arrangements include the power structures embedded in institutional frameworks. They can be used to understand the hierarchical relationships in schools, including the position of teachers as subordinate to principals, and students as subordinate to teachers (Fazio et al., 2025). These arrangements are influenced by organisational rules, social solidarities, and community relationships. Social-political arrangements are influenced by cultural values such as "tha dam-tshig ley gju-drey, " in the Bhutanese education system, which emphasises moral and professional conduct and collaboration with parents and communities (Kaka et al., 2022, p. 7). Social-political arrangements also shape relationships of solidarity, inclusion, and exclusion. They determine who has access to resources, opportunities, or influence within a practice. In Filipino, schools the patron-client relationships illustrate how relational prioritisation within kinship systems can determine power and influence (Panunciar et al., 2020).

The promotion of open communication and the establishment of collaborative networks between educators are essential practices that can improve staff occupational wellbeing and strengthen community resilience. Principals who engage personnel in decision-making and create inclusive forums for dialogue foster the sharing of experiences, thereby enabling collective meaning and belonging during difficult periods. Collaborative social-political arrangements can foster democratic and inclusive practices; however, hierarchical power dynamics or inequitable policies may inhibit staff agency, innovation, or relational trust precisely when they are needed most. Social-political arrangements are integral to shaping the relational dynamics, power structures, and solidarities in practices. They are deeply embedded in the fabric of social life and can either foster inclusivity and collaboration or reinforce exclusion and inequality, depending on how they are configured.

3.2.4 Practical Applications to Crisis Leadership

Practices are responsive to situations rather than static, varying according to circumstances and to the characteristics of the leaders, “practices are enmeshed with the world; practices enmesh us with the world” (Kemmis, 2019, p. 21). This responsiveness is especially pronounced during crisis, when principals must demonstrate agility and adaptability, tailoring their practices to fit the specific situation and context. The impact of their actions on others will vary according to the circumstances and the emotional wellbeing of those involved. Leadership in this sense can be understood as “practice-changing practice” practice that, in reshaping the practices of teaching, student learning and professional development around them (Kemmis et al., 2013, p. 208).

The TPA is well suited to studying the practices of principals during crisis specifically because crisis compresses decision-making: actions are taken and consequences follow in very short spaces of time, often with limited information, and principals must act for the good despite this uncertainty. The TPA includes praxis as “the action of people who act in

the knowledge that their actions will have good and ill consequences for which they have sole or shared responsibility, and who, in that knowledge, want to act for the good" (Kemmis & Smith, 2008, p. 4). This description captures the moral weight of crisis decision-making particularly well. Kemmis and Smith (2008) argue that "praxis is endangered in education today" (p.5) due to the pressures from policies, laws, rules, guidelines, and procedures. These pressures intensify during crisis, when principals' moral purpose can be challenged by the demands of rule-following, at risk of becoming mere operatives of the system (Salamon et al., 2016). Crisis is not incidental to this theoretical framework but a condition that throws the tensions TPA is designed to analyse, between individual agency and structural constraints, into particularly sharp relief.

Principals leading through crisis are challenged to create a culture of shared responsibility across all three arrangements: cultural discursive (their sayings), material-economic (their doings) and social-political (their relatings) (Kemmis et al., 2013). TPA holds that that sustainable change requires altering the underlying practice architectures. Not simply the practice itself, when introducing a new teaching strategy it requires not only changing what teachers do but also addressing the cultural, material, and social conditions that sustain existing practices (Kemmis, 2022). The same logic applies directly to crisis response, a principal's crisis practices are unlikely to be sustained unless the underlying cultural, material and social conditions of the school are addressed. The current study is framed around exploring the principals' praxis during crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic and the regional Victoria, Australia flood crisis of 2022 and how this praxis has shaped occupational wellbeing of staff and principals themselves and influenced principals' leadership into the future.

3.3 Conclusion

The TPA is a versatile framework that has been applied in education, leadership, sustainability, and beyond (Kemmis et al., 2014). It provides a nuanced understanding of how practices are shaped by their contexts and offers practical tools for analysing and transforming practices. Chapter three has established the TPA as the central theoretical framework for this study, because it is specifically suited to examining how principals' practices are shaped by cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements. This framework provides a lens through which Chapters 5 and 6 examine the interplay of saying, doings and relatings within the school environments in crisis. It has directly addressed the aim of the study: to identify the professional practices principals enact to support, improve, and sustain the occupational wellbeing of their staff and themselves during and after crisis, and to examine how leading through crisis changes principals' perspectives on, and approaches to, leadership. With the theoretical foundations established, Chapter 4 outlines the research design and methodology, detailing how the TPA informed participant selection, data collection, and analysis.

Chapter 4 Research Design and Methodology

4.1 Overview

This chapter discusses the research design and methodological processes employed in carrying out this study. Importantly, this chapter positions the epistemological premises on which the study sits. As described in earlier chapters, the guiding research questions which we seek to address are as follows:
Question 1 – *What professional practices do principals enact to support, improve, and sustain the occupational wellbeing of their staff and themselves during and after crisis?*

Question 2 – *How does leading through a crisis change principals' perspectives on and approaches to leadership?*

The study involved interviewing principals from rural and regional Victoria, Australia, to document their feelings, narratives, opinions, and perceptions of crisis events as experienced through their leadership practices. It is grounded in the understanding that personal experiences and beliefs shape how individuals perceive and make meaning of events; knowledge, therefore, is constructed rather than discovered. This study explores deep, complex, and nuanced human experiences rather than focusing on the measurement of discrete variables. It recognises reality as socially and individually constructed, shaped by participants' perspectives rather than being objective or fixed. Leading through crisis is influenced by multiple, intersecting variables, which cannot be fully understood through reductionist approaches. Accordingly, this study seeks to understand how participants construct meaning from their lived experiences of crisis leadership, and how these experiences inform their beliefs and knowledge construction. Knowledge is understood as personal, contextual, and experiential. Given my own experiences as a principal, I am positioned as a participant in the production of knowledge rather than as a detached or neutral observer.

4.2 Research Paradigm and Onto-Epistemological Position

This qualitative study is effective for studying phenomena in which participants' own lived experiences contribute to the construction of knowledge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Yin (2010) outlines features of qualitative research applicable here: studying people's lives in real-world conditions, considering their opinions and perspectives, attending to context, drawing on multiple sources of evidence, and allowing the researcher's insights to help explain behaviour. The key focus of this study was to understand how participants interpret their own experiences and attribute meaning to them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Interpretivism and constructivism are distinct, yet closely related, perspectives that together guide this study's approach to understanding social phenomena. Interpretivism emphasises individuals' subjective understanding and the importance of context in shaping their experiences (Bhar, 2019); rather than treating reality as objective and fixed, it holds that reality is constructed through the meanings individuals assign to their experiences. Constructivism shares this view but places greater emphasis on the *socially* constructed nature of that reality, knowledge and understanding emerge through interaction and shared meaning within a social context (Creswell, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2016).

This study treats interpretivism and constructivism as complementary rather than competing positions, a pairing explicitly recognised in the qualitative methods literature, where the two are frequently discussed together as a single combination stance rather than as rival paradigms (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Schwandt, 2000). Interpretivism supplies the epistemological claim that knowledge of leadership practice is necessarily interpreted rather than directly observed; constructivism supplies the further claim that this interpreted knowledge is co-constructed through the interaction between researcher and participant, rather than extracted from the participant alone. Both are underpinned by a relativist ontology, which holds that reality is not singular but multiple, shaped by individual experience and social interaction (Chalmers et al., 2009; Kivunja, 2017). Phenomenology, described in Section 4.4, is the methodological expression of this combined stance: it operationalises the interpretivist–constructivist position by focusing specifically on how participants lived experience of crisis is interpreted and given meaning, both by the participant and, reflexively, by the researcher.

Concretely, this means: each participant brought their own distinct reality, rooted in personal context (a relativist ontological claim); meaning was not discovered but constructed through the interaction between participant, researcher, and interview (an interpretivist–constructivist epistemological claim); and the researcher, as a former principal with lived experience of the same category of crisis, was positioned as an active participant in the production of knowledge rather than a detached observer, a subjectivist epistemological stance (Kivunja, 2017).

Based on Vygotsky's view, constructivism holds that "psychological phenomena [that] emerge from social interaction" (Liu & Chen, 2010, p. 64). This research focused on the impact of principals' practices and, therefore, their social interactions with staff and students; the constructivist paradigm placed participants at the centre of the research, allowing the researcher, as a former principal, to draw on my own knowledge, experience, and thinking to interpret and make meaning of the information shared (Kivunja, 2017). The aim throughout was to identify and record the practices principals perceive as having the most impact on staff occupational wellbeing, recognising that principals often do not have the time to reflect explicitly on daily practices such as relationship-building or participatory decision-making (Sergiovanni, 2007).

The interaction between relativist ontology and constructivism means that knowledge cannot be divorced from the nuances of personal experience. Given the researcher's own position as a former principal who experienced the COVID-19 crisis and the 2022 flood event, my lived experience, perceptions, and opinions were drawn upon to make meaning of the interview data, giving the study a subjectivist epistemology (Kivunja, 2017). This assumes a high level of engagement and interaction between the researcher and participants throughout data collection.

Thematic analysis sought to identify common themes across participants' diverse narratives while recognising the multiplicity of realities present. Principals' reflections on their sayings, doings, and relatings reveal how their actions and relationships affected occupational wellbeing within their schools, with each interview serving as a site of meaning-making. The research therefore acknowledges that truth within each school setting is relative, constructed within the minds of those who lived the experience, and inseparable from the context in which it occurred (Cohen et al., 2017; Moon & Blackman, 2014).

4.3 Researcher Positionality

As the primary researcher and instrument in this interpretive qualitative study, it is imperative to explicitly articulate my positionality and acknowledge potential biases that may have influenced the research process and outcomes. Reflexivity is a fundamental aspect of qualitative research, requiring researchers to critically examine their dispositions, biases, and assumptions, recognising how their values and expectations may shape both the conduct and conclusions of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To ensure the validity of the research, it is essential to acknowledge the researcher's role, particularly given that qualitative research is conducted collaboratively with participants rather than on them, thereby amplifying the influence of the researcher's positionality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

My professional background includes serving as principal of a secondary college catering to students from Year 7 to Year 12 for five years within the Campaspe Shire, classified as Inner Regional according to the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a). The school had a student population of 314 and an ICSEA score of 962, placing it in the 29th percentile. The teaching staff comprised 44 members with a full-time equivalent (FTE) of 35.1, alongside 21 non-teaching staff with an FTE of 15.6. Additionally, I held the position of Chair of the Loddon Campaspe Principal Network for several years and was a member of its Executive. My career in secondary education spans over 20 years in the Northwest region of Victoria, with a recent relocation to the Barwon region.

I commenced my principalship in 2019 and led the school through two significant crises: the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022 Victorian floods, both of which had devastating effects on the school and its community. Concurrently, I experienced several personal losses, including the deaths of my husband and parents, information that was

known to most participants. The COVID-19 pandemic presented considerable challenges for the school community, which included multiple immunocompromised students and staff. Given the close-knit nature of the local community, apprehensions regarding the pandemic were pronounced. The school's catchment area covered a large geographic region characteristic of rural Australia, with some students commuting over 45 minutes via dedicated school buses. This extended travel reflects the broader challenges rural students often face in accessing education. Furthermore, families experienced isolation compounded by limited internet connectivity and scarce access to technology. During lockdown periods, in-person attendance dropped to fewer than five students, with learning conducted exclusively online. Staff attendance was managed through voluntary rostering, which inadvertently created inequities among staff, some of whom travelled over an hour to attend the school. The pervasive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was frequently referenced by participants in the interviews.

The 2022 Victorian floods caused extensive damage to the school infrastructure; all classrooms were compromised, necessitating extensive repairs including flooring and plaster replacement. Delays in accessing the site due to water contamination and the need to store items offsite resulted in the loss of most resources and equipment. Approximately 45% of staff (over 20 individuals) had their homes destroyed by floodwaters; many were unable to return, leading to evacuation and prolonged displacement, with some homes remaining uninhabitable for up to two years. Consequently, numerous staff relocated to other towns to secure alternative accommodation. The devastation and trauma inflicted by the flood event were profound, with the community still engaged in recovery efforts. My direct involvement and connection to this event presented challenges during data collection, as some participants hesitated to discuss the floods for fear of eliciting my personal distress or trauma responses.

Similarly, my personal bereavements influenced several interviews; participants were initially reluctant to address these topics. I facilitated these discussions by indicating my comfort in engaging with these sensitive issues. This experience underscored the necessity to critically consider my personal experiences, interests, and theoretical perspectives, and their potential impact on the study (Hamberg et al., 1994). Transparency and honesty with participants were paramount throughout the research process. Reflexivity, as it pertains to the researcher, requires ongoing self-examination of positionality and its influence on research outcomes (Berger, 2015). At times, participant reactions, particularly their reticence to discuss the 2022 floods, prompted deeper reflection. This necessitated a thorough interrogation of my methodological approach and the manner in which I addressed crisis-related topics, including a critical analysis of my interview techniques and interactions (Corlett & Mavin, 2018).

As the interviews were conducted online, I carefully considered how my tone, body language, questioning techniques, and facial expressions might be perceived. I reviewed several initial interviews and implemented appropriate adjustments. It was essential to strike a balance between refraining from imposing my own experiences on the participants and encouraging authentic sharing of their perspectives (Berger, 2015). Due to my prior

role as a principal, I interviewed colleagues with whom I had established professional relationships, enabling a shared understanding of their responsibilities. This connection fostered trust, allowing participants to feel secure and supported throughout the process. Each participant received detailed information about the study, and interviews commenced with general conversation to ensure their comfort.

4.4 Methodology

The study is focused on crisis and how these events and experiences impact the beliefs, knowledge and professional practices of principals. Due to the focus on lived experiences, phenomenology can help illuminate the complexities of educational phenomena that quantitative methods might overlook. Husserl (1973), the founder of phenomenological research, describes the method as one that focuses on particular experiences and their effects they have on consciousness. Phenomenology, as a methodological lens allows researcher to capture the subjective perceptions of participants about their journey and experiences, which can provide deep insights into their realities (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This methodology not only considers the events occurring but also considers the political, historical and sociocultural contexts, which aligns well with the TPA framework being employed in this study (Crabtree & Miller, 1999).

The research questions were designed to establish an understanding of the professional practices deployed, either deliberately or unintentionally, during and after a crisis to support the occupational wellbeing of their staff and themselves. Phenomenological methodology is intertwined with reflexivity, requiring the researcher to reflect on my roles and assumptions in the research process. By recognising my influence on data collection and interpretation, this allowed the study of these social phenomena with greater authenticity and sensitivity(Creswell & Poth, 2016).

More specifically, the current study used the hermeneutical phenomenological approach as it supported the researcher being involved in the research without having to separate their biases or assumptions, the researcher included their own self-reflection within the interpretation of the interviews (Laverty, 2003). The study aimed to understand how the experience of crisis is interpreted and transformed into consciousness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Phenomenology recognises that how we interpret the world and what happens to us is influenced by our perceptions and previous experiences. Husserl (1925/2012) theorised the concept of phenomenology to understand how participants make meaning of their experiences (Alase, 2017). This methodology was appropriate as it seeks to “understand, describe, and interpret human behaviour and the meaning individuals make of their experience” (Kivunja, 2017, p. 37).

The research entailed interviewing principals and used questions that allowed them to reflect on their experiences during crisis, they included the COVID-19 crisis, family violence, child safety breaches and the Victorian floods among others. The interview questions

considered how these crises and their prior leadership experiences impacted their decision-making, behaviours, and practices. Phenomenology enabled participants in the research to reference their feelings and their senses, as it is based in “personal perceptions of experience and response” (O'Toole, 2013, p. 44). Each principal brought their own reality that was constructed locally through personal experience (Laverty, 2003, p. 26). Phenomenology is a humanistic style of research and affords participants’ respect. To truly study the phenomenon being studied, the researcher needs to build trust with the participants and understand them as leaders (Denscombe, 2010). The phenomenological methodology enables the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of the participants’ views and perceptions of the phenomena (Qutoshi, 2018, p. 220). It emphasises the subjective interpretation of human experiences and aims to uncover the essence of the fundamental nature of these experiences (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994).

4.5 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design, underpinned by the constructivist interpretivist paradigm, to explore how leading through crisis impacts principals' approaches to leadership and the professional practices that sustain occupational wellbeing. Interpretivism provided the lens through which to understand participants' subjective experiences, while constructivism offered a framework for understanding how those experiences contribute to the broader social construction of knowledge (Kanowski, 2022). The research was conducted in regional and rural Victoria, Australia, with principals who had led their schools through significant crises, including natural disasters such as floods and the COVID-19 pandemic. The choice of a qualitative approach reflects the aim of capturing deep, nuanced, contextually bound experience, recognising that knowledge and reality are shaped by individual and social perspective rather than being objective or fixed, consistent with the relativist ontology (Cohen et al., 2017).

4.6 Participant Selection

Participant selection was purposive, targeting principals from diverse regional and rural contexts in Victoria, Australia who had experienced significant crisis events in their leadership roles. The pre-existing professional relationships between the researcher and participants facilitated rapport and trust, enabling authentic sharing while necessitating reflexivity to mitigate potential bias (Janse van Vuuren & Van der Bank, 2023). Reflexivity was a critical component throughout the research process, with the researcher maintaining detailed journals and engaging in ongoing self-examination to ensure transparency and minimise the projection of personal experiences onto the data (Rinehart, 2021; Striepe & Cunningham, 2022). The questionnaire was developed with a series of questions designed to establish the moral purpose of each principal. The order of the questions was designed to both capture practices before, during and post crisis whilst enabling principals to describe their practices in terms of sayings, doings and relatings.

There is a well-established network to support principals within the Loddon Campaspe region of Victoria, and initially, I had intended to concentrate my interviews with this cohort of principals. Since returning to onsite learning after the COVID-19 pandemic however, we have had a very large turnover of principals. I extended the invitation to principals of government schools across Victoria via email. A consideration in selecting participants was whether to focus on secondary principals alone or on a mix of primary, secondary, and P-12 schools. I believe it benefited the study to interview principals from a variety of settings with a range of experiences to capture the true impact of the crisis upon school leadership.

Principals were requested to participate in an approximately one-hour interview. All participants nominated online interviews Microsoft Teams as a preferred method. I was conscious that giving participants a choice of venue and time respected the possibility that the interview might cover reflections that could include difficult memories or sensitive issues. Participants could opt out at any point during the process. Additionally, when the interviews were concluded and transcribed, upon requests (in consent form) the participants were offered the opportunity to check the transcription of the interview; only four participants requested to view the transcripts and all were satisfied with record of interview.

In addition to the interview data, I reference my own journals throughout the research as a powerful reflexive sources of my lived experiences as a school leader during crisis events. It is important to note that I was a principal for five years, prior to that I was an assistant principal for seven years both at a regional secondary schools. The school where I was principal had an ICSEA of 964, placing it the 31st percentile with 348 students. It was located in the Campaspe Shire and classified as Inner Regional.

34 invitations were sent out to principals across Northwest Victoria. 26 principals agreed to participate in the study, equating to a participation rate of 76%. Principals were selected using the following inclusion criteria:

- Employed by the Victorian Department of Education at the time of the study
- Worked as a principal in a school post-2020

4. 6. 1 Participant and School Profile

Having outlined the selection criteria and recruitment process, this section presents the demographic and contextual profile of the 26 participating principals and their schools, detail that informs interpretation of the findings in Chapters 5 and 6 but was not itself part of the selection criteria. Table 1 outlines the profile of each principal and their school, noting significant factors that influence the type of leadership required in terms of school context, including the number of students and staff, location, and socio-educational advantage.

Table 1 – Profiles of each Principal and School Information

PRINCIPAL PROFILES AND SCHOOL INFORMATION									
	Years in current role	Previous experience in leadership roles (years)	Student enrolments	Type of School	ICSEA (Scale of socio-educational advantage)	Staff Teaching (FTE = Full Time Equivalent)	Staff Non-Teaching (FTE = Full Time Equivalent)	Location	Local Government Area (LGA)
Anthony	5	9 yrs Principal	511	P-6	990- 42 percentile	42 Actual, 35.1 FTE	23 Actual, 16.2 FTE	Inner Regional	Campaspe
Caroline	5	5 yrs Principal	244	P-6	958 - 27 percentile	22 Actual, 19.1 FTE	8 Actual, 6.2 FTE	Inner Regional	Central Goldfields
Kyllie	3	5 yrs Ass Principal	168	P-6	977 - 36 percentile	16 Actual, 12.7 FTE	9 Actual, 5.2 FTE	Inner Regional	Campaspe
Lucy	3	22 years at school	274	P-6	928 - 16 percentile	29 Actual, 22 FTE	9 Actual, 7.3 FTE	Inner Regional	Campaspe
Pauline	19	5 yrs Leading Teacher	35	P-6	938 - 19 percentile	5 Actual, 5 FTE	3 Actual, 1.4 FTE	Inner Regional	Campaspe
Ryan	7	4 yrs Leading Teacher	131	P-6	962 - 29 percentile	11 Actual, 9.8 FTE	6 Actual, 4.4 FTE	Inner Regional	Campaspe
Josh	5	1 yr Principal	135	P-6	994 - 43 percentile	14 Actual, 10.8 FTE	6 Actual, 3.9 FTE	Inner Regional	Campaspe
Jane	3	2 yrs Ass Principal	418	P-6	955 - 26 percentile	38 Actual, 34.2 FTE	17 Actual, 12.2 FTE	Inner Regional	City of Greater Bendigo
Scott	3	3.5 yrs Ass Principal	908	7-10	970 - 33 percentile	86 Actual, 74.1 FTE	36 Actual, 28.0 FTE	Inner Regional	City of Greater Bendigo
Janice	3	20 yrs Ass Principal	672	7-12	942 - 21 percentile	68 Actual, 62.3 FTE	35 Actual, 25.1 FTE	Inner Regional	Campaspe
Damian	10	37 yrs at school	988	U, P-12	927 - 16 percentile	106 Actual, 94.2 FTE	102 Actual, 77.8 FTE	Inner Regional	Central Goldfields
Daniel	18	5.5 yrs Principal	1733	11-12	1005 - 48 percentile	152 Actual, 126 FTE	73 Actual, 55 FTE	Inner Regional	City of Greater Bendigo
Jake	5	5 yrs Ass Principal	794	7-10	942 - 21 percentile	85 Actual, 74.8 FTE	45 Actual, 34.8 FTE	Inner Regional	City of Greater Bendigo
Tom	2	2 yrs Leading Teacher	45	P-6	953 - 25 percentile	5 Actual, 4 FTE	4 Actual, 1.9 FTE	Outer Regional	Campaspe
Frances	11	24 yrs at school	93	P-10	981 - 38 percentile	17 Actual, 13.3 FTE	7 Actual, 3.8 FTE	Outer Regional	Loddon Shire
Rachel	1	12 yrs Ass Principal	569	7-10	922 - 15 percentile	73 Actual, 65.5 FTE	37 Actual, 26.2 FTE	Inner Regional	City of Greater Bendigo
Simon	6	15 yrs Principal	898	P-6	950 - 24 percentile	86 Actual, 69.9 FTE	53 Actual, 36.1 FTE	Inner Regional	Campaspe
Leanne	3	5 yrs Principal	10	P-6	918 - 14 percentile	3 Actual, 3 FTE	1 Actual, 0.5 FTE	Inner Regional	City of Greater Bendigo
Dallas	Acting 1	10 yrs Teacher	21	P-6	1011 - 52 percentile	6 Actual, 3.8 FTE	1 Actual, 0.5 FTE	Inner Regional	City of Greater Bendigo
Blake	1	3 yrs Ass Principal	151	P-6	975 - 35 percentile	13 Actual, 9.7 FTE	6 Actual, 4.0 FTE	Outer Regional	Gannawarra
Tim	3	3 yrs Leading Teacher	18	1-6	974 - 34 percentile	4 Actual, 1.9 FTE	2 Actual, 0.7 FTE	Inner Regional	Campaspe
Phil	10	20 yrs at school	113	U*	893 - 9 percentile	24 Actual, 21.2 FTE	35 Actual, 25. FTE	Inner Regional	Campaspe
Beth	8	5 yrs Ass Principal	885	11-12	969 - 32 percentile	85 Actual, 72.3 FTE	51 Actual, 40.2	Outer Regional	Rural City of Mildura
Akela	7	7 yrs Principal	583	7-12	1003 - 47 percentile	67 Actual, 54.9 FTE	22 Actual, 16.2 FTE	Inner Regional	Shire of Macedon Ranges
Michelle	8.5	8 yrs Principal	110	P-6	970 - 32 percentile	16 Actual, 10.9 FTE	11 Actual, 5.4 FTE	Outer Regional	Shire of Northern Grampians
Ted	8	12 yrs Principal	151	7-12	963 - 30 percentile	20 Actual, 19.1 FTE	10 Actual, 6.3 FTE	Outer Regional	Shire of Northern Grampians
*U = Specialist School setting									

The sample for this study consists of 26 principals with experience in the principal role ranging from acting for one year to 19 years in the role at the same school and almost 25 years as a principal across multiple schools. Table 1 above outlines the profiles of each principal and their schools, significant factors that influence the type of leadership required in terms of school context are also noted, including number of students and staff, location and socio-educational advantage. All data has been anonymised and pseudonyms have been used to reference each principal. The number of students enrolled in the school and the number of staff employed is noted to give an indication as to the size of the school. Table 2 below elaborates on the school codes used to identify the types of schools and the year levels that attend each school.

Table 2 – *Types of Schools*

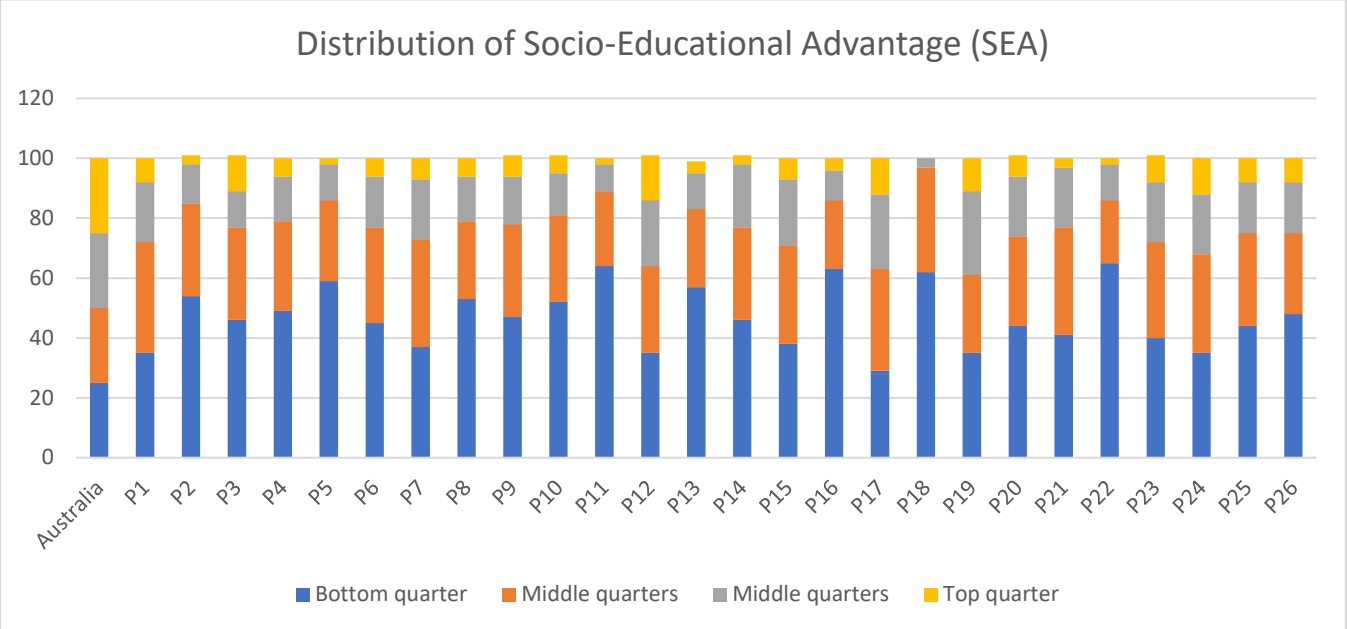
Type of School Code	Description	Number of schools participating
P-6	Prep* to Grade 6	14
P-10	Prep to Year 10	1
P-12	Prep to Year 12	1
7-10	Year 7 to Year 10	3
7-12	Year 7 to Year 12	3
11-12	Senior Secondary School that has only Years 11 and 12	2
U**	Specialist School	1
U, P-12	Specialist School and Prep to Year 12	1

*"Prep" (short for "Preparatory") is an Australian term referring to the first year of formal schooling, typically for children around five years old. It serves as an introduction to primary education, focusing on foundational literacy, numeracy, and social skills.
**U – represents Specialist Schools that provide specialised education for students with specific disability and high needs. Specialist schools have specific enrolment eligibility criteria related to their disability specialisation.

The type of school and number of students is significant as each of the different environments requires different structures and influences the leadership attributes of the participants. The size and type of school also varied considerably, with student enrolment numbers ranging from 10 students to 1733 students with a mean of 410 students, and school types ranging from primary to secondary, to combinations including a prep to twelve that incorporated a specialist setting. I have also recorded the size of the staff as this is (also a significant factor that influences the leadership styles required to meet the needs of each school community. The actual size of the staff is different in every circumstance and is noted by the Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) funded positions by the department. This is significant, as the number of staff a principal has can have a significant impact on their style; staff who are not full-time may have differing needs, and principals may need to adopt varying leadership approaches and practices to support diverse staff teams.

The scale of community socio-educational advantage (ICSEA) does not reflect the economic status of families within a school but is a measure used by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) to enable fair and meaningful comparisons between schools. ACARA collects information about student family background such as parental education, parental non-school education and occupation and information about the school including location and socio-economic background of the students it serves. ICSEA values are calculated on a scale that has a median of 1000 and a standard deviation of 100. ICSEA values typically range from approximately 500 (representing schools with extremely disadvantaged student backgrounds) to about 1300 (representing schools with extremely advantaged student backgrounds) (ACARA, 2020) . The schools of the participants varied came from were varied and the range of ICSEA percentiles was from 9% to 52%. For example, Table 1 indicates that Phil worked at a school with a ICSEA of 893, therefore that school is more educationally advantaged than 9% of schools in Australia and more educationally disadvantaged than 91% of school in Australia, whereas Dallas worked at a school with an ICSEA of 1011 which means that their school is more educationally advantaged that 52% of schools in Australia. The data is also presented in Figure 6 below in a histogram to present the distribution of students across the four socio-educational advantage (SEA) quarters representing a scale of relative disadvantage ("bottom quarter" through to relative advantage ("top quarter") (ACARA, 2020).

Figure 6 - Distribution of Socio-Educational Advantage (SEA)



The location of a school is also a factor that may influence the type of leadership required by participants. The schools are categorised by location as set by the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) which indicates remoteness (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a). This scale has been developed to objectively measure relative remoteness. The 5 possible options/locations are:

- Major Cities
- Inner Regional
- Outer Regional
- Remote
- Very Remote

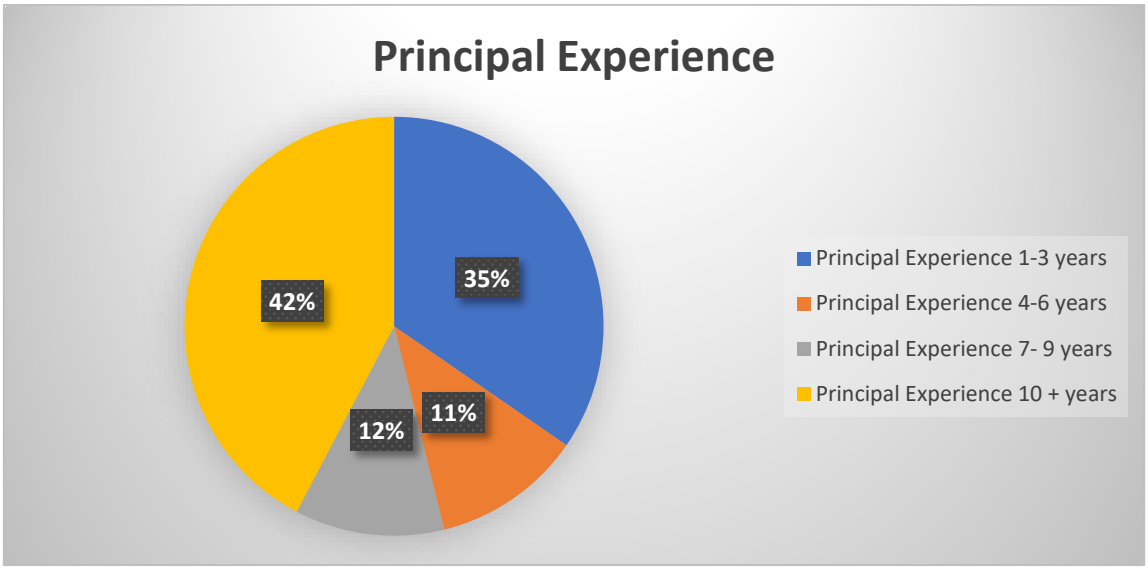
The participants for this study were from schools located in inner or outer regional locations. The Local Government Area in which the schools are located may also be significant as local circumstances can influence the social-political and the material-economic arrangements in which the school and principal need to operate. See the map below in Figure 7 that indicates the location of the Local Government Areas (colored areas) in which the schools were located that were involved in the study.

Figure 7- *Map of Local Government Areas where Schools in the Study are Located*



Note. Based on *Australia Victoria with LGA names.svg* by Cassowary (derivative of NordNordWest), 2011, Wikimedia Commons (licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0). Adapted with permission.

Figure 8 - *Years of Principal Experience*



An interesting finding in the sample of participants interviewed was the small number of principals with 4-9 years of experience; the majority of the sample were either long-term principals or very new to the role, as shown in Figure 8. This demographic of principals is concerning for the long-term health of the system. The data highlights principal retention risks driven by the emotional, physical, and systemic pressures of the role, particularly during and after crises. Principals balance operational leadership with safeguarding staff, student, and community wellbeing, often acting as emotional buffers who absorb others' stress and shield them from external pressures and bureaucracy. This is also compounded by role-related isolation, long work hours, cognitive overload, and difficulty maintaining healthy habits, especially in smaller schools with limited staffing. The cumulative effect, possibly manifesting in burnout, anxiety, depression, and diminished morale, threatening leadership continuity, as shown by the lack of principals with mid-range experience.

4.7 Data Collection

Principals in rural and regional Victoria were sent an invitation to participate in the study via email. 34 potential participants were sent the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix 1) via their email at the time of the invite. Once potential participants responded with an expression of interest, a consent form was sent so they could agree to be interviewed and book a timeslot with me, 26 principals agreed to participate. The Participant Information Sheet made it clear that the participants would be asked their consent to use quotes gathered during the interview. Each potential participant was also be provided with the Consent Form (Appendix 2), which provided participants with the opportunity to formalise their consent to be quoted if this is their wish. Upon consent being granted, participants were informed that , their names and identities would be anonymised through the use of pseudonyms. Signed consent forms were collected and stored securely as per University of New England policies and guidelines.

Data collection was conducted primarily through semi-structured interviews, chosen for the conversational, relational engagement they allow and the flexibility to probe participants' unique perspectives (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Yin, 2010). Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed for analysis.

The fourteen interview questions (Appendix 3) were emailed to participants beforehand to allow reflection time. Questions one to three established background information about the participant's school, professional experience, and moral purpose as principal. Question four asked principals to consider their leadership philosophy or style, supported by a table of leadership styles and attributes provided in advance. Question five focused on the Australian Professional Standards for Principals, asking participants to identify two standards they highly valued and describe how they demonstrated them through their sayings, doings, and relatings. Principals were then asked to describe a crisis they had experienced while leading a school. Questions seven to ten were more reflective, asking how practices had changed since the crisis, participants' sense of preparedness, and what crisis training they believed was appropriate. Questions eleven to fourteen focused on leadership and the occupational wellbeing of staff and self. Interviews concluded with an open invitation for any additional comments.

In addition to interview data, the researcher's own reflective journals, kept during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022 Victorian flood, were analysed as a second data source. This method is justified on two grounds. First, as a documentary source, the journals provide a first-hand, contemporaneous record of lived crisis experience that is temporally closer to the events described than retrospective interview recall, adding authenticity and a further reflexive check on the researcher's own influence on the analysis (Cohen et al., 2017). Second, given the researcher's dual role as insider-researcher, the journals provide a transparent, auditable record of my own positionality as it evolved through the crisis

events under study, rather than requiring this to be reconstructed retrospectively. The journals recorded departmental communications alongside the researcher's own thoughts, feelings, and concerns, and served the additional function of building the researcher's own awareness of my wellbeing during these events.

The aim of Research Question 1: *What professional practices do principals enact to support, improve, and sustain the occupational wellbeing of their staff and themselves during and after crisis?* was to establish the professional practices principals use to improve and sustain occupational wellbeing. In recognition of the fact that staff health and wellbeing are vital to organisational success, and that the classroom teacher is the most important factor in supporting student outcomes. Principals have the ability, through words, actions, behaviours, and professional practices, to have the largest impact on their staff's occupational wellbeing. Question 1 explores how best to support staff so that schools remain thriving, desirable workplaces, and captures how principals understand the influence of their own practices on others.

Research Question 2: *How does leading through a crisis change principals' perspectives on and approaches to leadership?* required principals to reflect on their own personal experience. To consider how crisis had impacted their approach to leadership: the styles of leadership they drew on, how they made decisions, and whether the crisis changed how they prioritised action. Question 2 enabled participants to reconstruct situations in greater detail and from a different perspective, without the pressure of the pending crisis. The interview questions were designed to allow principals to address both research questions from different angles, reflecting on their sayings, doings, and relatings with their community and staff.

In responding to Research Question 1, participants were asked to consider the Australian Professional Standards for Principals and identify two they highly valued, then to share why those practices were important and how they demonstrated them in terms of sayings, doings, and relatings with colleagues, staff, and departmental staff. Principals were asked to identify resources or support systems that enabled or constrained these practices, and, in a second block of questions ,to describe how they experienced the additional responsibility for staff occupational wellbeing during crisis, what they believed had the greatest impact on that wellbeing, and how they balanced supporting staff wellbeing with managing their own.

In responding to Research Question 2, principals were asked to identify their leadership philosophy or style (using the leadership-attributes list in Table 1 of Appendix 3), to describe one or more key crises affecting their school community, and to reflect on how their practices had changed since the crisis and which leadership attributes they now valued more. Principals reflected on how their personal experience shaped their decision-making and professional practices during crisis, whether they felt equipped to deal with the crisis at hand, and what resources or support systems they would recommend.

Data analysis, discussed in full in Section 4.8, followed the principles of IPA, involving an iterative process of reading and re-reading transcripts, initial coding, and the identification of emerging themes and patterns. This process was enhanced by the use of thematic analysis, which involved systematically coding the data, developing themes, and constructing a conceptual model that reflected the participants' experiences and interpretations (Reis, 2024). The analysis was conducted both ideographically, attending to individual interviews, and across all the interviews to identify commonalities and differences. The use of NVivo 14 software supported the organisation and coding of qualitative data, ensuring rigor and transparency in the analytical process (Cahapay, 2022; Kanowski, 2022). Throughout, the researcher remained attentive to ethical considerations, ensuring participant confidentiality, emotional safety, and adherence to approved research protocols.

