# School leaders' perceptions of fear: an interpretative phenomenological study

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# Abstract

The pressures upon today's school leaders are well documented (Sogunro, 2012; Wells & Klocko, 2015; Whitaker, 1996). Therefore, the importance of wellbeing for school leaders has become a growing area of concern for researchers and policy makers alike (Riley, 2016; State of Victoria, 2017). The purpose of this study is to contribute to the research around school leadership and emotion: in particular, school leaders' perceptions of fear as experienced in their professional roles. This was an empirical, phenomenological study in which nine school leaders were interviewed about their lived experience of fear. Analysis was conducted using IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Whilst each participant's unique experience provided an idiographic focus to the study, some common patterns across cases were also identified. These included themes of control, expectations and support. Participants recounted experiencing feelings of fear in situations in which they lacked control: those that were surprising, that contained high levels of emotion or that involved a threat to the leaders' physical or emotional wellbeing. Participants acted to manage and mitigate feelings of fear through imposing control, often through the utilization of various strategies. Feelings of fear were linked to expectations of leadership and the visibility of the leadership role. Support was a significant theme in the participants' recounts: both feeling supported or feeling betrayed after a perceived lack of support from an expected source. Recommendations from the study include an increased emphasis on the emotional aspects of school leadership in principal preparation programmes, and a continued focus on the wellbeing of Australian school leaders.

# Declaration

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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# Chapter 1 — Introduction

## *Introduction*

School leadership can be a complex and challenging task (Sogunro, 2012; Wells & Klocko, 2015). The practice of school leadership can involve “role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload” (Whitaker, 1996, pp. 60-61). According to a United Kingdom (UK) study, the work-related mental ill-health levels for head teachers were “almost double the rate for all other industries” (Riley, 2012, p. 46). It appears that school leadership can be a risky occupation for the individuals who seek to undertake it.

It is no wonder, then, that the recruitment of school leaders has become a problematic issue. The difficulty in principal recruitment has been widely documented (Lacey, 2002; Starr, 2009), and Australia is no exception (Barty, Thomson, Blackmore, & Sachs, 2005; Collins, 2006). Peter Gronn, in *The New Work of Educational Leadership*, quotes a Victorian school leader who was concerned that the perceived pressures of his role were discouraging others from pursuing senior leadership positions: “they don’t want the workload. They don’t want the conflict. They don’t want that much challenge” (Gronn, 2003b, p. 75). Another participant recounted comments from the school staff: “We see what you guys put up with, we know what you get paid, and it’s not worth it” (Gronn, 2003b, p. 62). This difficulty in leadership recruitment is encapsulated in the phrase: “leadership disengagement” (Gronn & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2003, p. 172). “Disengagement” is defined as “teachers who … are perceived as unwilling … to take on new, different or higher level responsibilities” (Gronn, 2003b, p. 63). A variety of explanations for leadership disengagement have been put forward in literature: school-based factors, politics, the

nature of the job, social and generational changes (Barty et al., 2005), teacher workloads and teacher perceptions of principal workloads (Gronn & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2003, p. 183). It is important to note that there are exceptions to this view (Barty et al., 2005); however, there is widespread evidence to show that there are challenges in principal recruitment. Any further investigation into factors that may help explain the phenomenon of leadership disengagement is, therefore, likely to be of great value to the Australian school sector.

This study's purpose is to further the collective understanding about the challenges that school leaders face in their role – and hence, shed more light on the causes of leadership disengagement. In this study, the experience of leadership will be examined through the lens of emotion, specifically, the experience of fear. This will add a unique dimension of understanding about issues that may impact an individual's decision about whether to pursue or to remain in a school leadership role, and strengthen the collective understanding of leadership disengagement.

The study of emotion in educational leadership has been a growing area over recent years (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004; Beatty, 2000; Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Blackmore, 2010; Crawford, 2009; Hargreaves, 1998), in recognition of the importance of the role of emotion in the practice of school leadership. As Hargreaves says, "the discourse of educational reform and school leadership must acknowledge and even honour the centrality of the emotions to the processes and outcomes of teaching, learning, leadership and caring in our schools" (Hargreaves, 1998, pp. 330-331). The importance of the study of emotions and leadership is also identified by Slater (2005, p. 332):

> … further studies that examine the emotions of leadership would enhance our understanding of how leaders' competencies in the affective domain can be used to build the capacity for leading and change in schools. As yet, the emotional experience of educational leadership has not been explored in sufficient depth in the educational administration research.

The ability to manage emotion has also been linked to "emotional intelligence", one of nine "intelligences" identified to benefit school improvement (MacGilchrist, 2004, p. 112). The recognition of the importance of emotions to the practice of leadership has led to suggestions that a study of the emotional aspects of leadership should be incorporated into educational leadership training programmes (Schmidt, 2010; Wallace, 2010). It seems safe to say that emotion will remain a significant focus in the ongoing conversation around educational leadership for the foreseeable future.

This study is positioned within the discussion of the role of emotion in the practice of educational leadership, but with a particular focus on the emotion of fear. Fear is not commonly a sole focus of educational leadership studies. It is mentioned with some frequency in studies of emotion and educational leadership (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004; Linn, Sherman, & Gill, 2007; Schmidt, 2009). However, to the author's knowledge, no empirical study with a specific focus on the lived experience of fear for Australian school leaders has yet been carried out. With this study, I seek to redress that gap. This study is a phenomenological inquiry to examine the lived experience of fear for Australian school leaders. My intention is to uncover school leaders' perceptions of how fear operates in their professional practice. Is fear helpful? Is it a hindrance? Or is it just an inescapable aspect of educational leadership in the 21st century?

## *Research Question*

Whilst a phenomenological approach is taken, which allows for the emergence of unexpected and unplanned directions in the research process, an overall guiding question frames the study. The use of research questions in phenomenology is supported in IPA (interpretative phenomenological analysis) literature: the questions should "focus upon people's understanding of their experiences" and be ''open not closed'', and "exploratory not explanatory" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 47). The following research question provides this overarching framework:

> How do Australian school leaders experience and respond to fear when performing their roles?

As a phenomenological researcher, my aim was to discover the nature of fear as a lived experience for the school leader. What is it like for each of the participants to experience fear in their professional role? Representing the participants' experiences of fear, therefore, was my primary goal: "to reveal the meaning within experience" (Smythe, 2012, p. 6). The study's emphasis, as indicated in its title, is therefore on the participants' *perceptions* of fear. This idiographic focus determined the structure of the study: aspects of each individual's experience are recorded separately in order to emphasize the uniqueness of their particular experience of fear, before more generalized comments and comparisons are made.

For this study, I included both principals and deputy principals in the definition of "school leaders", because of the perceived hierarchical seniority of these two roles in most school scenarios (as opposed to faculty heads, where levels of authority, accountability and role responsibilities often differ significantly from deputy or

principal positions). The majority (seven out of nine) of the participants were school principals (practicing, retired or no longer practicing). The other two participants were deputy principals (one practicing and one retired). The inclusion of deputy principals in this study is justified despite the difference in the day–to–day activities of a principal and a deputy principal: deputy principals often form part of a leadership team in conjunction with principals, and hold many high profile leadership responsibilities within a school. In addition, they can sometimes provide the perspective of an aspirant to the principal role, as many principals held the role of deputy before becoming a principal. Emotional experience does not discriminate: for example, a principal or a deputy principal could experience similar levels of fear from a threatening experience, regardless of his/her job title. In the case of this study, therefore, a deputy or assistant principal's experience of fear was judged to be of equal interest to a principal's experience of fear.

Societal and global influences have the potential to impact significantly upon educational organizations and their leaders (Bottery, 2006). Frank Furedi's book *A Culture of Fear* puts forward a view of a society that is obsessed with safety; one in which an underlying assumption is the necessity of minimizing risk. Wallace argues that educational organizations, along with the rest of society, are experiencing a rapid pace of change, lessening of "safety nets" (Blackmore, 2009, p. 214) and the challenges of globalization (Wallace, 2010). I was interested to see if school leaders' perceptions of fear were influenced by reactions to some of these wider social forces impacting upon the educational landscape. However, due to methodological and time constraints of the study, my focus became concentrated on the individual experiences that school leaders chose to share, and the implications that emerged from these stories about their experiences of fear. A study on the wider sociological

implications of school leaders' experiences of fear would merit ongoing future investigation.

# *Theoretical perspectives*

Fear is widely researched emotion, and there are many different approaches to its study. Hence, it is necessary to outline the specific approach to fear utilized in this study on the lived experience of school leaders, as well as to identify some key terms and the theoretical focus. To this end, a theoretical discussion on fear will be the focus for the rest of Chapter One. A discussion of the remaining theoretical perspectives will then be carried out in Chapter Two. This will allow for the focus of the literature review to be on the other theoretical concepts and literature relating specifically to school leaders' experiences of fear.

## Fear

Fear is part of the human condition (Jericó, 2009). The emotion of fear has been studied extensively: as Ekman says: "There has been more research on fear than any other emotion, probably because it is easy to arouse fear in nearly any animal, including the rat" (Ekman, 2007, p. 152). Öhman describes fear as "a ubiquitous experience" and highlights the large amount of literature that fear and anxiety have generated over time (Öhman, 2008, p. 709). Fear is a powerful motivator (Aron, 2001). It can empower or paralyze: "We can do nearly anything or nothing when we are afraid" (Ekman, 2007, p. 153). The ability to take action seems to help alleviate fear: "It is when we can't do anything that we are most likely to experience the most overwhelming fear, not when we are focused on dealing with an immediate threat" (Ekman, 2007, p. 154).

Fear is a multi-layered concept. It can encompass a range of different emotions and reactions. Jericó (2006, p. 2) labels anxiety, stress, fright, phobia and panic as "cousins" of fear. Öhman refers to anxiety as a "close ally" of fear (Öhman, 2008, p. 709). Fear has also been described as being part of an "emotional complex" that also contains "worry, anxiety, terror, fright, paranoia, horror, panic and dread" (Schmidt, 2009, p. 150). Jarymowicz and Bar-Tal describe fear in relation to "social emotions", where it is defined as "a component of more complex reactions and feelings, such as panic, dread, anxiety, despair, caution …"(Jarymowicz & Bar-Tal, 2006, p. 371).

Understanding the "softer" descriptors of worry, anxiety, concern and apprehension is a valid way of increasing a broader understanding of fear (Jericó, 2009). In addition, the phenomenon of stress is one that is often linked to fear. The range of possible descriptors contained within the emotion of fear is, therefore, broad. Fear is complex: Michèle Schmidt points out the difficulty in describing it "scientifically" (Schmidt, 2009, p. 150) because of the different causes and manifestations depending upon the individuals/groups experiencing fear. In other words, a situation eliciting a fear response from one individual may not necessarily elicit the same response, or even any response, from a different individual.

## *'Helpful' fear versus 'unhelpful' fear?*

Fear can be viewed as a social liability that needs to be overcome, as encapsulated by the phrase: "Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway" (Jeffers, 2007, p. xi). Possessing a particular fear is seen to be at best, shameful, or, at worst, unacceptable. But fear is not always portrayed in the literature as a destructive emotion (Elias, 1994; Jericó, 2009; Schmidt, 2009).

Writers (Furedi, 2007; Jericó, 2009; Schmidt, 2009) have long grappled with the question of the dual nature of fear: what can make a fear experience be categorized as beneficial, and what can make a fear experience be categorized as harmful. Different writers have described this dualism in different ways. As far back as 1939, Mira divided fear into “uncontrolled fear” which includes terror, panic and anxiety, and “controlled fear”, which encapsulates anxiety, alarm and caution (Mira, 1939, p. 1395). Jericó proposes “tempering” and “toxic” categories of fear to describe its positive and negative effects. Tempering fear is positive in that it protects us and furthers our interests; toxic fear, in contrast, inhibits our actions and our potential (Jericó, 2009, p. 12). Schmidt concurs with this dichotomy, arguing that, on the positive side, fear can be a powerful motivator and necessary for survival, but that it has a negative influence more often, rendering us less able to cope and more open to the influence of other debilitating emotions (Schmidt, 2009). Furedi presents a nuanced view of fear’s dual sides: that of “respectful” fear and “raw” fear. Respectful fear has a historical context: fear is not seen as solely negative, but is associated with respect and veneration, for example, fear of God. He also points out that this kind of fear was affirmed through societal structures. Raw fear, on the other hand, is “free floating and unpredictable” (Furedi, 2006, p. 8).

The following table summarizes the different representations of positive and negative fear as derived from literature:

*Table 1.* Authors' Representations of Positive and Negative Forms of Fear or Stress

| *Author* | *Positive descriptor* | *Negative descriptor* |
|---|---|---|
| Mira (1939) | Controlled fear | Uncontrolled fear |
| Jericó (2006) | Tempering fear | Toxic fear |
| Furedi (2007) | Respectful fear | Raw fear |
| Ohman (2008) | Normal fear | Clinical fear |

Fear, then, can be conceptualized as a helpful or unhelpful emotion. Leaving aside ontological questions of fear, of more interest to a phenomenological researcher (such as myself) is how people *perceive* the experience of fear. Is experiencing fear motivating, energizing, focusing and useful? Or is it paralyzing and unproductive? Is fear a hindrance, or a help?

## *Defining and positioning fear*

From a research perspective, fear is defined and approached in a variety of ways. Often discipline-dependent (psychology, sociology, organizational behavior), these definitions demonstrate a vast range of ways in which fear is conceptualized. Part of this diversity is due to the much debated definition of emotion: some describe emotions as residing in an internalized setting as solely the purview of the individual, while others highlight the social and relational nature of emotion. Michèle Schmidt uses the descriptors of “psychological” and “sociological” to describe this dichotomy: this will be elaborated upon in the following section (Schmidt, 2009, p. 149).

## Psychological definition of fear

From a psychological perspective, fear is a primary emotion (Jarymowicz & Bar-Tal, 2006; Schmidt, 2009) that prompts a “fight or flight” response to heighten an individual’s chance of survival. Ekman proposes a slightly different dichotomy: a “freeze or flee” response to fear. Fear occurs when there is a “threat of harm, either physiological or psychological” (Ekman, 2007, p. 152). Behaviorists would argue that fear is innate to humans, with “intimidation” or “violence” as possible reactions experienced in response to fear (Schmidt, 2009, p. 150): in other words, we are afraid because we anticipate some sort of harm. Ekman (2007, p. 154) concurs, highlighting the link between fear and anger:

> It is not uncommon to experience fear and anger in rapid succession…we may…be angry with the person who threatened harm. We may also be angry with ourselves for becoming afraid, if we believe that we should have been able to deal with the situation without fear.

Fear can be instinctive or learned (Ekman, 2007). Fear can be a reaction to a stimulus, or a considered response: it can occur through “conscious appraisal” or “via automatic and unconscious reactions” (Jarymowicz & Bar-Tal, 2006, p. 371).

The range of psychological literature on fear is vast, and will not be the focus of this study. Similarly, quantitative psychological methods used to identify fear, such as recognition of facial expression or measuring cortisol levels, while useful, will not be utilized in this study (Bouhuys, Bos, Geerts, Van Os, & Ormel, 2006; Putman, Hermans, & van Honk, 2007). Instead, the focus will be on the analysis of the experience of feeling fear as defined and described by the participants themselves,

and the meaning that emerges from their accounts about the nature of the fear experience. A phenomenological approach requires the study of fear as a lived, relational phenomenon. For this, we turn our attention to the sociological definition of fear.

## Sociological definition of fear

From a sociological perspective, fear is a socially constructed emotion. It arises out of contextual, political and relational phenomena (Furedi, 2007; Schmidt, 2009). Emotions are enmeshed in the social processes of organizations. As Sauer and Ropo (2006) say, “we call for understanding leadership as a social process. This brings the thick web of emotions back to the everyday life of organizations and leadership, where we think it belongs …” (p. 75). Emotions like fear are experienced in social contexts.

On a broader scale, society and culture also have a strong role to play: “Fear is determined by the self, and the interaction of the self with others; it is also shaped by a cultural script that instructs people on how to respond to threats to their security” (Furedi, 2007, para.10). An understanding of the influence of culture, therefore, is an important aspect to “getting to grips with fear in contemporary society” (Furedi, 2007, para. 10). Culture affects both the experience of emotion and how it is demonstrated: “Cultural norms that shape the way in which we manage and display our emotions also influence the way fear is experienced” (Furedi, 2007, para.10).

A discussion of the experience of fear is enriched by taking into account sociological perspectives. Hence, to discuss school leaders’ fears without taking into account their social contexts is going to lead to a perspective that is, at best, superficial.

An understanding of fear is inextricably linked with an understanding of the social context in which it is experienced, and the sociological perspective has much to offer in this pursuit.

## 'Individual' and 'collective' – a combined approach

Some authors feel that there is room for both psychological and sociological interpretations in the study of emotion in educational leadership; that, rather than being incompatible, they both offer useful insights (Hargreaves, 1998). Brenda Beatty (2007, p. 333) points out the ongoing debate between psychological and the sociological interpretations of studies of emotion:

> Paradigm wars will rage about whether emotions are best understood as internal private phenomena, external public phenomena, something in between, or something inextricably and dynamically enmeshed in the continuously negotiating and renegotiating social forces of culture, politics and self, but to promote school renewal, the principal must become an agent of multiple constituencies (Starratt, 1995). This adds complexity to the role that is particularly emotionally challenging.

If a school leader is indeed caught up in "multiple constituencies", then their individual experience – whilst only one view, still has merit. For the purposes of this study, the individual's experience is deemed to be a suitable perspective from which to gain insights into the experience of fear, whilst still allowing that other perspectives may be useful in further illuminating the subject. And, as Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2004) say, " … investigation into theories that place … more emphasis on how a leader feels and the quality of that subjective experience, become[s] increasingly relevant and purposeful" (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, p. 312).

This study's empirical data will be derived from asking individuals about their own experiences of fear, putting a strong focus on the individual's perception and their own interpretation of their experience of fear. Asking individuals about their feelings as a basis for study on emotion could open up this study to criticism, as though it places undue emphasis on the individual at the expense of social factors in the explanation of emotion. As Zorn and Boler (2007) say: "This approach focuses on self-conceptions and emphasizes individualism, thereby failing to acknowledge the role of educational culture and institutional structure in *forming feelings* in teachers, learners and leaders" (Zorn & Boler, 2007, p. 142) (emphasis mine). Zorn and Boler raise a worthwhile point; emotions do not always arise from an individual in isolation, but are contextually created, influenced and reinforced. For this reason, the impact of social and cultural forces is also acknowledged in this study.

In summary, fear is a contested concept. Fear is complex, widely studied and defined from different perspectives: both psychological and sociological. It can be understood as an individual emotion but can also be identified in broader collective contexts (Furedi, 2006). Fear can be categorized as a positive or negative experience depending upon its extent and effects. Whilst individual perspectives can form a rich source of empirical data to enhance our understanding of fear (as is the case in this study), it is likely that there will always be a range of other factors outside the parameters of a single study impacting upon both personal and collective experiences of fear. In this study, participants will have a significant role to play in defining fear, as it is their interpretation of fear that provides the basis for the study's findings. Subsequent empirical studies may deepen the investigation of fear for school leaders by utilizing a wider range of perspectives (for example, by interviewing

staff or community members). In this sense, the study of school leaders' experiences of fear is an ongoing pursuit.

## *Significance*

Challenges facing educational leaders in the 21st century are well documented. An increased emphasis on governance and accountability (Bush, 2008), the increasing complexity of principals' job roles (Schmidt, 2009), warring administrative and educational priorities (Blackmore, 2004), the unpredictability of a future of increased technological and global change (Crow, 2006) and, in the case of schools, an increased move towards devolution (Bush, 2008) are just some of the considerations weighing upon the shoulders of educational leaders. The risk of experiencing fear or stress in such an educational leadership position is significant. Understanding the emotional experience of educational leaders more deeply can lead to greater insight into the challenging and nuanced circumstances of their professional practice. Given the weight of these considerations, a study on the emotional impact of the school leadership role is timely.

There is evidence that undertaking the role of an educational leader carries with it a certain amount of stress (Schmidt, 2009; Woods, 2010). While stress is not necessarily the same as fear, Schmidt makes the connection between the two within an educational context: " … the impact of high-stakes accountability highlights key obstructions to the work ethic of education leaders – one of these being emotional pressures, and, more specifically, fear" (Schmidt, 2009, p. 149). Stress and fear, then, are close relatives: it is likely that a study on fear in educational leadership will also raise issues related to stress, as each can inform an understanding of the other.

Fear and stress can play a significant role in occupational wellbeing. If " … worker behavior and productivity are directly affected by employee affect and emotional states … " (Ashkanasy, Härtel, & Daus, 2002, p. 318), then a greater understanding of the causes and effects of an emotion such as fear can have positive benefits. Woods argues for the significance of the study of emotions in higher educational workplaces by linking them to the concept employee wellbeing (Woods, 2010). Fear and stress can have negative consequences for individuals: corticoids, adrenaline and noradrenaline all increase the likelihood of illness (Jericó, 2009). In addition, the inability to express negative emotion has been linked to physical consequences ranging from sleeplessness, fatigue, psychological distress, hypertension and even cancer (Ashkanasy et al., 2002), so the health risks of fear are not unfounded. Supporting the health and effectiveness of their educational leaders should, therefore, be a priority for governing bodies.

Greater consideration of educational leaders should result in long-term positive effects to the leaders themselves, and the industry as a whole. Bottery talks of the need for our educational organizations to preserve people in terms of sustainability: " … the prioritizing of policies that put the care of individual human actors before government and institutional demands" (Bottery, 2012, p. 458). In other words, if we are sensitive to the experience of the individual, we may be increasing the long-term survival and optimal performance of our educational systems. MacBeath et al. argue that the "psychological and social" aspects of school leadership are linked with the "physical health and emotional well-being" of a principal (MacBeath, O'Brien, & Gronn, 2012, p. 422). The peak functioning of school leaders and their long term sustainability in their roles is a worthwhile goal for pursuit by both researchers and policy makers.

A study on school leaders' experiences of fear is useful because it can inform and contribute to the area of school leaders' productivity and well-being. The role of emotions in general, and fear in particular, is significant in its potential for impacting educational leaders' work life – and even their personal well-being and long-term professional viability. This puts forward a strong case for an emotion-based study into educational leadership focusing on the phenomenon of fear. As Schmidt says: "The impact of high-stakes accountability on educational leaders remains understudied, particularly within the affective realm of such a phenomenon" (Schmidt, 2009, p. 153).

In this study, I seek to examine the role that fear plays in the professional lives of educational leaders, and to discover how educational leaders both perceive fear, and manage or mitigate its effects. If fear is a pervasive aspect of our society and our work cultures (Furedi, 2006), it would seem that a critical analysis of its effects on educational leaders and positive steps aimed at helping leaders to cope with their fear is of benefit to their long-term effectiveness, thus benefitting both the field of education and wider society as a whole. In their study on coping strategies for Scottish head teachers, Macbeath et al. (2012) called for more research to be done into coping strategies for head teachers in different contexts and cultural settings . The findings of this study will help to address this in an Australian context.

