

**THE PHYSIOLOGICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL AND WORK STRESS
OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS**

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Professional Studies
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to observe, describe and analyse the physiological, psychological and work demands that lead to episodes of stress in a principal's working week.

The Conceptual Model presented in Chapter 1 guides the research and provides the theoretical basis for the study. Stress is defined in a transactional manner and takes into account aspects of home and work life (Lifestyle/Workstyle Perspective), the state of the person's mind (Psychological Perspective) and the body (Physiological Perspective).

The research method is modelled on previous studies of stress in the principalship by Sieverding (1985) and Whan (1988) both of whom employed forms of physiological measurement (Sieverding, heart rate monitoring; Whan, tissue perfusion monitoring) to match changes in bodily performance with managerial activity. In the present study a Welch Allyn Blood Pressure Monitor was used to obtain accurate measures of a principal's blood pressure movement at 15 minute intervals during each day of the working week. This monitor is fully ambulatory and unobtrusive. Daily physiological measurement was matched to principal activity through close quarters observation. Managerial activity was uniformly categorised according to the theories of Mintzberg (1973) who identified 10 roles managers become involved in when attending to their duties. At the conclusion of each day a debriefing session served to clarify incidents and provide valuable background information. A selection of staff were interviewed at the end of each week to further assess whether a principal's actions, behaviour and movement were representative of his or her usual style.

This research is a field based, wholistic and qualitative study of five principals employed by the Brisbane Catholic Education Centre. It is designed to add to the ability to understand the phenomenon of stress in schools through descriptions of principal activity and subsequent analysis backed by the physical evidence of blood pressure movement which is recognised as a reliable indicator of physiological stress.

The research results provide some fresh perspectives and differ somewhat from the work of Sieverding who ranked Mintzberg's managerial activities indicating some functions were more stress producing than others and Whan who nominated a long list of stressors which raised the stress index in his study group. Sieverding nominated Spokesperson, Disturbance Handler and Student Supervision as the top three stress producers in his study of New York City principals. **Blood pressure monitoring in this research indicated no consistent rise in pressure was recorded when certain managerial tasks were repeated in the same week and even on the same day and no consistent replication of Sieverding's results were achieved. Blood pressure movement was found to be related more to the intensity of the situation surrounding the principal than to the actual managerial task.** Events that might be reasonably regarded as stressful were not and those tasks that seemed relatively uncomplicated and

routine raised blood pressure. The concept of "Situational Intensities" is foreshadowed in the Chapter 4 (Results) and further developed in the final chapter. A model is presented which shows the six sub-factors influencing the intensity of any situation for a principal are:

- * *movement*
- * *people*
- * *degree of engagement*
- * *distractions*
- * *task and*
- * *mood.*

Longer term professional recommendations to reduce stress are suggested in the final chapter. The six recommendations presented provide a framework in which principals can operate allowing them to control potentially difficult situations in a positive way. The six recommendations relate to:

- * *vision*
- * *decision-making style*
- * *communication*
- * *hardiness*
- * *character and*
- * *peer support.*

When combined with a carefully considered personal taxonomy of coping across the three perspectives (Lifestyle/Workstyle, Psychological and Physiological) the principal will have both professional and practical ways to stay at optimum performance.

DECLARATION

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.



P.J.THORNTON

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