The methodological approach taken in this study enabled a rich, context-sensitive exploration of how crisis leadership shapes principals' professional practices and perspectives (Hayes & Derrington, 2023). By situating the analysis within the theoretical framework of practice architectures, the study illuminated the interplay between individual actions, language, relationships, and the enabling or constraining conditions present in each school context (Day & Gurr, 2024b). This approach not only captured the complexity and diversity of principals lived experiences but also contributed to a deeper understanding of the professional practices that support staff wellbeing and leadership evolution during times of crisis.

Data analysis followed the principles of IPA, involving an iterative process of reading and re-reading transcripts, initial coding, and the identification of emerging themes and patterns. This process was enhanced by the use of thematic analysis, which involved systematically coding the data, developing themes, and constructing a conceptual model that reflected the participants' experiences and interpretations (Reis, 2024). The analysis was conducted both ideographically, attending to individual interviews, and across all the interviews to identify commonalities and differences. The use of NVivo 14 software supported the organisation and coding of qualitative data, ensuring rigor and transparency in the analytical process (Cahapay, 2022; Kanowski, 2022). Throughout, the researcher remained attentive to ethical considerations, ensuring participant confidentiality, emotional safety, and adherence to approved research protocols.

The methodological approach taken in this study enabled a rich, context-sensitive exploration of how crisis leadership shapes principals' professional practices and perspectives (Hayes & Derrington, 2023). By situating the analysis within the theoretical framework of practice architectures, the study illuminated the interplay between individual actions, language, relationships, and the enabling or constraining conditions present in each school context (Day & Gurr, 2024b). This approach not only captured the complexity and diversity of principals' lived experiences but also contributed to a deeper

understanding of the professional practices that support staff wellbeing and leadership evolution during times of crisis.

4.8 Data Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the data collected from the interviews. IPA is an approach that enables individual "nuances and complexities embedded in participants' sense making to the fore" (Guihen, 2020, p. 526). It is an analysis technique that can be used for in-depth examination of how each of the participants reflect and make sense of their own experiences in their unique settings. One of its strongest advantages is that it focuses on the individuals' reflections on their own experiences (Smith et al., 2010). IPA is embedded with reflexivity, meaning the researcher is consistently trying to make sense of the participant who is trying to make sense of what is happening to them (Smith, 2011).

The semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to capture the participants "*describing the meaning of lived experience of a phenomenon by the people who lived it* …." (Tomaszewski et al., 2020, p. 4). IPA is an inductive research method, that uses the specific examples from the interview to develop broader theories, connecting themes and insights across participants' lived experience within their context and social world, (Smith & Nizza, 2022). IPA is guided by hermeneutics, which acknowledges the subjectivity of interpretation and recognises that the researcher's own experiences and biases may shape how participants' experiences are interpreted (Delve & Limpaecher, 2023).

Each of the interviews was recorded and using Microsoft Teams, and the automated transcription of interviews was utilised. Each interview was reviewed, and the transcript was reviewed with the necessary corrections to ensure accuracy. To support transparency and trustworthiness, participants were invited to review the transcripts for meaning and accuracy (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Saldaña, 2021). There were not any participants who chose this option however, with this decision being understood within the context of principals' demanding workloads and time-poor professional realities, particularly given the sustained pressures associated with crisis leadership. Importantly, participants' non-engagement in transcript review was treated not as disengagement from the study, but as reflective of the structural constraints shaping their professional roles. It should be noted that this transcript-review offer was distinct from sharing the researcher's subsequent interpretation or thematic findings with participants; the latter was not conducted as a separate member-checking step, and this is acknowledged as a limitation. The transcription, familiarisation with the data, and the selection of meaningful quotations is the initial phase of the thematic analysis process, and this process enhanced the IPA and increased the validity (Naeem et al., 2023). Each interview was analysed in detail before looking for patterns or themes to emerge across the sample (Miller et al., 2018; Smith, 2017).

Finlay (2011a) outlined three important components of IPA, a:

- reflective focus on subjective accounts of personal experiences,
- an idiographic sensibility and
- a commitment to a hermeneutic approach (p. 140).

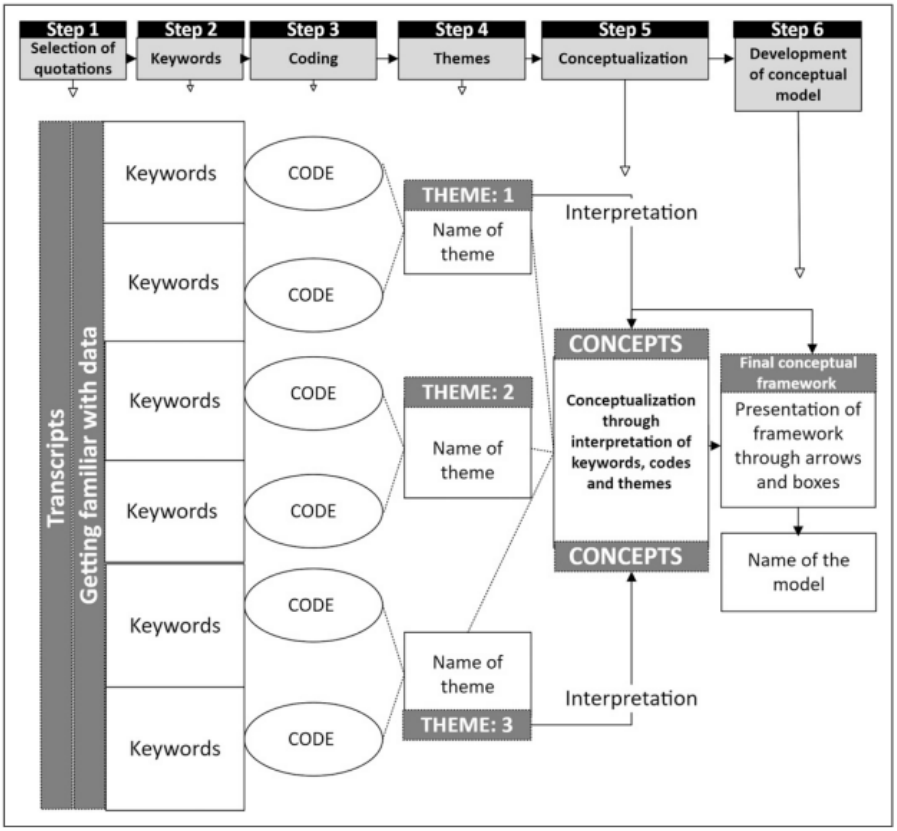
The reflective focus required the researcher to find the meanings of an experience and how it impacted and affected the participants. Initially holistically by analysing the content of each interview and then semantically by identifying keywords. The idiographic sensibility required the researcher to view the world through each individual participant's experience. The hermeneutic approach recognises that the researcher needs to position themselves within the study and use their own knowledge and experience to interpret and make sense of the participants' reflections (Finlay, 2011a). This enabled the researcher to record how each participant interpreted a common phenomenon, whilst recognising their interpretation could be significantly different from other participants (Miller et al., 2018). It was important to identify and highlight similarities and differences. Quotes, statements and the retelling of stories enhanced the data analysis and are recorded in the study to capture and honour individual experiences (Miller et al., 2018).

IPA proceeds through two stages (Larkin et al., 2006). In the first stage, the researcher worked to gain a close understanding of each participant's experience; because the researcher is necessarily involved in this process, it produces a third-person description that captures the participant's own view as closely as possible. The second stage is more interpretative, requiring the researcher to position that description within a wider societal narrative and to make sense of participants' experiences in relation to the phenomenon under study (Larkin et al., 2006). To ensure this two-stage process was conducted rigorously and transparently, it was operationalised through Naeem et al.'s (2023) six-step systematic thematic analysis process (Figure 11): selecting key quotations, identifying keywords, coding the data using short phrases, developing themes, defining concepts, and developing a conceptual model. This process itself is grounded in the foundational principles of thematic analysis established by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The first three steps of this process: selecting quotations, identifying keywords, and initial coding, correspond to IPA's first stage, producing a close, individual-level account of each participant's experience. The final three steps: developing themes, defining concepts, and building the conceptual model, correspond to IPA's second, more interpretative stage, in which individual accounts are drawn together and positioned within a broader narrative across the sample (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Liebenberg et al., 2020; Naeem et al., 2023; Xu & Zammit, 2020). NVivo 14 was introduced at the point this transition occurred, once initial keyword identification and coding were substantially complete, and was used to apply the resulting coding scheme systematically across all 26 transcripts, supporting the organisation, cross-case comparison, and auditability of the analysis (Cahapay, 2022; Kanowski, 2022).

Figure 9 illustrates a systematic thematic approach that involves selecting a number of key quotations, identifying key words, coding the data using short phrases or words, developing themes, defining concepts, and then developing a conceptual model (Naeem et al., 2023).

Figure 9 - *A Systematic Thematic Analysis Process*



Note. Adapted from "A systematic thematic analysis process: A novel six-step process for conceptual model development in qualitative research," by M. Naeem, W. Ozuem, K. Howell, and S. Ranfagni, 2023, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22, p. 4. Copyright 2023 by the Authors. Reprinted under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License.

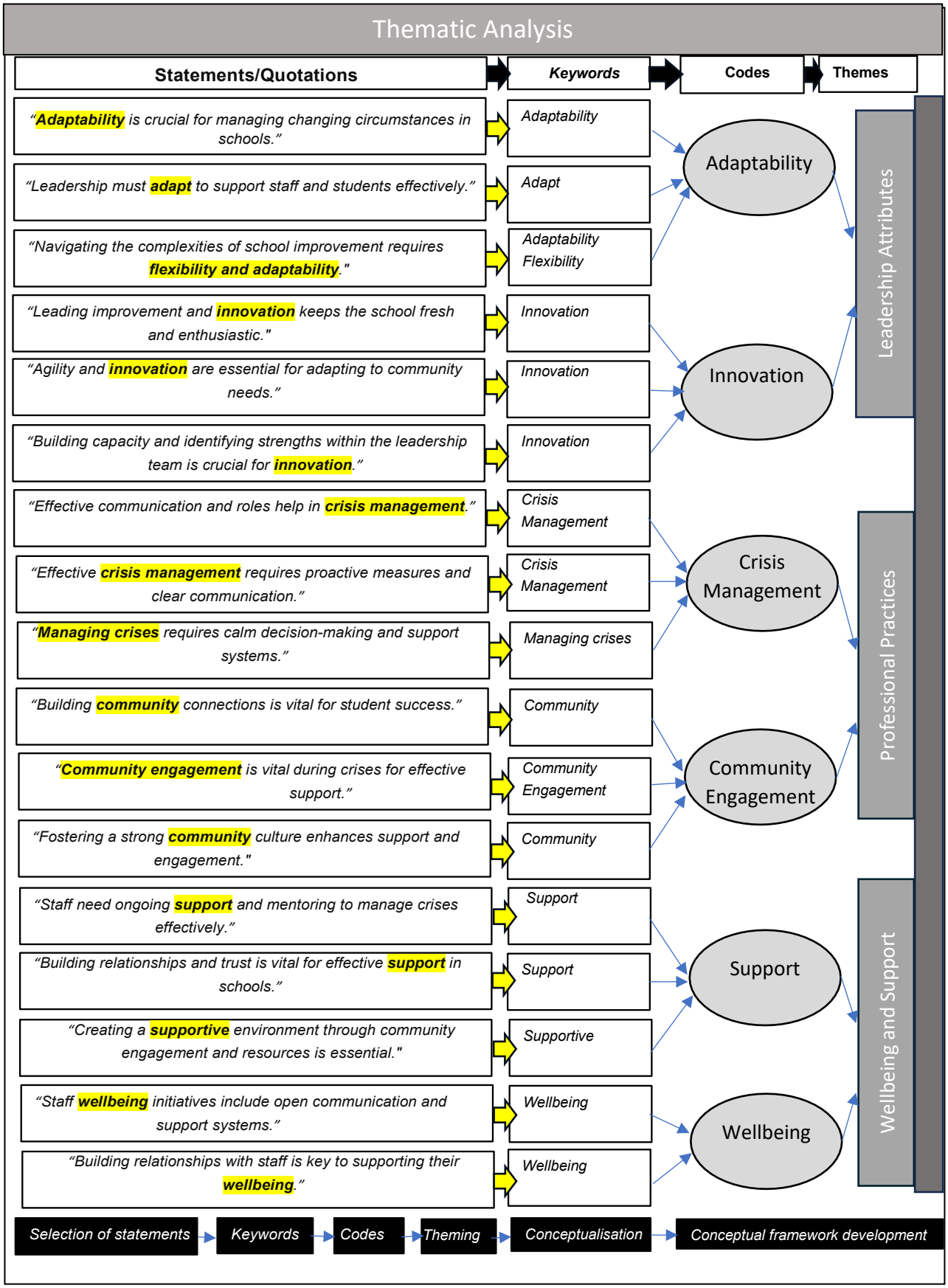
To ensure themes were derived from the data rather than imposed by the study's theoretical framework, coding proceeded in two distinct stages. In the first stage, transcripts were coded openly and inductively, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach: initial codes were generated line-by-line from participants' own language, without reference to the TPA or to any pre-existing category structure, and this open coding was completed in full across all 26 transcripts before any framework-based categorisation began. These open codes were then grouped into candidate themes and sub-themes based on patterns of co-occurrence and conceptual similarity across participants, using NVivo to track code frequency and co-occurrence across the sample. Only in the second stage were these data-derived themes mapped onto the sayings, doings, and relatings of the TPA, as an interpretive lens applied after the themes had already taken shape, rather than as the categories used to generate them in the first place.

This sequencing is reflected in the coding audit trail retained for this study, which records each code's first appearance in the open-coding stage prior to any TPA labelling.

This study deliberately did not quantify theme frequency across participants, a methodological choice consistent with, rather than a departure from, the IPA tradition underpinning this research. IPA is explicitly idiographic in commitment: its purpose is to produce a detailed, nuanced account of how particular individuals make sense of a particular phenomenon, rather than to establish the prevalence of a theme across a sample (Smith et al., 2010). Reporting that "16 of 26 principals" described a given practice would imply a level of measurement precision, and a generalisability claim, that a purposive sample of 26 principals interviewed once cannot support, and would risk recasting an interpretive, meaning-focused analysis in the language of a survey. Braun and Clarke (2006), whose thematic analysis approach this study also draws on, caution against this same move, warning that assigning numeric counts to qualitative themes, sometimes called "quasi-quantification", creates a false impression of objectivity and can obscure rather than clarify a theme's significance: a pattern raised by only two or three participants may be more analytically important, for instance where it reveals a genuinely novel or high-stakes practice, than one raised by many. Instead, prevalence in this thesis is communicated qualitatively and consistently, using terms such as "several," "many," or "most participants," anchored to what each term denotes in Chapter 4, and every claim about what principals did or believed is grounded in direct quotation so the reader can assess the evidential basis themselves rather than relying on a numeric proxy for it.

To identify the most relevant statements and quotations, I needed to familiarise myself with the data, by rewatching the interviews and crosschecking the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tuckett, 2005). It was important to ensure I identified statements and quotations from a wide cross section of participants as this increases the credibility and trustworthiness of the study (Côté & Turgeon, 2005). Jackson and Mazzei (2013) encourage researchers to exercise reflexivity by continually checking their own beliefs, assumptions and values whilst analysing the data. Having identified critical quotes and keywords, from each interview, these keywords were used to identify patterns for coding in NVivo (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The listing of keywords amplifies the depth and quality of the analysis and can be used to discuss the results (Naeem & Ozuem, 2022; Naeem et al., 2023). The initial list of keywords was over 800, I refined this list to 50 to ensure the list of keywords was truly representative of perspectives and interpretations of participants (Naeem et al., 2023). Figure 10 below, provides an example, not a complete representation, of the keywords, codes, and themes as identified in the study. The transcriptions were broken down into discrete parts to allow for further analysis and to identify common themes across all 26 transcriptions (Saldaña, 2021).

Figure 10 - *Thematic Analysis of Data*



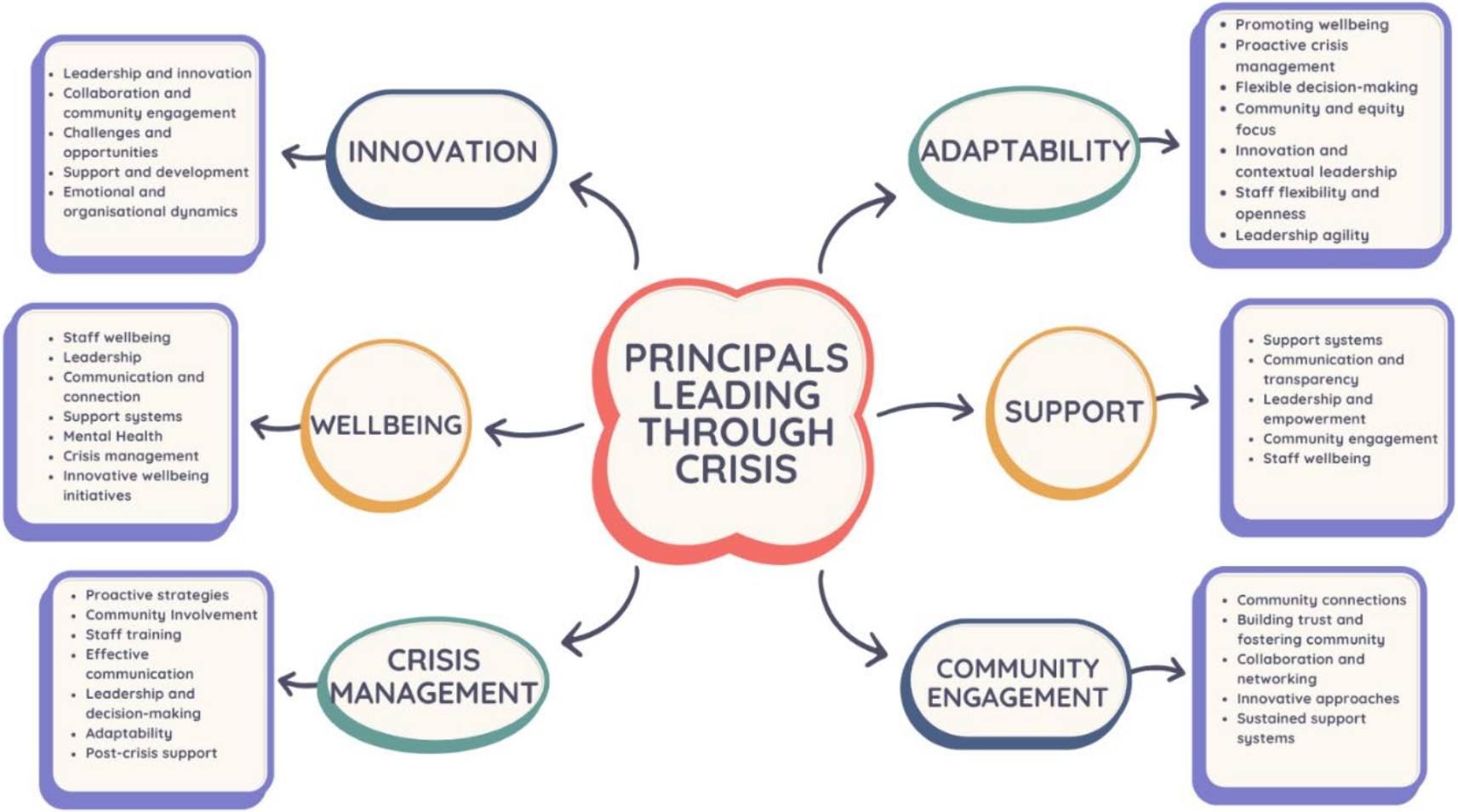
Alongside the interview data, I also analysed my own personal diaries from the time when I led my school through a crisis. When analysing personal diaries within my qualitative research, I employed a range of methods to ensure a rigorous and insightful examination of the data. Documentary analysis is a foundational approach, requiring the researcher to evaluate the context, authenticity, and credibility of the diary as a source, as well as to consider issues of external and internal criticism (Cohen et al., 2017). Given that the diaries were my own personal reflections, the authenticity and credibility were easy to establish. Thematic analysis of the diary entries followed the same logic as the interview data: reading and re-reading the text, coding meaningful units, grouping these into categories, and developing overarching themes capturing the core experiences and perspectives represented(Cohen et al., 2017; Naeem et al., 2023).

A reflective journal and memos were maintained throughout to track assumptions and interpretations while re-reading the diaries and interviews, strengthening the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis (Corlett & Mavin, 2018; Naeem et al., 2023). While situating the diaries within their broader social, cultural, and temporal context and attending to reliability, validity, and ethical considerations such as anonymity and informed consent (Cohen et al., 2017). This combination of careful documentary analysis, thematic or content analysis, and reflexive practice provided a comprehensive methodologically sound approach to analysing my personal diaries in my qualitative research.

Interpretative analysis is based on the belief that knowledge is built through social interactions and contexts, that shape the meaning individuals derive from their experiences (Ikram & Kenayathulla, 2022). On the contrary, the deductive analysis begins with consolidated theories or hypotheses, subsequently validating or refining them through the data (Gilgun et al., 2019). While these two approaches appear diametrically opposed, they share a common basis in a structured analysis process, underscoring the importance of context and theory within the research. At the centre of the interpretative analysis is the understanding that researchers are committed to the participants to co-creating the meaning (Fife & Gossner, 2024). The deductive analysis operates on the premise that theories precede empirical observations, enabling researchers to test hypotheses and draw conclusions (Azungah, 2018). Despite this, both methodologies acknowledge the influence of the researcher's perspective on analysis outcomes, thereby strengthening the constructivist notion that knowledge is subjective and context-dependent (Avenier & Thomas, 2015). By capturing participants' narratives through an interpretation lens, I was able to reflect on complexities and subtleties in the generated data (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Smith & Osborn, 2015).

From the list of keywords, I used inductive analysis to code the data. This approach emphasised the exploration of patterns through qualitative data, which allowed the researcher to go beyond mere description to a deeper interpretation (Jebb et al., 2017; Naeem et al., 2023). This iterative process is critical, since it allows changes in interpretation as new data arises, which leads to the continuous refinement of the conceptual frameworks (MacFarlane & O'Reilly-de Brún, 2012; Xu & Zammit, 2020). This approach was data-driven and therefore themes were derived from the data rather than trying to match them to pre-existing theories (Naeem et al., 2023). Finally, the development of the analytical framework was the researcher's construction from the analysis of the data. Presenting the findings as a conceptual framework enhances the study's validity. A number of themes emerged during the analysis of the interviews see Figure 11 below.

Figure 11 - *Emerging Themes*



4.9 Reliability, Validity, Bias and Trustworthiness

Reliability and validity in qualitative research are central concepts that establish the quality and rigor of the study. The reliability of qualitative research refers to the consistency, dependability and replicability of findings. Reliability ensures that if the study were replicated with similar participants and conditions. In qualitative research, human behaviour and interactions are context-specific and dynamic, making exact replication unrealistic (Cypress, 2017). The reliability and validity of the data was strengthened by the number of interviews conducted, increasing transparency. 26 participants were interviewed from a cross section of schools and with a variety of experience, detailed description of the research process, including data collection and analysis, was recorded. Although only one researcher conducted the interviews, all interviews were watched multiple times and transcribed for accuracy. Any insights or concepts drawn from the interviews were triangulated from multiple sources and were not just the voice of one participant (Yin, 2010).

Validity refers to the truthfulness, accuracy, and credibility of the findings. It ensures that the study captures the phenomenon as intended and provides meaningful and trustworthy results. Qualitative validity often involves subjective interpretations, making it harder to apply traditional positivist criteria (Cypress, 2017). To ensure validity of the data collected, a number of measures were taken. The researcher ensured they spent adequate time with each participant to fully understand their views, opinions and perceptions and to minimise distortion. All participants were invited to read their transcripts and the findings from the research was shared with all participants. The researcher provided detailed and rich descriptions of the context, setting and participants perspectives (Cohen et al., 2017). Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed replacing reliability and validity with "trustworthiness, " which includes:

1. Credibility: Confidence in the truth of findings.
2. Transferability: Applicability of findings to other contexts.
3. Dependability: Consistency of findings over time.
4. Confirmability: Neutrality and objectivity in findings (Cohen et al., 2017; Cypress, 2017)

Reliability and validity, or trustworthiness in qualitative research, are adapted to evaluate the study's rigor, ensuring that findings accurately reflect participants' experiences and are produced through a transparent, credible, and ethical research process. I regularly collaborated with two experienced colleagues throughout the stages of analysis as I refined the key themes. The concept of bias in qualitative studies can be perceived in several ways, from the methods of collection and analysis, the questions used and/or the lack of critical awareness by the researcher of their own role. Researchers need to be mindful when conducting qualitative research using interviews that the methods of collection are transparent, and the questions are structured to capture the participants'

opinions, views, and perceptions as opposed to the researcher mining for data to affirm their own perceptions (Galdas, 2017). Throughout the analysis of the data, the researcher was aware of the possible impact of their own bias towards events. All data was checked and rechecked, the analysis was thorough, and I was able to continually acknowledge any bias imposed by me during the analysis (Yin, 2010). It is important to acknowledge that I am embedded in the research, and it is not possible or desirable to separate myself from the process (Galdas, 2017). My focus throughout the research was to be transparent and reflexive about the process of data collection, analysis, and presentation. Any attempts to manage my bias may have been counterproductive and weakened its standing as an impactful enterprise (Polit & Beck, 2010).

4.10 Ethical Considerations

Due to the nature of the study involving human participants in the context of education, ethics clearance was sought from and approved by the Department of Education in Victoria (Application No 23-07-065, Expiration Date 01/01/2027) (see Appendix 6), and from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of New England, New South Wales (Approval No HE23-160 valid to 01/07/2025) (see Appendix 7). All procedures outlined in the approval letters were closely followed. The University of New England 'Management and storage of research data and materials policy', states that research materials and data and records need to be kept securely for five years after publication (UNE, 2023).

To build trust with participants prior to and during the interviews, the researcher leveraged established professional relationships, which facilitated rapport and created a safe and supportive environment for authentic sharing. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study, including the interview questions in advance, allowing them time to reflect and prepare, thereby reducing anxiety related to the interview process. The semi-structured, conversational interview style was intentionally chosen to promote a natural and respectful dialogue, enabling participants to feel comfortable expressing their experiences openly. Given the sensitive nature of crisis-related topics discussed, the researcher remained reflexive and transparent throughout, consciously avoiding the projection of personal experiences onto participants while being attentive to verbal and non-verbal cues indicating discomfort. When participants showed reluctance or distress, especially when discussing traumatic events such as floods or deaths, the researcher employed empathetic communication, reassuring them and allowing for pauses or topic shifts as needed. Ethical protocols were strictly adhered to, including confidentiality assurances and the option to withdraw at any time without consequence. Ongoing self-reflection on positionality and interview techniques, including reviewing interview recordings to adjust tone and approach, further ensured that participants' emotional safety was prioritised, thereby mitigating potential discomfort and fostering an atmosphere of trust and openness.

4.11 Conclusion

The research design and methodology employed in this study were carefully selected to capture the nuanced, subjective experiences of school principals leading through crisis. By adopting a qualitative, phenomenological approach grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study prioritised the voices and perspectives of participants, enabling a deep exploration of the ways professional practices and leadership approaches are shaped by critical events. Rigorous procedures for data collection, analysis, and ethical considerations ensured credibility, reliability, and trustworthiness, with reflexivity central to the researcher's role throughout the process. The use of thematic analysis alongside IPA further strengthened the validity and transparency of findings, creating a robust foundation for the subsequent chapters. Ultimately, this methodology facilitated the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and participants, allowing for a rich understanding of leadership in crisis and its impact on staff wellbeing and school culture. Chapter five presents the findings of the study, exploring how leading through crisis influences school principals' perspectives and approaches to leadership, and examines the professional practices that sustain staff wellbeing during and after crisis events. Chapter five presents the voices of participants to ensure authenticity is echoed through the findings.

Chapter 5 Results

This chapter presents the findings of the study which sought to explore how leading through crisis can change, influence, and impact school principals' perspectives on their leadership approaches in the short and long term. The research also aimed to examine the professional practices of principals that support, improve, and sustain the occupational wellbeing of themselves and their staff during and after crisis events. Drawing on semi-structured interviews conducted with 26 principals from rural and regional Victoria, this chapter addresses the two central research questions that guided the inquiry:

1. *What are the professional practices do principals enact to support, improve and sustain the occupational wellbeing of their staff and themselves during and after crisis?*
2. *How does leading through a crisis change principals' perspectives on and approaches to leadership?*

The analysis is further informed by the Theory of Practice Architectures, which frames the findings in terms of principals' sayings, doings, and relatings (Mahon et al., 2017).

Throughout this chapter, the voices of the participants are foregrounded through direct quotations and narrative accounts, providing rich insights into their lived experiences. The findings reveal the complexities, challenges, and adaptive strategies enacted by principals during times of crisis and highlight the practices that contribute to the wellbeing and resilience of school communities. By systematically unpacking these results, this chapter lays the foundation for the subsequent discussion, where the implications of these findings are examined in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks. Appending each principal's pseudonym with their school's ICSEA score and student enrolment number to the direct quotes serves as a deliberate methodological device. It preserves participant anonymity, consistent with ethics approval for qualitative educational research, while still giving the reader enough contextual information to interpret each quote in light of the school's socio-educational profile and scale. This matters because the findings repeatedly show that school size and level of disadvantage shape both the crises principals faced and the professional practices they drew on in response, so tagging quotes this way allows patterns to be traced transparently back to individual, verifiable data points rather than relying only on thematic summary, functioning as a lightweight audit trail linking interpretation to the raw data it is drawn from.

5.1 The Crises Experienced by Participants

Participants described eleven distinct categories of crisis, several experienced simultaneously; Table 3 lists these by principal. Consistent with the Theory of Practice Architectures, each crisis type below is briefly characterised in terms of which

arrangements, cultural-discursive (sayings), material-economic (doings), and social-political (relatings), it disrupted most directly, since this shapes the practices discussed in Sections 5.2 and 5.3.

The crises discussed by participants varied considerably in intensity, duration, and scale. A crisis such as COVID-19 was chronic, unfolding over years and requiring sustained adaptation, whereas a crisis such as a single flood event, a death, or an act of violence was comparatively acute and one-off in its immediate occurrence, even where its consequences endured for months or years afterward. Although many participants described experiencing the same or similar categories of crisis, the specific impact of each crisis on the principal and their community differed considerably, shaped by school size, location, and the particular circumstances in which it occurred. One consistent finding across the sample was that the impact of a crisis persisted well beyond the duration of the precipitating event itself, a pattern evident across every crisis type described below, and returned to directly in Section 5.2.2's discussion of post-crisis support.

Table 3 - *Crisis Experienced by Principals*

Principal	*Crisis Experienced*
Anthony	COVID-19, 2022 Victorian floods – sink holes at the school
Caroline	COVID-19, 2022 Victorian floods and family violence
Kylie	2022 Victorian floods, death of a student, family violence
Lucy	Staff member – child safety concerns, COVID-19, death of a student, 2022 Victorian floods
Pauline	Bus accident and teacher misconduct
Ryan	COVID-19, child safety breach and 2022 Victorian floods
Josh	COVID-19, 2022 Victorian floods
Jane	Terminally ill student, personal attack and COVID-19
Scott	Suicide of student parent
Janice	Child safety breach and 2022 Victorian floods
Damian	Cost of living crisis, family violence and, 2022 Victorian floods
Daniel	COVID-19
Jake	Child safety breach and death of a student
Tom	2022 Victorian floods and COVID-19
Frances	2022 Victorian floods
Rachel	Student behaviour
Simon	Financial mismanagement of previous principal
Leanne	Student behaviour and COVID-19
Dallas	Hostile parents and death of a parent
Blake	2022 Victorian floods and COVID-19
Tim	2022 Victorian floods
Phil	Student deaths and, 2022 Victorian floods
Beth	COVID-19 and death of multiple students
Akela	Workcover and EBA
Michelle	COVID-19
Ted	COVID-19 and death of two parents

5.1.1 COVID-19 Crisis

Most principals referenced the COVID-19 pandemic as a significant crisis during their leadership, given its enormous impact on their communities. Principals such as Beth described feeling isolated and alone at times, with support from the Department often felt to be limited; meanwhile, the community looked to principals for answers and information they felt ill-equipped to provide. The timeliness of information placed considerable pressure on participants, with information frequently available online before principals themselves received guidelines or a briefing. Participants noted that timing did improve over the course of the pandemic, with briefings eventually becoming a more efficient and effective form of communication than waiting for published guidelines. Ryan described the felt experience of this information gap directly:

> *"We were making decisions and did not have the full story."* (Ryan, ICSEA = 962, Students = 131)

Often reading confirming detail on the internet only after the fact. Trust in leadership was crucial for effective crisis management, though not every principal felt this trust was reciprocated; principals were frequently forced to make decisions with limited information. Beth described acting on instinct and experience ahead of formal guidelines, in anticipation of the first lockdown:

> *"We had gone around town and bought every hotspot device."* (Beth, ICSEA = 969, Students = 885)

Purchasing available screens and laptops and sending students home with a device pre-emptively, before the guidelines were published. Anthony similarly described often not waiting for formal communication given pressure from staff and the community:

> *"Often I had already sent communication and before it came out of the centre and their communication was never anything I did not already know."* (Anthony, ICSEA = 990, Students = 511)

Believing that maintaining this transparency built trust within the school community. Beth also described the symbolic as well as practical value of wellbeing gestures during this period, employing local physiotherapists to run remote OT sessions for staff even when uptake was uncertain, describing it as *"almost a token to show we care,"* given how difficult it was to demonstrate care for an offsite workforce.

Michelle identified COVID-19 as the single biggest challenge of her principalship, with particular concern for the wellbeing of students at home in dysfunctional family environments, for whom school was often the most consistent and safe environment available. Staff identified vulnerable students by home environment, social and emotional status, and other factors, and the school maintained a roster to support staff members who were themselves managing family responsibilities at home. Michelle summarised the guiding principle behind these decisions:

> *"We did what was in the best interests of our students."* (Michelle, ICSEA = 970, Students = 110)

Running an alternative timetable, including bike-riding days and campfire days, in recognition of the significant trauma and fear COVID-19 had caused within the community. Caroline described the lasting impact on students' socialisation skills and the technical challenges of supporting families without reliable access to devices or the internet, with staff working hard to prepare hard-copy learning packs alongside online classes:

> *"…there was a real fear…"* (Caroline, ICSEA = 958, Students = 244)

This experience changed the way Caroline approached leadership toward greater proactivity, now embedded permanently in the school's meeting schedule:

> *"I think before the crisis it was really I can go in and fix this and I can support, we can get external people in and we can respond to this crisis, we do work beforehand and build our resilience and it's almost teaching staff that they've got a responsibility for their own wellbeing."* (Caroline, ICSEA = 958, Students = 244)

Pauline, reflecting on her own experience, acknowledged there were always things she would do differently, but described having learned to be flexible and to break challenges down into manageable steps, avoiding rigidity in her thinking given the impact her response as leader had on everyone around her. Jane encouraged a deliberate separation of emotion from process where possible, noting the crisis had "*really highlighted the importance of having processes and policy in place*" to support decision-making and student, staff, and principal wellbeing alike. This crisis relates to the TPA primarily through doings, the rapid operational adaptation under sustained pressure and relatings, sustaining trust despite distance and delayed information.

5.1.2 2022 Victorian Flood Crisis

The 2022 Victorian flood crisis had varied impacts across the schools in this study; twelve of the twenty-six principals referenced the floods as a crisis for their school communities. Kylie's school was destroyed, with every classroom and space impacted and requiring flooring and plaster replacement; many staff and families lost their homes, with devastation extending across the whole community. After weeks of consultation with the Department, the school was relocated to a town fifty minutes away.

> *"Just being able to detach yourself from the situation and think about how it's affecting others and what do they actually need and being patient."* (Kylie, ICSEA = 977, Students = 168)

Not all staff were able to return to work, given personal circumstances including destroyed homes or displaced elderly family members; some staff left town permanently due to the trauma of the event. Principals described department phone calls insisting that normal teaching and learning programs resume immediately, despite the trauma experienced by the community. Given increased travel demands, affected principals introduced a Wellbeing Wednesday initiative, offering online work for students who were able to work from home. Several described frustration at a perceived lack of understanding from the Department, feeling pressure to run a five-day program when a neighbouring school was permitted to close simply because its teachers could not reach the site due to

closed roads. Kylie described being aware some of her decisions were not what the Department wanted, but being unwilling to compromise what was right for her school and community regardless of professional risk to herself.

Principals engaged with the Department to secure additional counselling and support for staff and students while simultaneously overseeing the physical rebuild of their schools. They described shielding and buffering staff from departmental frustration stemming from a lack of understanding of the crisis on the ground. Kylie described the early weeks as all-consuming:

> *"A feeling that it was consuming you – every thought and action in those first few weeks was flood related."* (Kylie, ICSEA = 977, Students = 168)

With little support offered specifically for her own wellbeing during this period. Numerous meetings took place on Sundays, and phone calls frequently occurred outside regular school hours; one late-night call from the regional office requested a full list of every student's location and relocation status, due the following day.

> *"We had no way of doing this as the systems were all down and many families left with nothing, emergency services were still door-knocking to find occupied homes."* (Researcher's reflective journal, ICSEA = 964, Students = 343)

Members of the leadership team spent three days at the crisis centre cross-referencing lists, making calls, and locating people, with new urgent departmental requests, often centred on data collection rather than empathy, taking daily precedence over caring for staff and students directly. Concerns were raised with the Department regarding staff whose homes had been destroyed, given only five days' discretionary leave was available for natural disasters, when some staff required weeks to begin recovery; the boundary between what was reasonable to ask of staff and what constituted genuine equity of workload became, in one principal's words, “completely blurred.”

Anthony described the floods as dividing his community, since only twelve families from his school were directly affected, yet the school remained closed for an additional three weeks due to sinkholes forming on the oval:

> *"It really impacted families, they got distressed about having to go back to online learning and missing school when they saw other students going to schools."* (Anthony, ICSEA = 990, Students = 511)

Anthony described the frustration of receiving contradictory information from local authorities and the Department regarding when the school could safely reopen, and the pressure of “*copping the backlash*” of community frustration despite the delay being outside his own control.

Frances experienced the floods' financial impact directly, hitting in January before crops had been harvested and devastating her family's livelihood alongside the wider community's. The flood divided the town, with tension arising as some landholders diverted water using heavy machinery onto neighbouring properties, “*securing their own*

kingdom" at others' expense. Frances chose not to share her personal circumstances widely, continuing to work while compartmentalising her own loss:

> *"I also realised that people's houses were more important than people's livelihoods, there was more devastation in other places."* (Frances, ICSEA = 981, Students = 93)

Frances delegated duties to staff members who lived elsewhere and were not personally affected, and reflected that strong pre-existing relationships and community connections were critical in navigating the crisis. Frances also described the value of local knowledge in managing the practical realities of the flood, particularly information about road closures that the Department itself could not readily supply:

> *"…it's pretty amazing how people pitch in and help out…"* (Frances, ICSEA = 981, Students = 93)

Anthony described at length the frustration of receiving accurate, timely information from community members and local emergency services regarding the sinkholes affecting his school, while the Department itself remained unable to confirm when the school could safely reopen:

> *"I was getting told by community members what would happen, what was happening because they were involved in the services, who were doing the work... And they were telling me things…this is all signed off now, why isn't school opening up?...I was copying the backlash of that because of the tardiness and lack of communication from the department around it because they couldn't come out to the school… because they couldn't get through floodwater."* (Anthony, ICSEA = 990, Students = 511)

Reflecting afterward, Anthony attributed his school's comparatively strong coping through the crisis directly to communication structures established well before the floods occurred:

> *"If I look back on it, I feel that the ways cope very, very well as a school and I think the biggest reason is the structures that were in place already before these crises came, and the biggest one I've touched on at the start was that we had already developed really strong communication."* (Anthony, ICSEA = 990, Students = 511)

Across these accounts, the flood crisis illustrates the TPA lens introduced at the opening of this section with particular clarity. The doings required of principals were overwhelmingly material-economic in character, assessing structural damage, relocating entire school operations, cross-referencing displaced families against emergency-service records, and negotiating leave and staffing arrangements for a workforce whose own homes had been destroyed. Yet it was in principals' relatings that the crisis exacted its heaviest toll: trust was repeatedly strained not by the flood itself but by the gap between what local knowledge and lived experience told principals was true, and what the Department could confirm or authorise from a distance. Anthony's account of being caught between community members' accurate, ground-level information and the Department's delayed sign-off, and Kylie's and Frances's descriptions of departmental urgency colliding

with the slower, uneven rhythm of community recovery, both point to the same underlying pattern: a material crisis that was navigable through action, compounded by a relational strain that was not.