## *Limitations and delimitations*

It was a delimitation of this study that both principals and deputy principals were included under the heading of 'school leaders'. This means that the findings cannot be ascribed to principals only, and it could be argued that the leadership roles of

principals and deputies are somewhat different in nature. However, the deputy principal role does in some ways have greater connection with the day–to–day work within a school, specifically in dealing directly with students and their families, making their perspective and insight important for recognizing aspects of the day to day work of educational leaders. Similarly, just because someone is a principal does not mean that they are insulated from these dealings: for example, a principal in a smaller or rural school may have a role that includes aspects more akin to a deputy's role in a larger metropolitan school. Finally, it cannot be denied that school leadership is exercised by both principal and deputy principal roles, albeit different in nature depending on context and circumstance. In addition, the nature of the fear they experience is likely to be the same regardless of their job title.

Time and logistical constraints limited the study's participants to a single group (school leaders themselves). Further research could provide insights into the effects of broader social or systemic forces upon the experience of fear for school leaders by increasing the range of perspectives: for example, other staff, parents, students, systemic administrators and community representatives.

## *Structure of thesis*

The thesis is structured over six chapters. Chapter One provides an introduction and overview of the thesis, stating the research question and justifying the approach to understanding fear that is utilized over the course of the study. Chapter Two reviews the literature on fear in organizations and, specifically, fear in school leadership. It also provides background on the theoretical perspectives that will be examined. Chapter Three outlines the methodology and includes a discussion of phenomenology, including the research method of interpretative phenomenological

analysis (IPA). Chapter Four presents selections of the accounts from each participant (their "fear narratives") and provides an analysis of each individual's experiences in order to retain an idiographic focus in line with the chosen methodology (phenomenology). Literature is included in parallel with the analysis to further deepen the insights into the participants' experiences of fear. Chapter Five includes a discussion of broader themes: that is, the "patterns across cases" (Smith et al., 2009) and their links with theory. Chapter Six summarizes the thesis and the findings, whilst suggesting directions for future research.

## *Glossary*

**Stress** – tension experienced as a result of fear and anxiety that can cause physical or emotional toll for an individual (Seaward, 2006; Sogunro, 2012)

**Anxiety** – a form of fear: usually more generalized, ongoing and focused on the future, rather than a reaction to a specific event (Heshmat, 2018).

**Toxic handler** – an individual in an organization who voluntarily absorbs others' emotional negativity and angst (Frost & Robinson, 1999).

**Emotional labour** – the work required to present a situationally appropriate emotional façade that differs from the emotion that an individual may be feeling at the time (Hochschild, 1983).

## *Summary*

Fear and school leadership, whilst an understudied pairing, is a worthwhile topic for a research investigation. Given the current challenges of principal recruitment (Barty et al., 2005; Gronn & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2003), any research that can provide insight into the lived experience of practicing school leaders and the challenges that they may face is likely to be beneficial. The investigation of emotions in general, and fear

in particular, is a necessary part of this process – all the more because of the apparent tensions between the notions of fear and school leadership. A phenomenological study such as this one, with a focus on school leaders' perceptions of fear, is likely to be a source of much interest in the pursuit of this goal. Hopefully, greater self-understanding can be the end result. In this way, school leaders can to learn to "*manage* rather than *deny* their emotional selves" (Slater, 2005, p. 330) (emphasis mine).

# Chapter 2 — Literature Review

## *Introduction*

Removing the current stigma around fear and school leadership can help in ensuring greater emotional well-being for leaders, potentially increasing the willingness of aspirant school leaders to take on more senior leadership roles. Understanding more about the experience of fear is the first step in this process: how and why it is experienced, how it is perceived and how current leaders manage fear in the course of their day–to–day work lives.

Whilst fear and school leadership are each the subject of their own extensive bodies of literature, less literature exists that combines the two. The focus of this chapter will be to survey the literature around fear and school leadership. Fear has been defined and discussed in the previous chapter; this chapter's focus is to overview current literature to provide insight into the specific ways in which fear may be experienced by leaders: both in organizations and, specifically, in schools. Organizational literature provides some useful insights to this end; however, the unique context of a school also demands a specifically educational perspective. There is, therefore, a strong emphasis on the educational leadership and management literature and its insights into school leaders' experiences of fear.

This chapter will be structured as follows: firstly, a discussion of organizational fear, secondly, a review of the literature on school leaders and fear, and thirdly, the introduction of a range of relevant theoretical perspectives that have the potential to provide insight into the nature of school leaders' experiences of fear.

## *Fear in organizations*

Whilst the study of emotions in organizations (for example, anger, happiness and envy) has been growing over recent times, there has been a lack of emphasis on the emotion of fear (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009). This is surprising, given the influence of fear on organizational life (Burke & Cooper, 2013; James, Diego, Will, Thomas, & Shawn, 2016).

Fineman (1993, p. 4) gives a clear justification for the further study of fear in organizations:

> Fear and anxiety have been underworked in organizational theorizing; obscured, perhaps, by the positive thinking and feeling expected for many work transactions. The fear of loss of face, prestige, position, favor, fortune or job focuses the corporate actor's mind and sharpens his or her political vision and skills. Such anxieties are readily transformed into a socially acceptable work enthusiasm or drive, which ambitious organizational members soon learn to display.

In other words, fear is highly influential in organizations because it affects motivations and actions. Fear also "encourages avoidance behavior, a narrowed perceptual and cognitive focus on perceived threats, and pessimistic judgments about risks and future outcomes" (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009, p. 164). This definition is very helpful for the study of workplace fear, where, although fear may not be life-threatening, it is nonetheless a powerful force with the potential to shape behavior, relationships and decision-making.

The study of emotions—in particular, fear—has pertinent applications for the manager's role in organizational life. Helena Flam argues that, whilst much management literature tends to focus on the fear experienced by workplace subordinates, fear is indeed prevalent in managers' experience: both as an emotion experienced by managers ("fear of failure") and as an impetus for subsequent decision-making (such as becoming "risk averse" and excessively rule-oriented in response to fear) (Flam, 2002, p. 94). As she says, " … not enthusiasm but rather fear and anxiety are endemic to managers and corporations – a fact which managerial theorizing completely ignores" (Flam, 2002, p. 97). As school leaders fall into the category of management, Flam's statements have relevance for a study that is focused on identifying school leaders' fears.

Whilst leaders themselves can feel fear, fear can also be present at a group or collective level. A "culture of fear" (Schmidt, 2009, p. 152) can be found in both societal and organizational settings. Frank Furedi's book on this topic illustrates the prevalence of fear and its societal impact. He argues that, despite living in some of the safest of historical times, a strong sense of fear affects current Western society (Blackmore, 2009; Furedi, 2006). These fears can be reflected in organizations. Lumby gives an example of the "anxiety-provoking environment" of a UK further education college, which involved "fear and lack of trust" and an emphasis on "performativity" (Lumby, 2009, p. 361) and a distrust of others. Whilst there are differences between corporate and educational contexts, educational leaders are not immune from these types of fears, and an ability to manage fear (both their own and others') is a crucial quality for a leader's optimal long-term performance in the role.

From an organizational perspective, then, fear is an influential but understudied aspect of workplace life. It is experienced by management as well as staff. Fear can have a collective focus: organizations can be described as having a culture, or environment, of fear. There is much scope for further investigation into corporate and collective fear culture, however, this falls beyond the parameters of this study. Instead, the focus will now turn to the specific organizational context and group: that is, how school leaders experience fear.

## *Fear and school leadership*

Researching fear in school leadership is difficult for many reasons. Little has been written specifically about school leaders' experiences of fear. When completing a search on school leaders and fear, the focus of the literature is often found to be on the issue that *causes* the fear, not fear itself. For example, in a newspaper article titled "Principals fear education the loser in school reforms", the focus is the added administrative responsibilities being given to public school principals in New South Wales (NSW) rather than the experience of fear itself (Stevenson, 2012) – although these responsibilities may indeed lead to the principals experiencing fear. Again, in the article: "Let's be honest: we are afraid", the main topic is the shortcomings of school inspection procedures (Kent). Neither of these articles was written primarily about fear (as a study of an emotion); rather, the political or structural issue at stake is the main argument. This makes it difficult to search for literature on the topic of fear, firstly because little has been written, but, in a twist of irony, because of the ubiquity of the word 'fear'. Fear is a dramatic, evocative word: hence it is often chosen for titles because is catches the eye and engenders an emotive response from the reader. Subsequently, it takes some effort to identify relevant material when conducting a literature review on fear in school leadership. Similarly to Alvesson's

comments about knowledge, fear “is everywhere and nowhere” (Alvesson, 1993, p. 1000).

References to fear can, however, be found in educational leadership literature, albeit sparingly. A search on fear and educational leadership will soon uncover the seminal work of Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski on the “wounded leader” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, p. 311). Fear is a significant element in the wounding of school leaders, as they comment: “Fear usually found its way into the crisis stories we gathered, sometimes as a central theme, other times as a corollary to issues of isolation, power, and vulnerability” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002b, p. 17). Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski also argue that fear is, in a sense, inescapable for school leaders: “leadership life is influenced and, in some cases, determined by fear of one kind or another” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, p. 320). Fear is inextricably linked with school leadership: the very practice of leadership increases the likelihood that the practitioner him/herself will experience fear because of the unavoidable self-revelation involved: “What is endangered, then, is what is evoked most fundamentally by the work of leadership itself: a person’s integrity, identity, fallibility, and spirit” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002b, p. 8). Fear, then, is an inevitable aspect of school leadership.

Another aspect arising from the Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski study was the reluctance of leaders themselves to talk about their fear. Fear was a topic to be avoided or denied: “Most school leaders we met, however, like to keep their fears at arm’s length, reluctant to admit, at least in public, that they have them at all” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, p. 320). When seeking participants for this study, I was aware at times of a similar attitude: that, for school leaders, fear was a

somewhat taboo topic for discussion. Leaders seemed more comfortable talking about success, strength or positivity. Raising the topic of fear with school leaders could be met with the furrowed forehead and the raised eyebrow—or, an attempt at passing it off with jocular lightheartedness as though fear was the furthest thing away from the experience of a successful leader who 'has what it takes'. During the interview process, there was sometimes a noticeable difficulty in keeping leaders talking about fear itself rather than moving the conversation to a more success-oriented or proactive place. This reluctance to acknowledge fear as a real and present part of school leaders' professional work is summarized by Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002a, p. 19):

> The irony, of course, is that a school operates as if fear does not exist; the culture of schools and the culture of leadership do not offer much solace. We expect our leaders to be fearless and most leaders also believe that they ought not to be afraid. It is a reckless expectation. Fear is part of the human condition of leadership and schooling – particularly when wounded – and needs to be acknowledged, accepted and, we dare say, even embraced.

It is worth questioning why school leaders can feel uncomfortable talking about fear. Discussing fear can raise vulnerabilities and threaten leadership personas that have been carefully crafted. Ironically, fear can still exist in a context where it is denied. Murphy (2000, p. 30) questions the heroic idea of a fearless leader in comparison with the actual experience of educational leadership:

> The image of the leader as hero can also undermine conscientious administrators who think that they should live up to these expectations. If leaders are supposed to have all the answers, for example, how do administrators respond when they are

> totally confused about what to do? **If they have learned that leaders are consistently strong, what do administrators think of themselves when they are terrified about handling a difficult situation**? (emphasis mine)

In this way, school leaders can feel ashamed of feeling fear, despite its inevitability in their professional role.

Literature contains examples of fear being experienced in the practice of school leadership. In fact, it would be unusual if school principals did *not* experience worry, anxiety or concern about any aspect of their job, given the weighty responsibility and social complexity of their roles. Literature from around the world has highlighted that fear in educational leadership is indeed a global concern. Fear is mentioned in studies from the United States (US) (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004; Ferrandino & Tirozzi, 2000; Klocko & Wells, 2015), Canada (Beatty, 2000; Pinto, 2015), England (Bottery, Ngai, Wong, & Wong, 2013), Australia (Blackmore, 2004; Starr, 2012) and Kuwait (Alsaeedi & Male, 2013). In his study on factors affecting people's decisions to become a principal, Peter Gronn talks about " … the interplay of emotion and risk in leadership decision-making" (Gronn, 2009, p. 209). More worryingly, in a study on the effects of school closure on principals, Lenarduzzi (2015) links the emotional implications to health issues: "The emotionally-charged environment manifested professional and personal concerns, anxieties and resultant health concerns in the life of the school leader" (p. 253).

In a study with aspiring school leaders, Linn et al. (2007) noted that when aspiring leaders were asked for metaphors to describe school leadership, an entire category of metaphors produced could be grouped under the heading "challenge, risk and threat" (p. 166). Even before undertaking a leadership role, potential leaders viewed

aspects of their subsequent leadership role as fearful. The metaphors chosen by the participants when finishing the phrase “the principalship is like” (Linn et al., 2007, p. 167), included: “a small boat on an open ocean” (p. 167), “riding a bull” (p. 167), “a horror film” (p. 168), “a ship at sea on a very foggy night trying to reach the lighthouse” (p. 168) and “an octopus … because its many legs will take a tight hold on you and suck you in before you realize what has happened” (p. 168). Undertones of fear and apprehension are evident in such metaphors. In this way, fear is a phenomenon that is clearly identified in school leadership literature. The assumption that fear is not a part of educational leadership is one that, therefore, needs to be questioned.

Now that it has been established that the experience of fear is likely to be a ‘given’ for school leaders, the focus can shift to finding out more about fear: what might school leaders fear? And how might they manage or mitigate this experience?

## What do school leaders fear?

The literature on school leadership and fear identifies many sources of fear for school leaders. These sources can be relational, individual, contextual or systemic. Understanding more about the sources of fear for school leaders will be a focus for the empirical aspect of the study; but first, the existing literature on the nature of school leaders’ fears will be examined.

A search on fear in the context of educational leadership highlights several ways in which fear shapes the experience of educational leaders: accountability pressures (Bush, 2008; Schmidt, 2009), a sense of “helplessness” or “powerlessness” (Maslin-Ostrowski & Ackerman, 2000, p. 223), balancing complex global, national and local changes (Bottery, 2006), “fear of failure” (Blackmore, 2010, p. 642;

McKillop & Moorosi, 2017) and personal vulnerabilities (Nir, 2009), even fear of changing school (McKillop & Moorosi, 2017) or losing their job (Whitaker, 1996). Gronn (2009) found what he termed a “list of principal role-associated hazards” (p. 206) from the perceptions of those participants from his study who took on the role of the principal: “the demands on your time … dealing with angry parents … relationships … sheer pressure and the accountability that is placed onto people and the litigation” (p. 206). To elaborate, he included a quote from a participant explaining the extent of the responsibility: “The principal is accountable for everybody on the work site … liable for actions of staff members without even knowing whether they are doing anything wrong … That’s a fairly frightening fact” (Gronn, 2009, p. 206).

Schmidt (2009, p. 154) elaborates on aspects of leadership that caused the most fear and anxiety for principals. These include:

> … data use … since test data provide evidence of weakness in schools and the need for change … changing expectations for the position, the movement to define new standards for candidates, the complex balance between leadership and management skills, a nationwide focus on school-wide improvement efforts, long hours, high stress and an imbalance between authority given and level of accountability expected …

In addition, principals feel pressure from the tension between improving their school and presenting a positive image of the school to the local community (Ferrandino & Tirozzi, 2000; Schmidt, 2009). The intensively social nature of the role also increases tension: “ … because principals generally work with varying stakeholders, needs, and responsibilities, they are easily predisposed to stressful situations, prompting them to react with heightened tension that does not abate easily” (Sogunro, 2012, p. 665).

Tension, complexity and the specific nature of school leaders' work are all factors that can be linked to stress, and, correspondingly, to fear.

School leaders can experience many different types of fear according to Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004): " … the fear of failure, the fear of change and of not changing, and the fear of being judged and criticized" (p. 320), " … of being fired … " (p. 320) (also see Pinto, 2015), " … of losing their career identity … " (p. 320) and " … of not measuring up … " (p. 320). In her study on fear and neoliberalism, Pinto discusses "participants' fears of reprisal for non-compliance, with specific concerns expressed about dismissal and career mobility" (Pinto, 2015, p. 150). Even school inspections can be a source of fear and anxiety for some school leaders (Penninckx & Vanhoof, 2015, p. 492). Nir discusses "the threat implied in exposing one's weaknesses" and "fears of damaging self-image" as reasons principals do not seek professional help (Nir, 2009, p. 176). Fear was also associated with being new to the job: in a study on career development of English female head teachers it was noted that: "All six heads mentioned lack of confidence, fear of introducing changes and feelings of anxiety at the beginning of their headships" (McKillop & Moorosi, 2017, p. 344).

The literature so far supports the claim that fear is indeed a widespread experience for school leaders. Some significant or common themes identifying what school leaders fear are discussed in the following sections: 'Accountability and responsibility', 'Fear for physical safety', 'Helplessness and powerlessness', 'Competing demands from opposing forces', 'Failure', 'Personal vulnerabilities' and 'Risk and other factors'. All of them identify the complexity of the lived experience of fear for school leaders. By having a better understanding of what school leaders fear,

we can better understand the nature of fear and perhaps gain some insights into how they navigate these challenging experiences.

## *Accountability and responsibility*

The sense of responsibility and accountability felt by school leaders is a common theme in educational leadership literature. Michele Schmidt links an over-emphasis on accountability to fear: " … in an accountability era … a focus on raising student achievement and school rankings … leaves school leaders … to experience a range of emotions – often delimited or defined by fear" (Schmidt, 2009, p. 147). Tony Bush outlines the increased responsibilities of school principals over recent years. Whilst educational expertise has traditionally been a mainstay of a school leader, the role of the principal is steadily becoming more management-focused. Along with increasing responsibility comes the call for higher standards: "Governments, parents and the wider public expect a great deal from their schools and most of these expectations are transmitted via the principals" (Bush, 2008, p. 27).

However, there is a dark side to the rise in expectations: the increasing "scrutiny" (Crow, 2006, p. 310) and accountability of schools, and by implication, educational leaders. Controlling bodies such as inspection and registration bodies (for example, Ofsted – national inspection body of England) can cause fear, as pointed out by Bottery, Ngai, Wong and Wong (Bottery et al., 2013, p. 52) :

> … even the most confident [headteachers] displayed a sense of *embattlement* … most felt that this was a game made *dangerous* by the *punitive* nature of Ofsted, and by the publication of such inspections, as well as pupil results … Evidence supporting practice, then, was for *defence*' (emphasis mine).

The conflict-rich language, as I have highlighted through italics in the above quotation, strongly reflects the emotion of fear. A similar emphasis on fear is found in the discussion on accountability in UK schools (Bottery et al., 2013, p. 56):

> … whilst some had the *courage* to encourage creativity, all were aware of the *dangers* of embracing new approaches, and some *hung back*, or never *ventured* into these deeper waters … English government legislation and inspection over the last 20 years had *repressed* the creative thrust (emphasis mine).

In this excerpt, the language of fear is clearly evident—demonstrating the rich potential for a study of fear in educational leadership. Fear was also described in Schoen and Fusarelli's (2008) work on the *No Child Left Behind* policy in the USA, where fear was ascribed to teachers, principals, district leadership and the superintendent because of the emphasis on standardized test results. In describing principals' circumstances, one of Schoen's participants said:

> Principals know the deal. If they can't make at least expected growth, they know that they'll get beat over the heads by the superintendent about their scores. Principals are 'jumping ship' left and right, trying to get out of situations where they know their scores may define their ability to lead and motivate students and teachers … Fear? Are you kidding?!

Schoen goes on to point out that "sentiments like these are being echoed across the nation" (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008, p. 193). Rangel's review of the literature on principal turnover found that one of the determinants strongly related to turnover was

“accountability policy” (Rangel, 2018b, p. 109). Fear is not limited to a single country’s school leaders, but can be found in a much broader global context.

Hall, Berg and Barnett (2003, pp. 2-3) caution against the amount of pressure faced by novice principals in the USA:

> ... the demands for accountability, maintaining a safe environment, and serving the needs of children (and many needs of their parents) means that in reality no one person can do it all … We also are very concerned about how long they can survive in the pressure cooker that the principalship has become.

School leaders have a heightened sense of responsibility upon assuming their roles. In a study on novice principals in their first three months on the job, Spillaine and Lee (2014) identify a sense of “ultimate responsibility” (Spillane & Lee, 2014, p. 431) felt by new leaders. This sense of responsibility is linked with levels of stress. Fear is exhibited here in the form of worry: “stress was manifested in novices’ reports of … nervousness, and constant worrying” (Spillane & Lee, 2014, p. 444). Quotes from participants in Spillaine and Lee’s study show that responsibility leads to a sense of fear (Spillane & Lee, 2014, pp. 443-444):

> Yeah I had to think about [becoming principal] because like, ‘Oh my God! What if I like totally run this school into the ground?! (Janice, Time 1)

and

> I’m still wondering what can go wrong, because if something goes wrong, it’s all under me (Charles, Time 1) .

The newness of the responsibility weighed heavily on the novice principals. The fear attached to responsibility is a fear that, should things go wrong, the leader will be the one to blame or held accountable. Fear linked with responsibility is also discussed by Slater (2005) when describing the need for principals to value the contributions of others: " … leaders may feel anxious and afraid of losing control, until they develop a new understanding of shared responsibility" (p. 327).

The fear associated with responsibility may have even grown with changes to systemic structures making schools more autonomous. Gronn (2009) says about the role of the leader: " … by virtue of her or his overall responsibility, the most senior leader figure stands exposed to the bulk of the risks" (p. 199). He goes on to say that " … diffusion of risk assessment and management to devolved units concentrates the experience of hazard on a handful of identifiable individuals who become objects of public blame and possible humiliation" (Gronn, 2009, p. 199). Responsibility opens the leader to potential threats in the form of "litigation" or "trial by media" (Gronn, 2009, p. 199). In his book *The New Work of Educational Leaders: Changing Leadership Practice in an Era of Social Reform*, Gronn talks about the rising popularity of teams in educational leadership in the climate of distributed leadership, and how this can be an especially high-risk environment for female leaders, where a lack of success can affect a head's "credibility" (Gronn, 2003b, p. 123).There is much scope here for leaders to feel fear in the face of the responsibilities they undertake in accepting their roles.

## *Fear for physical safety*

School leaders live with the threat of encountering unsafe situations as part of their jobs. In a longitudinal study on Australian school principals and wellbeing, Philip Riley (Riley, 2016, p. 11) noted that:

> The prevalence rate for Threats of Violence is extremely high … (… by 2016; close to 1 in 2 principals receiving a threat).

The threat to physical safety was such in South Australia that further resources were requested by principals (Williams, 2017, p. 1):

> Primary principals have called for more school counsellors and funding for extra deputy and assistant principal positions, to give them support in violent situations and ease their workload.

The risk to physical safety experienced by school leaders, in particular principals, is evident both in other parts of Australia (Hiatt, 2015) and in other countries (Huff, 1991). The extent to which this fear impacts upon school leaders on a day–to–day basis is a question that is worthy of deeper examination, as it represents an ongoing risk to both leaders themselves, and to the communities they lead.

## *Helplessness/Powerlessness*

Maslin-Ostrowski and Ackerman (2000) identified “powerlessness” as a factor in the “wounding” (Maslin-Ostrowski & Ackerman, 2000, p. 223) of one of the principals in their study. This principal struggled with her inability to be able to guarantee a concerned parent absolute safety for their child—despite her own and her school’s

efforts to do to—and struggled internally with her inability to do so. Having little power when an expectation of power exists can be a source of fear (Maslin-Ostrowski & Ackerman, 2000, p. 223):

> There is nothing that frightens school leaders as much as feeling helpless and impotent ... because many school leaders are rarely aware of what fragile power they have accumulated, they can scarcely admit to themselves or others how much powerlessness and helplessness or fear of helplessness influences them. Helplessness in leadership is the shadow at its most obvious – productivity, achievement, winning – these are measures of leadership and the leader. Impotence, powerlessness, and helplessness in all their forms are worse than death for most school leaders.

Powerlessness was also identified in a study by Whitaker, where a principal interviewed identified a feeling of powerlessness " … because I can't possibly control all the variables" (Whitaker, 1996, p. 63). To lack power can be a threatening experience for school leaders.

## *Competing demands from opposing forces*

Bottery (2006) outlines tensions for educational leaders in the public sector based around the issue of globalization: tensions between economic "efficiency" (p. 15) and heightened levels of service/care, national issues, balancing policy demands with suitability for the local context and a "low-trust" (p. 15) culture. The ethical tensions of leadership in a leader's role as "gatekeeper" are also a part of potentially fear-producing situations for school leaders (Starratt & Leeman, 2011, p. 39). Sometimes it is the school systems that produce "anxiety" for school leaders (Sorenson, 2007, p.

11). In interviews with Kuwaiti principals on the topic of transformational leadership, Alsaeedi and Male (2013) stated: “Sometimes new principals are concerned about trying new or different leadership practices. Therefore they tend to follow what they have been asked to do by the ministry. This may be because they are afraid of the rules or lack confidence” (p. 654). Principals can feel caught in tensions arising out of the complex range of factors with which they have to contend when enacting their leadership role.

## *Failure*

Leadership is an emotion-laden exercise, and, as such, is conducive to the emotion of fear. Blackmore (2010) discusses the dual impact of fear-related emotions upon leadership: the emotions that arise from the intense demands of the work—“the intellectual and physical labour of leading” (p. 642) —and those that arise from dealing with the moral and ethical issues that are inevitably part of a school leader’s role (Blackmore, 2010, p. 642):

> Guilt is always hovering in the background, just as anger lies beneath the calm surface, and fear of failure lurks not far from the momentary pleasures of success in increasingly punitive policy regimes.

Being responsible for decisions of a moral nature can lead to fear, at least in part because of the nature of welfare and social justice outcomes for students (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004; Blackmore, 2004; Kelchtermans, Piot, & Ballet, 2011). As discussed by Slater (2005) and Bredeson (1993), fear of failure is also evident in the “role strain” (Slater, 2005, p. 322) experienced by some school administrators,

“manifested in their feelings of loss of control, uncertainty and fear of failure” (Slater, 2005, p. 322). As Bredeson (1993, p. 46) notes, principals felt

> … anxiety manifested in feelings of having lost control, fear of failure, self-doubt about personal competence and ability to be successful, impatience and frustration, concerns about loss of professional identity, and increased feelings of uncertainty brought about by significant changes in their worklife.

The pressure of potential failure can create feelings of fear for school leaders because of the emotions, issues and processes associated with their role.

## *Personal vulnerabilities*

Much has been written about the stresses of leadership in general and educational leadership in particular. Educational leadership is not for the faint-hearted: shortening the careers of some or cutting them off before they are begun: “those in leadership positions felt burnt out, sought early retirement or did not apply for the post in the first place” (Bottery et al., 2013, p. 43).

Leaders are at risk of falling victim to “greedy” organizations (Gronn, 2003b, p. 160): those organizations that demand undue time and commitment from their resources in order to profit (Bottery, 2006; Schmidt, 2009). Those in leadership are reluctant to ask for help due to fears of being seen as weak or needy (Nir, 2009, p. 177):

> … in considering their status and hierarchical position in schools, they may be reluctant to ask for professional help even when help is available and needed, attempting to maintain their power and firm professional image.

Stresses of long hours, high public visibility, responsibility and a need to appear strong and in control are, therefore, potential anxieties that may affect educational leaders. The effects may not be overwhelmingly negative for all leaders: “each [response is] … determined by an interaction between policies, individual personalities and school contexts” (Bottery et al., 2013, p. 44): nevertheless, these are factors that have the potential to cause anxiety.

In addition, the social/relational aspect of the educational leader’s role is critical but can come at the cost of high “emotional labour” (Hochschild, 1983; Schmidt, 2009), bringing added tension to the individual involved. The emotional labour of managing anxiety is also discussed by Poirel and Yvon (2014, pp. 16-17), with a warning as to the impact on a principal’s wellbeing:

> … the principals also inhibit anxiety, but they do not seem to do it by choice. When the principals are unable to be optimistic, to avoid the problem or to minimize it, emotional labour becomes much more demanding physically and mentally. This must be taken very seriously for its impact on health …

Emotional labour is also the theme of Gallant and Riley’s (2013) study on aspirant principals in Victoria, Australia. They identify five “display rules” (p. 85) evident in the professional lives of aspirants leaders: “Be selfless and helpful; Show active listening; Show solidarity with current leadership; Facilitate effective relationships; and, Show no weakness” (p. 85). Fear was an aspect of this: as a respondent commented (Gallant & Riley, 2013, p. 87):

> … fear of showing signs of weakness which will be used against me later. This is similar to the idea of the mask “can’t be wrong”, “Don’t look weak” and “Don’t look like you don’t have the answers”.

The need to pretend to appear unemotional is also echoed in Wallace’s (2010, p. 595) writing on including emotion in school leadership programmes:

> Too often, leaders in educational organisations experience a tension between the perceived need to present a public face untroubled by emotion and the emotional labour (Fineman, 1993) that is an inevitable part of the work of administration, yet the emotional domain occupies an inordinate amount of an administrator’s time and energy.

Leaders do not always feel free to engage in public emotional displays (Beatty, 2000; Wallace, 2010), fear included. Wallace (2010) points out the public/private divide of emotional display: where principals have to actively think about their expression of a private emotion, such as fear, in the context of their public leadership role within their schools. Blackmore talks of the “mastery of emotions” as “seen to be critical to leadership” (Blackmore, 2010, p. 643): a leader is required to not appear overly emotional on one hand, but not appear unemotional on the other. Armstrong, in her article about teachers becoming vice principals, talked of the pressure to not show fear in crisis situations: “The requirement to solve high-risk situations (e.g., fights, bomb threats, gang conflict) without demonstrating fear also increased the VP’s feelings of insecurity” (Armstrong, 2012, p. 411). The intensity of the emotional labour conducted by school leaders in their day–to–day experience should not be underestimated, and it is important to examine the links with school leaders’ experiences of fear.

## *Risk and other fears*

Children are perceived to be a particularly vulnerable social group (Furedi, 2006). Risk management and issues of safety, therefore, are significant considerations in a principal's role. Societal fears—channeled through legislation, the media, parents and community groups—are influencers that a principal must manage as an aspect of his/her professional role. This has impacted on countries such as the USA: in a climate of a response to attacks in schools, a governor provocatively called for a discussion on arming school leaders (Vozzella, 2012), and this was more recently echoed by the current President Donald Trump (Green & Fernandez, 2018). Starr (2012) deals with aspects of risk faced by school leaders, describing risk management in education going "from the laudable to the laughable" (p. 475), indicating that attitudes to risk management can be extreme, however, acknowledges that " … when risk responsibility resides with the individual person or institution, ignoring risk becomes too risky to contemplate" (p. 475). Risk management, then, is part of the school leader's lived experience.

Other sources of fear may include actual events, stories of others, private interpretations, negative cultural stereotypes (Oestreich, 1995), fear of the "Other" and having to self-critique to examine one's own prejudices and context (Blackmore, 2010, p. 649). Anxiety can occur when school leaders experience "anticipation of situations which are likely to worsen … The principals experience anxiety because they are often on standby and do not have all the information necessary to cope with the situations for which they anticipate negative repercussions" (Poirel & Yvon, 2014). Principals must also deal with other's fears: be they parents, staff or members of the community. One principal was quoted saying that leadership is "all about responding to other people's feelings and situations" (Crawford, 2009, p. 81). This is

in the same vein as Frost and Robinson's concept of the "toxic handler", who deals with unpleasant emotional fallout in an organization (Frost & Robinson, 1999, p. 97). In addition, Reames et al. (2014) cites Thomson (2008) in elaborating on the breadth of school leaders' responsibility: " … Head teachers are left shouldering concerns and anxieties on behalf of the wider community and professional network … " (Reames et al., 2014, p. 73). In summary, school leaders deal with a myriad of situations which have the potential to cause anxiety, ranging from risk management and confrontation of personal fears and vulnerabilities, to working with a lack of adequate information and engaging with the fears and worries that manifest in their own communities.

## Reactions to fear

The previous part of this chapter contained a discussion on *what* school leaders fear. In the following section the discussion will turn to focus on how school leaders *react or respond* to fear. It is anticipated that this study will add to the body of work on how school leaders manage and mitigate fear, reflecting the unique context of Australian principals.

Gallant and Riley describe the process of "emotional numbing": a technique by which aspiring leaders cope with fear by numbing emotions: "as the aspirant builds an armor that cannot be penetrated, which helps keep their 'fears at arms length', but only adds to their isolation from support" (Gallant & Riley, 2013, p. 89). The authors cite Arlie Hochschild's seminal work on emotional labor, which will be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter.

Other examples of dealing with fear are more pragmatic. In a detailed study on school principals, Sogunro (2012) outlined "coping tips" (p. 684) to deal with their

work-related stress under the following five categories: “behavioral modification cues” (p. 684), “physical exercises” (p. 691), “relaxation techniques” (p. 691), “professional help” (p. 694) and “medication” (p. 694). Whilst these are responses to stress, the underlying connection between stress and fear gives these techniques credence as possible approaches to cope with fear. In a similar vein, MacBeath et al. (2012) outline five “coping strategies” (p. 431) identified in Scottish principals: “Dutiful compliance” (p. 431), “Cautious pragmatism” (p. 431), “Quiet confidence” (p. 431), “Bullish self-assertion” (p. 431) and “Defiant risk-taking” (p. 431). The authors suggest that these coping strategies are important because “they affect the health, well-being and sense of professional identity of the individual concerned” (p. 435), “help shape perceptions and expectations of headship” (p. 435) and influence aspiring heads toward or away from undertaking headships themselves . With such a range of strategies, new school leaders have many potential aids for coping with feelings of fear, as long as the requisite discernment is available to them.

Schmidt (2009) suggests utilizing a knowledge focus as a way of dealing with fear. She argues that a principal needs to increase his/her understanding of the often fear-inducing “global, market and accountability issues” (p. 155) in the light of the “moral discourse” (p. 155) of education. In addition, she recommends that principals take the action of encouraging “knowledge capacity” (p. 155) in their schools so that the educational community can critique unreasonable aspects of accountability expectations.  She also suggests “celebrating” (p. 155) aspects of education that are important but hard to measure, encouraging risk-taking within their schools and “fostering teamwork and distributing leadership” (p. 155). Bottery (2012) also argues for a need for leaders to “appreciate the complexity” (p. 456) of their context by developing “a more collaborative” (p. 456) approach,  and “humility” (p. 456) in

accepting their own “personal, professional and contextual limitations” (p. 456). He also cautions against taking a simplistic approach to issues that arise and reinforces the need for in-depth knowledge and comprehension (Bottery, 2012, p. 456):

> Given the complex environments within which such professionals operate, they require a deep understanding of how such complexity generates the ineradicable ironies and ambiguities of their work, for only such appreciation facilitates their resolution.

Relationships feature prominently in other literature on coping with fear. Woods highlights the importance of “social support networks” (Woods, 2010, p. 179). Gallant and Riley (2013) highlight the importance of support for aspirant educational leaders in overcoming wounding experiences. Beatty (2000, p. 352) talks about the role of collaboration in reducing fear/anxiety:

> While often emotional management was an almost completely private endeavor, it had been discovered to work even more effectively in the process of sharing and collaborating with trusted others. In contrast, leadership styles that were isolated, controlling and perfectionistic were associated with high anxiety, fear and reticence to risk … Authentic collaboration was a successful anxiety reducer and optimizing strategy.

Kish-Gephart et al. (2009) describe the importance of “social relationships in past and modern human society” (p. 174). Beatty (2000) points out that fear seems to be allayed when the load is shared with others (p. 354):

> … these leaders felt anxious and afraid at losing control, until they developed a new view of shared responsibility. This reframing of the risk as something borne by all,

> while rare, seemed to characterize a significant source of comfort and enjoyment for these leaders.

Fear can be eased or lessened when responsibility is shared. Relationships are also a means of mitigating an individual's fear: "It would seem natural for leaders to turn to each other for support as they face their fears and move toward what they may sense as danger in the perceived loss of control" (Slater, 2005, p. 331). Educational leaders cannot lead in isolation; rather, they need the support of their society and government to be able to enact their roles optimally (Schmidt, 2009).

It is necessary to take into account culture, leadership and context when considering how principals manage fear. A culture of trust is important for countering damaging fear or "insecurity" (Schmidt, 2009, p. 155); a "high trust" (Oestreich, 1995, p. 8) environment is optimal. This is echoed by Blackmore, who advocates the importance of a culture of trust in aiding an environment of collaboration: an "emotional economy that encourages risk taking without shaming or blaming for failure" (Blackmore, 2010, p. 648).

Authentic leadership is a specific example of a relational quality that lessens fear in followers when it is demonstrated in an organization. Yagil and Medler-Liraz discuss the positive effect that authentic leadership, including expression of emotion not normally associated with prototypical leaders, can have on reducing apprehension in followers and encouraging their own self-expression without fear of sanction. They conclude that "leader training should encourage expression of genuine emotions" (Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2014, p. 66).

Schmidt's (2009) suggestions for educational leaders regarding fear management demonstrate an acute awareness of context. Leaders need to know their organizations in order to appropriately interpret systemic directions. She advocates for focusing on equity and social justice issues in the face of prevailing educational ideologies, and "transformational" (p. 155) leaders who can inspire followers in a direction of change. Schmidt (2009, p. 156) also speculates that:

> … what seems to be needed is a new form of moral courage in order to over-ride a nascent culture of fear that pervades schools of today.

Fear can be found in school leadership literature, although not as frequently as might be expected. School leaders themselves can be reluctant to discuss fear, yet feeling fearful is a relatively inevitable aspect of school leadership practice. As has been discussed, school leaders can experience fear around issues of accountability, safety, power, tension and emotion, and they can react and respond to fear by utilizing a range of coping strategies, accessing support and practicing emotion management. In the next section, a range of theoretical perspectives that can inform an understanding school leaders' experiences of fear will be examined.

## *Theoretical perspectives*

A range of theoretical perspectives can inform an understanding of the lived experience of fear for school leaders. These include notions of: acting, heroic leadership, emotional labor, the toxic handler, trust, betrayal and the psychological contract.

## Acting

This study's particular focus is that of feeling fear in conjunction with the practice of leadership. I am interested in how feeling fear aligns with the notions of leadership best practice. Will participants feel any tension arising between their feelings of fear and how they perceive they *should* feel or act as a school leader? In his seminal work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1978) explores the nature of acting as an aspect of human interaction. As he says, " … everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role … " (p. 17). In other words, we are all actors who present a persona to others as part of our day–to–day existence. Goffman's theory of the individual as an actor will, therefore, have implications for interpreting the experiences of school leaders, particularly with regard to emotional display.

## 'Heroic' leadership and fear

Leadership and fear can seem to be antithetical concepts. In the comedy film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (Gilliam & Jones, 1975), "brave Sir Robin" is a comic parody because he is both a knight, and is, simultaneously, fearful. We laugh at Sir Robin because of an expectation that knights should not be afraid (or, perhaps, we are laughing at the parody because we find ourselves identifying with his fears and recognize the flaws in the assumption itself). Nevertheless, the archetype of the heroic and fearless leader has a long history. Ancient legends and myths contain heroes whose bravery is demonstrated in acts of travel or conquest, such as Genghis Khan or Alexander the Great. The idea that a strong, powerful individual is best suited to a leadership role is encapsulated in the "great man", or trait theory of leadership (Cawthon, 1996). Under trait theory, Lussier (2004) argues that traits such as "dominance" (p. 33) and "self-confidence" (p. 34) are associated with leadership.

Emotional control is also a preferred trait: “Stable leaders are emotionally in control of themselves, secure, and positive” (Lussier, 2004, p. 35). An emphasis on larger than life or “exceptional” qualities possessed by leaders can lead to the view that leadership is only for special or select individuals: “Leadership that is exceptional is presumed to be manifest behaviourally in individual deeds of heroic proportion” (Gronn, 2003a, p. 281). Heroic leadership has even been explored and expanded on with the establishment of “heroism science” (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2016, p. 9). The experience of feeling fear – as a leader – can seem to be antithetical to this representation of leadership.

There remains, however, much to be done to challenge traditional, heroic notions of leadership evident in the educational landscape. According to Haigh (2008, p. 20), heroic leadership is an attractive yet elusive quality:

> The "hero head" is really just wishful thinking - a Messianic dream on the part of governments that are looking for a quick fix.

Despite this, heroic themes are prevalent in leadership literature (Allison et al., 2016; Schmidt, 2009). People want their leaders to demonstrate heroism, as is evidenced by Allison et al.’s (2016, p. 7) comments:

> lay-perceptions of heroism that, regardless, of their accuracy, are no doubt important to know because these perceptions drive people’s decisions, social judgements, and everyday behavior.

Exactly how and why these perceptions come about is not the focus of this study: psychological and sociological explanations may both have merit (Harding & Pribram,

2002; Harding & Pribram, 2004; Hargreaves, 1998; Zorn & Boler, 2007). This is evidenced in Thomson's (2009) study of advertisements for school head teachers in England: she noted that the advertisements implied a particular type of person: "They were not to be wishy-washy, indecisive or hesitant, but always confident and assured of what they and the school did. And in doing this, they must … take everyone with them" (p. 51). In addition, the qualities that these advertisements sought were " … rational rather than also emotional, … self-protecting and defended rather than vulnerable and open …" (Thomson, 2009, p. 51). Bravery and heroism are evident, but, as Thomson points out, fear and vulnerability are not. Thomson's work demonstrates that fear may not sit comfortably within the institutional rhetoric associated with school leadership.

School leaders themselves can collude with heroic expectations of educational leadership, as can be evidenced by a school leader's fear of showing weakness. Emotions are corralled and controlled as subordinate to the professional role (Gallant & Riley, 2013). Sutton (2007) talks about teachers learning an "idealized teacher emotion image" (p. 267) through their experiences, where they learn to demonstrate some emotions and suppress others; it would not be a stretch to imagine that there could be an "idealized leader emotion image" governing individuals' perceptions of how they should feel and express their emotions. Individuals internalize ideas to become "self-governing individuals, who act in particular ways as they are positioned by dominant political and policy discourses" (Rogers, 2018, p. 95) – in this case, internalizing the idea that showing fear is unacceptable. If this is a belief internalized by school leaders, then they are not only under pressure to live up to others' expectations, they are under similar pressure to live up to their own. The role of internal expectations is identified by Goodwin (1968): "Such is the ideal of the perfect

headmaster which we have at the back of our minds, such is the ideal towards which we lurch" (p. 13). School leaders can feel this pressure from both externally and internally, in line with Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski's (2002a) contention: "We expect our leaders to be fearless and most leaders also believe that they ought not to be afraid" (p. 19).

Over recent years, trait-based explanations of leadership have begun to be challenged by alternative leadership theories, demonstrating a move away from framing leadership as solely the purview of a heroic individual, and broadening its scope. Some of these directions include distributed leadership (Gronn, 2003b) or contingent leadership (Bush, 2003), both of which provide an emphasis on the interplay of time, place and context on the effectiveness of leadership, rather than simply the traits of the individual leader. Perhaps, also, a growth in the literature on emotions and educational leadership (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Blackmore, 2004; Gallant & Riley, 2013; Samier & Schmidt, 2009; Schmidt, 2010) signals a move towards acknowledging emotions such as fear as a normal aspect of a school leadership role. Emotions can legitimately be a part of school leadership practice. When talking about the emotional fallout of making difficult decisions as a leader: "It is as if such emotions don't exist or, if they do, the implication is that they are simple to deal with or should be avoided ... but reality is something else. Leaders are human" (Ginsberg, 2008, p. 2). It is hoped that a study such as this can contribute to the goal of normalizing rhetoric around the emotional aspect of educational leadership, making fear 'safe' for school leaders to acknowledge, even if only to themselves.

## Emotional Labour

If feeling fear is, as has been suggested, an unacknowledged (or even antithetical) aspect of school leadership, then school leaders may feel required to adopt an alternative emotional display when they are experiencing feelings of fear. The area of emotions has been a growing area of interest in leadership literature over recent years (Crawford, 2009; Samier & Schmidt, 2009). Goffman's work highlights the way in which individuals present a persona to the world, an act requiring emotion management (Goffman, 1978). Arlie Hochschild's (1983) seminal work on "emotional labour" (p. 7) extends the understanding of the experience of emotion management in the workplace. Hochschild, in her work on flight attendants, focused on the distinction between the emotions they were feeling (for example, irritation) and the emotions that they were expected, as part of their job, to convey to their passengers (for example, warmth) (Hochschild, 1983). The concept of emotional labour, with the "deep" (p. 38) or "surface" (p. 38) acting required to perform a professional role, is relevant because this may fit the experience of this study's participants . In their roles, it is likely that school leaders may often feel a compulsion to suppress an emotion and/or instead, assume an alternative one. This makes the concept of emotional labour highly relevant to a study on fear and school leadership.

Arlie Hochschild and Daniel Goleman, in putting forward theories of emotional labour and emotional intelligence respectively (Ginsberg, 2008), have provided useful frameworks with which to conceptualize emotion and its place in an individual's work life. Ginsberg (2008, p. 3) makes the distinction between Hochschild's concepts of emotional work and emotional labour:

> emotional work is the effort individuals put into keeping their private feelings suppressed or expressed appropriately, while emotional labour relates to wearing the right 'mask' given the context you work in.

Wharton defines emotional labour as "… the process by which workers are expected to manage their feelings in accordance with organizationally defined rules and guidelines" (Wharton, 2009, p. 147). In this way, emotional labor could be construed to be a way of managing fear, through suppressing fear as an inappropriate emotion and, instead, displaying confidence or courage as a more acceptable image for a leader (Allison et al., 2016). The people-intensive nature of a school leader's role is likely to yield valuable insights into both the emotional work and the emotional labour involved in enacting this role.