5.1.3 Child Safety Breach Crisis

A child safety breach crisis refers to an incident involving the violation of child safety protocols, often implicating a staff member and profoundly affecting the school community. These crises are complex and emotionally taxing, requiring principals to manage immediate operational and legal responses while also attending to the wellbeing of students, staff, and families. Ryan described a localised breach involving a staff member and students, occurring outside the school itself:

> *"It is complex, tricky to manage, and it is impacting the entire community."* (Ryan, ICSEA = 962, Students = 131)

Describing the significant emotional and physical toll on the wellbeing team working to support students and staff, and the difficulty of knowing what could and could not be communicated to staff and the wider community. Ryan noted that staff from the conduct and ethics unit were supportive, but that he nonetheless felt overwhelmed and uncertain whether he was doing the right thing.

Lucy also experienced a child safety breach involving a staff member described as a trusted colleague. She described feelings of hurt and guilt during and after the breach, and its damaging effect on relational trust within the school. Schools in this position were forced to re-evaluate their processes to determine what, if anything, could have been changed, often working with limited information themselves. Principals in this position were on the frontline for their community, and, where the Department eventually issued public communication, the principal's name was the only signature on the letter. Lucy described the direct personal danger this created once required to publish such a letter:

> *"His son came to the school ready to kill us or kill me. A colleague stepped in and said it is not my fault I was only following Department process."* (Lucy, ICSEA = 928, Students = 274)

Exposing her to both professional and deeply personal public attack for a decision that was not hers to make. Across both accounts, the child safety breach crisis shows sayings and relatings pulling in opposite directions: the less principals could legally say, the more their relational standing was exposed to public and professional risk.

5.1.4 Death of Student(s)

A number of principals described the death of one or more students as among the most significant crises of their leadership. Kylie described the accidental death of a Grade 4 student outside school hours, and the deliberate emotional detachment she used to remain available to support staff and students:

> *"I think I can naturally detach myself from situations, I always think well, it is not actually about me… I think about how it is affecting others and what do they actually need."* (Kylie, ICSEA = 977, Students = 168)

Principals who experienced a student death often found it triggered secondary trauma in other staff or students with related prior experience, meaning a single crisis frequently required a multifaceted management response rather than a single, contained one.

Beth described a weekend in which six students were killed and a further seven significantly injured when an out-of-control car ploughed into a group of students on a Saturday night, in a remote location with delayed emergency response, requiring students to manage the initial crisis largely on their own. In the aftermath, the school became a focal point for community support amid intense media attention:

> *"We had to work out how to go into our classrooms the next day to acknowledge what had happened."* (Beth, ICSEA = 969, Students = 885)

Beth described the situation as horrific and unfolding without any existing plan, requiring the leadership team to do their best under extreme pressure; she noted that post-vention guidelines and templates would have eased staff guilt and uncertainty considerably. Despite engaging additional counsellors, support remained insufficient relative to the scale of ongoing need, with staff managing regular duties alongside funerals and continued trauma among injured students. Some staff meetings were replaced with voluntary, anonymous grief and counselling sessions, which saw unexpectedly strong attendance.

> *"I am not sure the community will ever fully recover from it."* (Beth, ICSEA = 969, Students = 885)

Phil, who had experienced 20 student deaths across a ten-year tenure, described the profound and recurring emotional and professional challenge this represented, particularly for support staff who often held close, one-on-one relationships with affected students and families but lacked ready access to adequate professional development for this specific demand. Despite ongoing efforts to provide training, strategies, and counselling, Phil described the continuing difficulty of securing timely, effective support given how often this particular crisis type recurred at his school.

Scott described a case in which three brothers returned home to discover their father had taken his own life, triggering profound trauma across the school community, compounded by the family's limited prior connection to the school and disparaging statements the father had previously made about the boys' mother. Scott described the significant ripple effect through the boys' tight friendship group:

> *"The three boys had a group of really tight-knit mates, so it had a really big cascading effect on the school community."* (Scott, ICSEA = 950, Students = 898)

The situation was complicated further by external agencies requesting the school make recommendations about the boys' care despite limited information, and by an uncle's persistent, negative characterisation of the boys' mother in meetings with Scott. Scott focused on the elements within his control, implementing comprehensive support measures to ensure the school remained a secure environment in which the boys retained a sense of belonging.

Across these accounts, relatings dominate the death-of-student crisis type in a doubled sense that the TPA makes visible. Kylie's deliberate self-detachment, Beth's account of walking into classrooms "*the next day,*" and Phil's accumulated experience across twenty losses all describe the same underlying relational labour: principals were required to manage their own relating to the event, their grief, their shock, their sense of responsibility, while simultaneously sustaining relational support for staff, students, and families who were grieving alongside them, and often looking to the principal to model how that grief should be held. Scott's account of the ripple effect through a tight-knit friend group shows this labour extending outward again, from the principal's own relating to the event, through their relating to immediate staff and students, to the wider web of relationships a single death disturbs across a school community. Unlike the flood or child safety crises above, where doings and sayings were each constrained by external material or legal conditions, this crisis type shows relatings operating as both the site of greatest personal cost to the principal and the primary practice through which the school community's recovery was enacted.

5.1.5 Family Violence Crisis

Many principals referenced a perceived rise in family violence, evidenced by an increasing number of Apprehended Violence Orders (AVOs) presented to schools. A central concern was the direct impact on students, since violations occurring on school premises required the principal to confront the offending party in front of children. Damian, at the same school for 37 years, described the pervasive reach of family violence within his community:

> *"[Family violence is] endemic…it impacts everything here, I would say there is not one kid at this school it does not impact…[family violence is] pervasive."* (Damian, ICSEA = 927, Students = 988)

He noted that experience and age had deepened his understanding of the scale of the issue, which he now recognised underpinned much of the school's student behaviour more broadly; citing the Dropping off the Edge 2021 report (Tanton et al., 2021), community members in his school's location were 2.4 times more likely to be exposed to family violence than in other parts of Victoria. Staff received professional development to deepen understanding of family violence's impact on behaviour, though managing their own emotional response when classrooms were not calm remained genuinely difficult.

Caroline described the persistent, daily nature of family violence's impact on her school community, meeting regularly with local law enforcement to stay informed of active AVOs and identify at-risk students. Families fleeing violence often had no option but to relocate, withdrawing children from school; the temporary nature of available housing, and the fact that safe-house locations were frequently known to perpetrators, made ensuring these students' safety and stability especially difficult. Caroline described an ongoing, high-risk case directly:

> *"I've got one at the moment and he, I live in fear that though he'll kill them…he has broken the order eight times in 14 days."* (Caroline, ICSEA = 958, Students = 244)

Describing her direct role in de-escalating confrontation with the perpetrator, who contacted her daily threatening to remove the children from school; Caroline responded by clearly stating the legal position while appealing to the children's wellbeing. Principals in this position described significant stress and a sense of powerlessness, confronting individuals in violation of AVOs while maintaining strict confidentiality, contributing to a sense of isolation; several described working with a psychologist themselves to develop coping strategies for the ongoing pressure. Across both accounts, the family violence crisis shows social-political arrangements operating as the dominant constraint on practice: power, safety, and legal limitation determined not only what principals could say and do, but who held the authority to decide it.

5.1.6 Cost-of-Living Crisis

The cost-of-living crisis has been nationwide, affecting all sectors of the community but especially the most disadvantaged. Financial concern is closely linked to increased stress and negative wellbeing impacts. Damian, whose school serves an area of severe disadvantage, described his own paternalistic commitment to student welfare, hiring a café manager to prepare healthy food free of charge for students:

> *"…hungry students get angry and cannot learn as well as others…"* (Damian, ICSEA = 927, Students = 988)

Many students had limited prior exposure to healthy, fresh food. The initiative, supported by Foodbank, Australia's largest hunger relief charity, through a Victorian Department of Education school breakfast club program, did not affect the profitability of the school canteen but was warmly received by students, with Damian describing its impact as:

> *"…transformative…"* (Damian, ICSEA = 927, Students = 988)

for both attendance and behaviour, and expressing pride in the school's response to this dimension of crisis. The material-economic arrangement runs in the opposite direction to the crises above: rather than constraining what principals could do, disadvantage became the condition Damian actively resourced against, translating a funding response directly into a new, sustained doing.

5.1.7 Impact of Negative Student Behaviours

Challenging and violent student behaviour was described as significantly affecting the occupational wellbeing of school staff, with principals emphasising that their own actions, and staff perceptions of fairness in handling incidents, played a crucial role in shaping staff wellbeing outcomes.

> *"Staff were really quite distressed by that…staff were yelling at our office staff because the office staff didn't call the police because they didn't know what they were to call the police for."* (Rachel, ICSEA= 922, Students = 569)

> *"…the violence, the aggression and the swearing was daily…I just didn't feel safe…"* (Leanne, ICSEA = 918, Students = 10)

Principals described proactively managing communication by briefing their leadership teams first, to pre-empt concerns and avoid undermining questions surfacing in all-staff meetings; multiple briefings clarifying procedures and policy helped staff feel more supported. Reintegrating students following a major incident was described as very difficult, requiring principals to rebuild relationships with families so they could become collaborative partners in behaviour management going forward. Overall, these experiences reinforced the pivotal importance of transparent communication, proactive leadership, and strong collaboration with families and support services in managing challenging behaviour while safeguarding staff wellbeing. Together, these accounts show doings and relatings operating in sequence rather than in tension: the doing of proactive, staff-first communication was what made the subsequent relational work of rebuilding trust, with staff, and with families during reintegration, possible at all.

5.1.8 Workforce Issues

Akela described several workforce-related factors that had increased principal workload and stress, amounting to a crisis in their own right. Changes to the Occupational Health and Safety program EduSafe substantially increased the administrative time required to lodge OHS concerns, with limited training accompanying the rollout. Akela described a report made to WorkSafe by a small group of staff bypassing the standard EduSafe escalation pathway, automatically triggering a higher-level response and resulting in a Provisional Improvement Notice (PIN) being placed on the school:

> *"…given how hard I work and my values and beliefs are all about service, it felt terrible…"* (Akela, ICSEA = 1003, Students = 583)

Describing the personal toll of feeling labelled despite her own strong safety practices and values. Rachel described the related difficulty of having to sign off on incidents that occurred before her own appointment to the school.

Several principals linked recent Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) changes, new time-in-lieu reconciliation requirements and the removal, from 2025, of teaching staff's obligation to cover ‘extras’, to a growing crisis in staffing capacity and morale, describing a shift toward resentment among staff no longer able to claim time in lieu for activities listed in their job description, and principals limiting out-of-hours activity attendance to manage cost. Several principals also noted the compounding effect of teacher shortages and a shrinking pool of Casual Relief Teachers (CRTs), with one describing having to employ teaching students under provisional “permission to teach” approval to remain staffed. Across both accounts, workforce crisis shows material-economic arrangements acting on principals' doings from above rather than beside them, EBA provisions, staffing systems, and funding models set constraints Akela and Rachel had to work within, rather than resources they could actively deploy.

5.1.9 Financial Mismanagement Crisis

Principals new to a school inherit the conditions and culture created by their predecessor. Simon inherited a set of financial circumstances that would have challenged the most experienced principal, including falsified enrolment records created to attract additional funding, and a culture among some staff that had supported this deception. Simon addressed the situation by learning the school's budget and funding model in detail, describing the effort this required:

> *"I was probably a servant leader at that time, too…I would get to school at 6:00 and there were times I didn't get home till 1:00 at night."* (Simon, ICSEA = 970, Students = 908)

Estimating this pattern continued for roughly two years. Despite attempting to distribute tasks, the reduced size of the leadership team made this difficult, and staff morale suffered as many did not fully understand the school's underlying financial situation; Simon deliberately chose not to criticise the previous principal publicly, which limited how much he could explain to staff directly. Rebuilding the school's position required difficult personnel decisions:

> *"I had to be really mean…I had to sack the business manager and put another three staff through the conducts and ethics process."* (Simon, ICSEA = 970, Students = 908)

Simon described this period as an enormous additional administrative burden and an uncomfortable working environment, made harder by needing to continue working alongside those involved. Despite the Department's own scepticism, having suggested recovery would take five years, Simon's team returned the school to a sound financial position within eighteen months, a result Simon felt went largely unacknowledged by the Department given the sacrifices involved. This crisis type shows a material-economic arrangement doing double duty: the same inherited deficit that demanded two years of administrative rebuild also constrained Simon's relatings, since restoring trust required rebuilding the school's finances without ever attributing blame to the predecessor who created the shortfall.

5.1.10 Personal Attack via Social Media and Legal proceedings

The rise of social media has made it easier for parents and community members to voice frustrations publicly and without verification, creating a largely unregulated space in which derogatory or untrue comments are difficult to remove. The Victorian Department of Education treats such personal attacks on school leaders as a private, not professional, matter, and has advised principals it does not provide support in this space. Phil described experiencing abusive comments from parents attempting to undermine him with other staff, and was advised by the Department to seek a personal intervention order himself.

Jane described sustained, untrue public attacks on her name and the Department's refusal to intervene:

> *"If someone's running my name into the ground with things that are not true…it just struck me at the time that, anyone could say anything about me and I'm on my own."* (Jane, ICSEA = 955, Students = 418)

Noting the negative flow-on impact on her own partner and children, who she was unable to shield from the comments. Jake described being falsely reported on social media as having attempted suicide by train, a claim connected online to unrelated child-safety accusations at his school; he received no personal check-in following the report, describing feeling disheartened that no one had thought to confirm he was safe. Even though he knew his superiors were aware of the situation and the false reports.

Janice, who was required to give evidence in court in relation to an incident at her school, described receiving very little departmental support through that process, despite the significant emotional toll on herself and other staff involved:

> *"….felt like I was hung out to dry by myself…"* (Janice, ICSEA = 942, Students = 672)

The incident and the resulting court process continued to affect her well after the fact. Across these accounts, cultural-discursive arrangements principals had no authorship over, social media's reach, and the Department's position that such attacks are personal rather than professional, left Jane and Janice's relatings exposed with no institutional shield, each describing the same outcome in strikingly similar terms: being left to face it alone.

5.1.11 Multiple, Overlapping Crises

The onset of COVID-19 did not halt other crises; rather, multiple crises frequently occurred simultaneously, intensifying their combined impact. Josh, in his first year as principal, described the immense pressure of managing overlapping challenges within an isolated community, including a Grade 6 student regularly self-harming and at risk of suicide; COVID-19 restrictions prevented Student Support Services from intervening in a timely way, and the student later attempted suicide and was hospitalised in a coma. To protect his largely remote and unaware staff, Josh personally absorbed mandatory reporting and sensitive matters rather than delegating them, while also fielding an influx of parents raising concerns extending well beyond the school's role, including suicidal ideation, marital breakdown, and family violence, describing the resulting toll directly:

> *"Vicarious trauma, that dealing with other people with empathy, trying to feel what they are feeling to relate to them so you can support them."* (Josh, ICSEA = 994, Students = 135)

This ultimately necessitated his own post-crisis counselling and support.

Jake described the day the first COVID-19 lockdown was announced: hosting the school's swimming sports at the local pool, with students without phone access, when he learned a student had died. Jake found informing staff and students of both the lockdown and the death simultaneously, before sending them into isolation, especially difficult, given how much harder it was to identify and support those most affected once the community dispersed from the school site. Josh's and Jake's accounts show why this final crisis type closes Section 5.2 rather than sitting alongside the others: where each preceding crisis foregrounded one arrangement most sharply, doings in the floods, sayings in the child safety breach, relatings in family violence, overlapping crisis collapses that separation entirely, demanding sayings, doings, and relatings be enacted simultaneously and without the sequencing any single crisis type might otherwise allow.

5.2 Findings for Research Question 1: Professional Practices Supporting Occupational Wellbeing

This section addresses RQ1 directly, organised into eight practice areas: communication and transparency; structured support systems; staff occupational wellbeing; principal occupational wellbeing; leadership and empowerment; community engagement; innovation; and, as a baseline coda, standards-based practice prior to crisis-specific analysis.

5.2.1 Communication and Transparency

Communication and listening played a pivotal role in fostering supportive environments across the sample. Transparent, open communication from school leadership helped build trust among staff while providing opportunities for staff to voice concerns and feel genuinely heard, strengthening the overall wellbeing of the school community. Principals noted that feeling supported and valued in their own roles was integral to maintaining their capacity to lead effectively, and that encouraging staff to seek psychological support and normalising help-seeking behaviour contributed further to a culture of care.

Damian described low-key, non-agenda-driven contact as the foundation of this culture, not seeking to know everything about staff, but ensuring they knew he was interested:

> *"At least they know I am interested in their world and who they are."* (Damian, ICSEA = 927, Students = 988)

Many principals believed the single biggest contributor to improving staff occupational wellbeing was simply communication. Damian described regularly “checking in” and taking time for conversations unrelated to school matters. Scott described how small, personal moments of connection built the relational trust needed for harder conversations later:

> *"You have a 2-minute conversation with a staff member because your heard their mother was unwell…the next time you need to have a different type of conversation they are usually way more open to it. Having that personal connection and building those little opportunities for connections is really*

important. I think it is hard for leaders in schools because we are expected to everything to everyone. But building connections by showing vulnerabilities is increasingly important" (Scott, ICSEA = 950, Students = 898)

Anthony identified a lack of clear information as the single most damaging failure mode during crisis:

"The biggest issue in all of these things is lack of information and clear communication out to the people it's affecting." (Anthony, ICSEA = 990, Students = 511)

Leanne prioritised regular communication specifically about the mental health supports available to staff:

"About mental health supports and needs is essential for staff support." (Leanne, ICSEA = 918, Students = 10)

Ryan reflected that the consistent thread across his own experience was less any single initiative than sustained connection itself:

"I think it's been mainly about them staying connected...and throughout the whole...everything that's been happening." (Ryan, ICSEA = 962, Students = 131)

Ultimately, the effectiveness of support systems in schools hinged on the strength of relationships, networks, and leadership practice. Anthony summarised this directly:

"The most important thing is their colleagues that they work with and respect... if you build a strong team culture already, those teams are self-managing." (Anthony, ICSEA = 990, Students = 511)

Principals supported staff during and after crisis by communicating clearly and often, providing both emotional and practical support, relying on team structures, remaining flexible, fostering a caring culture, maintaining clear processes, and encouraging peer support; being present, empathetic, and proactive in communication and practical help were repeatedly identified as the most impactful actions available to a principal. Daniel described the simple act of visibly caring as itself the most valued form of support:

"Being seen to care was probably the most important thing from staff's perspective...the fact that we acknowledged how difficult things were for them and you are... willing to listen." (Daniel, ICSEA = 1005, Students = 1733)

Tim, reflecting on his role during crisis, described the particular weight of being seen by the community as a fixed point of stability:

"I think the communication and just your openness. Everyone was welcome. But I think understanding a bit more of the role that you play as a principal in these communities, where everyone looks to you in those times, you are that solid figure for lots of these families and members of the community." (Tim, ICSEA = 974, Students = 18)

Several principals noted an evolving tension between transparency and the legal or ethical need to withhold information, particularly in the child safety and family violence crises, requiring them to exercise professional judgement about what staff needed to know to support their own wellbeing without breaching confidentiality. Across this section, communication functions as the clearest example of sayings as a distinct practice arrangement: what varied between principals was not whether they valued transparency, but the cultural-discursive resources, a two-minute check-in, a standing team culture, a solid public presence, each drew on to enact it, and the limits placed on that saying wherever legal or ethical constraint, as in Sections 5.2.3 and 5.2.5, required something be deliberately left unsaid.

5.2.2 Structured Support Systems

Beyond informal communication, principals described establishing formal support structures: scheduled wellbeing meetings, access to psychologists and counselling, grief and loss sessions, and staff social events. Phil introduced dedicated after-school wellbeing meetings, describing them as:

> *"…crucial for support…"* (Phil, ICSEA = 893, Students = 113)

Having a mental health practitioner and a dedicated wellbeing staff member on site, described the resulting practice directly:

> *"Because we have a mental health practitioner and a wellbeing person on staff, the best thing we have done is to dedicate two meetings a term to wellbeing and that's wellbeing of students and staff, topics like self-care and recognising depression."* (Phil, ICSEA = 893, Students = 113)

These structured systems played a vital role in fostering belonging and emotional resilience, reinforcing the collective nature of staff wellbeing rather than leaving it to be managed individually. Rachel described the value of departmental support structures beyond the school itself, the media unit, legal unit, and emergency services, in reducing the sense of isolation principals could otherwise feel:

> *"There are all these people in the department that actually are there to assist you…you're not alone."* (Rachel, ICSEA = 922, Students = 569)

Scott, an experienced principal mentor, reflected that newer principals were often well prepared instructionally but under-supported in the interpersonal, people-management side of the role:

> *"Have got a really good teaching practice side, but I need to develop my management side around people."* (Scott, ICSEA = 950, Students = 898)

Investing in middle leaders and providing leadership-development opportunities strengthened the broader support network within a school, creating a ripple effect benefiting the entire community; establishing comprehensive induction, mentorship, and professional networks for new principals was identified as essential to ensuring emerging

leaders received adequate guidance to navigate crisis. Janice accessed the Department's Early Intervention Program directly, through regular sessions with a psychologist:

> *"We talk through scenarios of things that have happened and what I might do different next time."* (Janice, ICSEA = 942, Students = 672)

Dallas similarly described the benefit of debrief sessions with a critical friend, valuable both for personal growth and for processing events rather than carrying them indefinitely:

> *"…to ensure you do not dwell on things and carry them…"* (Dallas, ICSEA = 1011, Students = 21)

Daniel identified a specific, recurring staff need underlying much of this structure, simply the opportunity to talk and be heard during crisis:

> *"…needed opportunities to talk and be heard during crisis…"* (Daniel, ICSEA = 1005, Students = 1733)

Mentoring in particular was identified as a vital component in supporting staff to manage classroom demands and navigate the complexity of their professional responsibilities; Josh linked this explicitly to his own development needs as a newer principal:

> *"…mentoring for their development…"* (Josh, ICSEA = 994, Students = 135)

Support from retired staff was also identified as valuable in addressing staffing shortages, illustrating the broader importance of drawing on community networks to bolster the school workforce during periods of strain. Crisis was repeatedly described as capable of inducing isolation and a lack of understanding from others outside the school, underscoring the importance of support systems that could respond with genuine immediacy when a crisis occurred.

Not all principals experienced departmental support as consistent, however: several described delays or inadequate assistance during critical incidents. Kylie described the department's failure to formally recognise the ongoing impact of crisis on recovery:

> *"…at no point was that ever actually recognised or acknowledged…"* (Kylie, ICSEA = 977, Students = 168)

Describing a three-day, over-subscribed onsite counselling service offered following lengthy negotiation with the Department:

> *"After long negotiation with the Department, the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) was offered to the schools of Rochester as an onsite service and was over subscribed. Limited days were available and staff responded really positively to it, however when the service was offered online, staff used terms referenced feeling abandoned again. Recovery takes a long time and for many of the staff still living in makeshift accommodation for up to two years, three days was not enough"* (Researcher's reflective journal, ICSEA = 964, Students = 343)

With no extension granted despite some staff remaining displaced for up to two years, and a subsequent online alternative seeing minimal uptake, illustrating directly the gap between the support available in the acute phase of a crisis and the length of actual recovery. Addressing the longer-term impacts of crisis, including mental health and community trust, was consistently described as essential to genuine recovery. Across this section, structured support systems show doings operating as the necessary complement to the sayings of Section 5.2.1: communicating care was not sufficient on its own, and it was the material-economic arrangements behind it, a dedicated wellbeing meeting, a psychologist on staff, a departmental network actually reachable, that determined whether support was delivered concretely or remained only spoken, a gap Kylie's account of an under-resourced, time-limited counselling service makes especially visible.

5.2.3 Staff Occupational Wellbeing

The role of school principals in fostering staff wellbeing was highlighted throughout the interviews, particularly in light of the challenges posed by the various crises described in Section 5.2. Staff wellbeing, and teacher wellbeing specifically, is intrinsically linked to their ability to teach and feel supported by leadership; participants were clear that the core business of schools, teaching and learning, can only be effective when integrated with a strong focus on the wellbeing of all. Principals placed staff wellbeing at the forefront of decision-making, recognising its direct influence on performance, morale, and overall school climate.

> *"The responsibility for the occupational wellbeing of staff weighs heavily on principals."* (Akela, ICSEA = 1003, Students = 583)

Many principals expressed the weight of this additional responsibility during crisis, balancing operational demands with staff wellbeing needs. Michelle identified the importance of self-care as foundational to being able to sustain this responsibility for others:

> *"Prioritising personal wellbeing through exercise and work-life balance is crucial."* (Michelle, ICSEA = 970, Students = 110)

Blake reflected on the need to be authentically empathetic during crisis, genuinely giving staff time to understand their perspective, fears, and concerns, describing this as requiring a shift in his own mode of operating:

> *"…trying to truly understand where other people are coming…"* (Blake, ICSEA = 975, Students = 151)

> *"…allowing yourself to move to that survive mode from the thrive mode…"* (Blake, ICSEA = 975, Students = 151)

and supporting staff to believe that recovery was possible:

> *"…we will get through this…"* (Blake, ICSEA = 975, Students = 151)

During crisis and its aftermath, principals were required to reassess their schools' needs, often shifting focus away from existing departmental initiatives or annual goals to respond to new priorities imposed by the crisis itself. Caroline described this recalibration directly, noting that not all pre-crisis initiatives retained their relevance amidst acute disruption:

> *"…taking the foot off…"* (Caroline, ICSEA = 958, Students = 244)

Many principals described a leadership approach that evolved from hands-on problem-solving toward a more facilitative stance prioritising staff resilience and autonomy, deliberately embedding wellbeing into the organisational agenda by allocating staff meeting time to personal wellbeing strategies. Caroline articulated the belief that fostering collective calm among staff was itself a leadership responsibility:

> *"We have got to be the calm people in the situation, if we are not calm as staff, our students will not be calm"* (Caroline, ICSEA = 958, Students = 244)

Principals also prioritised collective celebration, seeking out evidence of success at both staff and school-community levels, to generate enthusiasm and rebuild culture after crisis, while recognising not all staff would actively participate. Akela described this narrative-building explicitly:

> *"We were building a narrative about collaboration. The importance of working together in complex environments like schools and the pride that we can have in our work, the shared work that we do around students, it's just all of that kind of thing, it is why we are here."* (Akela, ICSEA = 1003, Students = 583)

Mental health became a more prominent and legitimate topic of conversation within schools during and after crisis. Principals emphasised the necessity of leading authentic discussions around wellbeing, while also acknowledging staff had a responsibility to attend work well enough to fulfil their professional commitments, conversations Jane described as needing to be approached with compassion rather than accusation:

> *"Are you well enough to be here to be able to make these commitments, because they are really big, and I care about you and I don't want to see you go under."* (Jane, ICSEA = 955, Students = 418)

A recurring practice was principals buffering staff from departmental bureaucracy, parental hostility, or distressing crisis details, particularly where legal or ethical considerations precluded full disclosure. Jake described this directly:

> *"I saw my role as being the buffer"* (Jake, ICSEA = 942, Students = 794)

This buffering role sometimes sat in tension with principals' own value of open, transparent communication; several described feeling conflicted about how much detail to share with staff. Dallas described managing this tension by controlling the flow of difficult information while still being as open as circumstances allowed:

> *"Actually having a staff meeting explaining what had happened because a lot of staff knew. What was going on, but actually being pretty open? And saying, well, this is the process, this is what's happened. This is the outcome"* (Dallas, ICSEA = 1011, Students = 21)

Many participants described using professional judgement and experience to navigate these complexities, guided by the principle that staff should receive only the information necessary to support the wellbeing and learning needs of those involved. Jane observed that principal wellbeing itself remained comparatively under-discussed even as staff wellbeing gained legitimacy:

> *"We talk about principal wellbeing but that's a huge hole. That's really huge"* (Jane, ICSEA = 955, Students = 418)

Staff occupational wellbeing shows doings and relatings working as a single, inseparable practice rather than two sequential steps: the concrete action of a wellbeing meeting or a buffered conversation only functioned as support because it was carried by the empathetic, personal connection, Blake's authentic understanding, Caroline's calm, Jane's care, that gave it meaning to the staff receiving it.

5.2.4 Principal Occupational Wellbeing

Consistent with the study's aim, principals also described the professional practices they used to manage their own occupational wellbeing during and after crisis, a dimension several principals noted receives far less attention than staff wellbeing. Phil described a deliberately solitary exercise routine, timed specifically to avoid others:

> *"I go to the gym at 4am in the morning so I can be by myself"* (Phil, ICSEA = 893, Students = 113)

and valued a peer support network that functioned specifically because of its distance from local judgement, meeting physically around three times a term and speaking by phone more frequently:

> *"The distance makes it easier to share more freely because the local judgement and connections are not there, this has been critical to be able to sustain the role"* (Phil, ICSEA = 893, Students = 113)

Many principals emphasised the importance of physical activity, the gym, swimming, walking, running, for maintaining physical and mental health, while others found solace in hobbies such as playing a musical instrument or gardening. Practising mindfulness, reflecting on personal experience, and consciously acknowledging stress levels were also common strategies. Anthony described the importance of identifying his own stress triggers, noting that it was less the confrontational conversations and more the accumulation of unfinished tasks that caused difficulty, making staying organised a deliberate wellbeing strategy in itself.

Many principals recognised the importance of role-modelling healthy behaviour, being visibly seen to care about their own wellbeing as well as others'. Ted linked his own wellbeing directly to that of his staff:

> *"…their wellbeing is my wellbeing…"* (Ted, ICSEA = 963, Students = 151)

Some principals described existing supports as ineffective for them personally. Josh described trying the Early Intervention Program without success, relying instead on informal debriefs, playing golf with a friend, or speaking with his father, himself a former principal, while acknowledging this was an area he needed to work harder on:

> *"…shocking at looking after myself…"* (Josh, ICSEA = 994, Students = 135)

Principals tended to put the needs of others, staff, students, and the wider community, ahead of their own wellbeing. Anthony summarised the interdependence directly:

> *"You cannot be a good principal and do a good job if you are not in the right frame of mind."* (Anthony, ICSEA = 990, Students = 511)

The role of principal was consistently described as emotionally intense: participants' moral purpose and natural empathy led them to give more of themselves to their community than was sustainable. Beth described an acute physical stress response during COVID-19:

> *"I was pretty sure I was continually going to have a heart attack because during COVID-19 because I had a physical response to the stress."* (Beth, ICSEA = 969, Students = 885)

The combination of emotionally intense situations, long work hours, and excessive workload was described as compounding, especially in smaller schools without the workforce to share the load. Kylie linked this directly to the quality of support principals could provide to others:

> *"You will not be effective if you are short and sharp with responses or you are not present in the moment to hear whatever the issue is or the support staff need."* (Kylie, ICSEA = 977, Students = 168)

Having a critical friend or mentor, whether from within the profession or independent of it, was repeatedly described as vital, the ability to debrief scenarios and seek support from others was central to principals' own wellbeing. Healthy eating and exercise were identified as important markers principals used to judge their own balance, while also acknowledging how difficult finding time for either could be. Most principals stressed the importance of their own wellbeing even while admitting they did not always prioritise it, recognising its role in shaping school culture and effective decision-making; poor principal wellbeing, by contrast, was linked to stress, burnout, and diminished performance affecting the whole school community. Scott encouraged principals directly to use available support:

> *"Use the employee assistance program or whatever the wellbeing supports that are out there."* (Scott, ICSEA = 950, Students = 898)

Relatings extended to the self, principals' own relationship to their practice, and to a community of peers, as a site of practice in its own right.

5.2.5 Leadership and Empowerment as a Wellbeing Practice

Empowering others often involved distributing leadership responsibility across the school community. Principals identified staff members' strengths and created opportunities for them to take on leadership roles, building capacity within the team so that decision-making and problem-solving were not solely dependent on the principal. Jane described this directly:

> *"Building capacity of those around me means it's not me going in and doing everything but identifying strengths and creating opportunities for others to lead."* (Jane, ICSEA = 955, Students = 418)

By trusting others to lead, principals fostered a sense of ownership and shared responsibility that strengthened the collective response to crisis. This extended to acknowledging the emotional toll of crisis directly and providing emotional support; Phil identified collaboration as essential to leading innovation and change, and to creating a culture where staff felt safe to express concerns:

> *"Support and collaboration are essential in leading innovation and change."* (Phil, ICSEA = 893, Students = 113)

Principals delegated responsibility and created structures, such as communication trees, so that all staff had someone from the leadership team regularly checking in on them. During crisis, principals needed to trust staff by empowering them and encouraging innovative practice, giving staff the freedom to experiment with new ways of working; the rapid transition to online learning during the pandemic required staff to adopt unfamiliar technologies quickly, and principals played a key role in fostering a culture where trial and error was accepted as part of the learning process. Even amid crisis, principals empowered others by anchoring the school community in a shared sense of purpose, reminding staff of the school's core mission and ensuring short-term crisis responses remained aligned with long-term educational goals. Beth reflected on this underlying moral purpose directly:

> *"I'm here to serve others and make sure I try to make a difference."* (Beth, ICSEA = 969, Students = 885)

By distributing leadership, fostering collaboration, and maintaining a clear sense of purpose, principals created the conditions for resilience and collective action. Anthony summarised the practice of empowerment as a deliberate act of restraint as much as delegation:

> *"Giving leaders permission to lead teams and not micromanaging."* (Anthony, ICSEA = 990, Students = 511)

Empowerment emerges as a relating rather than a doing in its own right: what Jane, Phil, Beth, and Anthony each describe is not a new task delegated but a redistribution of relational authority itself, the deliberate, sustained act of stepping back so that others could be trusted to lead.

5.2.6 Community Engagement as a Wellbeing Practice

Community support emerged as a significant factor in supporting both staff and students during difficult periods. Establishing partnerships with community organisations and parents enhanced the support available to schools, providing essential resources and reinforcing the collective responsibility for student wellbeing. Schools that actively built relationships and networks across their communities were better positioned to pool resources and respond to crises. Principals emphasised the importance of creating supportive environments where open communication, transparency, and trust fostered collaborative relationships between staff, students, and the wider community.

> *"Our role extends beyond the school walls; we're the glue that holds the community together. Building strong relationships with families and community partners is our most powerful tool."* (Frances, ICSEA = 981, Students = 93)

> *"None of us have enough to do what we need to do, so trying to network and partner across our community and build relationships has been really important for me in my principal work…I feel like I spend a lot of time out of my role to the detriment of a number of things including my visibility, my health and my sleep."* (Beth, ICSEA = 969, Students = 885)

Beth noted the particular imbalance created by her school's isolation and distance from other large towns, which increased the demand on her role. She sat on several boards, including Mallee Family Care and the LLEN (Local Learning Employment Network), and was independent chair of the area's Headspace organisation, roles undertaken in addition to, and uncompensated alongside, her substantive work as principal.

> *"So you know, for me that sometimes means being on boards like I'm on the board of Malley Family Care. I was the independent chair of Headspace. I'm on the board of the LLEN…get on working parties and groups because I feel like we need to have a voice in that and we need to be connected."* (Beth, ICSEA = 969, Students = 885)

Participating in community safety meetings, working groups, and local events strengthened relationships and trust, ensuring the school was seen as an integral part of the community. Daniel built trust through small, informal gestures:

> *"Chit chat to parents ... It is important it is that you go to the bus stop. It's one thing to be there, but it's the chat, and when you turn up to the musical performance."* (Daniel, ICSEA = 1005, Students = 1733)

Blake emphasised the importance of simple visibility at the school gate each morning:

> *"I try be very visible up… just being at the front gate and ... saying good day to the kids or grabbing any problems from parents as they come in."* (Blake, ICSEA = 975, Students = 151)

Community engagement was often a necessary response to broader social challenges, housing insecurity, family violence, and food insecurity, that extended well beyond the classroom, particularly in rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Daniel worked closely with Food Bank to ensure families had access to essential resources:

> *"…we provide free healthy food for our students…"* (Daniel, ICSEA = 1005, Students = 1733)

Caroline described community involvement as essential in addressing inadequate housing and support for women and children fleeing violence:

> *"But sadly for some of our families in that situation, getting out of that situation is too hard because there's no housing….and very little support."* (Caroline, ICSEA = 958, Students = 244)

Leanne articulated that this relational approach enhanced educational outcomes and fostered belonging and safety:

> *"Communication is critical... is anyone worried about anything? Does anyone think they need support?"* (Leanne, ICSEA = 918, Students = 10)

Ted continued a family-mentorship program that began during COVID-19, assigning staff members to check in regularly with a small number of families, an initiative he described as central to the school's ongoing relationship with families:

> *"…it is all about relationships…"* (Ted, ICSEA = 963, Students = 151)

Innovative approaches to engagement were also described. Tom implemented a community garden initiative, inviting “mothers, fathers and grandparents” to participate in its maintenance and harvest; although initially slow to gain traction, it eventually fostered stronger community ties. Ted's family-mentor initiative similarly began during COVID-19 and continued afterward, strengthening the relationship between the school and its families through consistent, assigned contact.

Effective community engagement required principals to act as bridges between the school and the broader community, initiating and then sustaining partnerships over time. Beth highlighted the value of pooling resources with local organisations:

> *"…because we don't have the resources on our own…"* (Beth, ICSEA = 969, Students = 885)

Ryan emphasised the need to build relational trust and rapport with external stakeholders, ensuring the school was seen as a credible, collaborative partner. Community engagement carried real costs alongside its benefits: the time required to build and sustain these relationships often went unrecognised by the broader system, with principals investing

significant personal time attending community events, serving on boards, and participating in local discussions with little formal acknowledgement. Ted identified systemic constraints compounding this workload directly:

> *"…staffing is not easy, recruiting is the whole staff's job…"* (Ted, ICSEA = 963, Students = 151)

Despite these costs, principals consistently framed community engagement as central to school success. Phil summarised the dual benefit directly:

> *"Principals not only enhance educational outcomes but also strengthen the social fabric of their communities."* (Phil, ICSEA = 893, Students = 113)

Ryan described the particular intensity of this engagement during crisis, when staff themselves are often personally affected by the same event the school community is experiencing:

> *"Our staff are knee deep in the community…when there's a crisis, it's generally happening to them too."* (Ryan, ICSEA = 962, Students = 131)

Janice described her inclusion team's community-facing achievements as a source of pride worth showcasing externally:

> *"…inclusion team has been really kicking goals."* (Janice, ICSEA = 942, Students = 672)

For long-serving principals such as Damian, community commitment was expressed as a defining, decades-long feature of their leadership identity rather than a discrete practice:

> *"I have a deep commitment to this community, and that's why I've sort of hung around at this school and been a sort of one club player."* (Damian, ICSEA = 927, Students = 988)

Community engagement represents the widest reach of relatings in this chapter. The same relational labour enacted with staff in Sections 5.2.3 and 5.2.5 extends beyond the school gate into the social-political arrangements of the wider community. This labour carries the same costs, including Beth's toll on her own visibility, health, and sleep. However, it is borne largely without formal institutional recognition.