## The "Toxic Handler"

In her book *Getting to the Heart of Leadership*, Megan Crawford discusses headteachers' potential exposure to "toxic emotions" (Crawford, 2009, p. 78). Her use of the word 'toxic' is in reference to Frost and Robinson's (1999) concept of the "toxic handler" (p. 98), and is a useful idea for examining the emotional aspects of school leadership. Frost and Robinson (1999) describe a toxic handler as "a manager who voluntarily shoulders the sadness, frustration, bitterness, and anger that are endemic to organizational life" (p. 98). This kind of person deals with others' negative emotions by being a sounding board, or a listening ear in times of difficulty or stress. A toxic handler is one in whom people confide their difficulties, often in private conversations where they feel safe to offload their frustrations. Five ways in which toxic handlers carry out their roles are to "… listen empathetically … suggest solutions … work behind the scenes to prevent pain … carry the confidences of others" (p. 99) and " … reframe difficult messages" (p. 99). Despite the corporate

focus of Frost and Robinson's work, it is not difficult to see how each of these actions could easily be translated to the educational sphere and applied to the work of school leadership. School leaders fit well into this category of toxic handlers because their role is strongly people-focussed (Wallace, 2010), and they can be required to implement policy decisions made by others (Blackmore, 2004). Frost and Robinson (1999) point out that little research has been done on toxic handlers, and the personal impact of the long term stresses of dealing with people's negative emotions in addition to their own work roles. This study's research into a school leaders' experience of fear can be viewed as an early step into further understanding of the work of toxic handlers in an Australian educational context.

## Trust, betrayal and the psychological contract

A study on fear is likely to be informed by insights on complementary phenomena, such as trust. Much work has been done on trust in schools (Hoy & et al., 1992; Tarter & et al., 1995; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998b). School leaders who act supportively gain the trust of teachers. According to Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998b), trust has been connected with "school effectiveness" (p. 341), "positive school climate" (p. 341) and "principal authenticity" (p. 341). Some literature on trust in schools identifies how school leaders can inspire trust in others within their schools and communities (Browning, 2014; Hoy & Kupersmith, 1984; Northfield, 2014; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). In this case, the school leader represents the one who is the *object* of others' trust. In other words, a school leader is the one who engenders trust from others, and whose role is to undertake his/her professional practice in such a way as to encourage a trust response from members of the school community. Less, however, is written about who the school leaders themselves trust others in an external supervisory role, identifying a gap in the literature representing

school leaders as the *subject* of trust – the 'truster' rather than the 'trustee'. An exception can be found in the dissertation literature; for example, on the role of trust between principals and superintendents (Hatchel, 2012). It is worth asking: if school leaders care for their community, who will the school leaders then trust to care for them?

## *Trust*

Trust is a theme emerging from both educational leadership literature and broader organizational literature (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996; Macduffie, 2011; McDonald, 2016; Northfield, 2014). Writings on trust became more prevalent during the 1990s after the conclusion of the Cold War; when collaboration rather than competition became an issue of social interest (Macduffie, 2011). Trust is a complex concept (Brooks, 2015), for which a range of definitions exist. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998b) define trust as "a general confidence and overall optimism in occurring events; it is believing in others in the absence of compelling reasons to disbelieve" (p. 342). Trust implies an expectation that others will look after one's wellbeing: "One trusts others … to act in one's best interest" (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998a, p. 342). Trust does not have to begin with a relationship: the concept of "presumptive trust" (Macduffie, 2011, p. 38) identifies trust as "positive social expectations that increase individual willingness to trust members of an organization" (p. 38). One trusts a person in authority because of the expectation that he/she will fulfil their role: "knowledge about an organizational role can boost expectations that the role occupant is both competent at executing role-based obligations and responsibilities and motivated to do so" (Macduffie, 2011, p. 39). In other words, one might expect a manager to be efficient, planned, benevolent and caring because of some prior knowledge or expectation based on the behaviours of other managers.

Nevertheless, other literature identifies a relational component of trust. The importance of personal contact is identified in virtual teams (Wood, 2010), and “trust requires a direct connection between actors” (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998b, p. 349). Mishra (1996) defines trust as “ … one party’s willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the belief that the latter party is (a) competent, (b) open, (c) concerned, and (d) reliable” (p. 265). Another popular model from Tschannen-Moran identifies 5 facets of trust: “benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence” (Brooks, 2015, p. 236). Trust involves expectation of appropriate treatment and can have a relational component.

For this study’s purposes, examining definitions of trust that link to fear is important. As in Mishra’s definition, trust implies “vulnerability” (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998b, p. 337) and risk (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996; Schlenker, Helm, & Tedeschi, 1973). To trust is to risk being hurt, even if there is only a possibility of this happening. As cited in Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998b, p. 337), Baier’s definition of trust as “accepted vulnerability to another’s possible but not expected ill will” also highlights the chance of negative outcomes in the exercise of trust. These will be discussed further in the next section on “Betrayal”.

## *Betrayal*

Due to this study’s emphasis on fear, it is likely that situations evidencing a lack of trust or a betrayal of trust will be of the most interest. Hence, the following section will be devoted to examining deficits of trust: such as, broken trust, betrayal and breaches of trust.

The decline of trust in organizations is noted in Kramer and Tyler (1995) both as a "social phenomenon" (p. 8) and from "widely publicized organizational practices" (p. 8). This is particularly problematic for schools, as organizations that rely largely on trust for effective functioning (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998b). Whilst this broader trend is noted, the following section will instead focus upon specific instances in which trust exists between individuals, but is broken or damaged.

Bies and Trip (1996) use the phrase "trust violations" (p. 338) to describe situations in which people do not act towards others in a way that is expected of them. They categorize trust violations as arising either from "a damaged sense of civic order" (p. 338) which constituted "violations of rules and procedures or unmet social expectations and obligations" (p. 338), or "a damaged identity" (p. 338) which violated the "social identity or reputation" (p. 338) of the other. Lewicki and Bunker (1996, p. 125) describe trust violations in the following way:

> One of the parties is perceived by the other as acting in such a way that the trust is violated. This creates instability and upsets the recipient, who then assesses the situation at both cognitive and emotional levels. Cognitively, the individual thinks about how important the situation is and where the responsibility for it lies. Emotionally, individuals often experience strong feelings of anger, hurt, fear, and frustration; these reactions lead them to reassess how they feel about the other.

Note the presence of fear as an outcome of a situation in which trust is violated.

## *The Psychological Contract*

To shed further light on the betrayal of trust, it is helpful to turn to the concept of the psychological contract. Rousseau defines the psychological contract as follows: "When an individual perceives that contributions he or she makes obligate the organization to reciprocity … a psychological contract emerges" (Rousseau, 1989, p. 124).

Different interpretations of psychological contracts are evident in the literature. Zhao distinguishes psychological contracts from expectations by identifying a basis for a psychological contract as the "perceived implicit or explicit promises by the employer" (Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo, 2007, p. 649). Psychological contracts exist in the minds of individuals: they are not necessarily mutually agreed upon by employers (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). They can be "transactional" (p. 229) or "relational" (p. 229), the latter containing "socioemotional elements such as loyalty and support" (p. 229). Psychological contracts are not static; they are always being re-examined and changing (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994).

Psychological contracts can be violated. This can be a hurtful experience for the individual involved: whilst unfulfilled expectations can lead to disappointment, the breaking of a psychological contract can lead to feelings of betrayal. Violation of psychological contracts is not an uncommon experience: one study showed over half of MBA graduates felt that their psychological contracts had been broken by their employers (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). The breaking of psychological contracts has negative outcomes for a workplace (Conway, Guest, & Trenberth, 2011), including damage to worker motivation and employee retention, or even to revenge (Morrison & Robinson, 1997).

Vulnerability, risk and expectations are the factors that link trust with the experience of fear. If school leaders have relied on an individual, organization or set of expectations to keep them safe and this does not happen, it cannot only lead to fear but, as part of the fear experience, feelings of hurt or betrayal. The connection between betrayal and fear is the threat of emotional harm.

## *Summary*

I contend that a study of school leaders' perceptions of their lived experience of fear would be a valuable contribution to both the existing body of literature, and to the profession. In this chapter, current literature on fear in organizations and fear in school leadership has been overviewed. Factors linked with school leaders' experiences of fear, such as: accountability, powerlessness, competing demands from opposing forces, failure, vulnerabilities and risk have been discussed. School leaders' responses to fear, such as: emotional numbing, coping strategies, maintaining a knowledge focus, utilizing relationships and understanding context and culture have been identified. In addition, relevant theoretical perspectives that may provide useful insights into better understanding the nature of the fear experience for school leaders have been explored, including: acting, heroic leadership, emotional labour, the toxic handler, trust, betrayal and the psychological contract.

In the following chapters, the empirical aspect of the study will be examined and discussed in order to discover more about school leaders' lived experience of fear. The methodology of the study will be outlined in chapter three, and chapter four will contain excerpts from the participant accounts. This study will contribute to the wider body of knowledge by elaborating upon the experience of fear for nine different

individuals who have been involved in school leadership across Australia. What is it like for school leaders to feel fear? Are there links between the fears mentioned in literature, and school leaders' actual experience of feeling fear in their role? School leaders' experiences of fear will also be examined using the aforementioned theoretical frameworks in order to gain further insight into the nature of their experience.

# Chapter 3 — Methodology

## *Introduction*

A study on school leaders' perceptions of the lived experience of fear lends itself to a phenomenological approach, since phenomenology is "a philosophical approach to the study of experience" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 11). This chapter contains a detailed explanation of the phenomenological approach that was utilized in this study. This study is best described as a qualitative study grounded in a social constructionist, interpretivist approach, that employs the specific methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology. This chapter will begin with a brief explanation of the theoretical perspectives, including a discussion of hermeneutic phenomenology and bracketing. Subsequently, specific methods will be outlined, including: interview structure and timing, participants, intellectual rigour and data analysis.

## *Why qualitative research?*

This study's theme—the impact of fear upon school leaders—lends itself to a qualitative approach. If qualitative research is, as Creswell puts it, about "the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2007, p. 37), then it would seem apt to apply a qualitative approach when investigating the meaning that school principals ascribe to fear in their working lives. Rejecting a purely abstract preoccupation, qualitative research allows for a focus on the "lived experience" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8) of an individual. The intent behind this study is to better understand how school leaders actually encounter, experience and deal with fears in the course of their working lives by providing them with opportunities to communicate their experiences to the researcher. A qualitative research approach enables in-depth, one–on–one data collection and produces the

“thick description” advocated by Geertz (Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p. 1). It recognizes multiple perspectives, diverse interpretations and complex explanations of events. It seeks to problematize, rather than to simplify. It enables the researcher to seek an answer to the question: ‘How does this person experience this phenomenon?’

As Sloman (1976) points out, whilst empirical science is often preoccupied with discovering “what *always* occurs” (p. 17), qualitative research is interested in “what *can* occur” (p. 17). The value of the unique or the particular is recognized in qualitative research, as well as that of the general.

## *Hermeneutic phenomenology*

The phenomenon under investigation is fear in the lives of school leaders: what is it like to feel fear in the context of school leadership? What impact does this have on school leaders?  I am taking a hermeneutic or interpretative phenomenological approach for my study. This approach emphasizes how an individual makes sense of, or attaches significance to, an experience or phenomenon. It is an idiographic approach, with a focus on the unique significance of the experience for the individual concerned (Smith et al., 2009). The purpose of my study is not to discover an essence of fear (as may be the focus of a descriptive phenomenological study) (Giorgi, 2009), but, instead, to examine the meaning of the experience of fear for each individual participant, with an understanding that this experience will be unique to each individual concerned. In line with a social constructionist and interpretivist perspective, I have assumed that people’s lived experience is socially constructed: influenced by context, background, life experience and cultural and social frameworks (Burr, 1998; Crotty, 1998). Whilst a descriptive phenomenologist may focus on drawing out a description of a phenomenon (such as fear) that is untainted

by factors pertaining to the unique context/attributes of the subject, an interpretivist recognizes that this is, to some extent, not achievable (Hammad, 2017; Mackey, 2005). To an interpretivist, a phenomenon cannot be easily separated from the individual who experiences it, in the same way that it is difficult to separate an individual from his/her story. As McLaren (2011, pp. 71-72) says,

> You are an organism in an environment, vitally connected and utterly dependent on resources outside yourself – elements and minerals; chemical, biological, geological and even astrophysical processes; friends, family, mentors, public servants; ecological, social, political and economic systems. Your story flows from and into a million other stories; it's hard to know where your story ends and others begin.

An individual cannot ever be totally removed from his/her context. In the same way, a phenomenon can never be truly separated from the individual through whom it is experienced. Heidegger encapsulates the human immersion in context with the word "Da-sein (being-in-the-world)" (Giles, 2008, p. 60), meaning that a person cannot be detached from their existence or lived experience: "Our being in the world is always perspectival, always temporal, and always 'in-relation-to something—and consequently … the interpretation of people's meaning-making activities is central to the phenomenological inquiry …" (Smith, 2015, p. 18).

Merleau-Ponty's work on the importance of the *embodied* nature of lived experience adds another dimension to this contextual focus. Since humans are not disembodied minds, a person will experience the world through living in it and encountering it through their body. Davidson talks about the importance of the body to describe "any understanding of the human situation" (Davidson, 2000, p. 642) and references Merleau-Ponty's claim: "I am conscious of my body via the world […] I am conscious

of the world through the medium of my body" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 82). Subsequently, participant's descriptions of their physiological reactions to fear were of interest during the study and, at times, probe questions were used to ascertain the physical nature of their experience of fear. According to Smith et al. (2009), perspective is always "embodied" (p. 18), "situated" (p. 18) and "individual" (p. 18). This has implications for the researcher: total understanding of someone else's experience is comparatively difficult to realize, as one cannot always completely see things from another's lived perspective. Nevertheless, the pursuit of understanding is still a critical goal for a researcher: "the lived experience of being a body-in-the-world can never be entirely captured or absorbed, but equally, must not be ignored or overlooked" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 19). The implications of this statement for a researcher deciding upon a descriptive or interpretative phenomenological stance will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

As an interpretative phenomenologist, I am doubtful as to a human's ability to recount a pure, Husserlian "lived experience" (Mapp, 2008, p. 308), and for that experience to be universally applicable. As Smith et al. (2009) put it, I have a "more modest ambition of attempting to capture particular experiences as experienced for particular people" (p. 16). In this context, my goal as an interpretative researcher is not to discover an essence of fear that is separate and apart from the individual and his/her context. Instead, the individual's experience is paramount: "we seek to stay close to experience itself (ontologic) rather than try to articulate a more generalised analysis of essence (ontic)" (Smythe, Ironside, Sims, Swenson, & Spence, 2008, p. 1390). Instead, therefore, I take the view that a school leader's experience of fear will arise out of (and be affected by) many different factors unique to that individual. The experience of fear—as it is presented to me, the researcher—is *itself* a construction

and interpretation of his/her own reality, and my subsequent analysis will provide more layers of interpretation. The “double hermeneutic” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3) of interpretative phenomenology means that an already interpretative participant’s account (in the form of data) is further interpreted by the researcher (in the form of the findings). The end product, unavoidably, is always an interpretation. As Wonjar and Swanson (2007) state, interpretive phenomenology is associated with “a blend of meanings and understandings articulated by the researcher and participants” (p. 177) and Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006) rightly suggest that “ … our success as phenomenologists will not ultimately be dependent upon our revealing the ‘pure’ experience of a participant; it will be dependent upon our being prepared to do the most sensitive and responsive job we can, given our inherent epistemological and methodological limitations” (p. 108).

## *Bracketing*

Bracketing can refer to a range of actions depending upon the researchers. Hamill and Sinclair (2010) describe it as a process where a “ … researcher’s preconceptions are held in abeyance to ensure researchers do not allow their assumptions to shape the data collection or impose their understanding and construction on the data” (p. 16). They also say, “By bracketing, we can temporarily suspend what we think we already know and actively listen to patients and their individual reality” (p. 17). Smith et al. (2009) describe the process of bracketing as follows: to “put to one side … the taken-for-granted ways of living in the familiar, everyday world of objects” (p. 13). A researcher cannot be completely distanced or removed from his/her research; however, it is understood that a phenomenological approach requires a researcher to attempt to ‘stand back’ and be alert to any personal preconceptions which may be at work in the design, undertaking and analysis of their research (Ahern, 1999). This

can be achieved through bracketing. Ahern defines bracketing as “an iterative, reflexive journey that entails preparation, action, evaluation, and systemic feedback about the effectiveness of the process” (Ahern, p. 408). Le Vasseur (2003) has an alternative definition of bracketing: a “dialectic between this momentary new impression and our old understandings” (p. 419). This points to bracketing as a process or a state of mind, rather than an action that is taken at a single point in time. Tufford and Newman (2012, p. 84) echo this, describing bracketing as “a process of self-discovery”. Hammill and Sinclair (2010, p. 21) describe bracketing as a similar process to empathy: “physically and psychologically tuning in to the clients … active listening, reflection, appropriate questioning and observation of non-verbal behaviour”. This is bracketing as an active state, practised by the researcher during the interview process. There is agreement that bracketing is often poorly defined in research studies and that there is a need for researchers to be specific, not only about the inclusion of the practice, but what they mean by bracketing and the methods by which it is carried out (Gearing, 2004; Tufford & Newman, 2012).

## Bracketing in descriptive and interpretative phenomenology

Descriptive and interpretative phenomenologists view bracketing differently (Gearing, 2004; Sorsa, Kiikkala, & Åstedt-Kurki, 2015). Bracketing is essential in descriptive phenomenology because ‘the things themselves’ of human experience are the basis for our understanding of the essence. Any interpretations, preconceptions or theories held by the researcher may have the potential to cloud the perspective arising out of the individuals’ experience; hence, it is vital for a researcher to bracket out their own ideas prior to engaging in research to allow the things themselves to emerge (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013; LeVasseur, 2003; Sorsa et al., 2015). As Gearing (2004) says,

this arises from a positivist philosophical position: that there does actually exist a pure, abstract form of universally-applicable essence untainted by the uniqueness of individual experience. It is with this latter claim that an interpretative phenomenologist may take issue.

Unlike a descriptive phenomenologist, an interpretative phenomenologist questions the extent to which it is possible to fully bracket out all potentially skewing perspectives (LeVasseur, 2003; Tufford & Newman, 2012). An interpretative phenomenologist may challenge the positivist notion of an objective, universal 'essence' of experience that can be removed from its context. Instead, from an interpretivist phenomenological perspective, both the researcher and the participant are inextricably caught in a constructivist web of physical, social and cultural being that affects their perceptions, interpretations and frameworks for interpreting their experiences. Heidegger describes this ongoing connection between a person and their context as "intersubjectivity" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 17). We cannot ever truly approach things in a completely unbiased way as either a researcher or a participant, and perhaps we can never actually go back to the 'things themselves', because we all see and interpret the 'things' using our own particular "conceptual framework" (Salsberry, 1989, p. 11) and based on our unique context as "situated" (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 108) human beings (LeVasseur, 2003; Smith et al., 2009).

## My perspective on bracketing

My attitude to bracketing is that of Ahern (1999), who describes it as a reflexive process. Therefore, my method of bracketing will be to maintain an ongoing attitude of reflexivity (Ahern, 1999; Tufford & Newman, 2012) and curiosity (Hammill & Sinclair, 2010; Le Vasseur, 2003). Ahern (1999) described bracketing as "the means by which researchers endeavour not to allow their assumptions to shape the data

collection process and the persistent effort not to impose their own understandings and construction on the data" (Ahern, 1999, p. 407). It can be summed up as an attitude of reflexivity on the part of the researcher (Ahern, 1999; Chan et al., 2013): is the researcher maintaining an open, responsive and questioning attitude, allowing new ideas to present themselves and maintaining curiosity about the study? If a researcher is continually undertaking the following steps suggested by Hammill and Sinclair (2010), such as: self-examining for his/her own attitudes, biases and preconceptions as well as thinking of the effect these may be having on the study, mitigating against this by (for example) engaging "supervisor support" (p. 21) and checking that "literature review themes do not occur in … research findings without due evidence" (p. 21), then bracketing is an ongoing process. I intend to attempt to retain such a reflexive attitude throughout the study. An associated technique is bridling, which is "trying to remain open to and sceptical of the phenomenon as they are studying the phenomenon" (Vagle, Hughes, & Durbin, 2009, p. 361).

An attitude of reflexivity can help maintain a careful balance between the researcher's perspective and any new perspectives that may arise through the research. To be an interpretative phenomenologist means that, as Smith et al. say, " … the reader, analyst or listener brings their fore-conception (prior experiences, assumptions, preconceptions) to the encounter, and cannot help but look at any new stimulus in the light of their own prior experience" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 25). This does not, however, mean that the things themselves are overlooked or ignored. Rather, they should take precedence in the formulation of new meaning: "In interpretation, priority should be given to the new object, rather than to one's preconceptions" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 25). This is a good example of my approach to bracketing: not to block out everything from my own experience, but rather to hold it

in suspension (at least temporarily) to let the full weight and depth of the “new object” – the participants’ words – be heard. The “new object” takes precedence in the formulation of new findings and understandings, but this does not imply that my own theories are not later brought to bear on these understandings to gain additional levels of meaning. Smith et al. (2009) describe “a more enlivened form of bracketing as both a cyclical process and as something which can only be partially achieved” (p. 25), and that links closely “with reflexive practices” (p. 25).

In Gearing’s (2004) category of ‘reflexive’ bracketing, the researcher brackets by making “transparent” their “values, culture and judgement” (p. 9) – whilst still attempting to set aside “some suppositions” (p. 9) that may allow new ideas to emerge. I am adopting this approach for my study. At certain times in the study I kept reflexive notes about my own attitudes, opinions, feelings and possible preconceptions. In subsequent analysis stages, findings may be examined in the light of theory, because I believe that theory can also inform findings. Using my previous knowledge combined with the participant’s experiences, new understandings can be created.

An additional aspect of my approach to bracketing will be to interpret the act of bracketing as ‘problematizing’. Like adopting an attitude of reflexivity, in the act of problematizing the researcher seeks to constantly question new information as it emerges. Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) describes problematizing as something that is focussed on the “position” of the researcher, with the aim “to unpack it sufficiently so that some of one’s ordinary held assumptions can be scrutinized and reconsidered …” (p. 56). These assumptions can exist at many levels of inquiry, described by him as: “in house, root metaphor, paradigm, ideology and field

assumptions" (p. 61). Problematizing at a range of levels will be useful for my study: both at the literature level and at the data analysis level, where the assumptions of both others—and myself as a researcher—will need to be questioned through utilizing reflexive methods.

Chan et al. (2013)(2013, pp. 3-5) suggest four strategies of bracketing linked with reflexivity. These are: "Strategy for Mental Preparation" (p. 3), "Strategy for Deciding the Scope of the Literature Review" (p. 4), "Strategy for Planning Data Collection" (p. 4) and "Strategy for Planning Data Analysis" (p. 5). I will discuss these with reference to my study:

1. *Strategy for Mental Preparation* – Chan et al. (2013) recommend researchers asking themselves if they are able to "put aside" (p. 4) their own thoughts and perspectives enough to gain insight from the participants. They also suggest that if a researcher can predict the findings in advance, they are not being "open minded" (p. 4) or phenomenological enough in their approach. In my own research I feel it is a strength that I am researching school leaders since I have never carried out the role of principal or deputy principal. In this sense, I am open to their interpretation of the job and the experiences without having any experience or expectation of my own based on personal experience. However, I was a teacher for many years and this may shape my perspective of school leaders: I may be more ready to judge them based on qualities that, as a teacher, I felt leaders should exhibit. I need to reflect on my own emotions based on past interactions with school leadership: be they negative (such as feeling let down or unsupported) or positive (such as feeling affirmed and supported) and examine these emotions to ensure they do not unduly affect my interpretation of the data. Understanding these emotions can be part of a

critical reflexive process, where if they cannot be 'unfelt' they can at least be acknowledged. Nevertheless, given the gap of several years and the fact that I am not interviewing any of the past school leaders with whom I have worked, should be enough for this not to unduly affect the process. In addition, as the focus of my study is on school leaders' experience of fear, not the quality of their leadership, the latter is unlikely to have an undue impact.

2. *Strategy for Deciding the Scope of the Literature Review* – There is disagreement in the literature as to how much literature should be reviewed—particularly in the early stages of a phenomenological study. Some feel that too much knowledge of literature will overly affect the direction of the study, and will suppress a questioning and open attitude (Chan et al., 2013; Hamill & Sinclair, 2010). Others feel that some literature knowledge is necessary (Chan et al., 2013), even beneficial: as Wonjar and Swanson (2007) argue, "the literature itself may even serve as a source to neutralize personal bias" (p. 173). Chan et al. (2013) point out that to continue the research process, a certain amount of familiarity with the literature is required in order to be able to justify continuation with the study. They suggest asking the question "Do we understand the topic enough that we can justify the research proposal while maintaining enough curiosity in this area?" (Chan et al., 2013, p. 4) and if the answer is yes, then enough literature has been read. Early literature review in my study informed the process by establishing the area within a wider field. Later stages of my analysis incorporated knowledge gained from the literature review in line with the interpretive phenomenological perspective, where new knowledge and interpretation are created from the words of the participants and the perspective of the researcher. As Wojnar and Swanson (2007) claim: "The goal of hermeneutic inquiry is to identify the participants' meanings from

the blend of the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon, participant-generated information, and data obtained from other relevant sources" (p. 175).

3. *Strategy for Planning Data Collection* – Chan et al. (2013) advocate for "semi-structured interviews guided by open ended questions" (p. 1) and "prepared probes" (p. 4) to gain more insight into aspects mentioned by the participant. My amended interview question format can be likened to Chan et al.'s open ended questions, as it provides very little formal structure and direction apart from a presentation of the issue (work-based fear) and its connection with the participant's experiences (see interview questions in Appendix 1).
4. *Strategy for Planning Data Analysis* – Whilst not using Colaizzi's (Polit, 2010) method of utilizing participants in data analysis, as is suggested by Chan et al. (2013), I will instead include the perspective of supervisors or critical friends during the analysis process to provide alternative insights. This will overcome any potential individual researcher bias in the data analysis and interpretation process, ensuring a greater level of trustworthiness (Giles, 2010).

As van Manen (2016) says, the two requirements for a phenomenological study are "an appropriate phenomenological question" (p. 253) and "experiential material upon which the reflection can be conducted" (p. 253). I believe that both areas are covered in my approach.

# *Methods*

The following section contains discussion of methods used in the study: in-depth and semi-structured interviews, participant selection, questions of intellectual rigour and data analysis (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis).

## Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used for the in-depth interviewing process. The author van Manen gives two reasons for interviewing: firstly, to gather information about a phenomenon, and secondly, to frame a conversation with an individual about the meaning of his/her experience (van Manen, 1990). According to Qu and Dumay, semi-structured interviews reflect a view of the interview as a social construct in and of itself, rather than simply a "pipeline" (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 242) for the transmission of knowledge from interviewer to interviewee. Recognizing that the interview itself is a socially constructed situation—or a "socially-situated encounter" (Roulston, 2011, p. 348)—it is important to emphasize the importance of an awareness of context when analyzing the resulting data.

## Phenomenological interviewing

Seidman describes the process of phenomenological interviewing as one in which "… the interviewer explore[s] complex issues in the subject area by examining the concrete experience of people in that area and the meaning their experience had for them" (Seidman, 2012, p. 15).

Phenomenology can be described as "the attempt to enrich lived experience by *mining its meaning*" (Seidman, 2012, p. 18) (emphasis mine). A deeper understanding of the meaning attached to a lived experience enhances its interpretation. This can be gained through the interview process. Qu and Dumay (2011) add to the metaphors describing an interviewer: as well as a "miner" (p. 240) for meaning, s/he can be a "traveler" (p. 240) who returns from a journey and recounts to others what they found (perhaps a better metaphor for a contextual process) . In addition, the construction of this meaning is based on language as a

tool for defining and communicating the past. In this way, researchers are aiming to bridge the gap between experience and representation. To use Polyani's distinction, they are seeking to transform a tacit experience into an explicit representation (Polanyi, 1983). As van Manen says: "The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence" (van Manen, 1990, p. 36).

As a phenomenological researcher, I was aiming to investigate the phenomenon of fear. This was done through my asking participants about their experiences of fear and listening to their responses. As a researcher, this involves a level of trust in my interviewees. As Yancey (2000, p. 102) comments about the dilemma of locating the "other mind",

> I believe…that when you shut a car door on your finger, something happens inside you that closely resembles what I experience when I slam a car door on my own finger. Yet I cannot know for certain, because I cannot get inside your mind; I must take your word for it when you tell me how much it hurts.

In the same way, I had to trust my participants that they were accounting feelings of fear as they had actually experienced it (albeit within their own scope and definition of the phenomenon), but at the same time acknowledging that the representation they gave me was open to debate. As a researcher, I also filtered their accounts through my own definition of fear. In this way, the study's findings are indeed an interpretation of fear: interpreted by both participants and myself as a researcher. This is consistent with an interpretative phenomenological analysis, which acknowledges the place of interpretation in a phenomenological investigation.

In the initial stages of the study, I used a list of questions (provided in advance for the participants) as the basis of the semi-structured interviews. However, during the course of the data collection period, it was pointed out during a milestone review that the utilization of a list of structured interview questions may, in fact, impose the researcher's preconceived notions of fear upon the participant (for example, asking participants to describe a single situation in which they experienced fear may imply that fear is always bounded by the linear constraints of an event in time). Therefore, I trialled a new interview format with the three subsequent participants who were yet to be interviewed: interviews were guided by fewer, more general questions encouraging the participant to discuss fear—as it was perceived and experienced by him/herself within their professional context—to limit any potential impact of the researcher's preconceptions and views around what constituted fear. The previous list of ten questions was reduced to one major question, asking the participant how they had experienced fear in their professional role. The participant then had complete freedom to interpret 'fear' as he/she wished. Probes were then available to be used in response to issues that may have been raised in the participant's narrative; or if the conversation 'stalled'. These could be generated during the interview in response to the topic of discussion, or reflect the content of some of the questions used earlier in the study. Saunders (2014) advocates the use of probe questions, (albeit in a minimal way): because, as he points out, among his respondents, "their self-analytical skills and ability to articulate meaning varied" (p. 89). In my study the participants were highly articulate. As they were in, or had previously held school leadership positions, they were generally confident and articulate individuals who were willing to share their experiences and possessed strong personal opinions. Stalled conversations, therefore, seldom constituted a problem during my study.

The first six interviews were conducted using the initial schedule of questions, as these were carried out before the milestone review when the new format was suggested. The remaining three interviews were then conducted using the new format. Both interview formats produced rich data around the experience of fear for the participant; hence, I felt that it was appropriate to use material gained from either interview format as a valid and useful source for my conclusions on school leadership and fear. During the analysis process, I gave special focus to material from question 4 in the original schedule because it produced narrative material that was rich in the "lived experience" at the heart of phenomenology.

A level of data consistency was also evident, regardless of which format was utilized for the questioning. For example, neither Jane, Sandy or Iona (the three participants who were interviewed under the new schedule) were asked specifically about coping strategies, yet, each of them mentioned coping strategies in their responses. I judged that whichever schedule was utilized, the participants were able to discuss their experiences and reflections around fear, reflecting the core purpose of the study. In addition, themes that emerged from the interviews were often consistent with those of the extant literature, as was highlighted throughout the study. This provided another indication of data consistency.

During the interview process I would utilize probe questions to seek greater detail or clarity around a particular experience or comment. This method of interviewing is similar to the "inductive" style advocated by Dickson, Knussen and Flowers (2007), where probes afford an opportunity to gain "… more detailed information to determine a richer, more insightful sense of how the participant thought about their

condition" (p. 855). For example, after one of the participants had recounted an experience, I sought clarity with the probe:

> *Int: … Can I ask … when you had these confrontational conversations … what was that like for you? How did it make you feel?*

In this way, I was endeavouring to gain more insight into the emotional impact of this situation upon the participant. Where appropriate, probes were also used to gain additional information and detail.

Empathy for the participants was also demonstrated during the interviewing process. I utilized techniques such as: attentive listening, acknowledging participant statements ("*mm, absolutely, absolutely*") and providing eye contact in order to make the participants feel at ease as much as possible. I remained conscious of the privilege that it was to have them share their stories with me.

## Timing

Initially, I had planned to use the Seidman method for my study. In this method, three 90 minute interviews are carried out. This is to allow for time to build a relationship with the participant, ideally leading to more in-depth knowledge and understanding (Seidman, 2012). However, the "tripartite 90-minute requirements" can represent a heavy commitment for participants (Goldman & Swayze, 2012, p. 236). Therefore, given the many constraints that working school leaders have on their time (Whitaker, 1996), I limited the data collection to a single interview with each school leader. From early interviews I found that I had a significant amount of data from a single, 90-minute session; school leaders were usually quite willing to talk at length about the subject material. There was only one participant (referred to as Jane in the study) who emailed me with more details following our interview.

Ninety minutes was the time allocated for each interview. Literature has demonstrated this amount of time to be effective (Beuthin, 2014; Seidman, 2012): two hours could be an intimidating prospect for participants, but one hour led to people becoming too time conscious and “watching the clock” (Seidman, 2012, p. 23). The exact timing of each interview varied slightly depending upon the individual circumstances. The interviews were mostly carried out face–to–face, but some were conducted by Skype or telephone, due to distance constraints. Audio recordings were made of all interviews, which were subsequently transcribed for analysis. In some cases (with the permission of the participant), video recordings were also made. This was to allow for a deeper analysis through observation of body language, gestures, tone of voice and changes in facial expression; however, this analysis was not subsequently carried out, as I deemed it to be unnecessary in the context of the study and time became a limiting factor. Transcripts were sent to participants for checking and endorsement.

## Participants

Smaller sample sizes are frequently utilized in qualitative studies (Zhong & Ehrich, 2010). Nine participants were interviewed for this study. This is a reasonable number of participants in an idiographic qualitative study such as this (Smith, 2015), given the depth and richness of the data provided in a ninety minute interview with each participant. Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) show that data saturation can occur at around twelve participants. The Francis method, where data saturation is achieved once no more new information is being provided (Kelly et al., 2016), was unnecessary, as each individual case was likely to provide another unique facet of the experience of fear, and the more facets, the greater the overall understanding of the nature of fear in school leaders’ experiences. The phrase “data saturation”, in a

study such as this, could be better thought of as the extent to which an individual participant's data is fully explored. Using this definition, a thorough and insightful analysis of a participant's data could fulfil the condition of data saturation. In addition, the group of practicing and retired school principals utilized for my study fulfill Guest et al.'s criteria by being a relatively "homogenous" group of "experts", and they point out that "samples as small as four individuals can render extremely accurate information with a high confidence level" (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006, p. 74). Student researchers have been recommended to have only three subjects when using IPA, but Guest et al. (2006) point out that, if a larger number is used, then the emphasis may be more on themes across cases than on individual ones. For this study, it was felt that enough detail about individual participants could be provided as well as broader themes represented. Therefore, nine participants were judged to be ample for this study: this is enough for cross comparison and for the uniqueness of each case to still be represented.

School leaders from a range of contexts (private, public, urban, rural) were sought as participants in this study. The participants were chosen based upon the criteria of having had some experience in a school leadership role. Eight of the study's participants were from public education, and it is uncertain if the ninth was from a public or a private context. Initially I began by targeting practicing school leaders, but then sought and gained approval to widen the criteria by also including retired school leaders. I thought that retired school leaders might be less time poor than practicing school leaders, and may therefore be more likely to agree to be involved. At the time of the study, four participants were practicing school leaders and four were retired (the status of the ninth was uncertain). The cohort was made up of three women and six men. In the case of Phil, we met when we were both participants in a course. We

identified a common connection (he was the brother of an old primary school teacher of mine). When I learned of his professional background I asked him if he would be interested in participating in my study, and he agreed. Jane and I also had a personal connection, as she was the daughter of a former neighbour.

I utilized personal and professional contacts with school leaders to find participants with school leadership experience who would be willing to be interviewed for the study. Principals Australia Institute, the South Australian Primary Principals' Association and the South Australian Secondary Principals' Association permitted me to submit a request for study participants in their e-newsletters. Contacts with a cohort in the Flinders University Masters in Educational Leadership and Management programme (rural and remote focus) led to several participants agreeing to be involved in the study (I was not involved in any way with the assessment of any course material for these students). As the study progressed, "snowball sampling" (Chromy, 2008) came into effect, as participants would recommend others who they thought would have a useful contribution. In the introductory paragraphs to each participant's case study (Chapter 4) I have provided more detail about how I came into contact with each one. In order to alleviate any personal pressure, particularly in the case of personal contacts, participants were made aware of the nature of the study by emailing them written materials after making contact, and providing them with a choice about whether or not they participated. They therefore had time to reflect and consider, and had to email me back on their own volition if they wanted to proceed.

Hence, participants were aware of the study's focus on the emotion of fear and were prepared to participate in order to discuss how they may have experienced fear in

their leadership practice. Given that fear is a relatively ubiquitous human experience, it was judged to be likely that the participants had indeed experienced fear at some time in their role. Had they not felt that they had experienced fear, they were free to choose not to participate in the study. The only participant who stated that she did not at first believe that she had experienced fear was Jane (as has been discussed in Chapter 4): nevertheless, she agreed to do the study. However, other fear-related emotions had been a part of her experience, as emerged from her narratives.

In this way, there was an element of participant self-selection for the study. A researcher conducting a future study of fear and school leadership could obtain a different kind of purposive sample, such as is outlined in other IPA studies (Marriott & Thomson, 2008; Dickson et al., 2007). A purposive sample targets a specific group who are likely to have experience that links to the focus of the research (Marriott & Thomson, 2008). This could be done by choosing from a population of school leaders who had, for example, experienced documented trauma in their workplace. However, I would strongly argue that my sampling still fits the purposive criteria, for two reasons. Firstly, because of the ubiquity of the emotion of fear. It is unlikely that a school leader would *never* have felt fear in the course of their professional role. Hence, it would be difficult to find a school leader, as long as he/she was reasonably self-aware and self-reflective, who did not have lived experience around the nature of fear in his/her professional role. In addition, purposeful sampling aims to represent the population; and the study contains both men and women, young and experienced and rural and urban leaders, providing a breadth of perspectives. It should be noted, though, that these distinctives are less important than understanding the nature of the lived emotional experience for the individual, which is the primary focus of the study. Each participant had a valid contribution to make to this undertaking.

Interview time and format (face to face, Skype, phone) was negotiated with each participant, and the interviews were conducted at a location suitable for both interviewer and interviewee. Sometimes this was in the home of the participant, sometimes it was in an interview room at the university or, in the case of phone interviews, it could be conducted from the homes/workplaces of either party.

## Ethics

Ethics approval for the study was gained from Monash University. Participant privacy and confidentiality was an important consideration: to this end, pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of all participants. As much as is possible I have attempted to mask references to specific people or institutions. At times I have included the use of both gendered pronouns (for example: his/her, or him/her) in order to further protect the identities of the aforementioned groups.

In the case of one of the participants, due to the sensitive nature of the information he/she shared, I agreed that I would make any material available to him/her for comment before publication. Hence, once my thesis was nearing its final draft, I contacted the participant and provided the relevant sections that contained any reference to him/her, or to his/her situation, for his/her approval. I also provided the participant with the opportunity to request for the thesis to be embargoed for a period of time, but he/she did not feel that this was necessary.

During the interview process, I sought to conduct the interviews in a location in which both the participant and myself felt comfortable. As indicated earlier, a range of locations was utilized, including meeting rooms at the university campus, or at the participant's workplace or another mutually arranged venue. I had the support of my

supervisor or spouse in conducting these interviews, either of whom I knew I could notify in the case that I felt insecure.

I included a crisis helpline phone number on materials provided for the participants, in case they felt the need to discuss any situations which may have provoked an emotional reaction during or after the interview.

## An interpretivist approach…validity, trustworthiness and authenticity

There are challenges when approaching the issue of validity in qualitative research with the same measures and frameworks of quantitative research (Smith et al., 2009). Some qualitative researchers still use the term validity (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002; Smith et al., 2009; Yardley, 2017) to discuss issues related to a study's rigor, whilst others propose other terminology, such as "verification" (Morse et al., 2002, p. 13), or "trustworthiness" (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 75) and "authenticity" (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 75). These concepts fit well with the parameters of this study; nevertheless, I believe that it is also appropriate to use the terminology of 'validity' for an IPA study if this is understood in the context of the research method (Smith et al., 2009).

Each of these concepts is useful to the qualitative researcher in describing the strength of the study's findings. "Trustworthiness" replaces the internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity measures of positivist paradigms with a quest for credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of results. "Authenticity" is concerned with fairness, learning and the possibility for subsequent action (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Shared ongoing discussions with supervisors throughout the research

process have strengthened the dependability and confirmability of this study's findings. In addition, the possibility of subsequent action is suggested in the final chapter as the findings are related back to the broader field.

Morse et al. (2002) argue for *verification* to be a focus instead of *validity*. Verification is an ongoing process that involves data being checked throughout the study, and the overall focus of the study being consistently maintained. They offer five specific strategies for verification: a coherent methodology, appropriate sampling, concurrent data collection and analysis, theoretical thinking and development of theory (Morse et al., 2002). They also highlight the importance of the researcher's attitude: that "lack of responsiveness" (Morse et al., 2002, p. 18) is the biggest threat to a study's validity. I have endeavoured to maintain a responsive attitude to the data by checking and re-checking throughout the analysis, and also keeping an ongoing focus of the nature of the fear experience for the participants.

Smith (2009) recommends Yardley's guidelines for validity in the context of an IPA study. Yardley's (2017) framework deals with "procedures for enhancing, evaluating, and demonstrating the quality of qualitative research" (p. 295). This is frequently cited in phenomenological literature as a useful guide for considering issues of validity (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Yardley (2017) suggests four categories to consider: "sensitivity to context; commitment and rigor; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance" (p. 295). I will now discuss how these categories relate to my study.

Contextual sensitivity involves "carefully considering the meanings generated by the participants" (Yardley, 2017, p. 295). Through in-depth thought using a reflexive

attitude, I have endeavoured to consider how the participants' experiences of fear have been revealed through their accounts. Smith et al. (2009) point out that contextual sensitivity can also be demonstrated through the technique of interviewing, where a contextually sensitive researcher will utilize strategies such as "showing empathy, putting the participant at ease" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 180) and "recognizing interactional difficulties" (p. 180). I was careful to be as accommodating as possible to the participant in the choice of venue for the interview, to be professional yet friendly in my demeanour in any interactions and to be sensitive to the accounts as they were shared. At one time, when a participant became mildly emotional, I deliberately talked for a while in order to allow him/her space to recover before we proceeded with the interview. Smith et al also define "contextual sensitivity" as sensitivity to the data during the analysis process. They include frequent inclusion "of verbatim extracts from the participants' material to support the argument being made" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 180). This was deeply important to my study, as I was deliberate about including participant data in order to support any claims. Hence, there are many instances in which participant data appear throughout the study as a way of ensuring the trustworthiness of the findings. This is encouraged by Smith, who says "a good qualitative research report should present enough of the raw data to allow the reader to interrogate the interpretation that is being made" (Richardson, 1996, p. 192).

Commitment and rigor can be demonstrated through the collection of data, how well the method is conducted and the depth of the analysis (Yardley, 2017). Smith et al. (2009) state that this can be achieved by quality interviewing, for example, "ensuring the participant is comfortable and in attending closely to what the participant is saying" (p. 181). As previously stated, these describe my attitude when interviewing.

In addition, rigor can be demonstrated through the sampling process. A sample should be “selected quite carefully to match the research question and reasonably homogenous” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 181). This was the case with my participants, as they all had experience of school leadership (providing the necessary homogeneity) and were all aware prior to the interview that the study involved discussing fear in relation to school leadership (which can be assumed to be a reasonably ubiquitous experience for a school leader).

Transparency and coherence is the third of Yardley’s categories. As she says, “the reader should be able to see clearly how the interpretation was derived from the data” (Yardley, 2017, p. 296). This reinforces my emphasis on inclusion of raw data throughout the study, in order to support and justify my conclusions. More details regarding the process of analysis can be found later in Chapter 3. In addition, coherence refers to the overall way in which the study makes sense. I have gone from the individual participant’s perspective to the shared patterns, and made broader suggestions for the implications of my analysis to the wider field of school leadership policy. In this way, I believe my study has a coherent structure.

Finally, Yardley (2017) states the need for “impact and importance” (Yardley, 2017, p. 295). This is an ongoing theme established at the beginning of my study. In light of the current rise of interest in emotional wellbeing for educators (Gronn, 2003b; Hargreaves, 1998; Whitaker, 1996), coupled with Riley’s (2016) findings regarding school principals’ experiences of violence, I believe that my study provides important insights into the experience of fear in the context of school leadership.

## *Data analysis*

Initially, I provided participants with a list of ten questions prior to the interview (see Appendix 1), in order to allow them time to provide considered responses. However, feedback that I received in a mid-project milestone about my methodological approach led me to alter my data collection strategy. Instead of working through a list of 10 questions in an interview, I began letting the bulk of the interview flow from a single question: “Tell me about your experience of fear”. It was advised that this approach would be more phenomenological in nature and better fit the overarching methodology by allowing participants the freedom to respond to the question with as few constraints as possible. I was then free to use pre-prepared prompts as necessary to maintain the flow of the interview.

Interviews were transcribed from the audio recording and analysed for patterns. I found that data analysis was not necessarily a linear process: there was a lot of iterative ‘forward and back’ between data and codes.

The data were analysed by searching for themes and patterns, aligning to some of the stages of IPA as set out by Smith et al. (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 82-101).

1. Reading and re-reading (this stage happened throughout the process)
2. Initial noting
    a. Descriptive comments
    b. Linguistic comments
    c. Conceptual comments
3. Developing emerging themes
4. Searching for connections across emergent themes
5. Moving to the next case

6. Looking for patterns across cases

On the initial reading of an interview transcript, I made notes in the margin about anything that took my interest. This could be any kind of observation: for example, the topic of discussion, feelings or linguistic features and what they might suggest. This aligns with the second step of Smith et al.'s stages (above). Initial attempts at noting descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments were carried out simultaneously, as the process seemed to 'flow' better than treating each separately. Later I went back to some of the data to engage in a more systematic analysis where I tried to separate out the descriptive, linguistic and conceptual categories; however, I found that this did not necessarily provide any different insights, making me confident in my original analysis. I was engaged in the research process: "to…persist in thinking and struggling to understand, yet to let the text (experience) speak…" (Smythe et al., 2008, p. 1393).