5.2.7 Innovation as a Practice Response

Innovation is a fundamental aspect of educational leadership, particularly in rural and disadvantaged communities where principals must adapt to rapidly changing circumstances and unique challenges. Effective leadership involves the capacity to identify emerging issues, implement new ideas, and drive improvements that enhance teaching, learning, and community outcomes. Beth described stepping outside her formal job description to serve her community:

> *"I am here to serve my community, so I do outside my job description and get involved in committees and community initiatives to help make a difference in my community"* (Beth, ICSEA = 969, Students = 885)

One significant area of innovation was the development of distance-education models in response to COVID-19. Principals played a key role in establishing virtual learning networks that maintained continuity of learning during remote schooling, which also strengthened collaboration between schools by creating a platform for the exchange of ideas and shared resources. Daniel established a virtual learning network not only for his own school but shared the resources with other schools:

> *"Being from a larger school, we found it important to share our ideas and resources with other schools to promote collaboration."* (Daniel, ICSEA = 1005, Students = 1733)

Principals also drew on previous experience with instructional models to implement evidence-based teaching practices, illustrating how innovation was often rooted in reflective practice, applying what had been learned previously to drive future improvements. Rachel introduced a learning excellence program to improve student outcomes, and Jane described using the pressure of the crisis itself as a deliberate capacity-building opportunity:

> *"Used the challenges of COVID-19 to build the capacity and identify strengths within our leadership team."* (Jane, ICSEA = 955, Students = 418)

Some principals described the particular difficulty of the remote learning environment, where the timeliness of departmental information often impeded their work: plans were put in place using innovative strategies to support students, staff, and the community, but when guidelines were eventually released, the plans frequently did not align, causing tension for principals and stress within communities. Michelle described acting ahead of formal guidance where she judged it necessary:

> *"We didn't tell anyone, I wasn't asking for permission from anybody. We just did what was in the best interest of our students"* (Michelle, ICSEA = 970, Students = 110)

Building community partnerships and showcasing school achievement in the wider community was a further dimension of innovation. Principals demonstrated a strong commitment to showcasing their schools' successes through local networks and conferences, creating opportunities to share knowledge and strengthen external connections. Janice suggested her inclusion team present at a conference to showcase its work, describing the team as:

> *"…inclusion team has been really kicking goals."* (Janice, ICSEA = 942, Students = 672)

This outward-facing approach not only raised the profile of rural schools but positioned them as leaders of innovation within the broader system. Ultimately, principals' capacity to lead innovation depended on a combination of agility, collaboration, and moral purpose, embedding innovation into leadership practice to create dynamic learning environments responsive to evolving community needs.

A critical enabler of innovation in small rural schools was collaboration through professional learning communities (PLCs), which provided a platform to share ideas, challenge existing practice, and adopt new methods, particularly around literacy, student wellbeing, and digital technologies. Frances spoke of the influence of younger, tech-savvy teachers introducing digital tools that enhanced student engagement. Innovation in rural schools was not without its challenges, however: small schools often struggled to attract and retain trained staff, limiting the capacity for sustained innovation. Pauline described the frustration of building staff capacity only to lose it to promotion elsewhere:

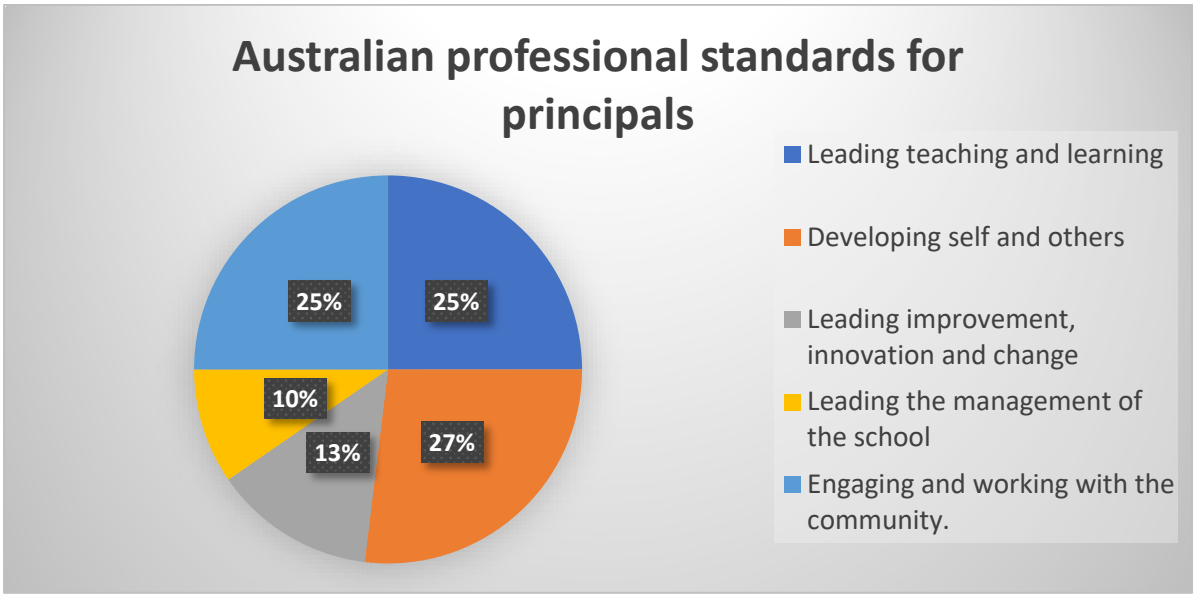
> *"We have trained seven of our staff for a structured synthetic phonics program, and now we do not have any left at the school."* (Pauline, ICSEA = 938, Students = 35)

Departmental constraints and delays in information availability further hindered the implementation of new initiatives, though many principals found that support networks and collaboration with other leaders helped overcome these barriers, principal networks were spoken of often as a source of advice, debriefing, and shared learning. Innovation shows doings turned generative rather than merely responsive: where Sections 5.2 and 5.2.2 showed material-economic arrangements largely constraining what principals could do, here the same constraint, isolation, disrupted resourcing, a workforce forced online, became the direct occasion for new arrangements to be built, from Daniel's shared learning network to Pauline's trained staff, even where, as her account shows, the arrangement built could not always be retained.

5.2.8 Standards-Based Practice: A Pre-Crisis Baseline

Participants were asked to identify two of the five Australian Professional Standards for Principals they most valued (Figure 12). All participants acknowledged that all five: Leading Teaching and Learning; Developing Self and Others; Leading Improvement, Innovation and Change; Leading the Management of the School; and Engaging and Working with the Community, were important, but individual circumstances, particularly school size, shaped which two were nominated.

Figure 12 - *Australian Professional Standards*



In small schools, principals more often nominated Developing Self and Others and Engaging and Working with the Community, citing close relationships and the ability to step directly into classrooms. In small-school settings, principals frequently assumed multiple leadership and administrative roles due to limited staffing and resource constraints, and this closer proximity to staff and students allowed for more personalised support and quicker decision-making; small-school principals specifically identified their ability to step into classrooms and teach when needed as fostering a family-like atmosphere:

> *"I have a passion for helping kids, it really concerns me sometimes that the kids don't fit into the system…you get to know all the kids, I can just pop in and teach"* (Pauline, ICSEA = 938, Students = 35)

Josh, also leading a small school, described the tension between delegating administrative work and having limited staff to delegate to, pushing as much administrative work as possible to office staff so as not to become consumed by tasks that could otherwise be delegated, though this was not always feasible given how limited that office staff was, alongside a consistent investment in developing others, having seen several of his own staff go on to leadership roles elsewhere:

> *"Three of my staff have now gone on to be Assistant Principals at other schools."* (Josh, ICSEA = 994, Students = 135)

> *"It feels like I am never really building and keeping the team we need."* (Josh, ICSEA = 994, Students = 135)

Reflecting the particular demand small schools place on a principal to know everything, and the ongoing cost of continually having to rebuild a team. The demands of small and large schools were described as very different, with the role of principal changing considerably depending on school size and staff composition. In larger schools, complexity

increased and principals relied more heavily on distributed leadership models, delegating responsibility to middle leaders and focusing their own attention on strategic oversight; Daniel, emphasising the importance of a strong leadership team to manage the school's various functions, more often nominated Leading the Management of the School, reflecting his greater capacity to delegate teaching-and-learning leadership to others:

> *"I am probably a little less hands on with teaching and learning than I am with some of the other aspects here."* (Daniel, ICSEA = 1005, Students = 1733)

> *"I don't feel compelled to be across the day-to-day of everything, but I want to have people in roles who understand what their function is, what their job is and I want to be able to trust them to do their work."* (Daniel, ICSEA = 1005, Students = 1733)

Daniel further reflected that having begun his principalship at a smaller school had, in hindsight, broadened his knowledge of every aspect of school operation in a way that ultimately strengthened his capacity to lead a much larger school later in his career. Across the sample, participants' responses regarding which standards they prioritised were closely interconnected with the broader themes revealed through the remainder of this chapter's analysis.

5.2.8.1 Leading Teaching and Learning

Leading teaching and learning was identified as "…being the cornerstone of what schools are about," as Anthony described it, though participants were clear this did not necessarily need to be the principal's primary personal role. To promote staff wellbeing, it was seen as essential that teachers themselves find satisfaction in their work; while most teachers are passionate about teaching and learning, competing priorities frequently divert attention from this primary responsibility, and the principal's role was described as ensuring teachers could concentrate on meeting the needs of their students. Anthony, having been out of the classroom himself for over 16 years, was candid that others were often better placed to lead this domain directly:

> *"...being the cornerstone of what schools are about."* (Anthony, ICSEA = 990, Students = 511)

> *"...people who are more equipped to lead teaching and learning in the school."* (Anthony, ICSEA = 990, Students = 511)

Lucy located her own role instead in culture-building that enabled others to lead teaching and learning effectively:

> *"...creating the culture of support…"* (Lucy, ICSEA = 928, Students = 274)

> *"…student outcomes and that is the core business of the school…"* (Lucy, ICSEA = 928, Students = 274)

Other principals, such as Akela, led teaching and learning through approaches explicitly aimed at empowering staff rather than directing them:

> *"...[through the] lens of building capacity, developing others and their potential, my role is to provide them with teams that they can lead, in good conditions for their leadership to be able to flourish."* (Akela, ICSEA = 1003, Students = 583)

Ted took a more directly modelled approach:

> *"You've got to lead from the front and do what you want others to do."* (Ted, ICSEA = 963, Students = 151)

Believing principals should say and do what they expect of others in this space. When asked how principals demonstrated leading teaching and learning in practice, responses varied considerably. Jake described a deliberate, hands-on demonstration:

> *"My assistant principal and I taught every class in the school throughout the term, to demonstrate good classroom practice, pace of lessons, etc."* (Jake, ICSEA = 942, Students = 794)

which he described as prompting valuable discussion and helping him and his assistant principal better appreciate the challenges facing teaching staff directly. Frances described the value of remaining connected to current practice specifically so as to be able to challenge and support staff:

> *"Actually challenge teachers and bring ideas into the school, so we can all improve."* (Frances, ICSEA = 981, Students = 93)

Beth, principal of a large school, described frustration at systemic pressure for principals to personally lead teaching and learning, given the competing demands on her time and the guilt created by being unable to attend every relevant training or initiative; she noted departmental initiatives were not always well-timed for schools, with Caroline observing that a new department focus on explicit teaching behaviours largely repeated ground her school had already covered years earlier, and adding that principals could only lead teaching and learning effectively once wellbeing was addressed with equal intensity. Damian reflected on a broader shift he had witnessed across his career, from an earlier era focused heavily on principals as instructional leaders:

> *"We are coming out of an era that focused on principals as instructional leaders, when I became a principal there was an obsession with teaching and learning and data"* (Damian, ICSEA = 927, Students = 988)
>
> *"…then you are missing a big part of the job…"* (Damian, ICSEA = 927, Students = 988)

5.2.8.2 Developing Self and Others

Developing Self and Others was the most highly regarded practice overall, consistent with the frequency with which participants separately named 'empowering others' as a key leadership attribute. Kylie described developing others as a direct route to building the capacity needed to distribute leadership more broadly. Lucy expressed a closely related philosophy, framing personal growth as inseparable from effective leadership itself:

> *"In order for that effective leadership, we all need that personal growth. It also gives an opportunity to empower the staff in new learning, thereby building leadership capacity."* (Lucy, ICSEA = 928, Students = 274)

Lucy also named a specific disadvantage of this practice for rural and regional schools, that investment in developing leaders often results in losing them to promotion elsewhere:

> *"Investing and developing leaders, and then they leave your school for a promotion to another school."* (Lucy, ICSEA = 928, Students = 274)

A dynamic that, while positive for the system overall, made it difficult for individual rural and regional schools to sustain momentum on their own improvement journey given high leader turnover. Scott linked this directly to retention risk for the profession as a whole:

> *"How we grow the profession, if people do not feel like they are valued in the profession as well and valued in terms of time and effort and commitment given by others to grow and develop them, then we will lose them from the profession"* (Scott, ICSEA = 950, Students = 898)

Scott also identified a specific structural barrier to this practice, describing how recent Enterprise Bargaining Agreement changes had reduced the number of 'extras' staff could cover, and how the resulting shortage of Casual Relief Teachers made it increasingly difficult for principals to release staff to attend professional development, forcing principals, despite wanting to build capacity, to decline requests they would otherwise have supported. Many principals identified the importance of developing themselves alongside others, citing the ongoing need for lifelong learning; Damian described his own role-modelling in this space as demonstrating the standard of interaction he expected staff to have with each other and with students:

> *"Sorts of interactions they expect adults to be having with each other and with the kids."* (Damian, ICSEA = 927, Students = 988)

With this role-modelling extending in practice to actively growing middle-level leaders and supporting graduate teachers.

5.2.8.3 Leading Improvement, Innovation and Change

Leading Improvement, Innovation and Change was identified as critical by both long-serving principals and those newer to the role, though newer principals in particular described a felt urgency to implement change quickly, even where the necessary preconditions were not yet in place. Tom used the metaphor of the "learning pit" to describe a shared learning process in which all staff begin with limited knowledge,

encounter setbacks, and emerge with deeper understanding, describing his own comfort modelling this vulnerability to staff:

> *"…jump in the learning pit and learn together…"* (Tom, ICSEA = 953, Students = 45)

> *"…knowing that I do not know all the answers and we learn together..."* (Tom, ICSEA = 953, Students = 45)

Daniel described creating the conditions for staff to feel comfortable contributing and raising ideas, drawing on collective problem-solving; Frances similarly empowered staff teams to lead improvement directly by supporting them to research and investigate new practice and bring their findings back into the school to build others' capacity. Jane identified a specific departmental course in leading difficult conversations as a significant enabler of this kind of change, describing its value directly:

> *"It's being able to have really honest conversations with people where they feel supported, they you able to build that relative trust but still hold the bottom line so that both, student learning doesn't suffer and the person doesn't suffer, they feel supported"* (Jane, ICSEA = 955, Students = 418)

Jane continued to reference this course regularly and actively encouraged colleagues to undertake it themselves, describing the underlying skill as pausing to genuinely inquire about others' thinking rather than assuming understanding, a skill she applied consistently in her own practice.

5.2.8.4 Leading the Management of the School

Leading the Management of the School was identified by the fewest participants as their single most critical practice, though most referenced it as necessary work that simply had to be done, particularly in smaller schools, where there was often no one else to delegate it to. Some principals considered this work highly administrative and were unconvinced it had a direct impact on student outcomes; where possible, principals delegated the leading of teaching and learning to an assistant principal in order to focus on school management themselves, noting that staff could only do their jobs properly, and feel genuinely supported, when this management was handled effectively, making it, in practice, one of the most important functions in the school. Beth described the visible cost of this work being done poorly:

> *"It is that when things are not organised, people don't know what's going on, then they don't know where they're supposed to be or what they are supposed to be doing."* (Beth, ICSEA = 969, Students = 885)

Daniel, principal of the largest school in the study, described being comfortable delegating operational detail while still valuing a clear understanding of what each role actually involved, in order to place the right people in the right positions and trust them to do their work; frustration, he noted, tended to arise specifically where that understanding was missing. Adapting to a new school, or even returning to a familiar one following promotion to principal, brought considerable new learning regardless of prior experience,

compounded by inconsistent induction processes across the system that depended heavily on the previous principal and the circumstances of their departure. All principals identified agility and adaptability as necessary to prioritise and complete administrative requirements, even where they personally preferred to operate in a highly organised and orderly manner, a preference schools do not always accommodate.

5.2.8.5 Engaging and Working with the Community

Engaging and Working with the Community was identified as a critical practice for effective school leadership, taking forms ranging from formal participation on community boards and working committees to attending sporting and community events, through to brief conversations at the school gate. Damian, a long-term member of his community, described this engagement as inherently political, requiring visible authenticity:

> *"…quite political, given the position, you need to be accessible, real and an authentic person."* (Damian, ICSEA = 927, Students = 988)

Investing in genuine conversation with community members wherever it arose, at the bus stop, the school gate, or a local musical event. Caroline reflected that some community members carried difficult memories of their own schooling, making this engagement a deliberate act of inclusion:

> *"I think bringing the community on board includes seeing that they have a place in their child's learning, no matter how inadequate they feel, because our community does feel inadequate for that. So it was really important for me to lead that culture of high expectations and bringing them along with us"* (Caroline, ICSEA = 958, Students = 244)

Michelle described her own motivation for community engagement as rooted in a personal refusal to let the school exist apart from its community:

> *"I do not want to be anonymous, in a place that the school is not integral to the community, it is not something that's ever appealed to me personally or professionally."* (Michelle, ICSEA = 970, Students = 110)

Phil, whose school sits in the lowest 9th percentile of ICSEA in Australia, described the breadth of the community he served directly:

> *"The cross section of the community can range from doctors all the way through to quite a few that are unemployed or have perhaps intellectual disabilities."* (Phil, ICSEA = 893, Students = 113)

Each of these principals described actively supporting families to have a genuine say in their children's education, and felt they were seeing engagement levels improve as a result. Replacing a long-serving, well-connected principal was described as particularly difficult, and several newly appointed principals described quickly prioritising outreach to local businesses and community groups on arrival. Principals living some distance from their school community identified travel time itself as a constraint on their capacity to build these connections and attend community events. Tim, new to a school where

relationships with the community had become “a bit stagnant” under a predecessor of 20 years, described the deliberate work required to rebuild this connection:

> *"The previous principal had been here for 20 years, and I think he put a few people offside, relationships were a bit stagnant. So, I was really working hard in that first year to try and build connections with the community, so getting local shop on board and building strong relationships with them and then also some of the local businesses and the community groups as well"* (Tim, ICSEA = 974, Students = 18)

Many participants noted that while engaging and working with the community was clearly important, it was not necessarily acknowledged or valued at a systemic level; the out-of-hours time required to attend community meetings and events could negatively affect principals' own health and wellbeing by extending an already long working week, adding further pressure to an already substantial workload.

5.3 Findings for Research Question 2: Change in Perspectives and Approaches to Leadership

This section addresses Research Question two directly, organised into five areas: adaptive and flexible decision-making; leadership agility and equity; evolving leadership styles and moral purpose; how crisis reshaped everyday practice; and training and preparedness.

5.3.1 Adaptive and Flexible Decision-Making

Adaptability is widely recognised as an essential trait of effective school leadership, particularly amid the complexity and uncertainty of contemporary education; ongoing policy reform, social disruption, technological change, and unexpected crises all require flexibility, resilience, and responsiveness (Harris & Jones, 2020; Netolicky, 2020). Adaptability in this sense refers to principals' and staff's capacity to respond flexibly and proactively to changing circumstances, shifting from rigid, plan-based decision-making toward continuous revision as conditions changed. Anthony described this as a fundamental change in mindset:

> *"You really have to be able to adapt. You can't think this is the way and keep following and thinking it's going to work out because that's the way it's worked in the past."* (Anthony, ICSEA = 990, Students = 511)

This adaptability extended to a changed relationship with control and delegation. Anthony described needing to rely on the people around him rather than attempt to manage every element personally, acknowledging this shift could feel genuinely uncomfortable:

> *"…cannot control everything…"* (Anthony, ICSEA = 990, Students = 511)

This required trusting teams to act without the principal's constant oversight; Anthony described being grateful his own leadership team continued attending school in person during COVID-19, which built the trust and confidence needed to delegate more broadly. Damian described drawing on those closest to him operationally as central to sound decision-making under pressure:

> *"I've always got more benefit out of the people who are physically closer to me."* (Damian, ICSEA = 927, Students = 988)

Emphasising the value of localised, collaborative decision-making over more distant, top-down direction. Beth described concrete anticipatory preparation ahead of the transition to remote learning:

> *"We prepped all of that before it happened…every kid needed to be able to get online."* (Beth, ICSEA = 969, Students = 885)

A key dimension of this adaptive capacity was proactive crisis management specifically, preparation, scenario planning, and reflective practice that allowed principals to respond with resilience once unforeseen challenges arose (Harris & Jones, 2020), rather than defaulting to purely compliance-driven approaches (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020). Several principals distinguished this broader adaptive capacity from a more specific, separately named skill of 'agility', the ability to pivot quickly between unrelated demands within a single day. Tom described this directly:

> *"Being agile enables me to actually meet the needs of everyone in the school."* (Tom, ICSEA = 953, Students = 45)

Adaptive decision-making shows doings shifting at the level of procedure itself rather than merely in content: what changed for Anthony, Beth, and Tom was not simply which decisions were made, but the underlying material and procedural conditions, control relinquished, contingency built in advance, agility treated as a distinct skill, through which decisions came to be made at all.

5.3.2 Leadership Agility and Equity

Leaders also demonstrated adaptability by meeting the diverse needs of their students directly, customising teaching methods and leveraging allied health resources such as online speech therapy to reach students who would otherwise miss out. Ted identified the benefit of this shift to online access directly:

> *"Your speech therapist, your OTs, those allied health people…can now do it online, freeing up kids from having to travel."* (Ted, ICSEA = 963, Students = 151)

Ensuring students received necessary support regardless of their circumstances. Community- and equity-driven leadership further underscored the importance of adaptability, with leaders in disadvantaged areas tailoring their actions to the specific challenges facing their community. Blake described equity as his central motivation directly:

> *"That equity piece is probably what motivates me the most…trying to address the disadvantage that people here face."* (Blake, ICSEA = 975, Students = 151)

By focusing on equity, leaders worked to ensure all students had access to the resources needed to build a foundation for long-term success. Adaptability in this sense not only allowed leaders to respond effectively to immediate need but also fostered an ongoing culture of innovation and continuous improvement, ensuring educational goals remained achievable despite uncertainty and disruption. Anthony summarised this disposition directly:

> *"You have to be adaptable and resilient to a variety of things during those times."* (Anthony, ICSEA = 990, Students = 511)

Leadership agility shows doings operating under a social-political constraint that Section 5.3.1 did not foreground: Ted's and Blake's practices were shaped not only by the procedural shift toward adaptability, but directly by pre-existing arrangements of access and disadvantage that determined which students, and which communities, adaptability had to reach.

5.3.3 Evolving Leadership Styles and Moral Purpose

The attributes of effective leadership are multifaceted, spanning interpersonal skills to strategic vision. During crisis, principals navigated unfamiliar territory, balancing the immediate needs of staff, students, and the wider community against rapidly changing circumstances; the combined demands of managing crisis and sustaining day-to-day leadership required adaptive strategies emphasising collaboration and resilience. Underpinning this was principals' moral purpose, a crucial aspect of leadership identity that shapes decision-making, actions, and the overall approach to leading a school community. Anthony described his moral purpose directly:

> *"Putting in place the conditions that allow every student to be able to succeed. I am committed to making a difference to our students lives and their outcomes as a result of their experiences at school."* (Anthony, ICSEA = 990, Students = 511)

All participants spoke of their schools and communities with passion, appreciation, and genuine concern. Damian, reflecting on 37 years at the same school, described his moral purpose as tied inseparably to place:

> *"I have a deep commitment to this community, and that's why I've sort of hung around at this school and been a sort of one club player. My moral purpose is about supporting young people and families in this community and creating opportunity that they might not normally get."* (Damian, ICSEA = 927, Students = 988)

Participants' responses demonstrated a strong moral purpose driving equity, inclusion, and social justice, ensuring every student had access to quality education and opportunity to succeed. Caroline stated this directly:

> *"I want all students to feel like they belong, feel safe and included."* (Caroline, ICSEA = 958, Students = 244)

This sense of purpose helped principals maintain focus on core values, student wellbeing, fairness, community empowerment, even under external pressures such as crisis, policy change, resource limitation, or competing demand. Pauline described this as a defining passion:

> *"A passion for helping students….it really concerns me that some kids don't fit into the system."* (Pauline, ICSEA = 938, Students = 35)

Phil described his purpose in terms of inclusive access:

> *"Providing inclusive education for students and providing an engaging learning that empowers all of our students for life."* (Phil, ICSEA = 893, Students = 113)

Ryan articulated his purpose as creating safety and potential:

> *"Create an environment that's safe and supportive and that allows the students to achieve their full potential."* (Ryan, ICSEA = 962, Students = 131)

Establishing this moral purpose for each participant gave insight into what drives their passion to lead, and their purpose often extended beyond the school gate, shaping advocacy for broader community needs and partnership with local organisations. Beth identified this wider influence directly:

> *"I really strive to ensure that we're a place for everybody, so we're a really inclusive environment and helping our kids believe in themselves about what they can do, where they can go next, but also recognising that we feed our community so our kids are the next doctors lawyers, teachers, plumbers, electricians."* (Beth, ICSEA = 969, Students = 885)

The conversations reflected a nuanced interplay between personal and professional moral purpose, and this purpose acted as a source of resilience for principals navigating the emotional demands of the role, providing an anchor for decision-making under pressure. Tim stressed the importance of always keeping students central:

> *"The kids at the centre, we always want the best for the kids."* (Tim, ICSEA = 974, Students = 18)

Akela summarised her moral purpose as rooted in belief in public education itself:

> *"I am an absolute faithful believer in public education, so my moral purpose is to lead a school where every student from every background has an opportunity to achieve their potential"* (Akela, ICSEA = 1003, Students = 583)

During crisis specifically, principals guided by a strong sense of purpose shifted focus from academic outcomes alone toward the holistic wellbeing of students and staff, described by Ryan as a "shift in mindset." This purposeful approach encouraged principals to prioritise emotional and physical safety, mental health, and equity, ensuring the most vulnerable students felt supported and included. Scott described the deliberate creation of small moments of connection as central to this:

> *"…build those little opportunities for connections…"* (Scott, ICSEA = 950, Students = 898)

Principals with a defined sense of purpose fostered inclusivity by building trusting relationships with students, families, and staff, actively engaging with the wider community and involving local organisations in school life; this strengthened support systems and ensured diverse needs were recognised. Supportive school environments were cultivated when principals led with empathy and openness, encouraging collaboration and building shared responsibility and collective resilience. Thriving communities were marked by adaptability, innovation, and continuous improvement; Anthony described the deliberate cultivation of others' growth alongside his own:

> *"Making sure others have the opportunity to build their skills….whilst constantly evolving."* (Anthony, ICSEA = 990, Students = 511)

Leadership styles and attributes differed for each participant and were shaped by their personal moral purpose and school setting. Most participants identified with more than one style, with more experienced principals describing leadership as a continuum that evolved with experience. Principals with under six years' experience more often identified with distributive and instructional leadership; those with more than six years more often identified with servant, authentic, and moral leadership, while drawing flexibly on multiple styles depending on circumstance. Akela linked her leadership philosophy directly to a specific cultural inheritance:

> *"I am Samoan so I've been raised by this ethos, that goes 'O le ala I le pule o le tautua', which means the road to leadership is through service."* (Akela, ICSEA = 1003, Students = 583)

Ted described how his leadership approach had changed markedly over two decades:

> *"How I approach my job now is different to how I did 20 years ago"* (Ted, ICSEA = 963, Students = 151)

Caroline described a specific, crisis-driven shift in how she regulated her own emotional involvement, having initially found it difficult to separate work from personal life:

> *"…lead from the head…"* (Caroline, ICSEA = 958, Students = 244)

Having previously "*led from the heart*," while acknowledging this remained a work in progress rather than a completed change. Jane described her own style as deliberately non-centralised:

> *"Don't believe in leading from the front all the time."* (Jane, ICSEA = 955, Students = 418)

> *"…plant a seed and let those around me grow it."* (Jane, ICSEA = 955, Students = 418)

Empowering others was the most frequently mentioned attribute participants identified as central to their leadership; trust, honesty, transparency, and accountability were also identified as important. Kylie described the flow-through effect of staff wellbeing on students and families:

> *"…happy when my staff are happy, then they are happy to have a go, and then the kids are happier, then your parents are happy too."* (Kylie, ICSEA = 977, Students = 168)

Some attributes mentioned but not captured in formal leadership-style frameworks included consultation, a focus on wellbeing, courage, and conviction. Frances named relationships as the defining attribute underpinning everything else in her leadership:

> *"It is relationships with everyone, the kids, the teachers, the families and the community."* (Frances, ICSEA = 981, Students = 93)

Moral purpose functioned as the stable ground against which everything else in this chapter could shift. Practices changed, decision-making became more adaptive, and leadership style itself evolved with experience and exposure to crisis, yet the underlying commitment participants articulated to student wellbeing, equity, and service remained constant throughout. This distinction matters for how the two research questions relate to one another: where Research Question one traces what changed in practice, this section suggests Research Question two's account of changing perspectives is better understood as a change in approach layered over a moral purpose that crisis tested but did not alter.

5.3.4 How Crisis Reshaped Everyday Practice

Principals reflected directly on how the crises they experienced changed or influenced their practices and attributes. Trust and communication were described as critical pillars of educational leadership, forming the foundation for effective collaboration, staff wellbeing, and crisis management; when leaders established trust, they created an environment where staff felt valued, safe, and empowered to share ideas, concerns, and feedback. Anthony described the mechanisms of communication as paramount when face-to-face contact was not possible:

> *"Mechanisms are the most important thing in these times when you're not at school and you don't see face to face, having really clear and communication and channels of communication is so important."* (Anthony, ICSEA = 990, Students = 511)

Principals in smaller, rural communities in particular emphasised open communication and being a visible, solid figure for families during crisis. The emphasis on resilience became more pronounced, with principals recognising the importance of a supportive environment in which staff could thrive despite challenge; this was especially evident during COVID-19, when many staff worked in isolation from home and maintaining connection required deliberate effort.

> *"In difficult times, what we need most is to sit together, share our experiences, and let each other know that we're in this together. It's our willingness to listen and collaborate that builds resilience across our community."* (Researcher's reflective journal, ICSEA = 964, Students = 343)

Frances emphasised knowing her community intimately as foundational to tailoring support effectively:

> *"It is important to me to know my students and know their families."* (Frances, ICSEA = 981, Students = 93)

Many principals highlighted the necessity of engaging local organisations and resources, mental health services, local businesses, community groups, to support families and students during crisis, with rural principals often drawing on especially strong pre-existing community connections. There was a clear shift toward prioritising staff mental health and wellbeing directly, with principals describing the need to adapt their leadership style to be more empathetic and supportive, recognising staff were often dealing with their own personal crises simultaneously. Jane linked this to informed decision-making specifically:

> *"When people are informed, they can make decisions around things that are important to them with all the necessary information."* (Jane, ICSEA = 955, Students = 418)

Regular check-ins and open communication were emphasised as vital practices, with transparency about challenges and decisions helping to alleviate staff anxiety; investing in professional development, including training on mental health awareness and crisis management, was seen as a way to empower staff and improve resilience. Damian described a deepened attentiveness to staff as individuals rather than only as employees:

> *"You worry about the individual, you worry about staff members as people, I have learned the importance of checking in."* (Damian, ICSEA = 927, Students = 988)

Principals' roles evolved to become more adaptive and responsive to community need, including flexibility in decision-making and willingness to change plans based on the current situation. Many emphasised distributed leadership, sharing responsibility among staff to lighten the load on principals while empowering teachers to take ownership of their roles. Anthony described the necessity of abandoning fixed expectations under crisis conditions:

> *"If you have a fixed mindset on how you want something to be right in crisis, that just does not work"* (Anthony, ICSEA = 990, Students = 511)

This required trust and delegation, relying on others rather than attempting to control every element, which several principals described as genuinely uncomfortable. Frances, describing her own tendency toward being a "*rescuer*," described having to learn to pause rather than immediately act:

> *"…actually stop and listen…"* (Frances, ICSEA = 981, Students = 93)

Recognising that not every situation needed to be "*solved*," and that at times simply listening, in person or by phone, was what staff needed. Beth, reflecting on the number of severe crises she had experienced across her career, described an awareness that her own frame of reference for what counted as a crisis had shifted in a way she considered unhealthy:

> *"My catastrophe scale is not right, and it is not healthy."* (Beth, ICSEA = 969, Students = 885)

She described consciously working to remain empathetic to others' experience of a situation regardless of her own calibrated sense of its severity. There was often a strong expectation for schools to function as community hubs, providing social support well beyond formal education; principals noted that during COVID-19 specifically, public perception of schools and principals was unusually high, though this had since returned to pre-pandemic levels alongside renewed discontent toward education more broadly. It was an explicit departmental expectation that principals network and build community relationships, yet no time was formally allocated to this work, nor any mechanism to record or compensate hours worked outside school hours. Beth described a degree of resentment arising from the unevenness of this expectation across the profession, not every principal invested this uncompensated time equally, with considerable disparity in workload and expectation between rural and metropolitan colleagues in particular (see also Section 5.2.6, where the direct cost of this to Beth's own visibility, health, and sleep is described). Blake described the same underlying cost, compounded by travel time and family responsibilities:

> *"When you have a partner and two young children and you are not getting home twice a week until 9:00 at night like it is hard enough getting home at 6:00pm. Every minute counts."* (Blake, ICSEA = 975, Students = 151)

Variations in leadership practice among principals navigating crisis were shaped by school size, socio-economic status, and community expectation. Across contexts, principals described an increase in empathy, deliberate trust-building, adaptability, innovation, and a deepened understanding of crisis management as attributes reshaped by their experience of leading through crisis, while remaining true to their underlying moral purpose.

Across this section, sayings, doings, and relatings shift together rather than in sequence, Anthony's communication mechanisms, Damian's deepened attention to staff, and Beth's recalibrated sense of crisis itself each move fluidly across all three, the clearest evidence in this chapter of Kemmis's claim that practice architectures reinforce one another rather than operating independently.

5.3.5 Training and Preparedness

Principals recognised the challenges of prioritising crisis-management training in busy schools until a crisis actually arose. The Department provides comprehensive Emergency Management Training, and all schools must complete annual Emergency Management Plans (EMPs); however, principals noted that when an actual crisis fell outside the scenarios described in the plan, the plan itself became of limited use, and the frequent turnover of named contacts within these plans made them difficult to rely on. Janice reflected directly on this gap:

> *"There's nothing I have had in terms of training that helps deal with crisis."* (Janice, ICSEA = 942, Students = 672)

Many principals acknowledged how difficult it would have been for a new principal, only briefly in the role, to face the crises they described. Kylie raised particular concern about the risk this posed to the wider community:

> *"…detrimental to the whole community…"* (Kylie, ICSEA = 977, Students = 168)

Jake reflected on entering the principalship without any real ability to anticipate what the role would demand:

> *"You don't go on with any preconceived ideas of what the role is going to be like or what you're going to have to do"* (Jake, ICSEA = 942, Students = 794)

The need for crisis-specific training was a recurring theme; many principals felt that despite experience, formal training could have better prepared them for the unexpected. Leanne described feeling acutely under-prepared:

> *"I didn't feel equipped at the time because I was totally out of my depth because it was just something I'd never experienced before"* (Leanne, ICSEA = 918, Students = 10)

In terms of feeling equipped to deal with crisis, principals more often drew on personal and professional lived experience than on any formal training. Josh summarised this directly, going further to suggest a structural remedy:

> *"You just have to have lived experience, there is currently no better way."* (Josh, ICSEA = 994, Students = 135)

Principal networks, both the Department's formal networks, supported through funding and financial incentive, and informal peer connections, were consistently identified as the most valued and practical form of support. Lucy described drawing directly on her professional network when needed:

> *"I think you know we're within a professional community. So I'm more than happy to ring who I need to ring in the department and say, what do you think?"* (Lucy, ICSEA = 928, Students = 274)

Communication and transparency, established before a crisis occurred, were identified as critical to navigating it effectively. Anthony emphasised the value of having established, well-understood communication channels in place ahead of time:

> *"…having really clear communication channels is important…"* (Anthony, ICSEA = 990, Students = 511)

Scott reinforced the importance of transparent communication with both staff and community, describing his approach to building a capable team around the right values rather than technical skill alone:

> *"…bring people to the table to share ideas, have robust discussions and collaborate."* (Scott, ICSEA = 950, Students = 898)

> *"Putting the right people in the right spots, and putting right people with the right moral purpose in the right spots, I'll employ the person with the right moral purpose, attitude, and commitment over the technically skilled person any day of the week."* (Beth, ICSEA = 969, Students = 885)

Many of the communities involved in this study had limited access to allied health services and professional support, requiring schools to pool resources with health services and other organisations to attract support. Daniel described the often-invisible background work this required, supporting not only his own school but others:

> *"…do in the background to support other schools…"* (Daniel, ICSEA = 1005, Students = 1733)

Pauline summarised the overall disposition crisis leadership required as one of learned flexibility rather than innate skill:

> *"I think you just learned to be flexible, and you just learn to just take it step by step and just, you know, like you can't be rigid in any of your thinking because it does have an impact on everyone."* (Pauline, ICSEA = 938, Students = 35)

Dallas, new to his school when crisis struck, described the particular difficulty of leading through crisis without an established relationship with staff:

> *"I didn't know too many staff either so that was tricky."* (Dallas, ICSEA = 1011, Students = 21)

Rachel summarised the overall value of peer networks over formal instruction directly:

> *"You don't necessarily get it from above, but you get it from either the network, you know it when principals are brave enough to share their stories and not sit there being the one who knows everything, and what we learned from each other is better than any course we could attend."* (Rachel, ICSEA = 922, Students = 569)

Training and preparedness show material-economic arrangements determining the ceiling on principals' doings well before any crisis arrives. What distinguished principals who felt able to respond from those who felt "*totally out of my depth*," as Leanne put it, was not their personal willingness to prepare, but whether formal resourcing, training genuinely

suited to the demands of crisis rather than generic emergency planning, a peer network actually reachable rather than one existing only on paper, an induction process robust enough to survive a change of principal, was already in place to be drawn on. Dallas's account of entering a new school two weeks before crisis struck, and Josh's conclusion that lived experience remains the only real preparation available, each illustrate this ceiling falling short in a different way: one through absent local knowledge, the other through an entire system's absence of formal alternative. This section suggests that principals' capacity to adapt was itself unevenly resourced, adaptability was not a personal trait some principals simply possessed and others lacked, but a doing made possible or foreclosed by the material-economic conditions surrounding each principal before the crisis they were required to adapt to had even begun.