In the earlier stages of the study, I began to code using my research questions as a focus. I chose four issues for which to search (source of fear, outworking of fear, effects of fear and coping strategies), underlining and colour coding any references to these that were found in the text, then comparing and contrasting the data. However, after my resolution to undertake a more phenomenological direction in my study, I decided to change my analytical approach in order to not impose my own predetermined categories onto the data.

Instead, I decided on a more narrative-based approach in order to let the stories speak for themselves. This led me to focus predominantly on the material that came out of the responses to question 4 (from the interviews done under the initial

schedule), or the interviews in their entirety that flowed from the initial question 'Tell me about your experience of fear …'. I began to focus more on what each narrative said about fear, noticing what seemed to encapsulate important aspects or meanings of the experience for the school leaders. I also noticed anything that seemed unusual, or stood out in the stories or comments. As the study progressed, I allowed myself to look more broadly across the entirety of the interview data, not simply focussing on specific, bounded narratives. There was a wealth of insight to be found in the reflexive and analytical commentary of the participants as they spoke about fear. Several of the participants either were, or had been, post graduate students themselves; hence, their levels of internal reflexivity were therefore generally high. This mean that their reflections contained valuable and illuminating insights: the participants themselves were already engaged in the act of interpretation.

During the feedback process, a critical friend had commented upon the power of the participants' stories. To this end, I decided to include longer sections of narrative for each participant (made easier by the smaller sample size of the study) as a way of giving the reader an insight into their particular experience/story ('Accounts'). I was aiming to create nine different representations: what was the lived experience of fear for Brad? For Iona? For Jane? In the following section ('Findings'), the cases were discussed both individually, and, if patterns seemed to be emerging, these were identified, but the uniqueness of the individual cases was preserved. As the main purpose of the study was not generalizability, the uniqueness of each case could be celebrated without necessarily having a need to emphasize the patterns across the cases, although it is evident when these occur. In this way, the idiographic nature of the study has remained prominent.

The transcript was read and comments were written in margins noting points that emerged from the text. Parts of text that represented strong themes or significant insights were underlined. From this process, themes were identified. Evidence from the data was included when writing about these themes, in order to ensure appropriate validity (Bramley & Eatough, 2005). It is worth noting that the process was iterative and interpretative in nature, and adjusted over multiple readings. During the course of the analysis, I was also aware of a tension in how I viewed certain types of data: material that was based directly in a narrative compared to material that was reflective, 'removed' or philosophical/abstract in nature. Remembering the phenomenological privileging of actual experience (van Manen, 2016), I at first gave greater weight to narratives: gleaning the information that I could about what it was like to experience fear in that specific instance. However, as other themes from the data emerged (for example, participants' comments that included their own analysis of their experiences or reflections) that I judged to be particularly powerful or pertinent insights into the experience of fear, I then included these as well.

During the writing process, I experimented with the incorporation of literature into each participant's analysis (Chapter 4). I decided that discussing the findings in connection with the literature provided a useful and enlightening context to the insights that were emerging, making it a richer and more informative work. In this way, the literature added to the analysis, rather than detracting from it. Literature was helpful in contextualizing the experiences of the individuals (as seen in Chapter 4).

However, I was also interested in looking for broader patterns across cases to ascertain any similarities in the experiences of the participants. At one stage of the analysis, I grouped themes into two categories: experiencing fear and coping with

fear (these categories seemed to fit with the emerging data). At first, I ranked the themes in importance according to the number of participants that had mentioned the theme. However, after revisiting Smith et al.'s explanation of numeration – that how often something occurs is interesting, but also that just because something is mentioned a lot does not necessarily make it more inherently important than something that is mentioned only once (Smith et al., 2009), I revised my categories to include themes that might be mentioned less but have relevant connections to literature or were of felt significance, or that I judged to be particularly powerful: "… something that matters significantly, something that we wish to point the reader towards" (Smythe et al., 2008, p. 1392).

In the final analysis, the themes that are included are ones that were prevalent across multiple participants (although the number of times they are mentioned varies). At a later milestone during the course of the study, I was encouraged to reduce the number of themes. Therefore, the final draft contains three major themes as a focus for the 'Findings' in Chapter Five. The analysis and the extensive use of direct quotations from the raw data make it clear to a reader the prevalence and extent of a particular theme, should this be of particular concern. It is to be expected that the explanation of such a complex issue as the perception of fear itself should not fit easily into neat categories, as I found during the analysis process. At times I felt the tension of the "quest to define, to answer, to provide firm evidence" (Smythe et al., 2008, p. 1395), particularly during the latter stages of deciding on broad themes and suggesting future directions: nevertheless, the emphasis that I placed throughout the study upon the unique experience of each individual case (and the depth of analysis and insight that was provided for each one) has, I hope, maintained the study's phenomenological focus.

I used the following questions to guide my thinking and analysis during the study:

1. What do school leaders fear?

2. How does fear impact upon the life of a school leader?

3. How do school leaders perceive and manage the effects of fear?

As the study progressed, however, the single research question outlined in Chapter 1 proved more appropriate to encompass the data.

In addition, the lengthy timeframe of the overall study provided me with ample opportunity to 'sit' with the data. Multiple readings, coupled with deep thought and reflection over a sustained period of time provided me with the opportunity to intimately familiarize myself with the narratives in order to achieve relevant insights. I found myself visiting and revisiting participant narratives, particularly with the question: 'What is this saying about the experience of fear for (name of participant)?" In that way, I hoped to retain the phenomenological focus of the study; in addition, to also achieve a level of data saturation (if, in a phenomenological sense, data saturation is gaining the maximum insight from an individual's account). Smith (2011) says that: "Themes should suitably reflect the most salient meanings within the participant's narrative" (p. 226). Identifying the 'salient meanings' I found to be an intuitive process; hence, my observations in Chapters 4 and 5 reflected an attempt on my behalf to enter into the world of the participant and understand the nature of his/her fear experience.

The following table provides demographic information about the participants whose stories are told and analysed in this chapter.

*Table 2.* Demographic Participant Data

| **Name** | **Gender** | **Role at time of interview** |
|---|---|---|
| Sandy | Female | Working as a deputy/assistant principal |
| Darren | Male | Working as a deputy/assistant principal |
| Malcom | Male | Working as a principal |
| Iona | Female | Retired |
| Jane | Female | Retired |
| Simon | Male | Unknown |
| Brad | Male | Working as a principal |
| Kevin | Male | Working in para-organizational or tertiary sector |
| Phil | Male | Retired |

## *Summary*

I have outlined my justification for a hermeneutic, or interpretative phenomenological approach to my research. This rests on an understanding that both data and findings are interpretative in nature. Bracketing constitutes an attitude of reflexivity as an ongoing process, being aware of any potential researcher biases during the course of the study. In order to allow for greater freedom of definition of the phenomenon (fear) by the participant, the number of questions in my interviews was reduced and made less directive during the course of the study. I believe these changes further strengthened my research methods and approach as an interpretive phenomenologist by providing greater congruency with established phenomenological research practice. Nine participants were recruited and interviewed (in a single ninety-minute interview). The interviews were recorded and transcribed, then analysed. Aspects of IPA (interpretative phenomenological analysis) were used, such as: reading, initial noting, identifying themes and seeking patterns across cases. In the subsequent chapters, the data are represented in two sections: an 'Accounts' section (in order to give the reader a sense of the individual case) and a 'Findings' section (in order to discuss the lived experience of fear for each participant and identify any patterns across cases).

# Chapter 4 — Under Attack: Fear narratives from school leaders

## *Introduction*

This chapter is centred around the experiences of the study's participants (six men and two women). Consistent with the idiographic nature of the study, each participant's case is discussed separately. This allows for the individual's unique "story" to emerge. Pseudonyms (Darren, Malcom, Sandy, Iona, Kevin, Jane, Brad, Simon and Phil) have been assigned to the participants in order to protect their identities.

Each individual's account is structured as follows:

1. The "description": A description of the individual is provided in order to introduce the participant and to allow the reader to have some insight into his/her background, experience and character, as well as how they came to participate in the study.
2. The "fear narratives": In this section, sections of the interview transcript are selected and compiled (with some bridging contextual explanation where necessary) to form a representation of the participant's experience of fear. Some of these excerpts are lengthy; this is in order to convey the power of the participants' stories and to demonstrate evidence for the analytical claims made in subsequent sections.
3. The "analysis": In this section, an analysis of the participant's account is provided, identifying key themes around the experience of fear. Sometimes literature is incorporated to provide additional insights into the participant's experience of fear.

4. At the end of each participant's section, the themes emerging from their accounts are summarized in a diagram.

References to literature have been incorporated into the analytical writing for each participant. Whilst this may seem unorthodox, I felt that including perspectives from literature alongside analytical insights increased both the depth of the analysis and the quality of the writing. Since each individual's account had idiographic significance, introducing literature enabled these unique experiences to be understood in the broader context of the field. This provided added depth and dimension to the analysis.

# *Darren: “I froze … and … snapped back into gear”*

## Introducing Darren …

At the time of the study, Darren was a deputy principal who was working in a remote area of Australia. He became part of the study as a result of ‘snowball sampling’: peers who were participating had told him of the study. Darren enjoyed the challenges of his job and the leadership aspect of being a deputy principal: as he said, “I like to help lead, guide and support”. He advocated a positive mindset and used the metaphor of an “adventure” on more than one occasion to describe professional challenges he faced. As was consistent for all of the interviews conducted for this study, Darren’s interview contained narratives interwoven with reflections.

## Darren’s fear narratives

In response to a question about an instance in his professional life that had triggered fear or apprehension, Darren recounted an incident when he was confronted by an angry parent:

> ... the lady at the front desk has sent him down to me and he was like a raging bull. Red face … he was just swearing profusely and … I was apprehensive as to ‘Holy moly, is this guy going to you know smack me into tomorrow? Or is he going to you know, what’s he going to do? … Pick up a chair and you know hit me over the face or what?’

He then described how he handled the situation:

> And I just thought to myself 'Well hang on buddy, you've got to gather yourself here, you've got to sort this out because it's not going to go away' and … so I guess to go into how I handled this situation … I guess again the apprehension is … you know … you've lost the benefit of intellect so I think that's what it is, you're acting on emotion without the benefit of intellect. So it evades you, it leaves, because your body's in overdrive … and …—oh—to this day I don't know how I did it but I just snapped back into gear and thought 'Right. This is what I've got to do' … And I just stood there really quietly and I sat down on my chair and there was just a silence for about 30 seconds. And he's going off he's going off he's going off and still swearing and doing whatever, and he just stopped and he said 'Why aren't you talking back?'… And I just you know and I just said, 'When you stop and you treat me like a human being I will talk to you' … I said 'Until that time you need to walk out and sit in the waiting area and when you feel that you're settled down and you will treat me like a human being, come back in and we'll have a conversation.' And I said it just like that … And—well—he did it!

To him, fear was paralyzing because it robbed him of the ability to reason. He says: "… you've lost the benefit of intellect so I think that's what it is, you're acting on emotion without the benefit of intellect. So it evades you, it leaves, because your body's in overdrive".

As has been discussed, Darren advocated a rational approach in situations of fear and high emotion.

> fear is the absence of understanding, because we don't know—what to do, how to act, what to say. Yes. That's what I think fear is. If I understand something, I don't

> fear it. Because I know what it is … Once you understand, I believe that fear is alleviated.

Darren recounted another experience where he was required to use intellect to regain control over a frightening situation; this was in an instance when a student held a knife to his neck. When asked if fear could be leveraged in a situation, Darren said:

> Yeah. It does. It did when I had the knife held up at my neck. It did! You know, because I was scared. Oh crap, I'd never had a knife held on me. But basically, I was so scared that I thought, *oh God I've got to think of something that's going to make this boy think straight.* And I just automatically said, *mate—you've got choices here.* I even said, *you can slit my throat and kill me, but* I said *you're not going to see your way out of iron bars for the rest of your life.* And I said, *you're going to have a miserable life.* And I said*, you can take Option B, you can put the knife down; you can walk out with me—I've still got to call the Police but it's not going to be half as bad as what it would be.* And I said*, I'm your teacher.* And I said*, you don't want to hurt me anyway.* And I said*, are you frustrated with the world? Because, I believe you are.* And he said, *yes, I am* and put the knife down. And yes. I was scared after that. But I guess that's leveraging fear.

Darren also discussed other experiences with students:

> student behaviours—they are draining. I've had that today. I've got none of my work done. Because I have literally been chasing kids all day. And a week ago I had to call the Police 12 times! I had a child today on top of a two-storey roof; he'd climbed up on the outside of the building. So, I stood there and watched—waited 'til the Police

> got there—then we had to try and get them down. This student was a little bit disturbed; so, he was saying *I'm going to jump!* Very draining!

Darren was conscious of his role as a leader in this situation, and his responsibility for student welfare and protecting his professional reputation.

> The level of concentration you've got to give—all I'm thinking about when those kids are on the roof is 'duty of care', 'duty of care', 'duty of care'. And, it's going through my mind, *what if this kid does jump? Have I done everything and put everything in place? As, if I have to go to Court, have I covered my bases?* I guess that is, very draining.

He continued his narrative about the student on the roof:

> And look, and it wasn't just that boy I had to get. There were other kids running around the School as well. You know, at the end of the day I had to deal with another student because he got king-hit in the face as well. And so, it doesn't stop. It's not just one isolated incident. In these communities, it's sometimes up to 10 in a day. And you just go home and you want to just flake out on the lounge because you are just physically and emotionally exhausted.

Even if the legal threat was removed, Darren is aware that how he handles situations will reflect back upon his leadership. The risk to his reputation is real. As he put it later:

> I would have to use fear with another adjoining word: compliance. You know, you're told to do something—go and do it—you don't really have the tools to do it and they still expect results. And I think that could make you fearful, and fearful of many things.

> Fearful of your job, socially—are you going to be seen as insignificant, inexperienced. Especially the leadership roles as well. Fear would be compliance.

## Analysis of Darren's account

In his interview, Darren came across as a school leader who was comfortable and confident in his leadership role. He was open when discussing experiences of feeling fear in his role as a school leader. As a self-confessed planner who liked to be organized, many of Darren's fear experiences stood in contrast to this as unpredictable and uncontrollable crisis events. In this sense, Darren acknowledged simultaneously the need for understanding, knowledge and reflection as ways to combat fear, and the impossibility of being able to be fully prepared for the fear-inducing experiences of school leadership.

Darren appeared to be calm and analytical when recounting his experiences of fear: for him, fear-generating experiences were an accepted part of his role, especially dealing with crisis events. As he said elsewhere in the interview, he enjoyed a challenge. Nevertheless, Darren's accounts also portrayed his discomfort during some of his experiences of fear, such as feeling paralysed and unable to think. Darren felt fear when threatened physically and emotionally: this was an aspect of the difficult tensions he faced when enacting his leadership role in a rural/remote school community.

Two prominent themes regarding Darren's lived experience of fear emerged from his interview. I have encapsulated these under the headings of: "Feeling fear around issues of control" and "Feeling fear with expectations and responsibility".

## *Feeling fear around issues of control*

The theme of control emerged from Darren's account in relation to his experience of fear. Darren felt fearful during times when he lacked control: these included times when he was physically threatened, when he was surprised by events or when the constraints of his leadership role placed him in a situation where he was responsible for others' safety. For Darren, experiencing fear restricted his sense of control over his intellect by robbing him of the ability to reason: conversely, Darren's feelings of fear diminished as he "regained" his ability to reason, increasing his sense of control and lessening his feelings of fear.

The analysis of Darren's account is divided into the following subthemes: "Threat and unpredictability", "The importance of knowledge and planning", and "Rationality vs emotion".

### Threats and unpredictability

Some of the narratives in Darren's account represented a threat to his physical and/or emotional wellbeing. Darren's account contained more than one situation in which, potentially, he was in physical danger. At one time, he had a student holding a knife to his (Darren's) throat; another time he had to deal with an irate parent and wondered: "what's he going to do—pick up a chair and hit me over the face or what?". For Darren, to be physically threatened involved feelings of fear.

Extreme situations involving threats of violence became normalized for Darren in his professional role. Despite the severity of these incidents, Darren was almost offhand in his re-telling: "Yeah, I've had a fair few things happen to me in schools—been

quite violated" and "…I've been threatened by students all the time…to be quite honest, calling the police and things, it's just routine". Darren's comments support Riley's findings (discussed in Chapter 2) on the high levels of violence or threats of violence to which Australian school leaders are subjected: "Principals and deputy/assistant principals experience far higher prevalence of offensive behaviour at work each year than the general population" (Riley, 2016, p. 11). Darren's experiences reflected a familiarity with threatening situations: further study into the long term effects of being exposed to these kinds of stressors would yield some important insights. An example of one state's response is the consideration of changes to South Australian legislation, including harsher penalties for perpetrators of violence on school premises (Williams, 2017).

Physical sensations in response to fear were also part of Darren's experience: when asked specifically about physical sensations after describing the incident with the angry parent, Darren said: "… it was the heart pound the dry mouth and I was even sweating profusely you know … and I also had … the old shakes in the hands as well … and basically I froze, I froze for you know …10, 15 seconds". Darren's reaction fits with the fight, flight or freeze responses to fear (Ekman, 2007; Jarymowicz & Bar-Tal, 2006; Schmidt, 2009). He relates the loss of intellect to his body being 'in overdrive', linking the emotional experience of fear to the physical experience. Darren was one of the few participants to mention a specific moment of stillness as part of a fear experience. For Darren, feeling fear was an embodied experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

In addition to physical threats, being emotionally threatened is also an aspect of Darren's fear experience. Darren is both exposed to, and is expected to manage,

others' negative emotions: this constitutes a fearful experience for him. Darren's language demonstrates the depth of his feelings; he uses the metaphor of a "raging bull" to denote the destructive potential of others' anger, and to highlight, in contrast, his own sense of vulnerability. Nevertheless, because of his professional role, Darren must attempt to manage these encounters towards a successful outcome.

In managing others' negative emotions, Darren is taking on the role of Frost and Robinson's "toxic handler" (Crawford, 2009; Frost & Robinson, 1999). A toxic handler is an individual who "shoulders the … frustration, bitterness, and anger that are endemic to organizational life" (Frost & Robinson, 1999, p. 98). Whilst Frost and Robinsons' toxic handler describes managers within an organization who are a sounding board for staff, I would argue that school leaders are also identified as toxic handlers within their own school community because of their exposure to the negative emotions of staff, parents and students. Darren's situation is an example; he must endure and absorb others' anger, and bring a resolution to the situation. In doing so, however, there is a personal cost: these situations can trigger fear for school leaders as they require sensitive handling and contain the possibility for physical or emotional harm to the leader who is taking on the toxic handler role. It is important to understand the concept of a toxic handler because there are potential costs associated with the role, such as "burnout … ulcers and heart attacks" (Frost & Robinson, 1999, p. 98).

School leadership positions can leave individuals like Darren vulnerable because of the inescapable nature of the "toxic handling" component of their roles. In Frost and Robinson's description of the manager who is a toxic handler, this role was undertaken by choice. These managers fielded staff complaints and negative

emotion because of perceived necessity; perhaps they were nice people and wanted to help others, or perhaps they perceived it was for the overall good of the organization (Frost & Robinson, 1999). However, for school leaders, toxic handling is not always a voluntary activity. Darren's leadership role requires that he be present in this situation and manage it as best as he can: he does not have a choice. This means that, whether they like it or not, school leaders are inescapably placed in the role of being "toxic handlers", with the associated risks that that entails. It would seem necessary, then, that skills of conflict resolution and emotional preparedness are an important part of school leadership training programmes, and avenues of support are identified to enable school leaders to cope with the negative impacts of their toxic handling roles.

Darren's fear-inducing experiences shared an element of surprise or unpredictability. In the incident with the irate parent, Darren felt apprehensive about the possibility of being physically hurt and the unpredictability of the situation. Later in the interview, Darren acknowledged that it was not possible for a school leader to be prepared for every situation that he/she would encounter. There is an inevitability to the experience of fear in school leadership: whilst a school leader's role contains unpredictability it will also contain the potential for experiencing feelings of fear.

## Knowledge, planning and preparation

Darren repeatedly referred to the importance of knowledge, planning and preparation in his interview. For him, these qualities represented the opposite or antithesis of fear. For Darren, knowledge reduced fear. As he said:

> Fear is the absence of understanding, because we don't know—what to do, how to act, what to say. Yes. That's what I think fear is. If I understand something, I don't fear it. Because I know what it is.

For Darren, knowledge and understanding were antithetical to fear. A self-confessed 'planner', he felt a strong sense of responsibility to provide thorough resources for the person who would be his successor when he moved to another school. He spoke of feeling anxious about whether the same level of preparation would be carried for him when he moved into his new position, indicating a fear of being put in a situation of playing professional 'catch up' when he is not given the information he needs. Knowledge and information allow Darren to carry out his role competently in this case; a lack of knowledge is fearful because it will impact upon his workload, if not upon his professionalism.

More than once, he spoke about using intellect and thinking to resolve fear. Positive thoughts of reassurance, hope and support, through visualization and self-talk helped Darren in the midst of feeling fearful. Reflexivity (Giles & Yates, 2011) was also a way in which understanding could be reached: as he said, "And it's not just experiencing it but it's going back and reflecting and understanding that experience itself …" Understanding and analysing experiences prepared Darren for facing future fearful situations.

## Rationality vs emotion

Darren's comments about what it was like to experience fear on an internal or emotional level display a perception of a divide between intellect and emotion, and raise issues of control and agency. In his accounts, Darren often spoke about being

“rational”, and the way in which his experiences of fear represented a challenge to this notion of rationality. For Darren, rationality seemed to be a preferred state which was interrupted and displaced by the uncomfortable experience of feeling fearful. As Darren described in the incident where he was confronted by the angry parent, “… apprehension is—you’ve lost the benefit of intellect … you’re acting from emotion without the intellect”. Fear meant he had lost the ability to reason, and was left vulnerable to emotion. Darren experienced a resolution to his feelings of fear when he was able to regain the ability to use his intellect. He referred to this several times, indicating his uncertainty around how he was able to do this:

> To this day, I don’t know how I did it, but I just snapped into gear and thought right, this is what I’ve got to do

and

> I don’t know to this day how I got out of that emotional state and summoned the intellectual ability to think about what I needed to do. I still don’t know. But it worked.

For Darren, to be fearful was to be in the realm of emotion, and to feel that he had been robbed of a critical part of who he was—an individual with the ability to reason. In this case, fear was a negative experience for Darren because it made him feel less than whole. Darren’s choice of the phrase “got out of that emotional state” demonstrates both a privileging of rationality over emotion, and the importance he attaches to acting rationally. For Darren, the experience of fear is linked with being emotional and vulnerable.

For Darren, having his intellect ‘in control’ is preferable. This is threatened by an experience of fear that brings *emotion* to the fore, reflecting a perception of the rational/emotional divide (Sachs & Blackmore, 1998) in Darren’s thinking. Darren perceives emotion (in this case, fear) as a liability, and as a threat to his capability to manage the situation.

## Regaining control

For Darren, the incident with the angry parent was resolved when his intellect came back into control: “I just snapped back into gear and thought ‘Right. This is what I’ve got to do”. Darren’s agency is part of his response to feeling fear, although his account emphasized his mystification he felt as to *how* he regained the capacity to act: “to this day … I don’t know how it worked, I honestly don’t. I have no reason why or how”. Regardless, it is clear that part of Darren’s reaction to fear was moving through the fear experience to regain a sense of action, rationality and control. His action also involved regaining affirmation from the offending party: Darren insisted that the person address him respectfully before he would engage in conversation.

Unsurprisingly, Darren’s response was rational in nature: “I like to think my way through. And think with a visual in mind—how it should look, how I should act and feel ...”. In this way, cognitive processes were important to Darren, and were a way of exerting control over the situation. He could understand, analyze, process and reframe experiences, and in doing so, exert a form of control. Darren also discussed using “self-talk” to manage anxiety. He would tell himself: “it doesn’t just happen to me! I’m not the only one in the world that this happens to”. Darren’s self-talk combats feelings of anxiety by reminding himself that he is not alone. In this sense, fear is linked to being alone or isolated. If he can convince himself that he is not alone, the

fear is allayed. Isolation is a known facet of school leadership (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002b; Kelchtermans et al., 2011); school leaders can be left "… feeling isolated and alone in a world of conflict" (Whitaker, 1996, p. 67). This is exacerbated when in the context of a rural or remote school (Halsey, 2007).

To feel out of control is a frightening experience for a school leader: "There is nothing that frightens school leaders as much as feeling helpless and impotent" (Maslin-Ostrowski & Ackerman, 2000, p. 223). For Darren, resolving the fear experience was about regaining control: when threatened by the angry parent and the knife-wielding student, he was conscious of using intellect to manage these situations through to their respective successful resolutions. He had re-established control and preserved his own safety in both situations.

Earlier in the interview, when discussing the nature of fear and a range of descriptors for fear, Darren had identified "worry" and "concern" with the experience of fear. He said "… another word that really has a big bearing around these is control. How much control have I got over it? ... See, with behaviour, I don't have control over it. Like anything, we can't *make* someone behave in a certain way". The issue of control will be discussed more extensively with later participants, but Darren identifies the lack of control that school leaders feel with feelings of fear. It is worth noting that, in Darren's role as a deputy principal, behaviour management was a significant aspect of his job, leading to the potential for frequent feelings of being out of control, and hence, for fear.

The fear of being out of control or losing control was a significant part of Darren's feelings of fear. This occurred when he felt physically or emotionally threatened. He

felt fearful when he was not able to operate rationally, and when events were unpredictable. Regaining control, as well as utilizing strategies of planning and preparation, helped alleviate Darren's feelings of fear.

## *Feeling fear with expectations and responsibility*

At times, Darren experienced feelings of fear when he was in situations of responsibility. This should not be surprising for a study on school leaders; responsibility is foundational to school leadership due to the nature of the context. In Darren's account of the student on the roof, he provided insight about his thought processes:

> All I'm thinking about when those kids are on the roof is duty of care, duty of care, duty of care. And, it's going through my mind, what if this kid does jump? Have I done everything and put everything in place? … if I have to go to court, have I covered my bases?

Fear is experienced for a variety of reasons. Apart from any underlying concern about the student's welfare, school leaders experience fear associated with the responsibility of their position. As Darren's account describes, the heightened responsibility for ensuring adherence to policy and good governance of a school can weigh heavily on a school leader in a time of crisis. As a school leader, Darren was not only dealing with a potentially traumatic situation, but was also dealing with his own feelings regarding the possibility of censure, penalties or damage to reputation should his professional practice be called into question by an undesirable or even tragic event. Darren describes this experience as "very draining". Darren's account portrayed the business of a school leader's role: not only is he/she exposed to

potentially high drama situations like the one described above, but school leaders can deal with more than one (multiple) stressful situations in the course of their professional practice. Later in the interview, he says

> … it wasn't just that boy I had to get. There were other kids running around the school as well … at the end of the day I had to deal with another student because he got king hit in the face as well. And so, it doesn't stop. It's not just one isolated incident. In these communities, it's sometimes up to ten in a day. And you just go home and you want to just flake out on the lounge because you are just physically and emotionally exhausted.

Experiences of fear can be stressful for school leaders, and these experiences can compound and increase pressure in what is already a stressful role. As Darren says, this can take both a physical and an emotional toll on a leader. Darren's account also described specific challenges that arise for school leaders working in rural/remote contexts. Expectations of dealing with broader issues than (for example, staff housing) puts added pressure on school leaders and starts to blur boundaries between work and personal life. As Darren said, "once your day has finished, it really hasn't".

Stress can affect school leaders in a negative way (Sorenson, 2007; Wells & Klocko, 2015). Emotional exhaustion has been linked to school leader burnout (Whitaker, 1996). In a discussion of stresses upon school leaders in the US context, Sogunro (2012) warns about some of the dangers of being exposed to long term stress: "Unabated high stress levels have been known to predispose stressees to serious psychological, physiological, physical and socioemotional problems" (p. 665). Some of these include: "… nerve disorders, depression, cardiovascular diseases, fatigue,

migrane headaches, backaches, … ulcers, upset stomach, insomnia … frustration, outbursts of anger and panic attacks, unremitting tension and anxiety, high rates of alcoholism, confusion, helplessness and lingering feelings of inadequacy", even "job impairment, reduced efficiency and overall school effectiveness" (Sogunro, 2012, p. 665). Both for an individual, and for a school, long term stressors can be harmful.

Darren's story of the student on the roof highlights the impact that a sense of responsibility can have on a school leader in a time of crisis. His position of responsibility opens him up to the risk of future censure, should he be judged not to have followed procedure in his handling of the situation. The risk to his reputation is real. Crisis situations are one example of the fear attached to not following protocols, whilst fears to do with expectations of leadership are also part of Darren's experience. Later on, Darren talked about "compliance" in relation to feeling fear in his professional role:

> I would have to use fear with another adjoining word: compliance. You know, you're told to do something—go and do it—you don't really have the tools to do it and they still expect results. And I think that could make you fearful, and fearful of many things. Fearful of your job, socially—are you going to be seen as insignificant, inexperienced. Especially the leadership roles as well. Fear would be compliance.

Darren's fear in this situation was around whether he was performing well and how he was perceived as a leader. Frustration is also evident at a perceived injustice: he felt that he was expected to produce results without being equipped, making "bricks without straw". Darren's fear was socially situated: his leadership reputation was at stake. To fail—even with good reason—can have potentially negative social and professional consequences, of which school leaders are acutely aware.

In this case, Darren is aware of the potential damage to reputation, position, and how he is viewed as a leader. The fear here seems to be of being portrayed as “insignificant, inexperienced” in contrast to being a strong leader. Darren is experiencing a sense of frustration around being expected to perform without being adequately equipped.

Responsibility has been acknowledged as a fear-inducing aspect of a school leader’s role (see Chapter 2). The pressures of being accountable for what happens in a school can be strong, particularly for new leaders (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Strong accountability demands from central office were highlighted in a study on principal burnout (Whitaker, 1996). Leadership reputations can be fragile but there is the pressure to portray the image of a leader who excels on every level (Starr, 2009). Appearing strong is a priority for school leaders (Gallant & Riley, 2013), whose professional reputation and future promotion potential could be affected by how others perceive their leadership skill. More will be discussed later on the notion of heroic leadership and how feelings of fear can arise out of idealized leadership notions.

Fear was experienced in situations when Darren felt he lacked control. He valued the place of reason, rationality and intellect as a method of dealing with fear. For Darren, fear was managed when he was once again able to apply rationality and intellect to the situation to create a course of action. He spoke several times about the mystery of this process: he seemed unaware of exactly how he was able to begin to reason and problem-solve in the situation, but was glad that he was. The ability to process and act with agency could also be construed as a method of control that Darren gained in the situation; hence, his fear was managed. Several of his fear narratives

involved times when he lacked control, such as experiencing threats to his physical and emotional wellbeing and the unpredictability of these situations. The link between unpredictability and fear is explained with Darren's identification as a "planner": one who enjoys being organized and prepared. Unpredictable experiences can defy attempts at control; hence can be sources of fear for school leaders.

Darren also experienced fear in the tensions between expectations and results, and in perceived threats to his leadership identity. Yet, he also admitted that, in certain situations, fear could be positive if it came as a challenge that he could take on and conquer. About this kind of fear, Darren says "It's a good and positive fear. It's one that doesn't hold you back. It's just one that says … go and own it".


*Figure 1.* Dimensions of Darren's fear experiences

# *Sandy:* "Will I ever be ready?"

## Introducing Sandy

I met Sandy through a mutual friend. When finding out about her field of work, I approached her to see if she would be interested in participating in the study, which she agreed to do. At the time of the interview, Sandy was a relatively young (under 40) female deputy principal in a regional government R-12 school. She was part way through a five-year contract as a deputy principal in the school, and was considering if she would apply for a principalship at the end of that time. This seemed to be an area of concern for Sandy; on multiple occasions during the interview she referred to her professional future. Despite having won a leadership award, she was acutely aware of the challenges that presented themselves as part of carrying out her leadership role, particularly in regard to her youth and gender. The following themes emerged from Sandy's fear experiences: feeling fear with loss of control (as the target of someone's anger, in the face of unpredictability, over her personal time should she seek a promotion), feeling fear when unsupported, and feeling fear around expectations (including issues of gender and emotion).

## Sandy's fear narratives

When asked to recount an experience of fear, Sandy described her encounter with an irate and emotional parent:

> So the end of the first term, it was the very last day of school. I'd done a science experiment in my class … But I'd grabbed one of the kid's water bottles, and used some of the water in the science experiment. I put it back. Anyway, used some of it, and there wasn't much left, so the parent came in at 4.30. She'd … driven home,

> come back and screamed and yelled at me because her daughter had filled her water bottle up with water out of the tap at school. Absolutely went crazy in the office at me (laughs). And I couldn't get a word in, she was just absolutely irate. And I was just like—because it was just near Anzac Day … and I thought maybe I've done something politically not right, maybe I've done something wrong … and she was going on about the water bottle. And I was like, 'WHAT?' (laughs)

She continued her recount:

> And I think all the staff were having drinks in the staff room, so they could hear the yelling that was going on from her and I pretty much just had to ignore it ... my heart was in my throat going really fast and I think the principal didn't come out, he just stood behind the door like off the side and listened, cause he's like ... yeah if he comes out he escalates it or takes over me dealing with it. And at the time I was really cross at him, because I was like (makes frustrated sound) 'could have come out and helped me' but time passed and I went—yeah, like, just you being in this role changes the dynamics of situations, so … you know … I lived. I went and … sat … down with my drink and inside I was like shaking, I can't believe she did that.

She later reflected on the intersection of unpredictability, fear and pressure to perform:

> And I guess the stuff that you *do* really worry about doesn't happen very often (like the person yelling in the front office or the staff member being incredibly obnoxious or you know threatened by power or whatever) but when it does happen it's usually out of the blue … I like to think about things and make sure I say things right and … mull over it in my head but in those situations you're kind of put on the spot to (draws a breath) say the right thing or don't say the right thing and either calm it down or

> inflame it … that only happens with practice though so we actually have to do it and have to make mistakes …

Sandy's account reflects her frustration around the impromptu nature of these situations: time to prepare a well-crafted response to the specific situation is a luxury that she is not afforded.

The sheer time commitment of a school leader's role was also a daunting factor that Sandy associated with experiencing fear: "I guess that's the main fear stuff is like: [lists some other fears), all the time it takes—and it *is* a fear, like I felt quite emotional talking about it cause it just like … takes so much of my time". She recounts:

> And I was like, yeah, 5 years as a deputy seems like plenty and … you know, I'll try to move on to principal after that. But I watch what my principal does, and I'm just like—whew! And I guess it's fear about the next step. Like do I really want to get there? Do I *really* want to do that? Is being a principal sacrificing more of my personal time? Because this job already takes up *so* much of my personal time.

For Sandy, fear about the implications of the time commitment required for a principal's role was a factor in her decision about whether to take on greater leadership responsibilities.

Sandy's account contained tensions surrounding how her leadership was perceived, both by herself and by others. She recounted her feelings after winning an educational leadership award:

Sandy: … in October I won an award as a leader, so—excellence in public education award—and you know it was a lovely week and all that, and then I went back to school next week and I was like—in my head I was just like, 'You've got to prove it, like you've got to make sure it's OK now because there will be members of staff that are watching, going 'Why did she win it?'' Um and I you know was in this little bubble of 'I won it, this is so exciting and lovely' and then when I went back to work I was just like—not everyone's got the goodwill towards you—yeah, there was just a couple of males, probably the ones that gave me the hard time earlier on that I would think would be looking at it and just going 'Why did she get it? What's she doing?' Like, 'Look at that, she can't even do that right, she messed that up … some of that pressure I know comes internally and, you know, drives you to be better at your job …

Int.: A highly scrutinized kind of position

Sandy: Yeah. Yeah, yep. And a little bit I think—some, not everyone—some people are very unforgiving for leadership as well, like you have to be … almost like royalty. You can't make a mistake. You've got to do everything the right way. And it's just not possible to—(laughs) it's just not possible at all to do it that way. Yeah. And I think often I'm trying to work to make sure that that *doesn't* happen but it is impossible.

Despite the public affirmation of her leadership capability, Sandy remains a victim to fears of criticism and judgement. Her perception of how others might judge her leadership performance brings about feelings of fear. She also experiences a confusing paradox, where leadership mistakes are simultaneously viewed as both unacceptable, and inevitable. Mistakes cannot be made, yet will certainly be made. In this paradox, certain failure is the only outcome: a fear-inducing scenario indeed.

Some of Sandy's fear narratives centre around challenges regarding her gender and her youth. As she said, "because you're a young female in the job and you've got to say how it goes, I think there are members of staff who don't like that". Sandy was acutely aware of the nuances of her leadership role. She struggled with balancing what she perceived to be two aspects of her leadership role: to "assert your power" and, simultaneously, "to look after the relationship". When conflicts arose she did not feel comfortable raising the gender issue with her principal: "I don't want to be seen as ... using the 'woman card'". Sandy described another situation of an emotional confrontation with a staff member:

> And he came into my office, and he *was,* he was getting angry and he was yelling. Not yelling, but his voice was big—voice—big gruff man and his voice was getting louder and louder and—like, I'm from a Polish background, I'm used to fighting, I don't have a problem with fighting, I can, I can do it (I: laughs) but I don't want to do it at work. But he was just getting louder and louder and I was getting louder and louder back at him and I just—it was just no-win situation because he was just being so like pig-headed about it all.

She described her reaction: "But yeah, no, heart was beating, I was trembling afterwards but I think it was that like adrenaline like 'fight or flight', and I was fighting, so …". As a woman in a leadership position, Sandy felt that it was important to take the response she did, in order her response to emphasize her worth and standing. As she said: "… if I'd sat there and taken it I don't think I could because again it's that female/male role where I'm being really passive and letting him talk to me like that whereas I was like—gonna shove it back at you because you can't talk to me like that". Sandy was keenly aware of the gendered implications inherent in her response

to the situation: she did not want to perpetuate gendered stereotypes by appearing "passive".

In Sandy's interview, emotion was sometimes portrayed as a liability to leadership. She described her principal—a leader who did not express emotion in situations of heightened emotion:

> He's good at that, he's really cool as a cucumber kind of person, not much bothers him. (I: yeah, yeah) And I think that's why I like working for him, cause … I mean (sigh), he probably doesn't realize it but he's role modelling all the time to me, this stuff and the stuff that I really – this is the stuff that I need to get better at as a person to be better as a leader. These are like the – I guess my shortcomings that I'm trying to address to help me be a better leader and a better person,

On another occasion she talked about how her principal handled a similarly emotionally charged situation:

> … the [principal] I'm with now is fantastic, I watch him all the time … to see how he handles it, and how calm he is. One time a staff member came in and just yelled at him at like, first thing in the morning, and I went and talked to him afterwards and said, 'Are you OK?' Like, I said 'Your heart must be beating so fast.' And he said 'Nah. I just sat there and looked at him, told him to leave and it was done'. And I was just like—but (gesture?). But he's at the end of his career, I'm at the beginning of my career (both laugh) so that's what I'm aiming to get to, where it's not like, someone's yelling at me, they're literally just blowing off steam, and I'll just listen and nod and deal with the situation not the actual emotions.

Sandy aspires to remain unaffected by emotion in her leadership practice. This reveals insights of her perception regarding the relationship between leadership and emotion. More about this will be discussed in the next section, “Analysis of Sandy’s account”.

## Analysis of Sandy’s account

For Sandy, experiencing fear was linked with the nature of her work. As a deputy principal, her day–to–day role involved dealing with people: subsequently, many of Sandy’s fear experiences occurred in a context of personal interaction (with parents, students or staff). She said: “The thing that always worried me was the people skills. Like, dealing with conflict, like having to control your own emotions and your own responses like is actually quite … exhausting”. Dealing with conflicts between people is a common aspect of school leadership (Sogunro, 2012), meaning that the circumstances of a school leader’s role provide plenty of possible triggers for feeling fearful.

Sandy’s fear experiences have been organized under the following themes: feeling fear as the loss of control (being the target of someone’s anger, unpredictability, the time commitment of leadership), feeling fear when unsupported, and feeling fear around expectations (idealized leadership and issues of gender and emotion).

### *Feeling fear as the loss of control*

Loss of control was a significant theme in Sandy’s narratives. Originally the following three themes were discussed separately, but upon reflection, they were all felt to contain an element of lacking control, hence, have been grouped together under the heading of “loss of control”.

## Feeling fear as the target of someone's anger

In her recount of the 'water bottle incident', Sandy described the experience of dealing with an irate parent who yelled at her because of Sandy's actions during a science experiment. For Sandy, it was a fear-inducing experience to be the brunt of another's verbal and emotional tirade. The language Sandy uses to describe this situation is itself extreme, reflecting the intensity of the experience for her ("screamed and yelled", "went crazy", "absolutely irate"). In Sandy's experience of fear, she herself was the target of the parent's anger. For many school leaders, including other participants from this study, being present in situations of heightened emotion is an experience which can lead to feelings of fear.

Experiences like Sandy's demonstrate that, for school leaders, fear can be triggered by being the target of others' negative emotions. This is also the case in fields other than school leadership. In a study on therapists' reactions to anger in their clients, it was noted that "80% of surveyed therapists indicated that they felt afraid or angry when clients were verbally abusive toward them" (Hill et al., 2003, p. 475). Similarly, expressions of anger from clients "provoke fear and alarm" (Chapman & Rosenthal, 2016, p. 119) for therapists. In the same way, school leaders experience fear when confronted with individuals who are physically or emotionally hostile and aggressive. Tensions caused by the emotion-laden nature of school leader's work have been previously documented: Gronn (2009) has "dealing with angry parents" (p. 206) on his list of "principal role associated hazards" (p. 206) and Sogunro (2012) comments that "principals … are easily predisposed to stressful situations" (p. 665). For many school leaders, being present in situations of heightened emotion is an experience which can lead to feelings of fear.

In addition to the fear of being the brunt of a tirade (with potential consequences for the individual's physical or emotional harm), a school leader's fear could also arise from a perceived lack of control of the situation: What might happen? How 'out of control' will this situation get? Am I in danger? Can I 'manage' the other person's response? If not, what implications does this have for my leadership? (this final point will be elaborated upon under the theme of 'expectations'). To be threatened is to experience a situation in which one lacks control of one's safety or reputation. A perceived lack of control can, therefore, be a fearful experience—as it was for Sandy.

## Feeling fear in the face of unpredictability

Another element of Sandy's fear experience was its unpredictability. This was exemplified in her experience of dealing with the angry parent: for Sandy, it was a completely unexpected situation. "Out of the blue", "bizarre" and "random" are words she later used to describe this experience of fear. It is significant that this incident occurred after school had finished on a Friday afternoon, during a relaxed 'happy hour': a time when teachers would normally feel their work for the week was done. Sandy had no prior knowledge that it was going to occur, and had not had a chance to prepare how she would respond or what she would say. For Sandy, fear is experienced in the unexpected nature of the incident: it is like a surprise attack. Had she had some warning and had time to develop a strategy, her fear may have been lessened. She is lacking information that would help her deal with the situation (Poirel & Yvon, 2014). For Sandy, having time to think and prepare gives her an element of control over a situation: both in her handling of the situation and in managing the 'performance' of leadership that she is required to give. Unpredictable situations rob school leaders of this sense of control, where they are forced to act quickly and without the benefit of reflection. They have lost some control over their handling of

the situation by having it thrust upon them unexpectedly. The outcome is less certain, and feelings of fear ensue.

As Sandy's account shows, her fear in this situation is also a fear of error—an unplanned response is likely to be wrong. It is the potential for 'leader error' that provides insight into the link between unpredictability and fear in Sandy's experience. Her fear of making a mistake in her handling of the situation compounds what, for her, is already a fearful experience. Sandy is aware that her actions in that moment will have future repercussions: her response will calm or inflame the situation. This is a high stakes decision, with potentially significant repercussions. The pressure on principals to perform at a high level is identified elsewhere (Gronn, 2009; Spillane & Lee, 2014), and Sandy is feeling this pressure. As a leader, she feels responsible to get it right—similar to the "can't be wrong" (Gallant & Riley, 2013, p. 87) leadership mask identified in Gallant and Riley's work. The quest to avoid mistakes becomes a fearful situation for Sandy because of the possibility of failure.

Compounding Sandy's feelings around the pressure upon her leadership performance is her recognition of the *inevitability* of mistakes. Making mistakes is not only a potential area of fear, but—despite her best efforts—a certain one. As she puts it, "we actually have to do it and have to make mistakes". Sandy feels that she has little control in this area: mistakes are both undesirable and unavoidable. The fear of making mistakes in a leadership role is an area that will be discussed in more detail later in the section on 'Feeling fear from expectations'.

## Feeling fearful of the time commitment

The sheer time commitment of a school leader's role was also a daunting factor that Sandy associated with experiencing fear. She specifically justified its inclusion in her interview experiences by linking it to fear: "I guess that's the main fear stuff is like: [lists some other fears), all the time it takes—and it *is* a fear, like I felt quite emotional talking about it cause it just like … takes so much of my time". Sandy's fear of the time commitment is an aspect of control: in this case, that taking a principalship would give her less control over her private time.

For Sandy, fear about the implications of the time commitment required for a principal's role was a factor in her decision about whether to take on greater leadership responsibilities, feeling that the time commitment of a school leadership role has the potential to be overwhelming. Moving to a leadership role would entail more of her "personal time" being demanded of her; hence this constitutes a loss of control over time that had previously been under her control.