5.4 Connection to the Theory of Practice Architectures

Throughout this chapter, the TPA has been referenced for each crisis type and each professional practice. This section draws those individual observations together into a single account. Rather than introducing the TPA for the first time, it asks what pattern emerges when the tags scattered across Sections 5.1 to 5.3 are read side by side: where sayings, doings, and relatings each did the most work, where they operated in tension with one another, and where they could not meaningfully be separated at all. The deeper analytical question of what this pattern means for understanding crisis leadership theoretically is taken up in Chapter 6; what follows here is a descriptive synthesis of what the data itself shows.

The theory highlights that practices are not isolated actions but are shaped, enabled, and constrained by three interconnected arrangements: Cultural-Discursive, Material-Economic, and Social-Political. These arrangements create the practice architectures that either support or limit what can be said, done, and related to within a given context. Figure 13 illustrates what principals said, did, felt and the way they related to others.

5.4.1 Sayings

Principals prioritised student and staff wellbeing, expressing a clear shift in focus from traditional academic metrics toward the emotional and physical safety of those in their care, reflecting a broader discourse on the importance of mental health evident throughout widespread crises such as COVID-19. Principals articulated the need to identify particularly vulnerable students, emphasising safety and emotional wellbeing, and described feeling the additional burden of staff wellbeing during and after crisis directly in how they spoke about their role.

Support networks played a pivotal role in principals' sayings, as they identified the need for additional resources and assistance during challenging times; community support was highly valued, with principals expressing appreciation for the solidarity shown by local organisations and families, and strong pre-existing relationships with external networks facilitating access to resources and information. Caroline articulated this directly:

> *"I think bringing the community on board but seeing that they have a place in their child's learning, no matter how inadequate they feel, because our community does feel inadequate for that."* (Caroline, ICSEA = 958, Students = 244)

The need for a critical friend or supportive colleague was described as crucial to principals sustaining their own physical and mental health during crisis, and many spoke about the adaptations needed to lead through crisis in terms of a shared narrative of resilience and flexibility among principals more broadly. The significance of social capital in strengthening the resilience of school communities was regularly referenced or implied throughout. Anthony reflected on his own strategy of building his team's capacity through language and collective framing:

> *"It's very much about collaboration, collaborative decision making…it is really an important shared responsibility."* (Anthony, ICSEA = 990, Students = 511)

5.4.2 Doings

The doings of principals during crisis reflected a consistent commitment to communication, adaptability, and equitable education. Communication and engagement emerged as fundamental practices, with principals prioritising open dialogue with staff, students, and families; methods such as communication trees and family-mentor programs were implemented to maintain consistent contact with the school community, fostering transparency, trust, and a sense of collective effort that reinforced a positive school culture. Tim described this role directly:

> *"I think the communication and just your openness. Everyone was welcome. But I think understanding a bit more of the role that you play as a principal in these communities, where everyone looks to you in those times, you are that solid figure for lots of these families and members of the community."* (Tim, ICSEA = 974, Students = 18)

Principals also demonstrated resilience in balancing professional responsibilities against personal obligations, including, in several cases, supporting their own children's remote learning,, with their capacity to fulfil multiple roles simultaneously highlighting their broader dedication to the school community. Decision-making was informed by data and feedback, enabling principals to adapt strategies to evolving circumstances, underscoring the centrality of adaptability to navigating crisis. Equitable learning opportunities were a key focus of principals' doings, with significant effort made to ensure both in-person and remote students received consistent, fair access to education; younger, tech-savvy teachers played a vital role in supporting older colleagues, exemplifying the collaborative and innovative practices adopted during crisis.

The relational dynamics between principals, staff, students, and families played a crucial role in fostering a supportive school environment; collaboration among staff was a hallmark of effective crisis response, with principals facilitating teamwork to identify

vulnerable students and adapt teaching methods. Engagement with parents was equally vital, with principals maintaining open communication and respecting parental concerns, including, during COVID-19, allowing some students to remain at home, reinforcing trust and strengthening the partnership between school and family. Phil described this relational work directly:

> *"So really tried to break down barriers, we've had some fantastic Koorie Education Support Officers that supported us with that as well…Having to be humble and realise that we all have come from different backgrounds and have different ideas on things and to respect people with that."* (Phil, ICSEA = 893, Students = 113)

Principals consistently acknowledged the evolution of their practice through experience, expressing commitment to leading effectively despite ongoing pressure; this empathetic leadership was described as supporting not only staff and student wellbeing directly, but contributing more broadly to the transformation of educational practice within their schools.

5.4.3 Relatings

Collaboration among staff emerged as a defining feature of the relational arrangements observed across the sample. Principals played a pivotal role in fostering a culture of shared responsibility, in which staff supported one another in identifying vulnerable students and adapting teaching methods, a collaborative ethos reflecting community-oriented approaches to leadership and reinforcing the social-political arrangements that enable collective problem-solving and mutual support. Beth articulated this directly:

> *"Effective collaboration isn't just about working alongside each other; it's about sharing ideas, challenging our old methods, and being open to new evidence-based practices that improve teaching and learning."* (Beth, ICSEA = 969, Students = 885)

Engagement with parents further exemplified these relational dynamics: allowing some students to remain home during COVID-19 out of respect for parental concern demonstrated trust in families' own judgement and, in turn, built trust through open communication, a relational practice underscoring the importance of parent–school partnership in navigating crisis and protecting student wellbeing. Supporting vulnerable students was a central concern within principals' relational practice; the establishment of initiatives such as the “Kind Kids Club” illustrated how schools could build connection with local kindergartens, strengthening community involvement and support more broadly. Scott described this initiative directly:

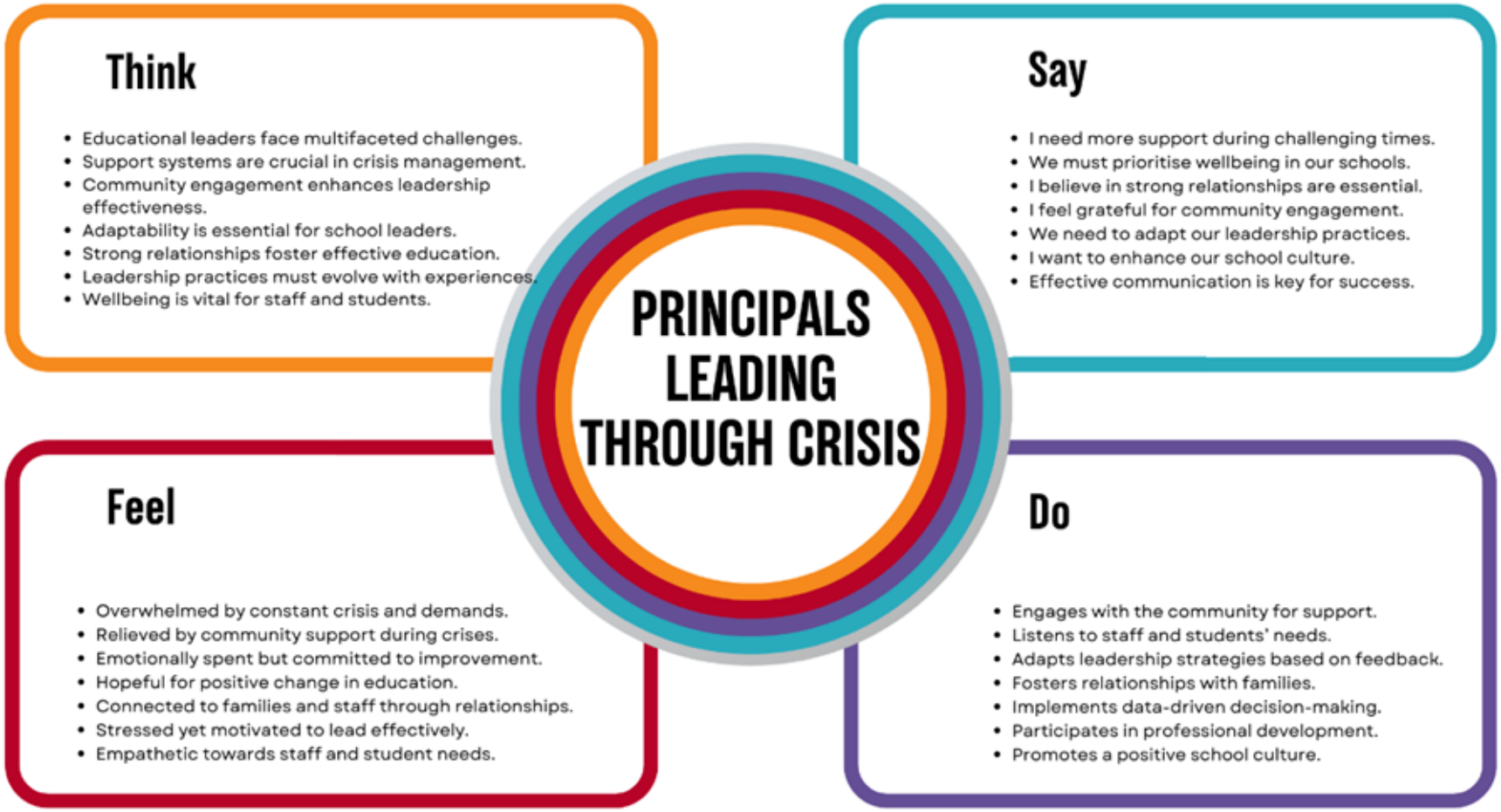
> *"Community engagement is vital for school success…so we created a group called ‘Kind Kids Club’...these kids self-select and so now we've got students visiting kindergartens across our area."* (Scott, ICSEA = 950, Students = 898)

This prioritisation of empathy and understanding reflected a broader commitment to equity and care, strengthening relational bonds between staff, students, and families, and illustrating how social-political arrangements fostered a culture of compassion and

inclusiveness within school communities. Despite these supportive relationships, principals faced considerable ongoing challenge: many reported feeling overwhelmed by the continuous demands of crisis leadership, often needing to set feelings aside to act in the moment, yet their resilience and dedication to staff and student wellbeing remained evident throughout. Principals consistently acknowledged that their relational practice evolved with experience, reflecting a dynamic interplay between relatings and the broader practice architectures within which they were embedded.

Despite the supportive relationships cultivated during the crisis, principals faced many challenges. Figure 13 separates feelings and relatings, as principals reported that often their feelings were put to the side in order to do what needed to be done in the heat of the crisis. Although the TPA does not account for feelings as a separate element, the individual feelings of the participants impact the ability of them to relate to others. Many reported feeling overwhelmed by the continuous demands of crisis leadership, yet their resilience and dedication to staff and student wellbeing remained evident. Principals acknowledged that their practices evolved with experience, reflecting a dynamic interplay between relational practices and the broader practice architectures. Their empathetic leadership supported their communities and contributed to the ongoing transformation of educational practices in response to crisis.

Figure 13 - Sayings, Doings, Relatings and Feelings of Principals



5.4.4 Synthesis

Kemmis's theory holds that cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements work together, rather than in isolation, to shape practice (Mahon et al., 2017). The crisis revealed principals' sayings, doings, and relatings as mutually reinforcing, for example, a discursive shift toward wellbeing (cultural-discursive) shaped how resources were prioritised (material-economic) and how collaborative relationships were fostered (social-political), illustrated descriptively in Figure 14. The analytical significance of these arrangements for crisis leadership specifically is developed in Chapter 6

Figure 14 – *Practices through the lens of the Theory of Practice Architectures*

Leading through crisis

PRACTICES	PRACTICE ARCHITECTURES
Sayings	**Cultural-discursive arrangements**
Support is needed during challenging times. Leadership needs to be adaptive Effective communication is the key for success Vulnerable students, emotional safety and wellbeing Fairness and inclusion Teamwork, partnerships, empowerment and shared responsibility Responding to data and feedback whilst referencing evidence-based practices	Language of wellbeing – vulnerable students, emotional safety and wellbeing Equity discourse – fairness and inclusion Collaboration language -teamwork, partnerships and shared responsibility Data-driven decision making
Doings	**Material-economic arrangements**
Engaging with the community for support. Listening to staff and students' needs. Adapts leadership strategies based on feedback. Fostering relationships with families and wider community Promotes a positive school culture	Communication technologies and platforms Equitable learning opportunities Professional development opportunities Technology resources
Relatings	**Social-political arrangements**
Overwhelmed by constant crisis and demands. Relieved by community support during crises. Connected to families and staff through relationships. Empathetic towards staff and student needs. Adaptability	Collaboration among staff Distributed leadership and shared-decision making Engagement with community Inclusive and equity-focused leadership practices

Moreover, principals' practices were not only shaped by these arrangements but also served to reshape the practice architectures within their schools. The crisis created opportunities for principals to challenge dominant discourses, reallocate resources, and strengthen social bonds, laying the foundation for more inclusive and resilient educational practices moving forward.

5.5 Conclusion

Across the interviews, transparent communication and emotional intelligence emerged as consistent threads, with many principals describing a deliberate culture of trust as having reduced anxiety and resistance to change within their staff. Adaptive policy adjustment, the capacity to make rapid curricular and operational change, was similarly described as contributing to resilience within school environments. Adaptability emerged across the sample as a fundamental competency of effective school leadership specifically under crisis conditions, consistent with participants' own accounts of needing to navigate sustained uncertainty; principals repeatedly linked resilience, flexibility, and clarity under pressure to

the broader organisational culture and staff commitment of their schools. Where principals employed a strategic, empathetic approach to decision-making and communication, participants associated this with improved morale and staff cohesion, and several linked these leadership practices to a perceived softening of the negative effects of crisis on both the learning environment and their own and their students' emotional wellbeing. Participants also consistently linked the effectiveness of their leadership to the material and psychological resources available to them, a theme returned to directly in Chapter 6's discussion of the TPA.

Reading across the interviews as a whole, school leadership during crisis was described by participants as fundamentally relational rather than purely managerial: principals who approached their staff with genuine care described being motivated not simply to manage their teams but to support, retain, and actively nurture them. Participants' own reflections throughout this chapter suggest that where principals led from this authentic, relational stance, they described creating the conditions for staff professional growth, collegiality, and a shared sense of collective resilience, a pattern consistent with, though not statistically established by, this study's qualitative dataset. This relational commitment to staff wellbeing and development was described by participants as strengthening their school communities and, in their own accounts, as improving the school's capacity to navigate future challenges. The evidence suggests that effective leadership during crisis is fundamentally relational, grounded in empathy, and driven by a commitment to collective growth and wellbeing

This chapter has presented findings addressing both research questions: the professional practices principals enact to support staff and their own occupational wellbeing during and after crisis, and how leading through crisis changes principals' perspectives on, and approaches to, leadership, grounded throughout in the crisis described. Across both questions, participants consistently described communication, structured support, adaptability, and an evolving articulation of moral purpose as central to leading through crisis. Many participants described their relationship with staff in markedly personal terms, suggesting that for this sample, the professional and relational dimensions of leadership were difficult to separate during crisis. The findings also illustrate the transformative nature of crisis for both leadership perspective and professional practice, consistent with participants' own sense that effective crisis leadership is relational, grounded in empathy, and oriented toward collective growth and wellbeing.

Building on these findings, chapter six will discuss these findings in relation to the existing literature and the TPA, considering where they confirm, extend, or challenge current understanding of crisis leadership in schools. It will synthesise the key themes identified, explore their implications for educational leadership practice. Through this discussion, the chapter aims to deepen our understanding of how leading through crisis shapes the evolution of school leadership and the ongoing development of resilient educational communities.

Chapter 6 Discussion

6.1 Overview

This chapter discusses the findings from the research, in light of the reviewed literature to evaluate how school principals lead during crises, and how such experiences impact their leadership approaches over time. The implications for practice emphasise the need for adaptive leadership structures, providing future directions of research that can further illuminate the complexities of educational leadership in crisis contexts. Drawing on the TPA this chapter analyses how principals' crisis leadership practices are enabled or constrained by the specific arrangements- material-economic, social-political, and cultural-discursive - present in their school environments (Kemmis, 2022). This study sought to lay the groundwork for ongoing dialogue and future research that is essential to the resilience and sustainability of educational systems. The research focused on identifying the professional practices of principals that support, improve, and sustain the occupational wellbeing of themselves and of their staff during and after crisis events.

The chapter is organised directly around the study's two research questions:

Research Question 1 – What professional practices do principals enact to support, improve, and sustain the occupational wellbeing of their staff and themselves during and after crisis?

Research Question 2 – How does leading through a crisis change principals' perspectives on and approaches to leadership?

Section 6.2 discusses findings for Research Question 1, organised under the same sub-themes established in Chapter 5: communication and transparency; structured support systems; staff and principal occupational wellbeing; leadership and empowerment; community engagement; and innovation. Section 6.3 discusses findings for Research Question 2: adaptive and flexible decision-making; leadership agility and equity; evolving leadership styles and moral purpose; how crisis reshaped everyday practice; and training and preparedness. Within each sub-theme, the discussion identifies where this study's findings confirm, extend, or challenge existing literature, and applies TPA as an interpretive tool to deepen that interpretation rather than as the chapter's organising scaffold.

Within the field of educational leadership, the examination of the dynamics of leadership during crisis has drawn academic attention in recent years. The findings reveal not only the complexities inherent in educational leadership but also emphasise the key leadership attributes identified by participants when navigating episodes of crisis. This research reveals that leadership during crisis is marked by heightened complexity, rapid shifts in roles and responsibilities, and an acute need for adaptability and care. Participants in recent empirical studies and reviews have consistently emphasised several key attributes and practices that distinguish effective leadership in crisis contexts from those in more stable times. These include a heightened focus on emotional intelligence, collaboration, communication, flexibility, and the prioritisation of wellbeing for all

members of the school community (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022; Thornton, 2021; Wittmer & Hopkins, 2022). The theoretical lens of the TPA is employed to interpret the findings, exploring the interplay between cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements (Kemmis, 2022). A distinctive feature of the theory is its politicisation of practice. It foregrounds the ways in which practices are always embedded in relationships of power, inclusion/exclusion, and social justice. By explicitly including sayings, doings and relatings , the theory ensures that the social, ethical, and political dimensions of practice are not overlooked (Mahon et al., 2017). The results align with the research of Leithwood and Harris (2020), who argue that effective leadership during uncertain times hinges on the ability to motivate teams and uphold a unified vision. Wittmer and Hopkins (2022) and Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins (2020) indicate that leaders prioritising collective effectiveness and actively engaging various stakeholders experience heightened confidence and morale, ultimately enhancing educational continuity amidst challenges.

The findings call for a shift in how educational leaders are trained to manage potential crises, consistent with systematic review evidence that principals internationally have reported minimal crisis-specific preparedness and have called for more robust training and guidance (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023). By equipping both current and future leaders with these competencies, principals can better handle unexpected challenges. Training needs to increase staff competency in trauma-informed practices to reduce the impact of crisis and critical incidents (Dicke et al., 2024). The findings also reveal possible shortcomings in the current literature, especially regarding the interplay between crisis leadership and distinct educational settings. Unlike routine leadership, crisis leadership in schools must address the safety, psychological stress, and wellbeing of students and staff, often under extreme uncertainty, time pressure and scrutiny (Da'as et al., 2025; Olney & Wood, 2023). A distinction the literature suggests that traditional leadership models do not adequately capture (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022).

The literature notes that traditional leadership models often fall short in crisis settings, suggesting the need for crisis-specific frameworks that recognise the urgency, emotional load, and ethical complexities unique to educational crises (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022). The results of this study support the idea outlined in the theory of servant leadership, which gives priority to the wellbeing and development of the members of the team as a fundamental principle (Greenleaf, 2002). The significant commitment to supportive behaviours, how to provide personalised mentoring and facilitate professional growth opportunities, has been reported among leaders who identify themselves as servant leaders. The literature consistently notes that traditional leadership models often prove inadequate in crisis situations, highlighting the need for crisis-specific approaches and strategies that address the urgency, emotional demands, and ethical complexities unique to educational crises (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022). The findings of this current study support the principles of servant leadership, which prioritises the wellbeing and development of team members as a foundational element. This is evident in the commitment to supportive behaviours, personalised mentoring, and professional growth opportunities, as described in this study and in the work of leaders who identify as servant

leaders. Principals in this research articulated a consistent willingness to “place the needs of the school and the community before their own,” even amid personal hardship, echoing findings from Striepe & Cunningham (2022, p. 7).

Moreover, the application of the TPA in this study supports Mahon et al. (2017) by emphasising the agency, intentions, and reflective capacity of practitioners in shaping crisis responses. The present findings align with those of Striepe & Cunningham (2022) demonstrating that principals’ practices during and after crises were marked by empathy, care, and a prioritisation of the physical and mental health of students, staff, and the wider community. Principals also demonstrated a commitment to building relationships, developing others, and utilising collaborative decision-making to empower staff, which is consistent with conclusions in Day & Gurr (2024b). Participants’ active listening, fostering inclusivity and unity, and celebration of others and their contributions, is consistent with Janse van Vuuren & Van der Bank (2023). This approach reflects the foundational work of Greenleaf (2002) and subsequent scholars, who have found that when leaders prioritise the needs of their employees, organisational effectiveness is significantly enhanced.. This study's findings are consistent with servant leadership research, Zhang et al. (2021) and Peng et al. (2023) showed that servant leadership is positively associated with follower-level outcomes including organisational commitment and in public-sector settings specifically, employee resilience. This supports the broader claim that schools implementing servant leadership principles may be associated with a more committed and resilient workforce, though this study's own data speak to principals' practice and perception rather than directly measuring staff-level outcomes.

6.2 Discussion of Findings for Research Question One: Professional Practices Supporting Occupational Wellbeing

The professional practices that principals employ to improve and sustain staff wellbeing are multifaceted and interwoven with daily leadership activities, especially pronounced during times of crisis. Principals explicitly prioritised staff's emotional and physical safety, not just students. This section discusses the Research Question one findings from Chapter five in relation to the literature, organised under six sub-themes: communication and transparency; structured support systems; staff and principal occupational wellbeing; leadership and empowerment; community engagement; and innovation. Practices in each area do not exist in a vacuum: they are always enabled and constrained by the specific practice architectures present at the site where they occur , the cultural-discursive arrangements (language, discourse, and meaning, shaping what can be said, thought, and understood), the material-economic arrangements (the physical, temporal, and material resources shaping what can be done), and the social-political arrangements (the relationships, power structures, and forms of solidarity or exclusion shaping how people relate to each other) (Kemmis, 2022; Mahon et al., 2017). These arrangements evolve as practices are reproduced, adapted, and transformed over time, for this study, during and after crisis, forming the conditions that make certain practices possible and sustainable in a

given school. They form the “niche” or environment that makes certain practices possible and sustainable in a given setting (Kemmis, 2022).

6.2.1 Communication and Transparency

Participants' emphasis on open, transparent communication as a foundation for staff wellbeing is reflected in the language, conversations, and discourse principals promoted within their schools, fostering open conversation about wellbeing, encouraging staff to seek help, and promoting care, hope, and collective wellness as central values. This is broadly consistent with Hayes et al. (2021), who found that rural principals embedded wellbeing into daily school life through regular check-ins and consistent presence, and with Kanowski (2022), who identifies a principal's everyday “way of being”, the embodiment of care in relationships, as foundational to collective wellness. Participants in this study similarly discussed prioritising relationships, care, and hope as means of enhancing staff wellbeing.

Where this study extends the existing literature is in its attention to the specific discursive and relational practices through which such cultures are enacted, rather than only their outcomes. It is important to note that while our data indicates the establishment of regular, transparent communication channels, such as open-door policies, regular updates, and debrief sessions, to help staff feel informed, valued, and connected, other studies have taken different approaches. Gorrell et al. (2021) and Van der Vyver et al. (2020) have emphasised that creating a culture of trust, where teachers feel safe, valued, and supported, is crucial for staff wellbeing. These studies further suggest that principals who display caring leadership practices contribute positively to teacher wellbeing, whereas a lack of care can diminish teachers' quality of working life. While the findings of this study align in part with these conclusions, the data primarily highlighted the everyday discursive and relational practices through which such cultures are enacted, rather than focusing solely on the outcomes or the presence/absence of care. Thus, while there is convergence with prior research regarding the importance of caring leadership and open communication, the present results foreground the specific discursive practices and routine interactions that appear to underpin these broader cultural arrangements (Cann et al., 2021). Nevertheless, further comparative research may be needed to determine the extent to which these practices are universally effective or are shaped by contextual factors unique to this study.

The relationship between sayings and cultural-discursive arrangements is dynamic and mutually constitutive. While practitioners draw upon existing discourses to make sense of their actions and communicate with others, their sayings also contribute to the ongoing evolution and reinforcement (or transformation) of those very discursive structures (Kemmis, 2022). Many of the sayings used by principals during and post crisis are situated within, and made possible by, a constellation of cultural-discursive arrangements that circulate within the broader field of education. The assertion that “support is needed during challenging times” emerges from a discourse of care and resilience, which has gained prominence in educational and organisational literature, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Atkinson, 2022; Bowles et al., 2021; Brion, 2021). The saying is

prefigured by cultural-discursive arrangements that prioritise emotional wellbeing, collective support, and the normalisation of seeking help during adversity. Such arrangements are visible in policy documents, staff training programs, and institutional rhetoric that foreground “wellbeing” as a key educational outcome (Kemmis, 2022).

Cultural-discursive arrangements are reflected in the language and discourses that principals promote within their schools. Victorian principals who prioritised wellbeing embedded it as a core value in everyday conversations, policies, and routines (Kanowski, 2022). They encouraged and normalised open discussions about mental health, self-care, and professional support, thereby legitimising staff experiences and fostering a shared culture of care and hope (Salamon et al., 2016). These sayings, such as explicitly inviting staff to seek help or dedicating meeting time to wellbeing, help to construct an environment where staff feel safe, valued, and connected. The cultural-discursive resources available, such as wellbeing frameworks, trauma-informed language, and practices of recognition, enabled Victorian principals to shape a professional environment where staff wellbeing is discussed openly and constructively (AITSL, 2019; Waters et al., 2021). This distinction, between wellbeing as a general leadership virtue and the specific, crisis-driven sayings this sample described, is worth holding onto, several of the studies cited here including Gorrell et al. (2021), address teacher wellbeing broadly rather than under crisis conditions specifically, so their alignment with this study's findings should be read as convergence on a related but not identical question. Further comparative research would be needed to establish whether the specific discursive practices identified here are universally effective or are shaped by conditions unique to rural and regional Victoria. The convergence with Hayes et al.'s (2021) similar finding of communication-centred rural crisis leadership in a different national context offers preliminary, though not conclusive, support that this pattern may extend beyond this study's specific setting.

6.2.2 Structured Support Systems

Victorian principals’ practices that supported staff wellbeing in times of crisis included delegating, trusting, and mentoring staff, fostering wellbeing and professional growth. Victorian principals who identified and implemented professional learning opportunities aligned with staff needs and school priorities helped staff feel valued and supported (AITSL, 2019). This included mentoring, coaching, and peer feedback systems. Regularly acknowledging teachers' voices, work, and effort, providing constructive feedback, and celebrating success are leadership practices that improve wellbeing (Cann et al., 2021). Material-economic arrangements are reflected in the provision of tangible resources and supports for staff wellbeing. This includes ensuring access to mental health resources, allocating time and space for wellbeing-focused meetings, implementing peer mentoring, coaching and making available facilities or materials that support physical and emotional safety. Victorian principals also influenced the allocation of budgets or staffing to support wellbeing initiatives, demonstrating a material commitment to staff wellbeing (Kemmis et al., 2013).

Principals who adapted their leadership based on feedback, self-assessment, and experience, and who were open to change, supported a dynamic environment where staff wellbeing flourished (AITSL, 2019). Engaging in transformational behaviours, such as inspiring, motivating, and supporting individual teacher growth, had a positive impact on professional wellbeing and retention (Korpershoek et al., 2020; Van der Vyver et al., 2020). By creating a culture of empowerment and self-directed professional growth, Victorian principals developed a professional learning community, which supports sustained staff wellbeing (AITSL, 2019). Material-economic arrangements are equally influential. Principals who improve and sustain staff wellbeing ensure the provision of tangible resources for staff support, such as access to mental health professionals, time and space for wellbeing-focused meetings, and the allocation of budgets to support wellbeing initiatives (McCallum, 2021). The physical and temporal organisation of the school, such as providing opportunities for staff to debrief and collaborate, alongside flexible work arrangements, demonstrates a material commitment to staff wellbeing (Anderson et al., 2020). Similar to education in the Northern Territory (2021), Victorian principals are often challenged by constraints such as limited funding, infrastructure, or staffing, but they actively advocate for and creatively deploy available resources to support their staff. Such actions are not only about the presence of resources but also about the principal's ability to reconfigure the material-economic arrangements, thereby creating new possibilities for staff wellbeing. This is consistent with broader evidence that school-level resourcing is linked to measurable outcomes such as staff retention, though this study's own data speak to principals' reported strategy rather than an independently measured effect of that strategy (Chen et al., 2026)

This extends existing literature in one respect: while much of the cited literature on support structures does not distinguish crisis-specific from general resourcing needs, the data in this study show principals describing acute, time-limited gaps , an over-subscribed, three-day counselling service, an inability to secure extended departmental support , that are specific to the recovery phase of crisis rather than everyday resourcing constraints. This distinction matters for policy: general wellbeing-resourcing literature does not fully anticipate the surge-and-cliff pattern (acute need followed by abrupt withdrawal of support) this study's findings suggest is specific to crisis recovery.

6.2.3 Staff and Principal Occupational Wellbeing

The findings reinforced that principals who demonstrated empathy, acknowledged staff difficulties, and created a culture where staff wellbeing is viewed as central were viewed as crucial leadership traits, supporting the findings of existing research in New Zealand (Cann et al., 2021; Thornton, 2021; Thornton & Rodley, 2021). Participants consistently prioritised staff's emotional and physical safety, and, consistent with the study's aim, also described practices directed at their own occupational wellbeing , solitary exercise routines, distant peer networks, deliberate self-care boundaries. This aligns with Thornton (2021), who found principals shifted focus from academic outcomes to holistic wellbeing during COVID-19, reporting that "it was always wellbeing first... we have to look after each other, and look after the kids" (Thornton, 2021, p. 54). This priority shift built trust; empathy and concern for wellbeing, as principals in this study described, functioned

similarly to the leader inclusiveness Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) found predicts both psychological safety and improvement efforts in teams, and is consistent with the broader finding that psychologically safe environments support the experimentation and adaptive learning central to innovation (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

This is consistent with the “leaders eat last” theme identified by Hayes (2021), which participants in this study echoed directly in describing a felt duty to shield staff from stressors even at personal cost, and with evidence that Australian school leaders report significantly higher rates of severe anxiety and depression than the general population (Dicke et al., 2025). This study's findings are also consistent with Campbell's (2024) account of principal emotional labour as compounding, invisible, and largely unsupported, and with Abdulaziz et al. (2024), who argue that leaders' actions directly shape their teams' psychological safety. Participants in this study described enacting exactly this buffering role, while also describing its personal cost, a cost the existing literature notes but, as Anderson et al. (2020) caution, risks being normalised as an expected professional virtue rather than addressed as a structural and organisational problem. This study's findings support that caution: several participants described individualised coping strategies (exercise, mindfulness, informal debriefs) that functioned as personal workarounds for what several described as a systemic gap in principal-specific support, rather than as evidence the gap itself had been resolved. The compounding effect is consistent with a possible 'cascade,' in which diminished capacity for supportive leadership behaviour has been empirically linked to increased teacher burnout and reduced engagement in other studies (Breevaart & Bakker, 2018; Fernet et al., 2012), suggesting a plausible, though in this study unmeasured, pathway by which principals' own wellbeing could affect their staff and school climate.

This pattern reflects a mismatch between cultural-discursive arrangements (a shared language increasingly normalising staff wellbeing as a leadership priority) and material-economic arrangements (resourcing that has not caught up to include principals' own wellbeing within that same priority) , a gap several participants named directly when observing that “*we talk about principal wellbeing but that's a huge hole.”* Addressing this tension requires moving beyond valorising principals' self-sacrifice toward policies and supports that recognise the emotional labour of school leadership directly (Hayes et al., 2021). Access to mental health resources, peer support networks, professional development in crisis management and self-care, and reasonable expectations regarding workload, a set of needs that Gorrell (2021) identifies as similarly pressing. Without such systemic intervention, this study's findings are consistent with the concern that a cycle of emotional buffering, self-neglect, and burnout is likely to persist among principals in comparable settings.

6.2.4 Leadership and Empowerment

Empowering others through distributed leadership is associated with reduced workload stress and improved teacher wellbeing, which in turn support greater commitment, a relationship demonstrated across 47 jurisdictions using OECD TALIS data (Bellibaş et al., 2024). This is consistent with principals in this study linking distributed leadership to a lighter, more sustainable load for their teams. Participants' practice of distributing leadership, delegating, trusting, creating structures such as communication trees, is consistent with evidence that transformational behaviours supporting individual teacher growth positively affect wellbeing and retention (Korpershoek et al., 2020; Van der Vyver et al., 2020). Social-political arrangements are a useful lens for interpreting why this mattered specifically during crisis: regular check-ins, open-door policies, and transparent decision-making built the collegial relationships several participants described as essential to sustaining trust once normal routines were disrupted (Cann et al., 2021).

This finding is consistent with Van der Vyver et al. (2020) on distributed leadership's contribution to collective efficacy, and extends it by showing this specific mechanism, empowerment as restraint, a principal's deliberate act of stepping back, operating under the acute time pressure of crisis rather than only as a general management style. Adapting leadership approach based on feedback, self-assessment, and experience, and remaining open to change, supported the dynamic environment in which this staff wellbeing appeared to flourish (AITSL, 2019).

Effective delegation, clear role definitions, and ensuring teachers have the resources and time needed for their work help reduce stress and support wellbeing (Gorrell et al., 2021; Wang, 2025). The language of collaboration, as evidenced in sayings such as “teamwork, partnerships, empowerment and shared responsibility, ” is similarly supported by cultural-discursive arrangements that foreground the importance of collective action, distributed leadership, and professional learning communities (Salamon et al., 2016). These arrangements are institutionalised in the form of teamwork protocols, collaborative planning meetings, and partnership agreements with community organisations. They create the conditions in which collaboration is not just possible but expected, and they shape the very meaning of professionalism and accountability in educational contexts (Kemmis, 2022).

6.2.5 Community Engagement

Victorian principals’ practices and approaches to leadership shifted towards fostering relationships with local organisations, parents, and community groups to pool resources and provide holistic support. For example, one principal worked closely with local authorities during the floods to coordinate responses and ensure student safety. Sanders and Sheldon (2009) reinforce these findings by emphasising the importance of collaborative networks in improving student outcomes. The findings of this study, however, also revealed the personal toll of community engagement among Victorian principals. Many participants felt the pressure of being the "face" of their schools, especially during crises, which often required them to attend community meetings and

events outside of school hours. Striepe and Cunningham (2022), also noted that community expectations can exacerbate the workload of school leaders during crises.

Community engagement and relational trust emerged as integral components of leadership changes during crises, playing a pivotal role in navigating challenges and fostering resilience within school communities. Victorian principals identified community engagement as a multifaceted practice encompassing collaboration with local organisations, families, and stakeholders to address both immediate needs and long-term challenges. Effective community engagement ensured schools functioned not only as educational institutions but also as community hubs, providing vital social support during crises. The relational dimension of leadership practices was critical in supporting staff wellbeing. Some Victorian principals emphasised the importance of empathy, trust, and genuine care in their interactions with staff. These practices align with the principles of servant leadership, which prioritise the growth and wellbeing of individuals within the organisation (Greenleaf, 2002; Walumbwa et al., 2008). The findings of this study also highlighted the role of relational trust in enabling collective efficacy. By fostering strong relationships with staff, Victorian principals were able to create a sense of community and shared purpose, which was particularly important during times of uncertainty. This aligns with Hargreaves and Fullan's (2013) concept of professional capital, which emphasises the importance of relational trust in sustaining effective leadership.

Relational trust underpinned the success of Victorian principals and their community engagement efforts. They emphasised that trust-building with staff, students, and external partners was essential for creating supportive environments and maintaining morale during turbulent times. Victorian principals consistently highlighted that trust-building with staff, students, and external partners was a prerequisite for authentic engagement. It was also essential for creating supportive environments and sustaining morale, especially during periods of disruption or crisis (Day & Gurr, 2024b; Reis, 2024). Transparent and consistent communication was highlighted as the cornerstone of fostering trust, enabling open dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders (Thornton, 2021). Victorian principals employed strategies such as regular check-ins, communication trees, and family mentorship programs to strengthen relational ties and ensure a sense of shared purpose.

A recurring theme in the interviews was the role of relational trust in navigating complex social issues exacerbated by crises. Relational trust among staff, and between school leaders and the community, is consistent with Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) account of trust reducing the perceived risk of change and enabling collective decision-making and staff willingness to experiment. A mechanism also supported by empirical work linking trust in school leadership to increased collaborative effort during reform implementation (e.g., trust-in-principal studies mediated by collaboration). Similarly, Kaul et al. (2022) found that high-quality relationships and trust among staff are essential for principals to move through crisis and manage the unknown. Victorian principals in rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged areas often assumed roles beyond traditional

educational leadership, addressing challenges such as family violence, housing insecurity, and food shortages. These responsibilities required deep relational trust with community members to effectively mobilise resources and advocate for vulnerable populations. Principals' intentional investment in relational trust is consistent with realist evaluation evidence that trust-building is a key mechanism sustaining collaborative partnerships and generating durable, expanding benefits over time (Jagosh et al., 2015). However, this study's own data reflects principals' belief that their investment served this purpose, rather than independently verified evidence of the sustainability or expanded reach of their specific community engagement initiatives. Participants believed their efforts to build relational trust, worked towards enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of community engagement initiatives (Kaul et al., 2022; Thornton & Rodley, 2021).

Furthermore, relational trust was crucial within school teams. Victorian principals engaged staff through participatory decision-making and distributed leadership, fostering collective responsibility and empowering individuals to take ownership of their roles. This shared leadership model not only alleviated pressure on principals, but also cultivated a culture of collaboration and innovation which was essential for effective crisis response (Van der Vyver et al., 2020). While community engagement and relational trust were celebrated for their positive impact, Victorian principals also noted the significant time and emotional investment were required. Principals played a pivotal role in building and sustaining this trust, by engaging staff in participatory decision-making processes and adopting distributed leadership approaches. This inclusive and collaborative style not only fostered a sense of collective responsibility among staff but also empowered teachers and encouraged innovation in addressing unprecedented challenges, aligning with Day and Gurr's (2024b) research. Social-political arrangements that prioritise inclusion and equity tend to foster more positive and resilient relational dynamics. When leadership is distributed and decision-making is shared, individuals are more likely to feel valued and respected, which enhances their willingness to engage empathetically with others and adapt to changing circumstances (Mahon et al., 2020). In times of crisis, these arrangements provide a foundation for collective resilience.

Community support is felt not simply as a spontaneous emotional response but as an outcome of deliberate organisational practices that position collaboration and care at the centre of the schools work (Kemmis, 2022) Empirical findings highlight that high-quality relationships based on trust enabled school communities to adapt more effectively, with staff cohesion and shared leadership enhancing both resilience and organisational learning (Day & Gurr, 2024b; Kaul et al., 2022; Thornton, 2021). Many principals expressed frustration that these efforts often went unrecognised by broader systems, highlighting a need for institutional support to sustain these practices. Community engagement and relational trust were central to crisis leadership, enabling schools to navigate multifaceted challenges, maintain cohesion, and build resilience (Day & Gurr, 2024b). By fostering strong relationships within and beyond the school community, principals created a

foundation for collaborative problem-solving and sustainable recovery, demonstrating the critical interplay between these elements in effective leadership during crises.

6.2.6 Innovation

Victorian principals consistently demonstrated a shift in practice by adopting innovative approaches and solutions to adapt teaching and learning in response to crises. The swift shift to virtual learning during the pandemic compelled principals to adopt new technological platforms and encourage staff collaboration to exchange resources and ideas. Demeshkant, Schultheis, and Hiebl (2022) emphasise the significance of technological innovation in preserving continuity during crises, corroborating the findings of this study. Victorian principals also showed creativity in meeting community needs. Collaborating with organisations like Foodbank, they provided free meals to students addressing food insecurity and enhancing student engagement. Such initiatives reflect an approach to leadership that transcends purely academic outcomes. Nevertheless, some innovative approaches were often limited by funding availability and resource constraints, aspects that fall within the material-economic arrangements of the TPA framework. Social-political dynamics, including partnerships with external organisations, also empowered principals to enforce creative solutions. Yet, some principals expressed frustration with systemic limitations, such as delays in departmental guidance, which obstructed prompt innovation.

Innovation emerged as a critical component of leadership during times of crisis, emphasising the importance of adaptability, creativity, and proactive problem-solving. Principals demonstrated a capacity to identify emerging issues and implement novel solutions that addressed both immediate challenges and long-term goals. This section explores how innovation shaped leadership practices and contributed to managing crises effectively. One of the most significant areas of innovation was the integration of technology to ensure continuity in education. In times of crisis, principals balanced the preservation of existing capabilities with the need for rapid innovation, developing new digital pedagogies and reimagining teaching and learning modalities to ensure continuity of education (Da'as et al., 2025).

Many Victorian principals described the need to "think outside the box" and employ novel methods to meet students' needs, such as reconfiguring lesson delivery, supporting teacher professional development in technology, and fostering collaborative problem-solving among staff, aligning with Panunciar et al's (2020) findings. These innovations were not only technical but also relational, as principals actively cultivated trust, distributed leadership, and empowered teachers to experiment with new approaches (Day & Gurr, 2024b). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Victorian principals established virtual learning networks to maintain instructional delivery. These networks not only supported online teaching but also fostered collaboration across schools, creating platforms for resource-sharing and collective problem-solving (Kaul et al., 2022). This study's findings extend the

existing literature by identifying a specific tension the cited studies do not foreground: participants described innovation adopted under crisis time pressure as sometimes unsustainable or under-evaluated once the acute phase passed. This is echoed in Pauline's account of training staff in a program the school could not retain them long enough to benefit from, a finding that qualifies, rather than simply confirms, the broadly positive framing of crisis-driven innovation in much of the cited literature. Principals encouraged their leadership teams to identify strengths and areas for growth, fostering a culture of continuous improvement (Hayes et al., 2021). This adaptability highlighted the role of innovation as a mechanism to build resilience and enhance teaching practices (Reis, 2024).

Innovation during crises required a blend of agility, collaboration, and moral purpose. Victorian Principals viewed crises as opportunities to accelerate school-wide learning and institutional change. They promoted a culture where experimentation and risk-taking were encouraged, helping teachers to adapt quickly and share their learning, particularly in the use of online teaching tools (Thornton & Rodley, 2021). The moral purpose of principals emerged as a guiding force in their leadership during crises. Victorian principals consistently demonstrated a deep commitment to equity, inclusion, and student wellbeing. This moral purpose shaped their decision-making and helped them navigate the complexities of crisis leadership. Their approach to innovation was grounded in a vision of continuous improvement, where principals actively sought feedback from the school community, reflected on lessons learned during the crisis, and embedded successful new practices into the school's ongoing routines and culture. In doing so, they demonstrated that effective leadership during times of disruption depends not just on managing change, but on leading it with creativity, courage, and a commitment to collective learning (Hayes & Derrington, 2023; Kaul et al., 2022). This finding resonates with the concept of moral leadership, which emphasises the importance of ethical decision-making and a focus on the greater good (Fullan, 2001; Sergiovanni, 1992). The moral purpose of principals also influenced their relational practices, as they sought to build trust and foster a sense of belonging within their school communities. By embedding innovative practices into their leadership, principals not only managed immediate challenges but also laid the groundwork for long-term educational and community development. This forward-thinking approach underscores the transformative potential of innovative leadership in navigating crises and fostering resilience and adaptability within school communities.

6.2.7 Synthesis of the Theory of Practice Architectures in relation to Research Question One

The TPA's concept of 'enmeshment' is particularly relevant when examining the practices of Victorian principals, emphasising that doings and material-economic arrangements are not simply linked linearly, but are bundled together in practice, constantly shaping and being shaped by one another (Hemmings et al., 2013; Kemmis, 2022; Kemmis et al., 2013). Furthermore, the relationship between relatings and social-political arrangements is one of reciprocal influence and mutual constitution. Social-political arrangements such as collaboration, distributed leadership, and inclusive practices shape the possibilities for empathetic, connected, and adaptable relationships among individuals (Liljenberg, 2021). At the same time, the enactment of these relational qualities can reinforce or transform the social-political order, fostering environments that are more equitable, supportive, and responsive to crisis (Kemmis, 2022). This dialectical relationship is not static but dynamic and potentially transformative.

When principals are attuned to the ways in which their doings are shaped by, and can shape, material-economic arrangements, they are better positioned to enact critical transformations, restructuring the conditions of possibility within which educational practices unfold (Kemmis et al., 2013). A commitment to equitable learning opportunities led some Victorian principals to audit technological access across the student body, resulting in targeted investments that not only altered the material-economic landscape but also expand what becomes possible in terms of teaching, learning, and community engagement (Kemmis, 2022). The relationship between doings and material-economic arrangements is one of mutual constitution, enmeshment, and dynamic interaction. Doings are always situated within, shaped by, and productive of material-economic arrangements. This means that the everyday actions of Victorian principals, engaging with the community, listening to staff and students, adapting strategies, fostering relationships, and promoting school culture, are never simply matters of individual agency or intention (Olney & Wood, 2023). Rather, they are always already mediated by the resources, technologies, infrastructures, and organisational structures that constitute the material-economic context of the school (Kemmis et al., 2013). It is by recognising and intentionally working with these arrangements that leaders can expand the possibilities for practice, address inequities, and create the conditions for meaningful and sustainable educational transformation (Kemmis, 2022; Mahon et al., 2020).

The TPA framework highlights that these practices are not simply a reflection of individual leadership style but emerge from and feed back into the broader cultural, material, and social conditions of the school (Olney & Wood, 2023; Reich & Lizier, 2023). Victorian principals' practices are both enabled and constrained by these architectures, policy mandates, available resources, and existing relationships shape what can be said, done, and related to in the school context. At the same time, principals who are attuned to their practice architectures can deliberately work to reshape them, challenging limiting discourses, advocating for resources, and fostering more inclusive and

supportive relationships (Kemmis, 2022; Reich & Lizier, 2023). The sustainable improvement of staff wellbeing thus depends not only on the actions of principals, but also on their capacity to understand, navigate, and transform the enabling and constraining conditions within their schools. Professional practices that improve and sustain staff wellbeing are those that embed caring discourses, provide material support, and cultivate inclusive, trusting relationships (Cann et al., 2021). The TPA provides a robust lens for understanding how these practices are shaped by, and in turn shape, the complex arrangements of school life (McCallum, 2021). Victorian principals who successfully promoted staff wellbeing by engaging in a continuous process of reflection, adaptation, and advocacy, recognised that lasting change requires altering not only individual actions, but also the practice architectures that make those actions possible. The Research Question one findings show cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements operating not as separate boxes into which findings can be sorted, but as interacting conditions that jointly enabled or constrained the practices described above. A shared discourse of care (cultural-discursive) only translated into genuine staff support where matched by actual resourcing (material-economic) and by relationships of trust robust enough to survive the disruption of crisis (social-political); where any one of these was missing, as in the gap between the language of principal wellbeing and the resourcing behind it, the practice faltered.

6.3 Discussion of Findings for Research Question two: Change in Perspective and Approaches to Leadership

This section discusses the Research Question two findings from Chapter five in relation to the literature, organised under five sub-themes: adaptive and flexible decision-making; leadership agility and equity; evolving leadership styles and moral purpose; how crisis reshaped everyday practice; and training and preparedness. Leading through a crisis changed Victorian principals' perspectives on and their approaches to leadership. They shifted from rigid, pre-planned strategies to flexible and adaptable decision-making, often revising approaches in real time based on staff and community needs. Principals reported that crises highlighted the need to delegate, trust, and empower others, and to be open to new ways of working.

6.3.1 Adaptive and Flexible Decision Making

Evidence from current literature reinforces that leading through a crisis fundamentally shifted principals' perspectives on leadership. This cohort of Victorian principals reported that crisis leadership was markedly different from their pre-crisis routines, requiring a greater emphasis on adaptability and flexibility. Similarly, a study in New Zealand focused on leading through COVID-19 highlighting how principals prioritised wellbeing over learning, increased the frequency of communication, and adopted collaborative approaches (Thornton, 2021). This shift, however, was not always linear or universally embraced by principals in New Zealand. The transformation in perspective was often reactive, driven by the immediacy of the crisis rather than proactive, strategic change.

Victorian principals sometimes struggled to balance new approaches with external accountability measures and departmental expectations, leading to tension between adapting leadership philosophy and meeting systemic demands. Thus, while crises can catalyse profound changes in leadership perspectives, these changes often generate uncertainty and conflict between innovative practices and traditional expectations, rather than resolving smoothly into a settled new approach.

Crisis leadership forced Victorian principals to change their practices and become more adaptable and agile. Moreover, some systems or stakeholders valued consistency and predictability, creating friction between the need for agility and the desire for routine. This tension reveals that while adaptability is essential, it is also exhausting and can undermine leader and staff wellbeing if not carefully supported. Much of the literature supports distributed and shared leadership approaches, especially during times of crisis, outlining that it supports democratic organisations, provides opportunities for collective learning and provides opportunities for teacher development thereby increasing school capacity (Panunciar et al., 2020; Thornton & Rodley, 2021). This study's findings are consistent with literature identifying adaptability as vital to navigating uncertainty (Mazurkiewicz, 2021b). It extends it by identifying a specific cost: several participants described the relentless need to adjust decisions and plans in real time as itself a source of stress and burnout risk. This was especially noted where leaders were forced to balance agility with maintaining stability and safety for staff and students and where institutional stakeholders continued to value consistency and predictability. This qualifies the largely positive framing of adaptive leadership in much of the cited literature, adaptability, this study's findings suggest, is not cost-free.

6.3.2 Leadership Agility and Equity

The necessity for adaptability and agility in crisis leadership is well-documented. Victorian principals, similarly to those is Da'as et al. (2025) study confronted rapidly evolving circumstances, such as sudden school closures and the urgent shift to online learning, requiring immediate, flexible responses. Many leaders describe "pivoting" between roles and responsibilities, drawing on distributed leadership models and encouraging innovation among staff (Hayes & Derrington, 2023). However, the demand for constant adaptability created significant tension. Many Victorian principals felt unprepared, noting that emergency management plans often fell short of the realities they faced. The relentless need to adjust decisions and plans in real time increased stress and risked burnout, especially when leaders were forced to balance agility with maintaining a sense of stability and safety for staff and students. Much of the cited literature supports distributed and shared leadership specifically during crisis, on the basis that it supports democratic organisation, provides opportunities for collective learning, and increases school capacity through teacher development (Panunciar et al., 2020; Thornton & Rodley, 2021).

Where equity was concerned, this study's findings extend the literature by noting that leadership agility was itself unevenly resourced: participants in schools with limited allied-health access, for instance, described agility constrained by what was materially available to deploy, not only by their own adaptive capacity , consistent with the TPA's account of

doings as mediated by material-economic arrangements (Kemmis, 2022). This is directly grounded in this study's own crisis-specific data rather than in general adaptive-leadership literature. Principals leveraged agility to implement creative, tailored solutions , customised teaching methods, online access to allied health services, for their specific communities (Da'as et al., 2025). Though the varying material-economic arrangements available to each school, including professional development opportunities and available technology, could equally reinforce inequities and stifle innovation where they were lacking (Kemmis, 2022; Salamon et al., 2016).

6.3.3 Evolving Leadership Styles and Moral Purpose

Crises were transformative experiences for many Victorian principals, reshaping their leadership philosophies and practices. Participants described a shift towards more empathetic, relational leadership styles, emphasising trust, transparency, and collaboration. Principals identified that they became more comfortable with saying, "I don't know", fostering a culture of honesty and mutual support.

The moral purpose of principals emerged as a guiding force in their leadership during crises. Victorian principals consistently demonstrated a deep commitment to equity, inclusion, and student wellbeing. This moral purpose shaped their decision-making and helped them navigate the complexities of crisis leadership. Their approach to innovation was grounded in a vision of continuous improvement, where principals actively sought feedback from the school community, reflected on lessons learned during the crisis, and embedded successful new practices into the school's ongoing routines and culture. In doing so, they demonstrated that effective leadership during times of disruption depends not just on managing change, but on leading it with creativity, courage, and a commitment to collective learning (Hayes & Derrington, 2023; Kaul et al., 2022). This finding resonates with the concept of moral leadership, which emphasises the importance of ethical decision-making and a focus on the greater good (Fullan, 2020; Sergiovanni, 1992). The moral purpose of principals also influenced their relational practices, as they sought to build trust and foster a sense of belonging within their school communities.

The findings also highlight the moral purpose that underpinned principals' actions during crises. Many participants demonstrated a commitment to equity and inclusion, ensuring that vulnerable students and staff received the support they needed. Vulnerable students are those who, due to various personal, social, economic, or contextual factors, are at risk of experiencing educational disadvantage, disengagement, or harm compared to their peers (Day & Gurr, 2024b; Wang, 2025). Principals became more vulnerable through crisis due to increased emotional demands, overwhelming stress, lack of support, expanded accountability, and the personal toll of caring for others.

6.3.4 How Crisis Reshaped Everyday Practices

The emotional intensity of principals' work is often under-recognised, but is a crucial source of stress, especially as principals deal with crisis (Campbell, 2024; Kanowski, 2022). Their roles required them to be both "caretakers of all" and resilient leaders, often at the expense of their own well-being and sense of security (Anderson et al., 2020; Da'as et al., 2025; Hayes et al., 2022; Hayes & Derrington, 2023).

Crisis management plays a pivotal role in shaping leadership practices during times of adversity. The findings from this study reveal that effective crisis management is not merely a reactive process but a dynamic interplay of proactive planning, adaptability, and relational leadership. It underscores how crises amplify the responsibilities of school principals, requiring them to balance operational demands, staff wellbeing, and community engagement. They are responsible for ensuring continuity of education, arranging for technology access, and sometimes even organising food distribution and other basic needs for students and families (Hayes & Derrington, 2023). Victorian principals highlighted the importance of having emergency management plans, clear communication channels, and defined roles as foundational elements of crisis management. However, they also noted that many crises, often extended beyond the scenarios outlined in such plans, necessitated real-time adaptability. Regular training in crisis management, including simulations and drills, was identified as essential for equipping staff with the skills to respond effectively when plans fail to account for unforeseen circumstances.

Leadership during crisis demands a blend of timely decision-making, emotional intelligence, and strategic delegation. Victorian principals reported that their ability to lead effectively was rooted in their capacity to trust their teams, distribute leadership, and empower staff to take ownership of their roles. This approach was especially emphasised during the multiple crises, where principals "relied on the strength and skills of others" and "distributed leadership appears to be even more important in a crisis situation when there are so many tasks to attend to" (Thornton, 2021, p. 405). Trust was identified as essential during crisis and was a core component of many of the principals' leadership approaches (Hudson, 2024). Empathy emerged as a critical component, with principals focusing on providing emotional and practical support to staff and students. Principals identified that empathy was important to the development of trust, enhanced collaboration, and a nurturing school climate (Victoria Academy of Teaching and Learning, 2023).

Many principals considered the emotional health of staff as a fundamental responsibility. Principals actively monitored the wellbeing of teachers, paying particular attention to those experiencing social isolation or expressing concerns about student wellbeing (Anderson et al., 2020). They described the need to remain calm and decisive, even in situations of uncertainty or incomplete information. Rather than focusing solely on efficiency, school leaders encouraged kindness, understanding, and flexibility in response to the varied challenges faced by their communities (Thornton, 2021). Transparent and open communication was consistently emphasised as a vital practice. Principals prioritised

regular updates to staff and the community, even when definitive answers were unavailable. The use of communication trees, family mentors, and regular check-ins fostered trust and created a sense of collective effort. Principals noted that pre-established communication mechanisms significantly enhanced their ability to disseminate accurate information and reduce uncertainty during crises.

The aftermath of a crisis often required principals to provide ongoing support for staff and students while reflecting on lessons learned. Participants highlighted the need for long-term mental health support, tailored professional development, and debriefing sessions to ensure the recovery of their school communities. These measures not only addressed immediate needs but also contributed to building resilience and preparedness for future crises. Effective crisis response requires flexibility, rapid decision-making, empathy, and the ability to adjust strategies as situations evolve (Thornton, 2021). The study underscores the necessity of training programs that focus on mental health awareness, adaptive leadership, and crisis communication. Victorian principals expressed a desire for resources and policy templates that could guide decision-making during crises, as well as access to robust networks of peer support. Crisis amplify the principal's responsibilities well beyond the "normal" job, demanding not only operated management and instructional leadership, but also deep care for staff wellbeing and proactive engagement with the wider community (Anderson et al., 2020; Dicke et al., 2024).

The findings suggest that crisis management is not just a situational response but a transformative practice that reshapes leadership approaches, emphasising adaptability, relational trust, and moral purpose. Crisis management deeply influences leadership practices, requiring principals to navigate complex social, emotional, and operational challenges. The cumulative effect is a significant increase in stress, cognitive and emotional workload, and even risk of burnout for principals (Kanowski, 2022; Wang, 2025). Principals must balance their own self-care with the needs of others, often putting their own wellbeing last (Campbell, 2024; Hayes et al., 2022). By fostering resilience, collaboration, and a focus on wellbeing, principals can lead their school communities through crises while laying the foundation for long-term improvement and innovation. These insights contribute to a broader understanding of leadership as a dynamic and community-oriented practice, particularly in times of uncertainty.

6.3.5 Training and Preparedness

The rapid, unpredictable changes during crisis left principals with little guidance and made them more susceptible to anxiety and self-doubt, similar to the findings of Hayes and Derrington (2023a). Victorian principals reported a lack of training and preparedness for leading through uncertain and turbulent times, which heightened their sense of vulnerability and exposure (Da'as et al., 2025). Victorian principals cited the lack of system direction and timeliness of information as a source of these feelings. Those more experienced principals were able to reference previous experiences for clarity and confidence. Many Victorian principals described having to "figure it out" themselves due to

vague, delayed, or inflexible guidance from higher authorities (Kaul et al., 2022). Despite the personal stress described by principals, they felt compelled to project calm and control for the sake of their communities, sometimes suppressing their own emotional needs and vulnerabilities (Hayes & Derrington, 2023).

The findings underline the importance of robust support systems for both staff and principals. Many Victorian principals expressed the need for mentorship and peer networks to navigate crises. Some principals relied on informal networks to debrief and share experiences, while others accessed departmental programs, such as the Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy (Department of Education Victoria, 2025b). The inconsistency in support availability, particularly in regional areas, was however a recurring concern. The lack of formal training in crisis management was another critical gap identified. Victorian principals emphasised the need for training programs that address mental health awareness, communication strategies, and post-crisis recovery planning. Similarly, Mutch (2015b), also advocates for targeted professional development to equip leaders with the skills needed to manage crises effectively.

Comprehensive support systems and targeted training are essential in preparing school principals to effectively manage crises. Crisis leadership demands a multifaceted approach that extends well beyond routine administrative practices to address the complex and unpredictable challenges that arise during emergencies. The implementation of robust support structures and tailored professional development empowers principals to lead with resilience, flexibility, and empathy (Dicke et al., 2024; Hayes & Derrington, 2023). Support systems have emerged as an essential cornerstone of effective crisis leadership. Both formal and informal networks were repeatedly cited by Victorian principals as vital sources of emotional, strategic, and professional assistance. Formal mechanisms, including departmental resources, principal networks, and mentoring programs, played a key role in fostering collaboration, shared problem-solving, and the rapid exchange of information and best practices (Kaul et al., 2022; Thornton & Rodley, 2021). These systems enabled Victorian principals to connect with peers in comparable contexts, drawing upon shared experiences to navigate unprecedented challenges. Informal networks, such as peer groups and trusted colleagues, provided essential spaces for debriefing, exchanging ideas, and seeking advice, reducing feelings of isolation and supporting principals' wellbeing (Anderson et al., 2020; Dicke et al., 2024). Community engagement was also pivotal, as schools partnered with local organisations, businesses, and health services to mobilise resources and address the evolving needs of students and staff. Principals underscored the significance of established relationships with external networks, which facilitated timely access to critical resources and fostered trust and cooperation during periods of crisis (Kaul et al., 2022).

Training in crisis management was identified by Victorian principals as a significant enabler for building leadership capacity during emergencies. While most principals relied on personal and professional experiences to guide their actions, many expressed a desire for formal training to address the unique skill sets required for crisis leadership (Dicke et al., 2024). These include mental health awareness, communication strategies, and decision-making under pressure (Reis, 2024). Victorian principals also called for post-crisis support guidelines, such as templates and best practices, which could provide greater confidence and structure during recovery phases. Regular emergency management training, while mandated, was often deemed insufficient, as it failed to account for the nuanced and unpredictable nature of crises (Dicke et al., 2024). Victorian principals advocated for training that includes real-world simulations and localised scenarios to better prepare leaders for diverse challenges. Additionally, Victorian principals stressed the need for training programs to emphasise relationship-building with community stakeholders, ensuring that leaders are equipped to mobilise resources and foster collaboration. The findings from this study correlate with many other studies highlighting that effective leadership in times of crises requires not only technical skills, but also strong relational capabilities (Da'as et al., 2025; Gorrell et al., 2021; Hardwick-Franco, 2019; Hudson, 2024).

6.3.6 Synthesis of the Theory of Practice Architectures in relation to Research Question Two

Support systems and training are integral to the professional practices of school principals during crises. While existing frameworks provide a foundation, there is a critical need for more tailored, context-specific interventions that prioritise collaboration, mental health, and adaptability. Participants expressed a desire for formal training in crisis management, mental health awareness, and communication strategies. This aligns with the broader literature, which emphasises the importance of professional development in building leadership capacity (Harris, 2020; Hayes et al., 2021). In addition to training, principals need access to adequate resources and support systems. The challenges of navigating bureaucratic systems and accessing timely support were consistently highlighted some participants. Furthermore, educational policy frameworks should emphasise the need for leadership approaches that foster inclusive decision-making and stakeholder involvement, ultimately fostering a more resilient educational environment. Policy makers must address these systemic barriers to ensure that principals are equipped to lead their schools effectively during crises.

The Research Question two findings show TPA's three arrangements shifting together rather than independently under crisis conditions. A cultural-discursive shift toward valuing adaptability and relational leadership. A material-economic reality that did not always keep pace with that shift (constraining how much agility principals could actually enact). A social-political reorganisation of authority and trust that made distributed decision-making both necessary and, at times, genuinely destabilising. This is the specific interpretive work

TPA does for Research Question two: it explains why crisis produced a change in leadership approach without displacing the moral purpose underneath it , the underlying arrangements shifted around a stable core, rather than replacing it.

6.4 Conclusion

This discussion chapter has synthesised the key findings of the research with existing literature to provide a nuanced understanding of how school principals' leadership practices are shaped and transformed during and after crisis situations. The research revealed that principals' professional practices, particularly their sayings, doings, and relatings, play a critical role in sustaining the occupational wellbeing of staff and in fostering a resilient and adaptive school culture. Leading through crisis not only challenges established arrangements and approaches to leadership but also catalyses significant shifts in principals' perspectives, prompting them to embrace more adaptive, relational, and innovative strategies. Furthermore, the findings underscore the importance of transparent communication, distributed leadership, and the prioritisation of staff wellbeing as fundamental to effective crisis leadership. The interplay between individual agency and contextual constraints, as articulated through the Theory of Practice Architectures, highlights that sustainable change in schools requires attention to cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements.

Across both research questions, this chapter has identified where the findings confirm existing literature (e.g., the value of distributed leadership and relational trust during crisis), where they extend it (e.g., specifying the crisis-specific costs of adaptability and community engagement that general leadership literature does not fully capture), and where they suggest a genuine gap in current understanding (e.g., the apparent shift in principals' own threshold for what counts as a crisis after repeated exposure). The interplay between individual agency and contextual constraint, understood through TPA, suggests that sustainable change in how schools respond to crisis requires attention to all three arrangements together, the language a school uses around wellbeing, the resources actually available to support it, and the relationships of trust that determine whether either can be enacted under pressure. The following chapter draws together the implications of these findings for policy, practice, and future research, considering what this study contributes to the field of educational leadership during crisis and where its findings point toward questions this study was not designed to answer.

Ultimately, this chapter has demonstrated that leadership through crisis is inherently complex and imperfect, yet it offers unique opportunities for professional and organisational growth. The insights gained from this research provide a foundation for future policy development, professional learning, and research aimed at supporting principals and their communities through ongoing and future challenges. Building on the findings and interpretations presented in the Discussion chapter, the final chapter, the Conclusion chapter offers a synthesis of how leading through crisis has shaped and

transformed school principals' perspectives and professional practices, particularly in relation to supporting staff wellbeing and adapting leadership approaches. Through this synthesis, the chapter underscores the ongoing importance of reflective, context-sensitive leadership in sustaining the wellbeing of school communities through and beyond periods of crisis.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

This thesis aimed to investigate how leading through crisis changes and impacts Victorian school principals' approaches to leadership. The research sought to identify the professional practices that sustain and enhance the occupational wellbeing of staff, whilst also exploring how principals' approaches to leadership evolve following crisis events. Through a phenomenological methodology grounded in IPA, and using the TPA as its central analytical lens, the study provided a more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of principals as they navigated unprecedented challenges and crisis events (Gorrell et al., 2021). Based on semi-structured interviews with 26 primary and secondary school principals from rural and regional Victoria, Australia, the study provided valuable insights into the lived experiences of school leaders during and after crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022 Victorian floods. Based on the findings and discussion presented in this thesis, several recommendations are proposed to support further research, enhance practical applications, and guide policy development.

7.1 Implications for Policy and Practice

7.1.1 Professional Development and Training for Crisis Leadership

The findings have significant implications for Victorian education policy and practice, highlighting the urgent need for the Department of Education to implement targeted professional development programs that prepare principals for effective crisis leadership. Such initiatives must go beyond operational management to include the development of emotional intelligence, resilience, and strategies for supporting the wellbeing of staff and students, incorporating scenario-based training, adaptive decision-making, and positive school culture-building (Dicke et al., 2024; Hayes & Derrington, 2023). Strengthening systemic support structures, such as access to mental health resources and peer networks, is essential, especially in rural and regional areas where allied health services are lacking and principals often report isolation and increased risk of burnout (Dicke et al., 2024; Gorrell et al., 2021) Moreover, embedding adaptability and innovation into departmental leadership frameworks will help principals cultivate flexibility, creative problem-solving, and collaborative leadership, enabling them to respond effectively to both expected and unforeseen challenges (Elliott & Hollingsworth, 2020; Hayes & Derrington, 2023). Together, these measures call for a comprehensive, dynamic approach to principal development and support that is responsive to the evolving complexities of the educational landscape.

7.1.2 Systemic and Policy Support

Policy reform across all levels, school, state and Departmental, is urgently needed to better support principals, schools, and their communities, particularly through the integration of clear guidelines for staff and student wellbeing and the allocation of resources for mental health initiatives. System level policies should ensure that supports are tailored to the

unique needs of each school, regardless of size or location, acknowledging that principals in small or disadvantaged schools often lack adequate staff and resources to manage workload and broader community challenges such as food insecurity and housing instability (Elliott & Hollingsworth, 2020; Gorrell et al., 2021). The Victorian Department of Education must guarantee equitable access to both proactive and reactive wellbeing supports for all schools, while also reducing administrative burdens and unnecessary accountability measures during and after a crisis. Delegating non-essential tasks, providing practical tools such as policy templates and resource lists, and ensuring consistent points of contact can help principals focus on leadership and crisis management (Dicke et al., 2024). This study found that effective crisis leadership was charactised by these interrelated themes: communication and transparency, structured support systems, deliberate attention to both staff and principal wellbeing, leadership and empowerment, community engagement, and innovation. These are best enabled by relational trust, systemic flexibility, distributed leadership, and ongoing professional learning (Anderson et al., 2020; Thornton, 2021). Research shows that as principals navigate successive crises, their leadership becomes more collaborative and distributed, recognising that complex challenges demand collective effort and contextual decision-making (Thornton & Rodley, 2021). Building resilient, supportive systems, grounded in trust, autonomy, and tailored resources, will not only mitigate stress and improve wellbeing but also empower principals to lead their schools and communities effectively through future crises.

7.1.3 Trust, Delegation, and Distributed Leadership

The importance of principals being trusted to make decisions during times of crisis is fundamental to the resilience and adaptability of the entire school community. Principals are often required to make swift, high-stakes decisions under conditions of uncertainty and incomplete information, balancing the immediate operational demands with the emotional and psychological wellbeing of staff and students. This complex role demands a high degree of trust from the school community and system leaders, as trust empowers principals to delegate responsibilities effectively and involve others in collaborative decision-making processes, which in turn strengthens the collective capacity of the school to respond and adapt to crises (Hayes & Derrington, 2023; Thornton, 2021). Trust not only facilitates delegation but also fosters a culture of collaboration and shared ownership. When principals are trusted, they can empower staff, encourage innovative problem-solving, and mobilise diverse expertise within the school community, which is critical in navigating the multifaceted challenges crises present (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022; Thornton & Rodley, 2021). Distributed leadership becomes particularly important during crises, as principals rely on the strengths and skills of leadership teams and staff members to manage the numerous tasks that arise, thereby mitigating the pressure on any single individual and enhancing overall organisational resilience.

7.1.4 Post-Crisis Debriefs and Organisational Learning

Post-crisis debriefs and ongoing conversations during the recovery period, serve as an essential mechanism for organisational learning and improvement. These reflective processes allow school leaders and the wider system to analyse the crisis response, identifying what strategies were effective, what challenges emerged, and how future responses can be strengthened. Such debriefs contribute to the development of adaptive leadership practices that are responsive to the unique contexts of different crises and school communities (Dicke et al., 2024; Hayes et al., 2022). They promote a culture of continuous improvement and preparedness, enabling schools to not only recover but also build resilience against future adversities. They also ensure that principals feel heard and that the system learns and improves from their traumatic experiences in the hope that something good can come from crisis events.

The literature underscores that effective crisis leadership is not merely about managing the immediate emergency but also about fostering long-term organisational learning and wellbeing. Principals who engage in transparent communication, empathetic leadership, and collaborative decision-making practices create psychologically safe environments that support staff wellbeing and sustain educational continuity (Anderson et al., 2020; Hayes & Derrington, 2023; Wittmer & Hopkins, 2022) These practices, grounded in trust and collective efficacy, are vital to the sustained success and resilience of schools navigating crises. The system trusting in principals is a cornerstone of effective crisis leadership, enabling timely decision-making, delegation, and collaboration that strengthen school resilience. Post-crisis debriefs complement these leadership actions by fostering reflective learning and adaptive strategies, ensuring that schools and the system evolve and improve their crisis responses over time. Together, these elements form an integrated approach to crisis leadership that supports the wellbeing of school communities and promotes sustainable organisational growth in the face of ongoing challenges.

7.1.5 Summary of Implications

The implications of these findings are far-reaching for policy and practice. Firstly, there is a need to move beyond individualistic models of leadership development towards approaches that recognise and address the cultural, material, and social architectures that shape practice. Professional development programs should equip principals not only with technical skills but also with the capacity for critical reflection, ethical judgement, and relational leadership. Training should focus on the sayings, doings, and relatings of leadership, and help leaders to identify and address the enabling and constraining conditions in their own contexts. Secondly, policy frameworks should be designed with an awareness of the multidimensional nature of crisis leadership. Support systems for principals must address not only the immediate demands of crisis management but also the long-term work of rebuilding and sustaining community. This includes providing access to networks, mentoring, and opportunities for collaborative problem-solving, as well as recognising the emotional labour and personal toll of crisis leadership (Dicke et al., 2024;

Thornton, 2021) Policies must also be flexible enough to allow for local adaptation, recognising that a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to meet the needs of diverse school communities. Thirdly, the findings highlight the importance of embedding wellbeing as a core value within educational systems. This means not only supporting the wellbeing of students but also prioritising the occupational wellbeing of staff and leaders. Systemic initiatives should focus on creating cultures of care, promoting psychological safety, and providing resources for self-care and mutual support. As the TPA makes clear, such discursive shifts must be matched by material investment and relational work if they are to produce lasting change.

7.1.6 Practical Recommendations

In terms of practical recommendations, principals and their teams should be supported to develop adaptability through ongoing professional learning focused on crisis management, community engagement, and innovation. Mentorship and peer networks should be strengthened, particularly for new principals, to provide forums for debriefing, sharing experiences, and collaborative learning. Trauma-informed practice and effective communication should be integrated into leadership development, recognising the emotional and relational dimensions inherent in crisis work (Carello & Butler, 2014; Miller et al., 2024). It is also recommended that educational authorities and policymakers invest in systems and processes that facilitate the sharing of best practices across schools and regions, promoting collective learning and resilience (Miller et al., 2024; Sherwood et al., 2021). The experiences of principals in this study underscore the value of learning from peers, particularly in navigating challenges for which there is no predetermined script. Platforms for storytelling, case studies, and reflective dialogue can help to surface tacit knowledge and build collective capacity.

7.2 Limitations

All studies have inherent limitations, which may arise from a range of conceptual, methodological, contextual, or practical factors (Cohen et al., 2017). A key limitation of this study lies within the composition of the participant cohort, which was restricted to principals working in rural and regional areas of Victoria, Australia. While the sample size was substantial for a qualitative investigation (n = 26) and provided rich, in-depth insights into the experiences of educational leaders within these contexts, the geographic and professional focus may limit the broader applicability of the findings. Rural and regional school environments often present distinctive challenges and opportunities that may differ significantly from those encountered in metropolitan settings, including variations in community expectations, access to resources, and support for staff wellbeing.

Consequently, the findings should be interpreted with an awareness that the perspectives represented in this study may not fully capture the experiences of principals in urban or international contexts. Nonetheless, the study offers valuable and contextually grounded understandings that contribute meaningfully to the body of knowledge on educational leadership and staff wellbeing in rural and regional schools. The transferability of these findings is therefore best considered in relation to settings that share similar demographic, geographic, and systemic characteristics. Moreover, the study concentrated primarily on principals' perspectives, without incorporating the voices of other key stakeholders such as middle leaders, teacher leaders, teachers, students, and community members. While this focus enabled an in-depth exploration of leadership practices and decision-making from the standpoint of those formally responsible for guiding schools through crisis contexts, it inevitably limited the scope of perspectives represented in the findings.

Educational leadership, particularly in times of crisis, is inherently relational and influenced by the interactions, perceptions, and responses of multiple members of the school community. Excluding these voices may therefore overlook important dimensions of how leadership is experienced, enacted, and perceived across different levels of the educational environment. The nature of data collection was another limitation identified in this study. The research primarily relied on semi-structured interviews due to their potential to elicit rich, detailed, and contextually grounded insights (Cohen et al., 2017; O'Toole, 2013). However, this data-collection method is inherently dependent on participants' self-reporting and recollections. As such, the data reflect participants' subjective interpretations and memories of events, which may be influenced by factors such as hindsight bias, selective recall, or the desire to present oneself or one's school in a favorable light (Cohen et al., 2017). These influences can shape the narratives offered and the emphasis placed on particular experiences or outcomes.

Furthermore, the interview context itself may have affected participants' openness. Given that principals hold positions of significant responsibility and public accountability, some may have been cautious in sharing sensitive information or critical reflections, even with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. While strategies such as establishing rapport and adopting a reflective, non-judgmental interview stance were employed to mitigate this risk, it is acknowledged that some dimensions of their experiences may remain underrepresented. Alternative methods of data collection for future studies could include surveys that could be collected as part of the debrief process post-crisis. Focus group discussions may facilitate deeper levels of reflection and provide opportunities for colleagues to connect.

7.3 Future Research

Future research should broaden participation to include principals and school leaders from metropolitan, regional, and international systems. This is to allow examination of how socio-economic, cultural, and systemic conditions can influence leadership practices, decision-making, and wellbeing during and after crises. Comparative studies across varied educational jurisdictions would illuminate the impact of contextual factors, such as school size, governance, resource allocation, and community expectations, on crisis leadership, revealing both shared and context-specific patterns of practice (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022). Including middle leaders, teacher leaders, teachers, students, parents, and staff would deepen understanding of crisis leadership as a collective, relational phenomenon, highlighting the co-construction of leadership through school community interactions (Urick et al., 2021). Such research should triangulate findings through interviews, document analysis, focus groups, and observations, enhancing validity and providing a multi-dimensional portrayal of crisis leadership (Dicke et al., 2024). Two further directions arise directly from gaps identified in this thesis's own analysis. First, this study found that several principals described their own threshold for what counted as a crisis shifting after repeated exposure, in ways they recognised as potentially unhealthy; longitudinal research is needed to track this shift over time and establish whether it represents a genuine occupational-health risk specific to sustained crisis leadership. Second, while participants in this study described the professional standards they valued as a general baseline, the interview data collected here could not establish whether principals' standards-based practice itself shifts under crisis; a study designed specifically to probe this question, asking participants directly whether and how their standards-based practice changed, would close a gap this study's own methodology left open.

Expanding research to metropolitan and international contexts would reveal how cultural norms, policy frameworks, and local mandates shape leadership responses, communication, and trust during uncertainty. Metropolitan schools, facing larger and more diverse populations, may demonstrate different leadership challenges and opportunities compared to other settings (Hayes & Derrington, 2023). Additionally, conducting comparative studies across different geographical areas can provide valuable insights into culturally responsive leadership practices during crises, enhancing our understanding of the elements that foster effective leadership in various contexts. Further, intersectional analysis should explore how gender, ethnicity, class, and professional identity influence leaders' experiences and responses to crises, revealing the nuanced interplay between social identities and context (Da'as et al., 2025). Interdisciplinary approaches, drawing from education, psychology, sociology, and organisational studies, are essential for developing adaptive, ethical, and resilient leadership paradigms. Collaboration between researchers and practitioners will ensure frameworks are both conceptually rigorous and practically applicable (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022). As global challenges become more interconnected, understanding the intersection of leadership styles, inclusive practices,

and evolving policy is crucial for equipping leaders to navigate future uncertainties. Future research should also examine how recent policy changes, such as Enterprise Bargaining Agreements, Time in Lieu, and “right to disconnect” laws, affect teacher wellbeing, classroom practices, and school culture in the post-pandemic period, extending the workforce-related pressures this study's participants described in the context of crisis specifically (Reis, 2024).

7.4 Summary

Returning directly to the two questions that guided this study: in response to Research Question one, “*What professional practices do principals enact to support, improve, and sustain the occupational wellbeing of their staff and themselves during and after crisis?”,* this study found that communication and transparency, structured support systems, deliberate attention to both staff and principal wellbeing, leadership and empowerment, community engagement, and innovation together constituted the professional practices principals relied on, each shaped by the cultural, material, and relational conditions of their specific school. In response to Research Question two, “*How does leading through a crisis change principals' perspectives on and approaches to leadership?”,* this study found that principals' leadership approach shifted markedly toward greater adaptability, agility, and relational practice, while their underlying moral purpose remained stable throughout, functioning as the anchor against which this change occurred.

In conclusion, it is important to reflect on the analogy “surgeons don’t run hospitals” which highlights the need for principals (surgeons) to focus on pedagogical leadership, rather than being overwhelmed by administrative duties. This analogy powerfully illuminates the core dilemma facing contemporary school leaders: principals, who, like surgeons, should be enabled to focus on their core professional purpose and practice of their professions, yet are structurally constrained by the growing weight of administrative, managerial, and compliance demands (Dinham & Crowther, 2011; Terosky, 2016). This analogy is directed specifically at administrative and compliance burden, not at crisis leadership itself: this thesis's own findings show that leading through crisis is, and must remain, a core and non-negotiable part of the principal's role, one that this thesis argues should be better resourced and supported, rather than a burden to be delegated away.

Through the lens of the Theory of Practice Architectures (TPA), it becomes clear that these constraints are not accidental, but are the product of misaligned cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements which crowd the “doings” of administration into the space that should be occupied by pedagogical leadership and relational trust-building (Kemmis et al., 2014; Mahon et al., 2017; Salamon et al., 2016). In contrast to hospitals, where professional administrators create a supportive architecture allowing surgeons to focus on healing, schools often lack the material-economic supports needed to free principals for their instructional and community leadership roles (Gorrell et

al., 2021; Kemmis, 2019). This endangers the praxis of educational leadership, undermining both the moral purpose of schooling and the wellbeing of principals themselves (Kanowski, 2022; Kemmis & Smith, 2008; Salamon et al., 2016).

The findings of this research, grounded in the TPA, reveal that effective crisis leadership is not a heroic or solitary act, but emerges from the interplay of sayings, doings, and relatings shaped by, and shaping, the surrounding practice architectures of school and leadership environments. Principals who lead with adaptability, empathy, and a commitment to collective wellbeing, who prioritise open communication, distributed leadership, and strong community relationships, are better able to foster resilience and inclusion, both in times of crisis and beyond (Anderson et al., 2020; Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2015; Thornton, 2021). The centrality of wellbeing, for both staff and self, is not merely a reactive posture; it is a proactive practice embedded in the cultural-discursive fabric of effective and humane schools (Kemmis, 2022; Mahon et al., 2020). The argument is not just pragmatic but moral and ontological: educational practice and wellbeing are shaped by their architectures.

Policy should support practice architectures that enable principals' professional agency and sustain school communities. Leadership in crisis, seen through TPA, is best understood as a practice shaped by cultural, economic, and political conditions. Supporting principals through systemic change is essential to building educational systems that are humane, resilient, and responsive to future challenges. Accordingly, the most impactful solution is a deliberate re-architecting of the material-economic and social-political arrangements of school leadership. This study's findings make the case for embedding professional administrators to handle operational and compliance burdens. Which this thesis argues is likely to help principals reclaim their pedagogical core business, leading to improved staff and student wellbeing. Thereby possibly reducing burnout, and renewing the alignment of leadership practice with the educational mission, although this specific intervention was not tested by this study. (Gorrell et al., 2021; Kanowski, 2022).

This thesis therefore advocates for systemic change: policies and practices that reshape the practice architectures of schools so that principals are empowered as pedagogical leaders, supported by strong peer and community networks, and sustained by a culture that values their wellbeing and professional agency (Kaul et al., 2022; Rinehart, 2021). Trust in principals is fundamental to effective crisis leadership, enabling timely decision-making, delegation, and collaborative problem-solving that enhance school resilience and wellbeing. Coupled with post-crisis debriefs fostering reflective learning and adaptive strategies, this integrated approach supports sustainable organisational growth and the ongoing wellbeing of school communities in the face of adversity. Leadership preparation must be reoriented to focus on adaptability, crisis management, relational care, and the ability to reflectively engage with the sayings, doings, and relatings of leadership practice (Reich & Lizier, 2023). Longitudinal research is needed to deepen our

understanding of how these practices influence recovery and sustained wellbeing in the post-crisis phases (Brion, 2021; Dicke et al., 2024).

Ultimately, just as hospitals are structured to enable surgeons to heal, so too should schools be restructured to enable principals to lead teaching and learning. By foregrounding the lived experiences of principals and attending to the conditions that shape practice, this thesis offers both a conceptual framework and a set of practical recommendations for supporting school leaders in their vital work. While there remains a persistent expectation for principals to be perfect in navigating complex challenges, the realities revealed through this study underscore that effective school leadership is inherently imperfect requiring adaptability, empathy, and a willingness to learn from both successes and setbacks. Only by reimagining and realigning our practice architectures can we ensure that schools fulfil their moral purpose, that educational leadership remains a sustainable and rewarding vocation, and that our systems are resilient enough to meet the complex crises of our times.

References

Abdulaziz, A., Noman, M., Abdulaziz, A. S., Ibrahim, A. A., & Kaur, A. (2024). Principal's learning-centred leadership practices and teacher's wellbeing: A self-determination theory perspective. *Educational Studies*, *50*(4), 448-466.

Abrahamsen, H. N., Gunnulfsen, A. E., Kleveland, H., Day, C., & Gurr, D. (2024). The importance of school principals in building teacher and student well-being and promoting academic and social learning: the Norwegian case. In (Vol. 28, pp. 145-166). Springer International Publishing AG. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-62735-4_7

Adams, C., & J. Olsen. (2017). Principal support for student psychological needs: A social-psychological pathway to a healthy learning environment. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *5*(55), 510-525. https://doi.org/10.1108/jea-05-2016-0045

AITSL, Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership,. (2019). *Australian professional standard for principals and the leadership profiles*. https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/national-policy-framework/australian-professional-standard-for-principals-and-the-leadership-profiles.pdf?sfvrsn=c07eff3c_26

Alase, A. (2017). The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): A guide to a good qualitative research approach. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, *5*(2), 9-19.

Alene, A. A. (2022). The influence of distributed leadership style on educational crisis management (the case of TPLF war) in government secondary schools of Bahir Dar City Administration, Ethiopia. *Management in Education*, 89202062211396. https://doi.org/10.1177/08920206221139636

Anderson, E., Hayes, S., & Carpenter, B. (2020). Principal as caregiver of all: Responding to needs of others and self. Leading in Crisis. Research Brief. *Consortium for Policy Research in Education*.

Anyon, Y., Nicotera, N., & Veeh, C. A. (2016). Contextual influences on the implementation of a schoolwide intervention to promote students' social, emotional, and academic learning. *Children & Schools*, *38*(2), 81-88. https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdw008

Arar, K., Oplatka, I., & SpringerLink. (2022). *Advanced Theories of Educational Leadership* (1st 2022. ed.). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14510-0

Atkinson, S. J. (2022). *Leadership during the COVID-19 crisis in rural schools* (Publication Number 29206914) [Ph.D., The University of Texas at San Antonio]. ProQuest One Academic. United States -- Texas. https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/leadership-during-covid-19-crisis-rural-schools/docview/2667890838/se-2?accountid=17227

Augustine, C. H., Gonzalez, G., Ikemoto Schuyler, G., Russell, J., Zellman, G. L., Constant, L., Armstrong, J., & Dembosky, J. W. (2009). *Improving school leadership: The promise of cohesive leadership systems* (1 ed.). RAND.

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021a). *Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Edition*. https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/standards/australian-statistical-geography-standard-asgs-edition-3/jul2021-jun2026

Avenell, K. (2021). Whole school leadership. *The Australian Educational Leader*, *43*(2), 47-48.

Avenier, M.-J., & Thomas, C. (2015). Finding one's way around various methodological guidelines for doing rigorous case studies: A comparison of four epistemological frameworks. *Systèmes D'information & Management*, *20*(1), 61.

Avolio, B. J., Luthans, F., & Walumbwa, F. O. (2004). Authentic leadership: Theory building for veritable sustained performance. Gallup Leadership Institute. University of Nebraska. *The Leadership Quarterly*

Azorín, C. (2020). Beyond COVID-19 supernova. Is another education coming? *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, *5*(3/4), 381-390. https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-05-2020-0019

Azungah, T. (2018). Qualitative research: deductive and inductive approaches to data analysis. *Qualitative Research Journal*, *18*(4), 383-400. https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-D-18-00035
Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. (2006). *Transformational Leadership* (2 ed.). Taylor and Francis.
Begley, P. T. (2006). Self-knowledge, capacity and sensitivity: Prerequisites to authentic leadership by school principals. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *44*(6), 570-589. https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230610704792
Bellibaş, M. Ş., Gümüş, S., & Chen, J. (2024). The impact of distributed leadership on teacher commitment: The mediation role of teacher workload stress and teacher well-being. *British Educational Research Journal*, *50*(2), 814-836. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3944
Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, *15*(2), 219-234.
Bhar, S. (2019). Introducing phenomenological research methodology in sustainable consumption literature: Illustrations From India. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *18*, 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919840559
Biggerstaff, D., & Thompson, A. R. (2008). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): A Qualitative methodology of choice in healthcare research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *5*(3), 214-224. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780880802314304
Bishop, W. E., Fifolt, M., Peters, G. B., Gurley, D. K., & Collins, L. (2015). Perceptions and experiences of K-12 educational leaders in response to the 27 April 2011 tornadoes. *School Leadership & Management*, *35*(2), 215-235. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2015.1041487
Bogler, R. (2001). The influence of leadership style on teacher job satisfaction. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *37*(5), 662-683. https://doi.org/10.1177/00131610121969460
Boin, A., Hart, P. T., McConnell, A., & Preston, T. (2010a). Leadership style, crisis response and blame management: The case of Hurricane Katrina. *Public Administration (London)*, *88*(3), 706-723. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2010.01836.x
Boin, A., Hart, P. T., McConnell, A., & Preston, T. (2010b). Leadership style, crisis response and blame managment: The case of Hurricane Katrina. *Public administration (London)*, *88*(3), 706-723. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2010.01836.x
Boin, A., Hart, P. t., Stern, E., Stern, E., & Sundelius, B. (2017). *The politics of crisis management*. Cambridge University Press.
Bowles, E., Reeves, S., Patrick, J., & Key, M. (2021). *Educational leadership amidst a sustained global health crisis: Perceived challenges of four school leaders in a metropolitan area leading schools through the COVID-19 pandemic* ProQuest Dissertations Publishing].
Branch, G. F., Hanushek, E. A., & Rivkin, S. G. (2013). School leaders matter. *Education Next*, *13*(1), 62-69.
Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, *11*(4), 589-597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806
Breevaart, K., & Bakker, A. B. (2018). Daily Job Demands and Employee Work Engagement: The Role of Daily Transformational Leadership Behavior. *Journal of occupational health psychology*, *23*(3), 338-349. https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000082
Brion, C. (2021). Leading in times of crisis. *The Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, *24*(3), 27-38. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555458921992386
Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools - A core resource for improvement*. American Sociological Association.
Bukko, D., Liu, K., & Johnson, A. H. (2021). Principal practices that build and sustain trust: Recommendations from teachers in a high-trust school. *Planning & Changing*, *50*.

Cahapay, M. B. (2022). The phenomenon of leading without a guidebook: Educational leadership practices of Philippine school principals in virulent COVID-19 times. *International Journal of Educational Leadership and Management*, *10*(1), 2-24. https://doi.org/10.17583/ijelm.0.7666

Campbell, E. (2024). Annual principal survey: Leadership's emotional load. *Independent Education*, *54*(2), 34-35.

Campbell, P., Chaseling, M., Boyd, W., & Shipway, B. (2019). The effective instructional leader. *Professional development in education*, *45*(2), 276-290.

Cann, R. F., Riedel-Prabhakar, R., & Powell, D. (2021). A Model of Positive School Leadership to Improve Teacher Wellbeing. *International Journal of Applied Positive Psychology*, *6*(2), 195-218. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41042-020-00045-5

Canyon, D. (2020). Definitions in crisis management and crisis leadership. *Security Nexus Research*, *21*, 1-10.

Celik, A., Akgemci, T., & Akyazi, T. E. (2016). A comparison between the styles of transformational leaders and authentic leaders in crisis management. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, *6*(2), 183-196.

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. (2015). Learning curve issue 10: Effective leadership. *NSW Department of Education*. https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au

Chalmers, D. J., Manley, D., & Wasserman, R. (2009). *Metametaphysics : new essays on the foundations of ontology*. Clarendon Press.

Chatzipanagiotou, P., & Katsarou, E. (2023). Crisis management, school leadership in disruptive times and the recovery of schools in the post COVID-19 era: A systematic literature review. *Education Sciences*, *13*(2), 118. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13020118

Chen, F., Li, Y.-J., & Liu, T.-F. (2026). Research on influencing factors and correlation pathways of rural teachers' retention in China. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *16*, 1728628. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1728628

Coelli, M., & Green, D. A. (2012). Leadership effects: school principals and student outcomes. *Economics of education review*, *31*(1), 92-109. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2011.09.001

Cohen, Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2017). *Research methods in education* Routledge.

Collins, M. D., Dasborough, M. T., Gregg, H. R., Xu, C., Midel Deen, C., He, Y., & Restubog, S. L. D. (2023). Traversing the storm: An interdisciplinary review of crisis leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *34*(1), 101661. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2022.101661

Coombs, W. T. (2007). Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory. *Corporate reputation review*, *10*(3), 163-176. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.crr.1550049

Corlett, S., & Mavin, S. (2018). Reflexivity and researcher positionality. *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Business and Management Research Methods*, 377-399.

Côté, L., & Turgeon, J. (2005). Appraising qualitative research articles in medicine and medical education. *Medical Teacher*, *27*(1), 71-75. https://doi.org/10.1080/01421590400016308

Cox, J. S., & Mullen, C. A. (2023). Impacting student achievement: Principals' instructional leadership practice in two title I rural schools. *Journal of school leadership*, *33*(1), 3-25. https://doi.org/10.1177/10526846221133996

Crabtree, B. F., & Miller, W. L. (1999). *Doing qualitative research*. SAGE Publications. https://books.google.com.au/books?id=4ebxYPyY5noC

Creswell, J. W. (2006). *Qualitative inquiry & research design : choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications.

Cypress, B. S. (2017). Rigor or reliability and validity in qualitative research: Perspectives, strategies, reconceptualization, and recommendations. *Dimensions of Critical Care Nursing*, *36*(4), 253-263.

Da'as, R. a., Qadach, M., & Schechter, C. (2025). Crisis leadership: Principals' metaphors during COVID-19. *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, *53*(2), 357-379. https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432231170580

Daniel, R.-G., Patricia, M.-O., Maysaa, Y. B., & Melanie Ann, S. (2021). Confronting a compound crisis: The school principal's role during initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Education*, *6*. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.617875

Dasborough, M. T., & Scandura, T. (2022). Leading through the crisis: "Hands Off" or "Hands-On"? *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, *29*(2), 219-223. https://doi.org/10.1177/15480518211036472

Day, C., Gu, Q., & Sammons, P. . (2016). The impact of leadership on student outcomes: How successful school leaders use transformational and instructional strategies to make a difference *Educational Administration Quarterly*(52), 221-258.

Day, C., & Gurr, D. (2024a). *How successfuls schools are more than effective principals who build and sustain teacher and student wellbeing and achievement* (2024 edition. ed., Vol. 28). Springer International Publishing AG. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-62735-4

Day, C., & Gurr, D. (2024b). *How successfuls schools are more than effective principals who build and sustain teacher and student wellbeing and achievement* (1st 2024. ed.). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-62735-4

De Voto, C., Superfine, B. M., & DeWit, M. (2023). Navigating Policy and Local Context in Times of Crisis: District and School Leader Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *59*(2), 339-383. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X231163870

DeJonckheere, M., & Vaughn, L., M. (2019). Semistructured interviewing in primary care research: a balance of relationship and rigour. *Family Medicine and Community Health*, *7*(2), e000057. https://doi.org/10.1136/fmch-2018-000057

Delve, H., L., & Limpaecher, A. (2023). *What is interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)?* https://delvetool.com/blog/interpretive-phenomenological-analysis

Demeshkant, N., Schultheis, K., & Hiebl, P. (2022). School sustainability and school leadership during crisis remote education: Polish and German experience. *Computers in the Schools*, *39*(2), 120-136. https://doi.org/10.1080/07380569.2022.2071221

Denscombe, M. (2010). *Good research guide for small-scale social research projects* (4 ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.

Department of Education Victoria. (2025a). *Principal selection*. https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/principal-selection/policy-and-guidelines/leadership

Department of Education Victoria. (2025b). *School operations; principal health and wellbeing*. https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/principal-health-and-wellbeing/resources

Dicke, T., Jardine, A., Grining, M., Barrance, T., Gordon, T., Marsh, H., Telford, A., Kidson, P., Clarke, T., & Ko, H. (2024). *Understanding critical incidents: Empowering australian school leaders (IPPE Report)* (Sydney: Institute for Positive Psychology and Education, Australian Catholic University, Issue.

Dicke, T., Kidson, P., & Marsh, H. (2025). *The Australian principal occupational health, safety, and wellbeing survey: 2024 data (IPPE Report)*. Institute for Positive Psychology and Education Australian Catholic University.

Dicke, T., Marsh, H. W., Parker, P. D., Guo, J., Riley, P., & Waldeyer, J. (2020). Job satisfaction of teachers and their principals in relation to climate and student achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *112*(5), 1061-1073. https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000409

Dinham, S., & Crowther, F. (2011). Sustainable school capacity building - one step back, two steps forward? *Journal of Educational Administration*, *49*(6), 616-623. https://doi.org/10.1108/09578231111186926
Donohoo, J., Hattie, J., & Eells, R. (2018). The power of collective efficacy.(fostering a collaborative school culture). *Educational Leadership*, *75*(6), 40.
Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams. *Administrative science quarterly*, *44*(2), 350-383. https://doi.org/10.2307/2666999
Edmondson, A. C., & Lei, Z. (2014). Psychological Safety: The History, Renaissance, and Future of an Interpersonal Construct. *Annual review of organizational psychology and organizational behavior*, *1*(1), 23-43. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031413-091305
Edwards-Groves, C., & Grootenboer, P. (2015). Praxis and the theory of practice architectures : Resources for re-envisioning English education. *The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, *38*(3), 150-161. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03651896
Elg, H., Strachan, J., Butt, P., Cox, T., Carlson, B., Beatty, L., Condous, O., Daunt, A., & Barker, A. (2022). Victorian Floods 2022: Thousands displaced in 'one in 50 year flood'. *Herald Sun*. https://www.heraldsun.com.au/leader/victorians-are-being-urged-to-prepare-their-properties-as-storms-build/news-story/81dc0536c410547b4b2b2a7973184453
Elliott, K., & Hollingsworth, H. (2020). *A case for reimagining school leadership development to enhance collective efficacy*. Australian Council for Education Research. https://doi.org/10.37517/XYQS1429
Ertem, H. Y. (2024). School leadership fostering mental health in the times of crisis: synthesis of school principals' views and PISA 2022. *BMC Psychology*, *12*(1), 695-614. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-024-02195-6
Fazio, X., Kemmis, S., & Zugic, J. (2025). Viewing science teacher learning and curriculum enactment through the lens of theory of practice architectures. *Science Education (Salem, Mass.)*, *109*(1), 305-334. https://doi.org/10.1002/sce.21901
Fernet, C., Guay, F., Senécal, C., & Austin, S. (2012). Predicting intraindividual changes in teacher burnout: The role of perceived school environment and motivational factors. *Teaching and teacher education*, *28*(4), 514-525. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2011.11.013
Fife, S. T., & Gossner, J. D. (2024). Deductive qualitative analysis: Evaluating, expanding, and refining theory. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *23*. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241244856
Finlay, L. (2011a). *Phenomenology for therapists researching the lived world*. J. Wiley.
Finlay, L. (2011b). *Phenomenology for therapists: Researching the lived world*. Wiley-Blackwell.
FitzGerald, A. M., & Quiñones, S. (2018). The community school coordinator: leader and professional capital builder. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, *3*(4), 272-286. https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-02-2018-0008
Fletcher, J., & Nicholas, K. (2016). What can school principals do to support students and their learning during and after natural disasters? *Educational Review (Birmingham)*, *68*(3), 358-374. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2015.1114467
Floman, J. L., Ponnock, A., Jain, J., & Brackett, M. A. (2024). Emotionally intelligent school leadership predicts educator well-being before and during a crisis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *14*, 1159382-1159382. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1159382
Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change*. John Wiley & Sons.
Fullan, M. (2020). *Leading in a culture of change* (Second edition. ed.). Jossey-Bass.
Gainey, B. S. (2009). Crisis management's new role in educational settings. *The Clearing House*, *82*(6), 267-274. https://doi.org/10.3200/TCHS.82.6.267-274
Galdas, P. (2017). Revisiting bias in qualitative research: Reflections on its relationship with funding and impact. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *16*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917748992

Ghasabeh, M. S., Soosay, C., & Reaiche, C. (2015). The emerging role of transformational leadership. *The Journal of Developing Areas*, *49*(6), 459-467.
Gigliotti, R. A. (2020). *Crisis leadership in higher education : theory and practice*. Rutgers University Press. https://doi.org/10.36019/9781978801868
Gilgun, J. F., Charmaz, K., & Bryant, A. (2019). Deductive qualitative analysis and grounded theory: Sensitizing concepts and hypothesis-testing. In (pp. 107-122). SAGE Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526436061.n7
Giorgi, A. (2009). *The descriptive phenomenological method in psychology: A modified Husserlian approach*. Duquesne university press.
Gkolia, A., Koustelios, A., & Belias, D. (2018). Exploring the association between transformational leadership and teacher's self-efficacy in Greek education system: a multilevel SEM model. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, *21*(2), 176-196. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2015.1094143
Göksoy, S. (2015). Distributed leadership in educational institutions. *Journal of education and training studies*, *3*(4), 110-118.
Gorrell, A., Nobile, J. D., & Hay, I. (2021). Social support for principals: Experiences in NSW primary schools. *Leading & Managing*, *27*(1), 18-36.
Greenleaf, R. K. (2002). Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power & greatness. *Mahwah, NJ: Paulist*.
Gross, S. J. (2020). *Applying turbulence theory to educational leadership in challenging times*. Routledge London.
Guihen, L. (2020). Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the career experiences of women deputy headteachers. *International journal of research & method in education*, *43*(5), 526-540. https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2019.1693537
Gurr, D., & Drysdale, L. (2013). Middle-level secondary school leaders: Potential, constraints and implications for leadership preparation and development. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *51*(1), 55-71. https://doi.org/10.1108/09578231311291431
Gurr, D., Longmuir, F., & Reed, C. (2021). Creating successful and unique schools: leadership, context and systems thinking perspectives. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *59*(1), 59-76. https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-02-2020-0045
Hadad, S., Blau, I., Avidov-Ungar, O., Shamir-Inbal, T., & Amir, A. (2025). Continuity and quality in pre-service teacher preparation across modalities: Core principles in a crisis leadership framework. *Education Sciences*, *15*(10), 1355. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15101355
Hallinger, P. (2005). Instructional leadership and the school principal: A passing fancy that refuses to fade away. *Leadership and policy in schools*, *4*(3), 221-239.
Hallinger, P. (2011). Leadership for learning: lessons from 40 years of empirical research. *Journal of educational administration*, *49*(2), 125-142. https://doi.org/10.1108/09578231111116699
Hallinger, P. (2016). Bringing context out of the shadows of leadership. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143216670652
Hallinger, P. M., J. (1985). Assessing the instructional management behaviours of principals *The Elementary School Journal*, *86*(2), 217-247.
Halsey, J. (2017). *Independent review into regional, rural and remote education - discussion paper*. https://flo.flinders.edu.au/pluginfile.php/3480201/mod_resource/content/1/Discussion%20paper%2003917_independent_review_.pdf
Hamberg, K., Johansson, E., Lindgren, G., & Westman, G. (1994). Scientific rigour in qualitative research—examples from a study of women's health in family practice. *Family Practice*, *11*(2), 176-181.
Hardwick-Franco, K. G. (2019). Educational leadership is different in the country; What support does the rural school principal need? *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, *22*(3), 301-315. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2018.1450997

Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (2013). The power of professional capital. *The Journal of staff development*, *34*(3), 36.
Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (2020). Professional capital after the pandemic: revisiting and revising classic understandings of teachers' work. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, *5*(3/4), 327-336. https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-06-2020-0039
Harris, A. (2003). Distributed leadership in schools: Leading or misleading? *Management in Education*, *16*(5), 10-13. https://doi.org/10.1177/089202060301600504
Harris, A. (2020). COVID-19 – school leadership in crisis? *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, *5*(3/4), 321-326. https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-06-2020-0045
Harris, A., & DeFlaminis, J. (2016). Distributed leadership in practice: Evidence, misconceptions and possibilities. *Management in Education*, *30*(4), 141-146. https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020616656734
Harris, A., & Jones, M. (2020). COVID 19 - school leadership in disruptive times. *School Leadership & Management*, *40*(4), 243-247. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2020.1811479
Harris, A., & Jones, M. (2025). Crisis leadership: implications for school leaders. *School Leadership & Management*, *45*(3), 201-205. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2025.2515299
Harris, A., & Spillane, J. (2008). Distributed leadership through the looking glass. *Management in Education*, *22*(1), 31-34. https://jdoi.org/10.1177/0892020607085623
Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses to achievement*. Routledge.
Hattie, J. (2015). High-impact leadership. *Educational Leadership*, *72*(5), 36-40.
Hattie, J., & Yates, G. C. (2013). *Visible learning and the science of how we learn*. Routledge.
Hayes, S. D., Anderson, E., & Carpenter, B. W. (2022). Responsibility, stress and the well-being of school principals: how principals engaged in self-care during the COVID-19 crisis. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *60*(4), 403-418. https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-08-2021-0153
Hayes, S. D., & Derrington, M. L. (2023). School leadership in uncertain times: identifying dimensions of effective principal leadership. *School Leadership & Management*, *43*(4), 330-347. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2023.2171002
Hayes, S. D., Flowers, J., & Williams, S. M. (2021). “Constant communication”: Rural principals' leadership practices during a global pandemic. *Frontiers in Education (Lausanne)*, *5*. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2020.618067
Heffernan, M., & Carey, A. (2022, October 20, 2022). From cramming to sandbagging, floods upend schools’ end-of-year plans. *The Age*. https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/from-cramming-to-sandbagging-floods-upend-schools-end-of-year-plans-20221020-p5bra2.html
Hemmer, L., & Elliff, D. S. (2020). Leaders in action: The experiences of seven Texas superintendents before, during, and after Hurricane Harvey. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *48*(6), 964-985.
Hemmings, B., Kemmis, S., & Reupert, A. (2013). Practice architectures of university inclusive education teaching in Australia. *Professional Development in Education*, *39*(4), 470-487. https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2013.796293
Hoerr, T. R. (2008). The principal connection: What is instructional leadership. *Educational Leadership*, *65*(4), 84-85.
Horwood, M., Marsh, H. W., Parker, P. D., Riley, P., Guo, J., & Dicke, T. (2021). Burning passion, burning out: The passionate school principal, burnout, job satisfaction, and extending the dualistic model of passion. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *113*(8), 1668-1688. https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000664
Hudson, C. (2024). Leading a successful rural school in Australia. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *62*(4), 417-430. https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-02-2024-0037
Husserl, E. (1925/2012). *Phenomenological psychology: Lectures, summer semester, 1925*. Springer Science & Business Media.
Husserl, E. (1973). *The idea of phenomenology*. The Hague : Nijhoff 1964, 1973

Hutchins, N. (2023). *Students return to school in Rochester after floods: Hutchins* https://arr.news/2023/01/31/students-return-to-schools-in-rochester-after-floods/

Hynninen, E., Delahunty, E., & D'Agostino, E. (2023). *Rochester residents tell parliamentary inquire change is needed, after devastating 2022 floods*. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-08-23/rochester-floods-parliamentary-inquiry-change-needed/102764020?utm_campaign=newsweb-article-new-share-null&utm_content=link&utm_medium=content_shared&utm_source=abc_news_web

Ikram, M., & Kenayathulla, H. B. (2022). Out of touch: comparing and contrasting positivism and interpretivism in social science. *Asian Journal of Research in Education and Social Sciences*, *4*(2), 39-49.

Jackson, A. Y., & Mazzei, L. A. (2013). Plugging one text into another: Thinking with theory in qualitative research. *Qualitative inquiry*, *19*(4), 261-271. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800412471510

Jagosh, J., Bush, P. L., Salsberg, J., Macaulay, A. C., Greenhalgh, T., Wong, G., Cargo, M., Green, L. W., Herbert, C. P., & Pluye, P. (2015). A realist evaluation of community-based participatory research: partnership synergy, trust building and related ripple effects. *BMC public health*, *15*(1), 725. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-015-1949-1

James, E. H., & Wooten, L. P. (2010). Leading under pressure. *From Surviving to Thriving Before*.

James, S. (2025). *History of the principal job*. Education Walkthrough. https://educationwalkthrough.com/history-of-the-principal-job/

Janse van Vuuren, J., & Van der Bank, F. (2023). The development of a behavioural competency framework for school principals. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*, *49*(1), e1-e14. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v49i0.2050

Jaramillo, F., Grisaffe, D. B., Chonko, L. B., & Roberts, J. A. (2009). Examining the impact of servant leadership on salesperson's turnover intention. *The Journal of personal selling & sales management*, *29*(4), 351-365. https://doi.org/10.2753/PSS0885-3134290404

Jebb, A. T., Parrigon, S., & Woo, S. E. (2017). Exploratory data analysis as a foundation of inductive research. *Human Resource Management Review*, *27*(2), 265-276. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2016.08.003

Jedynak, P., & Bąk, S. (2021). *Risk management in crisis : winners and losers during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Taylor & Francis.

Judge, T. A., & Piccolo, R. F. (2004). Transformational and transactional leadership: A meta-analytic test of their relative validity. *Journal of applied psychology*, *89*(5), 755-768. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.89.5.755

Kaka, K., Rizk, N., & Miller, J. (2022). Assessing Educating for Gross National Happiness : Applying the Theory of Practice Architectures. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *32*(2), 36-58. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v32i2.327

Kanowski, S. (2022). School principals' well-being: A phenomenological perspective. *Leading & Managing*, *28*(1), 74-102.

Karasavidou, E., & Alexopoulos, N. (2019). School crisis management: Attitudes and perceptions of primary school teachers. *European Journal of Educational Management*, *2*(2), 73-84.

Kaul, M., Comstock, M., & Simon, N. S. (2022). Leading from the middle: How principals rely on district guidance and organizational conditions in times of crisis. *AERA Open*, *8*. https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584221077303

Keating, A. (2016). Educating tomorrow's citizens: What role can schools play? *Foro de educación*, *14*(20), 35-47. https://doi.org/10.14516/fde.2016.014.020.004

Kemmis, S. (2010). Pedagogy, culture & society. *Research for praxis: knowing doing.* , *18*(3), ebi-ebi. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2010.530144

Kemmis, S. (2019). *A practice sensibility: An invitation to the Theory of Practice Architectures*. Springer Singapore Pte. Limited.

Kemmis, S. (2022). *Transforming practices changing the world with the Theory of Practice Architectures* (1st 2022. ed.). Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-8973-4

Kemmis, S., Bristol, L., Edwards-Groves, C., Grootenboer, P., Hardy, I., & Wilkinson, J. (2013). *Changing practices, changing education* (1 ed.). Springer Singapore Pte. Limited.

Kemmis, S., & Smith, T. J. (2008). *Enabling praxis: Challenges for education*. BRILL.

Kemmis, S., Wilkinson, J., Edwards-Groves, C., Hardy, I., & Grootenboer, P. (2014). *Changing practices, changing education*. Springer.

Kettle, M., Heimans, S., & Dargusch, J. (2024). Principal Leadership as a Situated Ecology of Practices in a Diversifying Rural School. In S. White, J. Downey, & M. Fuqua (Eds.), *Sharing Leadership Stories in Rural Education: Leading Rurally across Australia and the United States* (pp. 51-66). Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-8293-2_4

Kivunja, C., & Kuyini, A. B. . (2017). Understanding and applying research paradigms in educational contexts. *International Journal of higher education*, *6*(5), 26-41.

Koehn, N. (2020). Real leaders are forged in a crisis. *Harvard Business Review*, *3 April*. https://hbr.org/2020/04/real-leaders-are-forged-in-crisis

Korpershoek, H., Canrinus, E. T., Fokkens-Bruinsma, M., & de Boer, H. (2020). The relationships between school belonging and students' motivational, social-emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes in secondary education: a meta-analytic review. *Research Papers in Education*, *35*(6), 641-680. https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2019.1615116

Lambert, L. (2002). A framework for shared leadership. *Educational Leadership*, *59*(8), 37.

Larkin, M., Watts, S., & Clifton, E. (2006). Giving voice and making sense in interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 102-120. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp062oa

Laverty, S. M. (2003). Hermeneutic phenomenology and phenomenology: A comparison of historical and methodological considerations. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *2*(3), 21-35. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690300200303

Le Fevre, D., & Sinnema, C. (2024). *Leadership through times of crisis: Possibilities and practices for adaptive leadership* (Vol. 30). Australian Council for Educational Leaders Penrith, NSW.

Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2020). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. . *School Leadership and Managment*, *40*(1), 5-22. https://doi.org/10.1080/136324434.2019.1596077

Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2005). A Review of transformational school leadership research 1996-2005. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, *4*(3), 177-199. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700760500244769

Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2008). Linking leadership to student learning: The contributions of leader efficacy. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *44*(4), 496-528. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X08321501

Leithwood, K. A., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S. E., & Knapp, M. S. (2012). *Linking leadership to student learning*. Jossey-Bass.

Liebenberg, L., Jamal, A., & Ikeda, J. (2020). Extending youth voices in a participatory thematic analysis approach. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *19*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920934614

Liljenberg, M. (2021). A professional development practice to enhance principals' instructional leadership – enabling and constraining arrangements. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, *6*(4), 354-366. https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-12-2020-0102

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.

Liu, C. C., & Chen, I. J. (2010). Evolution of constructivism. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*, *3*(4), 63-66.

Liu, S., & Hallinger, P. (2018). Principal instructional leadership, teacher self-efficacy, and teacher professional learning in China: Testing a mediated-effects model. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *54*(4), 501-528. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161x18769048
MacFarlane, A., & O'Reilly-de Brún, M. (2012). Using a theory-driven conceptual framework in qualitative health research. *Qualitative Health Research*, *22*(5), 607-618. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732311431898
Mahon, K., Edwards-Groves, C., Francisco, S., Kaukko, M., Kemmis, S., & Petrie, K. (2020). *Pedagogy, education, and praxis in critical times* (1st 2020. ed.). Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-6926-5
Mahon, K., Kemmis, S., Francisco, S., & Lloyd, A. (2016). Introduction: Practice theory and the theory of practice architectures. In. Springer.
Mahon, K., Kemmis, S., Francisco, S., & Lloyd, A. (2017). Introduction: Practice Theory and the Theory of Practice Architectures. In (pp. 1-30). Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2219-7_1
Marshall, J. M., & Clark, B. L. (2023). A systematic literature review of educational leadership and U.S. school shootings: Establishing a research agenda. *Educational Administration Quarterly*. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X231166335
Mazurkiewicz, G. (2021a). Educational leadership in times of crisis. *Risks*, *9*(5), 1-8. https://doi.org/10.3390/risks9050090
Mazurkiewicz, G. (2021b). Educational leadership in times of crisis. *Risks (Basel)*, *9*(5), 1-8. https://doi.org/10.3390/risks9050090
McCallum, F. (2021). Teacher and staff wellbeing: Understanding the experiences of school staff. In M. L. Kern & M. L. Wehmeyer (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Positive Education* (pp. 715-740). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-64537-3_28
McCallum, F., & Price, D. (2010). Well teachers, well students. *The Journal of Student Wellbeing*, *4*(1), 19. https://doi.org/10.21913/jsw.v4i1.599
McLeod, S., & Dulsky, S. (2021). Resilience, reorientation, and reinvention: School leadership during the early months of the covid-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Education (Lausanne)*, *6*. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.637075
Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: a guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Wiley.
Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research : a guide to design and implementation* (Fourth edition. ed.). Jossey-Bass, a Wiley Brand.
Miller, R. M., Chan, C. D., & Farmer, L. B. (2018). Interpretative phenomenological analysis: A contemporary qualitative approach. *Counselor education and supervision*, *57*(4), 240-254. https://doi.org/10.1002/ceas.12114
Mitroff, I. I. (2004). Crisis leadership: Planning for the unthinkable. *(No Title)*.
Moon, K., & Blackman, D. (2014). A guide to understanding social science research for natural scientists. *Conservation Biology*, *28*(5), 1167-1177. https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.12326
Moustakas, C. E. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods* (1st ed.). SAGE.
Munby, S. (2019). *Imperfect leadership: A book for leaders who know they don't know it all*. Crown House Publishing.
Mutch, C. (2014). The role of schools in disaster preparedness, response and recovery: what can we learn from the literature? *Pastoral Care in Education 32*(1), 5-22. http://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2014.880123
Mutch, C. (2015a). The impact of the Canterbury earthquakes on schools and school leaders: Educational leaders become crisis managers. *Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice*, *30*(2), 39-55.
Mutch, C. (2015b). Leadership in times of crisis: Dispositional, relational and contextual factors influencing school principals' actions. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, *14*, 186-194. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2015.06.005

Naeem, M., & Ozuem, W. (2022). Understanding misinformation and rumors that generated panic buying as a social practice during COVID-19 pandemic: evidence from Twitter, YouTube and focus group interviews. *Information Technology & People (West Linn, Or.)*, *35*(7), 2140-2166. https://doi.org/10.1108/ITP-01-2021-0061

Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K., & Ranfagni, S. (2023). A step-by-step process of thematic analysis to develop a conceptual model in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *22*. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231205789

Nembhard, I. M., & Edmondson, A. C. (2006). Making it safe: the effects of leader inclusiveness and professional status on psychological safety and improvement efforts in health care teams. *Journal of organizational behavior*, *27*(7), 941-966. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.413

Netolicky, D. M. (2020). School leadership during a pandemic: navigating tensions. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, *5*(3/4), 391-395.

Nissinen, T., Upadyaya, K., Lonka, K., Toyama, H., & Salmela-Aro, K. (2024). School principals' job crafting profiles and their differences during the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Organization Theory and Behavior*, *27*(3), 185-205. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOTB-03-2023-0060

Northern Territory Government, n. d. (2021). Education NT teacher wellbeing strategy 2019-22. https://www.teachintheterritory.nt.gov.au/sites/default/files/uploads/files/teacher_wellbeing_strategy_-_2021_updated_with_sig_-_web.pdf

Nyatuka, B. O. (2017). A survey of school-family-community partnerships in Kenya. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, *2*(4), 229-243. https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-04-2017-0010

O'Toole, J., & Beckett, D. . (2013). *Methodologies and methods in educational research : Creative thinking and doing* Oxford University Press.

Odhiambo, G., & Hii, A. (2012). Key stakeholders' perceptions of effective school leadership. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *40*(2), 232-247. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143211432412

OECD. (2019). Teacher and school leaders as lifelong learners. *TALIS 2018*, *1*. https://doi.org/10.1787/1d0bc92a-en

Olney, T., & Wood, C. (2023). Using the Theory of Practice Architectures to establish what it means to "do" learning design, and the arrangements that enable and constrain practice. *Frontiers in Education (Lausanne)*, *8*. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1291032

Pablo, F., & Carine, V. (2020). Teachers' well-being: A framework for data collection and analysis. In (pp. 0_1-81). Paris: OECD Publishing.

Panunciar, D. M., Bacolod, M. M., Abadiano, M. N., & Deocares, M. S. (2020). Emerging school leadership amidst Covid-19 pandemic. *Psychology and Education*, *57*(9), 5935-5963.

Pauchant, T. C., Mitroff, I. I., & Schneider, S. K. (1993). Transforming the crisis-prone organization: preventing individual, organizational and environmental tragedies. In (Vol. 1, pp. 63-65).

Pearson, C. M., & Clair, J. A. (1998). Reframing Crisis Management. *The Academy of Management review*, *23*(1), 59-76. https://doi.org/10.2307/259099

Pellicer, L. O., & Deal, T. E. (2008). *Caring enough to lead : how reflective practice leads to moral leadership* (Third edition. ed.). Corwin Press, a SAGE Publications Company.

Peng, C., Liang, Y., Yuan, G., Xie, M., Mao, Y., Harmat, L., & Bonaiuto, F. (2023). How servant leadership predicts employee resilience in public organizations: a social identity perspective. *Current psychology (New Brunswick, N.J.)*, *42*(35), 31405-31420. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-04138-z

Platinum Accounting. (2021). *Melbourne lockdown dates 2020, 2021 and 2022*. https://www.health.gov.au/topics/covid-19/about#:~:text=The%20World%20Health%20Organization%20(WHO)%20declared%20the%20novel%20coronavirus%20(,pandemic%20on%2011%20March%202020

Polit, D. F., & Beck, C. T. (2010). *Essentials of nursing research : appraising evidence for nursing practice* (7th ed.). Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.
Pont, B., Moorman, H., & Nusche, D. (2008). *Improving school leadership* (Vol. 1). OECD Paris.
Porche, D. J. (2009). *Emergent leadership during a natural disaster: A narrative analysis of an acute health care organization's leadership* ProQuest Dissertations Publishing].
Qadach, M. (2024). Self-efficacy of school principals for effective school functioning during the COVID-19 crisis. *International Journal of Educational Management*, *38*(7), 1975-1989. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-06-2024-0342
Quinlan, D. M. (2017). Transforming our schools together: A multi-school collaboration to implement positive education. *Positive Psychology Interventions in Practice*.
Qutoshi, S. B. (2018). Phenomenology: A philosophy and method of inquiry. *Journal of Education and Educational Development*, *5*(1).
Rains, T. J. (2024). *Leading through disruption: A phenomenological study of higher education executive leadership in the wake of market disruption* Indiana Wesleyan University].
Rajabifard, A., Rajabifard, A., Paez, D., & Foliente, G. (2021). *COVID-19 pandemic, geospatial information, and community resilience : Global applications and lessons*. Taylor & Francis.
Ramos-Pla, A., Tintoré, M., & del Arco, I. (2021). Leadership in times of crisis. School principals facing COVID-19. *Heliyon*, *7*(11), e08443-e08443. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e08443
Reich, A., & Lizier, A. L. (2023). De-centring the leader: using the theory of practice architectures in a postgraduate education course. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, *55*(1), 6-22. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2022.2114435
Reis, S. (2024). *Turbulence resistant schools: A qualitative phenomenological study of educational leadership in central and eastern europe*. University of Montana.
Rinehart, K. E. (2021). Professional learning in leadership: Principal self-assessment, self-knowledge and wellbeing. *Leading & Managing*, *27*(1), 1-17.
Robinson, V. M. (2011). *Student-centered leadership* (1st ed.). Jossey-Bass.
Robinson, V. M., Hohepa, M., & Lloyd, C. (2007). *School leadership and student outcomes: Identifying what works and why* (Vol. 41). Australian Council for Educational Leaders Winmalee.
Robinson, V. M. J. (2008). Forging the links between distributed leadership and educational outcomes. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *46*(2), 241-256. https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230810863299
Robinson, V. M. J., Lloyd, C. A., & Rowe, K. J. (2008). The impact of leadership on student outcomes : an analysis of the differential effects of leadership types. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *44*(5), 635-674. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X08321509
Rørstad Welle, K. B., & Gunnulfsen, A. E. (2025). School leadership: Dilemmas in dealing with crises. *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*. https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432251325099
Ross, J. A., & Gray, P. (2006). Transformational leadership and teacher commitment to organizational values: The mediating effects of collective teacher efficacy. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, *17*(2), 179-199. https://doi.org/10.1080/09243450600565795
Salamon, A., Sumsion, J., Press, F., & Harrison, L. (2016). Implicit theories and naïve beliefs : Using the theory of practice architectures to deconstruct the practices of early childhood educators. *Journal of Early Childhood Research : ECR*, *14*(4), 431-443. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X14563857
Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (Fourth edition. ed.).
Sanders, M. G., & Sheldon, S. B. (2009). *Principals matter: A guide to school, family, and community partnerships*. Corwin Press.

Sanzo, L., Sherman, K., H, W., & Clayton, J. (2011). Leadership practices of successful middle school principals. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *49*(1), 31-45. https://doi.org/10.1108/09578231111102045
Schatzki, T. R. (2003). A new societist social ontology. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, *33*(2), 174-202. https://doi.org/10.1177/0048393103033002002
Schatzki, T. R. (2005). The sites of organizations. *Organization Studies*, *26*(3), 465-484. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840605050876
Schleicher, A. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 on education: Insights from Education at a Glance 2020. *OECD Publishing*.
Schwandt, T. A. (2000). Three epistemological stances for qualitative inquiry: Interpretivism, hermeneutics, and social constructionism. In *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 189-213). Sage Publishing.
Senge, P. M. (1997). Activating the fifth discipline. In *5th discipline* (Verson 1.1 ed.). United States: The Learning Circle.
Sergiovanni, T. J. (1992). *Moral leadership: Getting to the heart of school improvement*. ERIC.
Sergiovanni, T. J. (1998). Leadership as pedagogy, capital development and school effectiveness. *International Journal of Leadership in Education Theory and Practice*, *1*(1), 37-46.
Sergiovanni, T. J. (2007). Leadership and excellence in schooling. *Rethinking leadership: A collection of articles*, *5*.
Shapiro, J. P., & Gross, S. J. (2008). *Ethical educational leadership in turbulent times*. Routledge.
Sheena, D., Benoliel, P., & Berkovich, I. (2025). A qualitative exploration of principals' transformational leadership and transactional leadership behaviors during the COVID-19 crisis: the rise of integrated crisis leadership. *Frontiers in Education (Lausanne)*, *10*. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1576165
Shire of Campaspe. (2025). *Rochester Place Based Plan*. https://www.campaspe.vic.gov.au/Our-services/Community-support-programs/Place-Based-Planning-and-Township-Facility-Planning/Rochester#:~:text=Nestled%20on%20the%20banks%20of,tomato%20growing%20and%20meat%20production.
Slemp, G. R., Chin, T.-C., Kern, M. L., Siokou, C., Loton, D., Oades, L. G., Vella-Brodrick, D., & Waters, L. (2017). Positive education in Australia: Practice, measurement, and future directions. . In E. Frydenberg, R. J. Collie, & A. J. Martin (Eds.), *Social and emotional learning in Australia and the Asia-Pacific: Perspectives, programs and approaches* (pp. 101-122). Springer.
Smith, J. A. (2011). Evaluating the contribution of interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Health Psychology Review*, *5*(1), 9-27. https://doi.org/10.1080/17437199.2010.510659
Smith, J. A. (2017). Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Getting at lived experience. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *12*(3), 303-304. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262622
Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2010). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research* SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105309355859
Smith, J. A., & Nizza, I. E. (2022). *Essentials of interpretative phenomenological analysis*. American Psychological Association.
Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2015). Interpretative phenomenological analysis as a useful methodology for research on the lived experience of pain. *British Journal of Pain*, *9*(1), 41-42. https://doi.org/10.1177/2049463714541642
Smith, L., & Riley, D. (2012). School leadership in times of crisis. *School Leadership & Management*, *32*(1), 57-71.
Sokol, R. L., Heinze, J., Doan, J., Normand, M., Grodzinski, A., Pomerantz, N., Scott, B. A., Gaswirth, M., & Zimmerman, M. (2021). Crisis interventions in schools: A systematic review. *Journal of School Violence*, *20*(2), 241-260. https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2021.1879098

Sørengaard, T. A., & Langvik, E. (2022). The protective effect of fair and supportive leadership against burnout in police employees. *Safety and Health at Work*, *13*(4), 475-481. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shaw.2022.09.002
Starratt, R. J. (2004). *Ethical leadership* (1st ed.). Jossey-Bass.
Striepe, M., & Cunningham, C. (2022). Understanding educational leadership during times of crises: a scoping review. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *60*(2), 133-147. https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-03-2021-0057
Striepe, M., Cunningham, C., Devi, M., Gurr, D., Longmuir, F., Robertson, S., Taylor, A., & Thompson, P. (2025). Lessons from Australasian principals' experiences with crises: adapting, learning and transforming. *School Leadership & Management*, *45*(4), 344-366. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2025.2546094
Sum, N. (2022). School leadership & management school leaders' perceptions of their roles during the pandemic: an Australian case study exploring volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA leadership). *School Leadership & Management*, *42*(2), 188-207. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2022.2045268
Sutherland, I. E. (2017). Learning and growing: trust, leadership, and response to crisis. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *55*(1), 2-17. https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-10-2015-0097
Tai, J., Bearman, M., Gravett, K., & Molloy, E. (2023). Exploring the notion of teacher feedback literacies through the theory of practice architectures. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, *48*(2), 201-213. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2021.1948967
Tamadoni, A., Hosseingholizadeh, R., & Bellibaş, M. Ş. (2024). A systematic review of key contextual challenges facing school principals: Research-informed coping solutions. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *52*(1), 116-150.
Tanton, R., Dare, L., Miranti, R., Vidyattama, Y., Yule, A., & McCabe, M. (2021). Dropping Off the Edge 2021: Persistent and multilayered disadvantage in Australia.
Terosky, A. L. (2016). Enacting instructional leadership: perspectives and actions of public K-12 principals. *School Leadership & Management*, *36*(3), 311-332. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2016.1247044
Thornton, K. (2021). Leading through COVID-19: New Zealand secondary principals describe their reality. *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, *49*(3), 393-409. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220985110
Thornton, K., & Rodley, H. (2021). Lessons from leading through COVID-19: Secondary principals' perspectives. *Leading and Teaching from Home*, 52-59.
Tintoré, M., Cunha, R. S., Cabral, I., & Alves, J. J. M. (2022). A scoping review of problems and challenges faced by school leaders (2003–2019). *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, *50*(4), 536-573. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220942527
Tomaszewski, L. E., Zarestky, J., & Gonzalez, E. (2020). Planning Qualitative Research: Design and Decision Making for New Researchers. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *19*, 1609406920967174. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920967174
Tuckett, A. G. (2005). Applying thematic analysis theory to practice: A researcher's experience. *Contemporary Nurse : A Journal for the Australian Nursing Profession*, *19*(1-2), 75-87. https://doi.org/10.5172/conu.19.1-2.75
Turner, K., Thielking, M., & Prochazka, N. (2022). Teacher wellbeing and social support: a phenomenological study. *Educational Research*, *64:1*, 77-94. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2021.2013126
UNE, University of New England,. (2023). *Management and storage of research data and materials policy. Storage and retention*. University of New England. https://policies.une.edu.au/document/view-current.php?id=208&version=1
Upadyaya, K., Toyama, H., & Salmela-Aro, K. (2021). School principals' stress profiles during covid-19, demands, and resources. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*, 731929. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.731929

Urick, A., Carpenter, B. W., & Eckert, J. (2021). *Confronting covid: Crisis leadership, turbulence, and self-care*. Frontiers Media S.A.

Van der Vyver, C. P., Kok, T., & Conley, L. (2020). The relationship between teachers' professional wellbeing and principals' leadership behaviour to improve teacher retention. *Perspectives in Education*, *38*(2), 86-102. https://doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v38.i2.06

Viac, C., & Fraser, P. (2020). Teachers' well-being: A framework for data collection and analysis. *OECD Education Working Papers*, 0_1-81. https://doi.org/10.1787/c36fc9d3-en

Victoria Academy of Teaching and Learning. (2023). *The Academy Leadership Excellence Framework*. https://www.academy.vic.gov.au/about-us/academy-leadership-excellence-framework

Victorian Government. (2023). *Responding to emergencies and natural disasters in schools and early childhood services* https://www.vic.gov.au/responding-emergencies-natural-disasters-in-schools-early-childhood-services#emergency-management-plans

Virella, P. M. (2024). Cultivating critical hope while leading during crisis: A qualitative cross-comparative analysis. *American Journal of Education*, *130*(2), 275-300. https://doi.org/10.1086/728269

Virella, P. M., & Woulfin, S. (2023). Leading after the storm: New York city principal's deployment of equity-oriented leadership post-Hurricane Maria. *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, *51*(5), 1031-1048. https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432211022778

Walumbwa, F. O., Avolio, B. J., Gardner, W. L., Wernsing, T. S., & Peterson, S. J. (2008). Authentic leadership: Development and validation of a theory-based measure. *Journal of Management*, *34*(1), 89-126.

Wang, F. (2025). Cognitive Wellbeing of School Principals: An Uncharted Territory. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2025.2481500

Ward, R. (2022). Hundred of school impacted by Vic floods. *The Canberra Times*. https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7950690/hundreds-of-schools-impacted-by-vic-floods/

Waters, L., Cameron, K., Nelson-Coffey, S. K., Crone, D. L., Kern, M. L., Lomas, T., Oades, L., Owens, R. L., Pawelski, J. O., Rashid, T., Warren, M. A., White, M. A., & Williams, P. (2021). Collective wellbeing and posttraumatic growth during COVID-19: how positive psychology can help families, schools, workplaces and marginalized communities. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1-29. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2021.1940251

Whitla, M. (2003). *Crisis management and the school community* (2nd ed.). Australian Council for Educational Research.

WHO, World Health Organisation, . (2020). *Mental health: a state of well-being, WHO*. http://origin.who.int/features/factfiles/mental_health/en/

Wittmer, J. L. S., & Hopkins, M. M. (2022). Leading remotely in a time of crisis: Relationships with emotional intelligence. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, *29*(2), 176-189. https://doi.org/10.1177/15480518211053531

Wombacher, K., Herovic, E., Sellnow, T. L., & Seeger, M. W. (2018). The complexities of place in crisis renewal discourse: A case study of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, *26*(1), 164-172.

Woods, P. A. (2016). Authority, power and distributed leadership. *Management in Education*, *30*(4), 155-160. https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020616665779

Xu, W., & Zammit, K. (2020). Applying thematic analysis to education: A hybrid approach to interpreting data in practitioner research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *19*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920918810

Yin, R. K. (2010). *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish, First Edition*. Guilford Publications.

Zhang, Y., Zheng, Y., Zhang, L., Xu, S., Liu, X., & Chen, W. (2021). A meta-analytic review of the consequences of servant leadership: The moderating roles of cultural factors. *Asia Pacific journal of management*, *38*(1), 371-400. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10490-018-9639-z

Zheng, Q., Li, L., Chen, H., & Loeb, S. (2017). What aspects of principal leadership are most highly correlated with school outcomes in China? *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *53*(3), 409-447. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X17706152

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Information for Participants

School of Educations
University of New England
Armidale NSW 2351
Australia
Phone 02 6773 3333
www.une.edu.au/ about-une/faculty-of-humanities-arts-social-sciences-and-education/school-of-education

Information Sheets for Participants

I wish to invite you to participate in my research project, described below.

My name is Melissa Gould, and I am conducting this research as part of my PhD in the School of Education at the University of New England. My supervisors are Associate Professor Leonardo Veliz and Dr Kristy O'Neill.

Research Project	**Imperfect Principals – Leading through crisis.**
Aim of the Research	The research aims to explore how leading through crisis can change and impact school principals' perspectives on their approaches to leadership in the short to long term. It also examines the professional practices of principals that support, improve and sustain the professional wellbeing of their staff in times of crisis. The study will aim to answer the following two questions. Question 1 - What professional practices do principals enact to support, improve, and sustain the occupational wellbeing of their staff and themselves during and after crisis? Question 2 - How does leading through a crisis change principals' perspectives on and approaches to leadership?
Interview	I would like to conduct an online interview with you using videoconferencing at time that is suitable to you. The interview will take approximately one hour. With your permission, I will make an audio recording of the interview to ensure that I accurately recall the information you provide. Following the interview, a transcript will be provided to you if you wish to see one.
Confidentiality	Any personal details gathered during the study will remain confidential. No individual will be identified by name in any publication of the results. All names will be replaced by pseudonyms; this will ensure your anonymity. If you agree I would like to quote some of your responses. This will also be done in a way to ensure that you are not identifiable.
Participation is Voluntary	Please understand that your involvement in this study is voluntary and I respect your right to stop participating in the study at any time without consequence and without needing to provide an explanation. Should you withdraw, any information provided up to that point will not be used in the study.

Questions	The interview questions will not be of a sensitive nature: rather they are general and will enable me to enhance my knowledge of the professional practices of principals during times of crisis and how these practices may impact on the professional wellbeing of staff.
Use of Information	I will use information from the interview as part of my doctoral thesis, which I expect to complete in July 2025. Information from the interview may also be used in academic journal articles and conference presentations before and after this date. At all times, I will safeguard your identity by presenting the information in a way that will not allow you to be identified.
Upsetting Issues	It is unlikely that this research will raise any personal or upsetting issues but if it does you may wish to contact your local Employee Assistance Program 1300 361 008 or Lifeline on 13 11 14.
Storage of Information	I will keep all hardcopy notes and recordings of the interviews in a locked cabinet in my home in Highton. Any electronic data will be kept on cloud.une.edu.au, UNE's centrally managed cloud server managed by the research team. It will also be kept on a password protected computer in the same location. Only the research team will have access to the data.
Disposal of Information	All the data collected in this research will be kept for a minimum of five years after successful submission of my thesis, after which it will be disposed of by deleting relevant computer files and destroying or shredding hardcopy materials.
Approval	This project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of New England (Approval No HE23-160 Valid to 01/07/2025) and the Victorian Department of Education (Application No 23-07-065, Expiration Date 01/01/2027).
Researchers Contact Details	Feel free to contact me with any questions about this research by email at melgould26@gmail.com or by phone on 0437 856 343 You may also contact my supervisors'. My principal supervisor's name is Leonardo Veliz and they can be contacted by email at leonardo.veliz@une.edu.au or by phone on 0481964038 and my Co-supervisor's name is Kristy O'Neill and their email address is kristy.oneill@une.edu.au and phone number is 02 6773 2942.
Complaints	Should you have any complaints concerning the manner in which this research is conducted, please contact: Mrs Jo-Ann Sozou Human Research Ethics Officer Research Services University of New England Armidale, NSW 2351 Tel: (02) 6773 1115 Email: humanethics@une.edu.au

Thank you for considering this request and I look forward to further contact with you.

regards,



Melissa Gould

Appendix 2 – Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

for

PARTICIPANTS

Research Project: Imperfect Principals – Leading through crisis

---

I, ……., have read the information contained in the Information Sheet for Participants and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. Yes/No

I agree to participate in this activity, realising that I may withdraw at any time.

Yes/No

I agree that research data gathered for the study may be quoted and published using a pseudonym.
Yes/No

I agree to having my interview audio recorded and transcribed.
Yes/No

I would like to receive a copy of the transcription of the interview.
Yes/No

I am 18 years of age or older.

Yes/No

…….	…….
Participant	Date



…….	…….
Melissa Gould Researcher	Date

Appendix 3 – Interview Questions

Overview/Background

1. Please describe your school and school community
2. How long have you been the principal of this school and overall?
3. What is your moral purpose as a principal?

Leadership and practice architecture

4. Can you please tell be about your leadership philosophy or leadership style as a principal. *(See Table 1 for some examples and attributes, you may choose one style or identify with attributes from many styles)*

The Australian Professional Standard for principals describes five professional practices particular to the role of a principal:

- Leading teaching and learning
- Developing self and others
- Leading improvement, innovation and change
- Leading the management of the school
- Engaging and working with the community.

See Table 2 for descriptions of each practice.

5. Our practices as principals are comprised of Sayings, Doings and Relatings and the relationship between them.
   When considering two of the professional practices above that you highly value:
   a. Share with me your views on why you believe that professional practice to be important.
   b. In what ways do you practically demonstrate this practice? How do you relate to others (principal colleagues, staff, departmental staff) when demonstrating these practices?
   c. What resources or support systems enable or constrain these practices?

6. In your role of principal, have you experienced one or more key crises that has impacted your school community? Please explain.

Figure 1 provides a framework for understanding how practices are socially constructed.

7. How have your practices changed since the crisis - are there leadership attributes that you value more now?
8. In what ways did your personal experience during the crisis impact your decision making and professional practices?
9. Did you feel equipped to deal with the crisis at hand? If you could give feedback about the resources and support systems during this time, what would it be?
10. What specific training do you think principals require to feel adequately supported with crisis management?

Leadership and staff occupational wellbeing

11. In what ways did you feel the additional responsibility of the occupational wellbeing of your staff during the crisis?
12. Reflecting on your practice, what do you believe had the biggest impact on the occupational wellbeing of your staff during and after the crisis?
13. How do you as a school leaders effectively support staff wellbeing while managing your own?
14. Can you give me some examples of you how supported staff to help improve their occupational wellbeing during and post crisis?

Conclusion

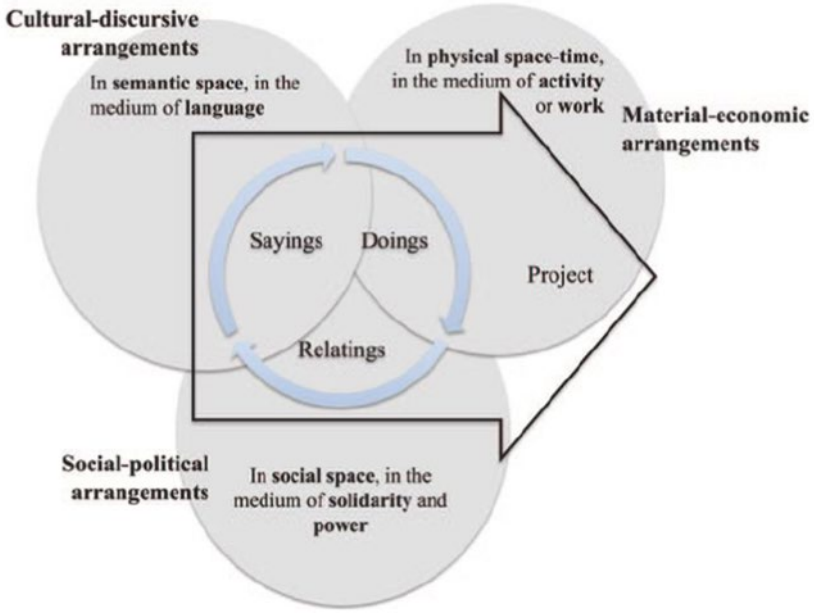
Did you have any other comments or questions that you would like to add to our discussion?

TABLE 1	
Leadership Approach	Attributes
Authentic Leadership	- Self-awareness - *Transparency and honesty* - Consistency - Relational transparency - Ethical decision-making - Passion and purpose - *Empowerment and inclusivity* - Resilience - *Lifelong learning*
Servant Leadership	- *Focus on serving others* - *Empowerment* - *Listening and empathy* - *Humility* - *Commitment to growth* - *Building community* - *Leading by example* - *Vision and purpose* - Long-term perspective - *Adaptability*
Distributed Leadership	- *Shared leadership* - *Collaboration and empowerment* - *Flexibility and adaptability* - Decentralised decision-making - *Trust and accountability* - *Diversity and inclusion* - Synergy and innovation
Transformational Leadership	- Vision and inspiration - Charisma and enthusiasm - Intellectual stimulation - Individualised consideration - *Empowerment and delegation* - Strategic direction - Change facilitation - Performance improvement
Moral Leadership	- *Ethical decision-making* - Integrity and honesty - *Justice and fairness* - *Compassion and empathy* - *Courage and conviction* - *Accountability* - *Role modelling* - Building ethical culture - Social responsibility
Instructional Leadership	- *Focus on teaching and learning* - *Curriculum development* - Instructional supervision - *Data-driven decision-making* - *Professional development* - Student-centred approach - Vision for educational excellence - *Collaboration and teamwork*

TABLE 2	
The Australian Professional Standard for principals describes five professional practices particular to the role of a principal:	
Professional Practice	Description
Leading teaching and learning	Principals create a positive culture of challenge and support, enabling effective teaching that promotes enthusiastic, independent learners, committed to lifelong learning. Principals have a key responsibility for developing a culture of effective teaching, for leading, designing and managing the quality of teaching and learning and for students' achievement in all aspects of their development. They set high expectations for the whole school through careful collaborative planning, monitoring and reviewing the effectiveness of learning. Principals set high standards of behaviour and attendance, encouraging active engagement and a strong student voice.
Developing self and others	Principals work with and through others to build a professional learning community that is focused on continuous improvement of teaching and learning. Through managing performance, effective continuing professional learning and feedback, they support all staff to achieve high standards and develop their leadership capacity. Principals support others to build capacity and treat people fairly and with respect. They model effective leadership and are committed to their own ongoing professional development and personal health and wellbeing in order to manage the complexity of the role and the range of learning capabilities and actions required of the role.
Leading improvement, innovation and change	Principals work with others to produce and implement clear, evidence-based improvement plans and policies for the development of the school and its facilities. They recognise that a crucial part of the role is to lead and manage innovation and change to ensure the vision and strategic plan is put into action across the school and that its goals and intentions are realised.
Leading the management of the school	Principals use a range of data management methods and technologies to ensure that the school's resources and staff are efficiently organised and managed to provide an effective and safe learning environment as well as value for money. This includes appropriate delegation of tasks to members of the staff and the monitoring of accountabilities. Principals ensure these accountabilities are met. They seek to build a successful school through effective collaboration with school boards, governing bodies, parents and others. They use a range of technologies effectively and efficiently to manage the school.
Engaging and working with the community.	Principals embrace inclusion and help build a culture of high expectations that takes account of the richness and diversity of the wider school community and the education systems and sectors. They develop and maintain positive partnerships with students, families and carers and all those associated with the wider school community. They create an ethos of respect taking account of the spiritual, moral, social and physical health and wellbeing of students. They promote sound lifelong learning from preschool through to adult life. They recognise the multicultural nature of Australia's people. They foster understanding and reconciliation with Indigenous cultures. They recognise and use the rich and diverse linguistic and cultural resources in the school community. They recognise and support the needs of students, families and carers from communities facing complex challenges.

FIGURE 1

Theory of Practice Architectures



The theory of practice architectures breaks practice down into three elements, namely; Doings (or the actions of humans), Sayings (or what people actually say) and Relatings (or the relationships people share and the way they relate to other people and situations) (Kemmis, 2019). When combined the Doings, Sayings and Relatings, practice is formed.

This is a version of practice theory that aims to show how social life and education are produced and reproduced – and transformed – in practices. The theory holds that practices are composed of sayings, doings, and relatings that hang together in the project (purpose) of the practice. In turn, these sayings, doings, and relatings are enabled and constrained (and made possible) by cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements found in or brought to the site where the practice occurs.

Appendix 4 – Introduction email

Dear…….

You are invited to participate in my research study into the professional practices of principals. My study "Imperfect Principals – Leading through crisis" aims to explore, through a strengths-based approach, how principals lead through crisis. To participate in this study you would need to have held the position of principal during the COVID-19 crisis and/or the 2022 Victorian flood crisis, if you were not a principal during either of these events please disregard this email.

This study aims to research how leading through crisis can change and impact school principals' perspectives on their approaches to leadership in the short to long term. It also examines the professional practices of principals that support, improve and sustain the professional wellbeing of their staff in times of crisis. The study will aim to answer the following two questions.

Question 1 - What professional practices do principals enact to support, improve, and sustain the occupational wellbeing of their staff and themselves during and after crisis?

Question 2 - How does leading through a crisis change principals' perspectives on and approaches to leadership?

Your participation would involve an interview with me that would take approximately one hour at a time of your choice, the interview can be face to face or via videoconferencing. All interview questions will be emailed to you prior to the interview to give time to reflect and prepare. Although the questions will be used as a guide, the interview will be transactional to ensure your voice is heard. All interviews will be audio recorded for transcription purposes. All data collected will be deidentified. You can withdraw from the process at any time. Participants will be asked to sign a consent form or give verbal consent for me to use quotes gathered during the interview.

Please find attached the Participant Information Sheet for more information about this study.

I believe, that as principals who have led through crisis, we have learnings, experiences and perspectives that need to be shared, collated, and analysed to inform best practice moving forward.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me either via email melgould26@gmail.com or via phone 0437856343.

I look forward to working with you.

Kind regards

Melissa Gould

Research Data Management Plan

Imperfect Principals – Leading through crisis.

Melissa Gould

School of Education

31st October 2023

Acknowledgments

This template is based upon requirements set out in the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research, the UNE Management and Storage of Research Data and Materials Policy, the UK Digital Curation Centre and a template created by the University of Newcastle, which has been reproduced by permission.

Template last updated 31 March 2020.

Document History	
Author of this document	Melissa Gould
Author's relationship to the projec	Researcher
Date document created	31/10/2023
Date document last modified/upda	1/11/2023
Date to review this document	30/01/2024
Position or person responsible for reviewing the plan, if applicable	Melissa Gould Researcher

About the Project		
1.0	Project title	Imperfect Principals – Leading through crisis.
1.1	Project description (aims of project and why data is being collected or created)	Schools ultimately aim to provide positive educational outcomes for all students. School principals shape the educational experience of students, fostering a positive learning environment, managing the school's operations, and guiding the growth and development of both students and teachers. The project aims to research the professional practices of school principals in times of crisis and how those practices impact on the wellbeing of staff. Crisis amplifies the role of the school principal as a community leader and highlights how their practices directly impact on their staff, students and wider school community.
1.2	Date of project commencement	01/11/2023
1.3	Estimated date of project completion	01/07/2025
1.4	Name of Chief Investigator (including ORCID, if possible)	Melissa Gould
1.5	Name/s of other project investigator/s	
1.6	Name/s of Supervisor/s (if applicable)	Associate Professor Leonardo Veliz Dr Kristy O'Neill
1.7	Primary contact for the data	Melissa Gould
1.8	Name of School/Research Centre	School of Education
1.9	Lead partner organisation (if applicable)	
1.10	Other partner organisations (if applicable)	

Data Management Plan	
2.0	**FUNDING BODY**
Provide details of relevant funding bodies and their Grant application numbers.	
Not Applicable	
3.0	**DATA TO BE PRODUCED**
What methods will be used to capture or create data during the project? What are the expected file formats of the data? How much data is expected to be created throughout the project? Will specialised tools, software or equipment be used to create, capture or manage the data?	
Interviews will be audio recorded with an audio recorder, to create an MP4 file. Transcripts of each interview will be produced in a Word document. There will be 26 interviews in total.	
4.0	**DATA DOCUMENTATION AND METADATA**
What information is needed for the data to be read and interpreted in the future? How will metadata to describe the data be created, captured and managed? How will data be organised? Examples include: filename conventions, version control and file directory folder structures.	
Data will be stored in one folder with a sub folder for each interview. In each of the subfolders will be the audio and the transcript. Each sub folder will be labelled with the pseudonym used in the final document.	
5.0	**DATA STORAGE AND SECURITY**

Where will data be stored during the project? Will you be using your account on cloud.UNE? How often will data be backed-up and who will be responsible? How will access to the data be managed during the project? Are there any commercial, ethical or confidentiality restrictions that need to be considered regarding accessing or storing data during the project? Where will physical data, materials, and/or outputs from the project be stored?
Data will be stored on cloud.UNE and backed up each month by Melissa Gould. Only Melissa Gould will have access to the data during the project. Physical notes will be stored in a locked filing drawer in my office at my home.

6.0	**ETHICS, COPYRIGHT AND INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY**

Does the data contain sensitive, confidential or personal information? If so, how will this be protected? Are there ethical/privacy considerations that affect the sharing/publishing of the data outside of the immediate research team? Are there likely to be any copyright restrictions that apply to the data? Has an agreement been reached regarding ownership of the data and primary materials between partner institutions?
The data will not contain sensitive, confidential or personal information. Any data that is shared or published will be deidentified. Participants will be provided with an Information Sheet that will be sent to each potential participant via their email before they are offered a timeslot for an interview. The Information Sheet makes clear that the participants will be asked their consent to use quotes gathered during the interview. Each potential participant will also be provided with the Consent Form, which provides participants with the opportunity to formalise their consent to be quoted if this is their wish. Should this be the case, the names and identities will be anonymised through the use of pseudonyms.

7.0	SHARING AND REUSE OF DATA

Have any restrictions been placed on sharing or re-using some or all of the data post project? When will the data be shared post project? (immediately, 3 months, 6 months, 1 year) With whom will you share your data, and under what conditions? Are there any funding obligations to make the data available?

The collected data is not to be shared. The findings from the project may be shared and published in some form, article in journal and/or presentation at a conference.

8.0	DATA RETENTION AND DISPOSAL

How long will data be retained? (permanently, 5 years, 7 years, 20 years) How will the disposal of sensitive or confidential data be carried out?

Data will be retained for 5 years and then will be deleted from the cloud. All notes and documents will be shredded.

9.0	PRESERVATION AND ARCHIVING

Where will data be stored upon completion of the project and who will manage this long term? Will supporting documentation be stored with the data to enable future access and interpretation? Are there likely to be costs associated with the long-term storage of the data?

Data will be stored for 5 years on cloud.une with the completed project, there should be no associated costs for t long-term storage.

Appendix 6 – Department of Education Ethics Approval

Department of Education

2 Treasury Place
East Melbourne Victoria 3002
Telephone: 03 9637 2000
DX210083

DATE:	02/01/2024	
TO:	Gould, Melissa, University of New England	
	O'Neill, Kristy, University of New England	
FROM:	Dhakal, Susov, Skye Ronnenbergh	
PROTOCOL TITLE:	Imperfect Principals # Leading through crisis	
FUNDING SOURCE:	NONE	
PROTOCOL NUMBER:	23-07-065	
APPROVAL PERIOD:	Approval Date: 02/01/2024	Expiration Date: 01/01/2027

Application number: 23-07-065

Melissa Gould

Dear Melissa Gould

Thank you for your application of 03/09/2023 requesting permission to conduct research in Victorian education settings, for the research project titled Imperfect Principals # Leading through crisis.

I am pleased to advise that your research proposal is approved in principle, subject to the following:

1. The research is to be conducted in accordance with the final documentation you provided to the Department of Education.

2. Research is to be conducted in accordance with Victorian government health advice, including public health directions related to COVID-19, and any adjustments to research methodology requested by participating settings in this regard.

3. Separate approval for the research is to be sought from school principals and/or site managers, who are the final decision-makers as to whether the research is to be conducted in their education setting. It must be made clear to each principal/site manager that you approach that participation in the research is optional and is not a Department of Education requirement. Recruitment of research participants at education sites can only commence after approval has been sought from principals and/or site managers.

4. Please understand and recognise that schools and early childhood settings may not have capacity to engage in research activities due to their operating environments. As such schools should only be contacted once (i.e. no repeated requests).

5. Principals and site managers should be provided with this approval letter and, if applicable, the letter of approval from a relevant and formally constituted Human Research Ethics Committee.

6. Principals and site managers are to be provided with clear guidance regarding the project, including all relevant information regarding the potential time

Your details will be dealt with in accordance with the *Public Records Act 1973* and the *Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014*. Should you have any queries or wish to gain access to your personal information held by this department please contact our Privacy Officer at the above address.

VICTORIA State Government

Department of Education

2 Treasury Place
East Melbourne Victoria 3002
Telephone: 03 9637 2000
DX210083

burden to sites and individuals, proposed research methodologies, and risk mitigation strategies which may relate to the project.

7. All individuals participating in the research project should be provided an explanatory statement about the research and active, informed consent needs to be obtained from all eligible participants.

8. If your project seeks participation from DE staff (corporate), then participants need to ensure that approval from their Executive Director must be sought prior to their participation in any research activities.

9. The project is to commence within 12 months of this approval letter. Any extensions or variations to your project, including those requested by an ethics committee must be submitted to the Department of Education for its consideration before you proceed.

10. You acknowledge the role of the Department of Education in any publications arising from the research.

11. This letter of approval to contact education settings for the purposes of recruitment does not constitute an endorsement of the project, its outcomes or recommendations, on the part of the Department of Education, nor does it constitute an endorsement of programs/interventions associated with the research.

12. The Research Agreement conditions, which include the reporting requirements at the end of your project, are upheld.

Please note that schools and early childhood settings must collect, record and hold vaccination information for all other visitors working onsite. Only visitors who have provided information that they are fully vaccinated or medically excepted persons are allowed to work onsite after 29 November 2021.

Should you have further questions on this matter, please email the Performance and Evaluation Division (research@education.vic.gov.au) and quote your application number.

Yours sincerely,
Research and Surveys Unit | Performance and Evaluation Division
Department of Education

Your details will be dealt with in accordance with the *Public Records Act 1973* and the *Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014*. Should you have any queries or wish to gain access to your personal information held by this department please contact our Privacy Officer at the above address.

VICTORIA State Government

Appendix 7 – UNE Human Research Ethics Committee Ethics Approval

Human Research Ethics
Research Services
University of New England
Armidale NSW 2351 Australia
Phone 02 6773 3449
humanethics@une.edu.au

www.une.edu.au/research-services

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

MEMORANDUM TO: Dr Leonardo Veliz, Dr Kristy O'Neill & Mrs Melissa Gould

School of Education

PROJECT TITLE: Imperfect Principals - Leading through crisis. An exploration/analysis of leadership through crisis from the perspective of the theory of practice of architecture.

APPROVAL No.: HE23-160

COMMENCEMENT DATE: 19 December, 2023

Thank you for submitting the above research project for ethical review. This project was considered by the University of New England Human Research Ethics Committee (UNE HREC) at its meeting held on 16 November, 2023
I am pleased to advise you that the above research project meets the requirements of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)* and ethical approval for this research project has been granted by UNE HREC.

Approval of this project from UNE HREC is valid from 19 December, 2023 to 1 July, 2025 subject to the following conditions being met:

- Immediately report anything that might warrant review of ethical approval of the project.
- Notify the UNE HREC of any event that requires a modification to the protocol or other project documents and submit any required amendments in accordance with the instructions provided by the HREC. These instructions can be found at Applying for human ethics approval - University of New England (UNE)
- Submit any necessary reports related to the safety of research participants in accordance with UNE HREC policy and procedures.
- If the project runs for longer than 12 months, report to the UNE HREC annually in the specified format by completing the Progress Report form found at Applying for human ethics approval - University of New England (UNE)
- Notify the HREC when the project is completed at all sites by completing the Final Report form found at Applying for human ethics approval - University of New England (UNE)
- Notify the UNE HREC if the project is discontinued at a participating site before the expected completion date, with reasons provided.
- Notify the UNE HREC of any plan to extend the duration of the project past the approval period listed above and submit any associated required documentation. Instructions for obtaining an extension of approval can be found at Applying for human ethics approval - University of New England (UNE). **Researchers cannot conduct any research on the project if the approval period has lapsed.**
- Notify the UNE HREC of their inability to continue as Principal Investigator including the name of and contact information for a replacement or a project abandonment notification.

Human Research Ethics
Research Services
University of New England
Armidale NSW 2351 Australia
Phone 02 6773 3449
humanethics@une.edu.au

www.une.edu.au/research-services

This letter constitutes ethical approval only. This project cannot proceed at any site until separate research governance authorisation has been obtained from the CEO or Delegate of the institution under whose auspices the research will be conducted at that site.

Should you have any queries about the UNE HREC's consideration of your project please contact the Research Ethics Officer. The UNE HREC's Terms of Reference, Standard Operating Procedures, membership and standard forms are available from Human Research Ethics - University of New England (UNE)

The University of New England Human Research Ethics Committee wishes you every success in your research.

Yours faithfully,

[redacted]

Prof Christopher Armstrong
Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research
University of New England

This HREC is constituted and operates in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).