Sandy's comments echo the metaphor of the "octopus because … its many legs will take a tight hold on you and suck you in before you realize what has happened …" (Linn et al., 2007, p. 168). The time commitment of a school leadership role has the potential to overwhelm the individual. Being a deputy principal allows Sandy to see first-hand what the role of principal might entail, and the pressure of the time commitment, for her, is a fear-inducing element of this. Sandy is not alone in her concerns of the time commitment of a principal's role: "juggling time" (Sachs & Blackmore, 1998, p. 276) was a theme also identified in Sachs and Blackmore's study on women school leaders in Queensland, Australia. Aspects of this need to be made clear in principal preparation programmes, as the time commitment for school

leaders can be high: 55% of Australian principals in a study worked “upwards of 51-56 hours per week during term” (Riley, 2016, p. 8). Sandy’s fear, it appears, is well founded.

## *Feeling fear when unsupported*

As well as experiencing fear associated with loss of control through unpredictable and threatening situations, the social context is another factor of Sandy’s fear experience. The confrontation with the parent occurred in a public space (her colleagues could overhear the incident) and she was not supported by her principal. Even though afterwards she acknowledged the reason for him not stepping in to help her, her reaction at the time was anger at his perceived lack of support. This experience is a stressful one for Sandy: she is playing a “toxic handler” (Frost & Robinson, 1999) role to manage the emotions of an angry parent, and she is the brunt of a verbal tirade taking place in a public forum, where her peers can hear what is going on. There is potential for Sandy to be experiencing feelings of shame (Was it something I did? What will my colleagues think of me?) and threat to her emotional wellbeing. It would not seem unreasonable for Sandy to want support in this situation, but she was left on her own to handle it. For Sandy, this experience of fear was one in which she did not receive support from an expected source. Support is critical for leaders (Beatty, 2000; Gallant & Riley, 2013; Woods, 2010), as is discussed in more detail in the following chapter (Chapter 5). Sandy’s case demonstrates a link between lack of support and feelings of fear.

## *Feeling fear around expectations*

Expectations surrounding leadership played a significant role in Sandy's experiences of fear. For Sandy, feelings of fear were triggered: both from her perception of others' expectations of her (as a leader), and her own expectations about leadership. The fear arose from actually or potentially failing to live up to an idealized image of leadership (whether it was an image held by Sandy herself, or an image that she believed was held by others). For Sandy, part of her fear experience around not living up to expectations was linked with issues of gender and emotion.

One of Sandy's fear narratives was a recount of a time when she won an award for educational leadership. This pinnacle of professional success may seem an odd inclusion in a conversation around fear, yet, for Sandy, this seemed to emphasize negative emotional aspects of her work situation. In this narrative, Sandy's fear is twofold: from her own internal expectations and from her perception of others' judgements: "Look at that, she can't even do that right". Fear is evident even in the middle of success for Sandy—she had just won a public award for professional excellence, justifying her above average professional skills, and yet, the fear remains. She must now live up to the award she has just received. She has high standards for herself, and she feels that others have high standards for her leadership.

Sandy's narrative describes two vying contexts of leadership experience. One is the award ceremony, which she describes as a "bubble". Bubbles imply a sealed hermetic container, a protective barrier against the outside world. The leadership award ceremony and the days that surrounded it were that kind of bubble for Sandy, a safe environment in which her skills were celebrated and she was affirmed.

Bubbles, however, also imply a sense of fragility. Just as a bubble bursts easily and is temporary in nature, so too, Sandy experienced that returning to normal life was like leaving the bubble. She was vulnerable and exposed to the potentially negative judgements of others. In this way, her workplace is not a safe emotional space for Sandy. Her workplace can be a place where she is vulnerable to attack, and therefore, fearful.

Sandy feels that her professional leadership performance is the object of others' scrutiny. Her recounting of some of her 'self-talk' later in her interview demonstrates her concerns over whether she is doing a good job (self-expectations), and whether she is being perceived by others to be doing a good job (her perception of others' expectations). She puts it like this: "… am I doing enough? Am I doing the right thing? Am I wasting time? Should I be doing this? Am I being efficient? Do other teachers think I'm being efficient?" Sandy is conscious that, as a leader, she is operating in a public forum. Her actions are the focus of others' scrutiny in a way that her previous professional roles may not have been. Feeling fear in regard to expectations—both of herself and others—is a significant aspect of Sandy's professional role.

For Sandy, fear is experienced as she encounters the possibility that she might not live up to expectations. For a school leader, grappling with the gap between idealized leadership perception (whether it is from others or from the leader him/herself) and the actual practice of leadership can be linked with feelings of fear. The power of expectations has been noted by other authors: "Performativity is … about judgements about the self and whether you or others feel or perceive whether you measure up" (Blackmore, 2004, p. 441). Part of Sandy's fear experience is located in

performativity, regardless of whether it originates from her own standards or from others'. Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski question the basis of some of the expectations leaders experience: whether they are "… attempting to live up to an impossible heroic mythology – the result of all the powerful and subtle projections followers tend to place on their leaders" (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, pp. 313-314). Starr points out that "the principalship demands an extraordinary amount from otherwise ordinary human beings" (Starr, 2009, p. 13). Sandy's fear is based on the intangible but nevertheless powerful expectation that as a leader, she must excel and deliver high performance—otherwise she might be judged as having failed. In this way, Sandy's fear can be described as a fear of failure.

## The inevitability of failure

Living with a fear of failure would be difficult enough, but Sandy's narrative opens up another way in which fear can affect a school leaders' experience: the **inevitability** of failure. The thing that is feared (failure) is, on some level, certain to come to pass. Perfection is not possible. Mistakes will be made. No amount of strategizing, hard work or good intentions will enable a flawless practice that lives up to everybody's expectations. Sandy captures this well when she says, "You've got to do everything the right way. And it's just not possible". So, Sandy lives with the fear of potential failure, *and* with the fear of certain failure: a worrying prospect indeed.

Sandy experiences fear linked with the expectations that she feels about how well she will be 'performing' as a leader. She is aware of a perception that exists by which she will be judged—that leaders are infallible. At the same time, she acknowledges that, in the practice of leadership, mistakes will be made. Expectations will remain unmet, and people will be disappointed. Sandy's experience represents a paradox of

leadership: the fear of failure experienced alongside the inevitability of failing. In this way, the fears are confirmed. It is not difficult to see the stressful aspect of a school leadership role demonstrated in Sandy's experience, and why this kind of experience might deter others (as well as herself) from undertaking a leadership role.

## A template for action

On a more positive note, whilst expectations of leadership were a source of fear for Sandy, they also provided a template for her actions. Sandy found it helpful to adopt the persona of a leader: acting how she knew a leader 'should' act despite her own feelings or reluctance to engage. She later put it like this: "… there's stuff … I'm worried about doing or I feel scared of doing and it's kind of like, 'I have a job. I have to put on a different persona. And I have to just do it". Here, her own expectations around leadership served an *enabling* purpose for Sandy: they provided both a guide and a motivation for her to act. Adopting the persona of a 'leader' was a way of dealing with fear: it allowed her to know what she needed to do and spurred her to carry out difficult or intimidating tasks. She recalls, when feeling intimidated by being surrounded by a group of Year 10 boys, thinking "My heart's beating really fast. That's strange that I feel that way. But I'm the deputy principal, get on with it". This 'different persona' is Sandy's perception of the idealized leader, who acts without (or at least in spite of) fear. Sandy is engaged in Hochschild's concept of "deep acting", where "we try to stir up a feeling we wish we had, and at other times we try to block or weaken a feeling we wish we did not have" (Hochschild, 1983, pp. 42-43). In this instance, Sandy is blocking fear, and endeavoring to express the confidence and assertiveness that are more in keeping with her image of an idealized leader. Hence, expectations enable her leadership practice.

## *Feeling fear around issues of gender and emotionality*

Some of Sandy's fear narratives centre around challenges regarding her gender and her youth. As she said, "because you're a young female in the job and you've got to say how it goes, I think there are members of staff who don't like that". She was aware of people within her workplace who had difficulty with her exercising authority. Sandy was acutely aware of the nuances of her leadership role. She struggled with balancing what she perceived to be two aspects of her leadership role: to "assert your power" and, simultaneously, "to look after the relationship". Sandy even questioned whether male leaders exhibited the depth of concern for maintaining relationships that she did: she felt that, as a woman, her concern for relationships was a central, yet draining aspect of her leadership. When conflicts arose she did not feel comfortable raising the gender issue with her principal: "I don't want to be seen as ... using the 'woman card'".

Sandy's interview was highly self-reflective, so it is perhaps no surprise that, being a woman and a leader, issues of gender emerged in her narratives. The challenges faced by female leaders in exerting authority have been noted elsewhere: "Male principals … appear not to have so much of the expressive and contrary interpersonal aspects to deal with at the outset of establishing themselves as school leaders, as do the female leaders in this study" (Halsey, 2007, p. 73). Much has been written on the challenges facing women in leadership positions (Greyling & Steyn, 2015; Whitehead, Andretzke, & Binali, 2018). Prejudice can exist even when it is not expected. In a study on women's leadership in rural schools, the participants discovered "implied prejudices" (Gilbert, 2012, p. 44) despite not expecting to see "gender barriers" (p. 44) when they undertook principal roles. These challenges can add to the complexity of what is already a difficult role: "There is considerable

challenge facing novice principals, particularly if they are single and female, in small rural schools" (Clarke & Wildy, 2005, p. 54). Men can have a social advantage in their practice of leadership: "male principals located in rural communities have historically been more able to control social space than their female counterparts" (Clarke & Stevens, 2006, p. 14). Whilst Sandy's school was not small, and was regional rather than rural, her narratives give evidence of very real challenges.

Another theme that emerged from Sandy's fear narratives was that of emotion: feeling emotion and displaying emotion. It is sometimes difficult to separate the discussion of emotion from the discussion of gender, as both themes are intertwined. In Sandy's description of an emotional confrontation with one of her staff members (the "big gruff man"), Sandy described her reaction of fear: "But yeah, no, heart was beating, I was trembling afterwards but I think it was that like adrenaline like 'fight or flight', and I was fighting, so …". Sandy experienced fear in a situation of highly charged emotion (a not uncommon situation where a school leader is bearing the brunt of an emotional encounter with a staff member—as can be seen in other participants' interviews). She responded with a similar level of emotion, and, upon reflection, she saw the fact that she had 'stood up' to him as a positive thing. For Sandy, despite feeling fear, her reaction was demonstrating that she had power and agency in that situation. As a woman in a leadership position, Sandy felt that her response was an important one to take to emphasize her worth and standing. As she said: "… if I'd sat there and taken it I don't think I could because again it's that female/male role where I'm being really passive and letting him talk to me like that whereas I was like—gonna shove it back at you because you can't talk to me like that". Sandy felt that she was challenging the stereotype of a 'passive' female role by

her own assertive response in the face of fear. In this case, the expression of emotion was empowering for Sandy.

However, Sandy's accounts do not always view strong emotional expression as empowering. She also sees it as a liability that is threatening to her leadership. This is demonstrated in the final narrative in which Sandy describes her principal—a leader who does not express emotion in situations of heightened emotion as "cool as a cucumber". Again, this represents an idealized image of leadership for Sandy, in which an ideal leader is unaffected and unemotional in the face of the stresses of school leadership. Later, she marvels at her principal being seemingly unaffected after being yelled at by a staff member. In doing so, she revels her perception of a 'good' leader as one who is not governed by emotion.

Sandy's comments about her admiration of the principal's 'emotionless' style contrast with her censure of her own personal levels of emotional expression. This reflects Sandy's perception about the idealized leader: as one who is always in control of his/her emotions, or one who does not seem to feel them at all. It then becomes problematic when she notices aspects of her experience that do not correspond with this dictum of emotional control: in the interview she referred to "my shortcomings that I'm trying to address to help me be a better leader and a better person". A gap is being identified between Sandy's perception of a "good" leader, and her judgement of her own practice. The feeling of fear leads to questioning and self-doubt about her leadership performance and potential. One might wonder why Sandy sees her emotionality (whether it be experiencing her emotions or controlling her emotions) as a flawed aspect of her character. Does possessing strong feelings *really* make her less of a 'leader'? Does expressing these feelings make her less of a leader?

Sandy is experiencing what Sachs and Blackmore refer to as a “highly gendered” work environment where “women … are excluded by dominant images of ‘good leadership’ and particular hegemonic cultures” (Sachs & Blackmore, 1998, p. 267). In Sandy’s case she is feeling the gendered expectations from both others and from own ideas of leadership, as is evidenced at her concern over her own levels of emotionality. Sachs and Blackmore (1998) argue that “… women in traditional male positions are faced with the dilemma of balancing rationality, as demanded by institutional norms, and the affective dimension of emotionality, which for them is a preferred mode of negotiating social situations” (p. 268). Sandy is feeling torn between her perception of idealized ‘emotionless’ leadership, and her lived experience of emotion in her leadership practice. Reconciling them is, for her, a problematic issue.

The gap between feeling and expressing emotion is conceptualized as emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). School leadership is likely to involve emotional labour due to the complexity of the social structure that is a school, and “behavior rules and emotional intelligence serve to regulate the emotions of people working in a school” (Sachs & Blackmore, 1998, p. 270). A level of emotional self-control is part of the expected requirement for a school leader; principals do not like to be seen as not having control over their emotions (Crawford, 2009). Nevertheless, expression of a negative emotion (such as anger, as Sandy demonstrated) leaves her—as a woman—vulnerable to negative appraisals of her leadership in a way that a male leader would not be. Marian Court puts it like this: “… the expression of anger has been seen as culturally acceptable for men, but not for women … negative terms such as dragon, spitfire, bitch and nag are applied to women and girls, but not to men and boys” (Court, 1995, p. 151). Sachs and Blackmore (1998) point out that men’s

anger is not described in the same way. In this way, Sandy's expression of emotion has gendered implications: she is more likely to be judged because of her emotional expression than a male leader might be.

Sandy perceives emotion as untrustworthy; something that may weaken rather than enhance leadership practice. There are gendered implications in this perception: the rational (traditionally 'male') focus is often favored in leadership theory and practice over the emotional (traditionally 'female') focus (Sachs & Blackmore, 1998). It should be pointed out, however, that the conception of the emotionless leader has been challenged in literature: for example, Blackmore talks about "the emotional and messy work of … leading" (Blackmore, 2004, p. 439), and Crawford says "… emotion is with leaders all the time, whether they acknowledge this consciously or not" (Crawford, 2009, p. 15). Sandy can be reassured that the truly emotionless leader might not exist.

For Sandy, fear is in the gap between an idealized perception of a 'good' leader (in terms of lack of emotionality or emotional control) and encountering her own emotions in the lived experience of her job. This tension results in fear: for Sandy, she experiences fear that she is falling short as a leader. It is worth noting Beatty's (2000, p. 340) comments on the difficulties for women leaders:

> When being known means being known for one's authentic self, and one's authentic (female) self is inherently marginal to the dominant organizational culture, the resulting potential for cognitive and emotional dissonance is worthy of consideration ...

Sandy's reflection upon the challenges that she would realistically face are putting her off moving to the next level of leadership.

For Sandy, fear was experienced in both specific situations and in a generalized, longer term anxiety. Sandy's choice of experiences demonstrates a pivotal aspect of researching school leaders' lived experience of fear: that is, that fear is not limited by temporal and situational constraints. It can be identified in specific, bounded experiences (such as Sandy's account of a parent 'yelling' at her outside the staffroom on a Friday afternoon), but, equally, is manifest as long term worry ("… the biggest thing that's always worried me is …").

Sandy experienced fear in situations where she felt a loss of control. She experienced feelings of fear when being a target of another person's anger. Inability to predict and therefore prepare for situations was part of making an experience a 'fearful' one, as was the possibility of making a mistake in the handling of a situation. The time commitment of leadership was a factor that made Sandy fearful, both of the constraints of her current position and in her consideration of moving into a principal's role. Feeling unsupported by those from whom Sandy may have expected support was also a significant aspect of her experience of fear. The people-centric nature of a school leadership role was the forum for Sandy's fears. Expectations (from herself and others) generated fear for Sandy; however, idealized images of leadership also provided her with strength for, and guidance on, how to act in times of feeling fearful. As a young, female leader, Sandy's lived experience of fear and emotion was at odds with her ontological perception of "good" leadership.

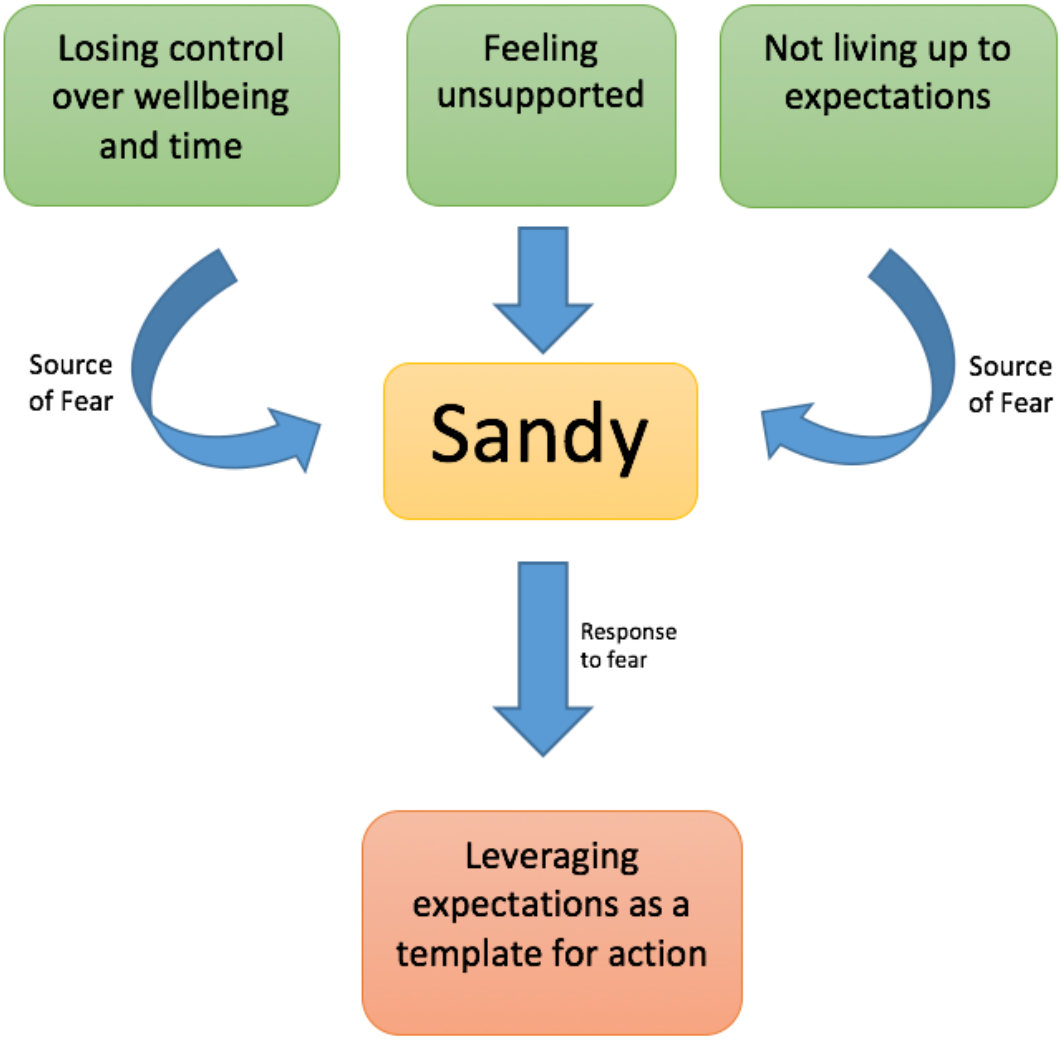


*Figure 2.* Dimensions of Sandy's fear experiences

# *Malcom: "It just became out of hand…"*

## Introducing Malcom

Malcom is a middle-aged, male school principal in an Australian rural/remote context. I met Malcom when he was studying a Masters in Educational Leadership and Management course at university, through which he volunteered to be part of my study. Malcom was a mid-career/experienced school leader with a relational approach and a calm, relaxed conversational style. Malcom presented a calm and objective demeanor in our interview; with a self-reflective and intellectually curious attitude evident when he discussed his own experience of fear. This could have been in part due to his experience as a post graduate student.

## Malcom's fear narratives

Two of Malcom's fear narratives have been included in this section: one, a situation where he was assaulted by a parent, and another which was an ongoing professional conflict with his supervisor. Both accounts have been provided below to maximize the impact of the uninterrupted narrative. From Malcom's two accounts, feelings of fear were evident around themes of physical safety, issues of the unknown, feeling powerless and feeling unsupported.

Malcom described a situation where he had been assaulted by a parent:

> … I was threatened and assaulted by an aggressive parent … when I was principal of a school called (name), it was a prep to Year 12 school and it was in a 100% mining town northwest of (location), so (Australian state) again. There was an altercation with a parent because I disciplined their son. And … both mum and dad came in screaming and dad threatened to take me outside and belt me and he actually

grabbed my shirt and shoved me and so I mean that was fairly confronting stuff. My deputy was in the room at the time and he stood up between us. I don't know if he hadn't have done that what would have transpired. But it just became out of hand. And so you know—I experienced heart pounding, my blood was rushing to my head, you know, feeling sort of … you could feel yourself getting hot from the neck up … I was tense, I noticed that my breathing was increased. So how I managed that situation is that I terminated the interview and I directed him off the school premises. Which he went, but I got a whole earful of … residual behavior. And I contacted the police and I also contacted the mining manager … whom I knew had said to me in the past if we had trouble with any of his employees he needed to know. So I'm not quite sure what happened with all of that … the police, they felt, there was one fellow there and he wasn't the best operator and he himself I think was suffering from stress and such so … that was a bit ineffective there … but I think the mining manager must have interviewed him and I never had any trouble again.

Malcom also recounted a second narrative: one in which he described going through a stressful set of circumstances (including his own ill health and the need to care for an aging family member) that led to altercations with his supervisor.

Malcom: ... you know, very highly stressful, I had three monthly checks for my cancer; my mother in law whose husband had died the year before through cancer and now lost her son through suicide was a mental wreck and so the there was no one else other than [name] my wife and me to help care for her. So there was my care and her care. So I approached my supervisor and told her all of this and said 'Look I, if it's possible, can I be considered for a move to the north side of [city] one to receive treatment and two to care for my mother in law' … and I got a move to [district name] which was 2 hours away … and it … was a very challenging school so I did fly down and I met with the principal and … decided that I wouldn't, that I'm not the right fit for

that school. OK … so I came back to [name of town] and told my supervisor. Now my supervisor used that as a performance discussion … So … in spite of … being upfront with her and talking to her about my personal struggle, she … turned it around and turned it into a performance discussion. What I'm not telling you is that she replaced me in the interim and my replacement time the department were trying to get more females into leadership roles and so with my supervisor she you know she treated all of us as objects not people and she would she had a quota to fill so she was going to get 6 females by … into … these positions and … it was actually my replacement that phoned me to tell me that I had a move … So the whole process was botched and it wasn't transparent it wasn't an open process it was a closed process, so she was covering up her own tracks by then putting the blame on me, and that was very very stressful … We have to go to plan B. So, so it was a performance discussion so I was told that … in her mind that I didn't … value children … – she expected me to perform at that level in any school across [name of state], I tried to have the conversation that it wasn't about my ability to perform it was my … choice and my situation … but anyway we went to Plan B and we moved my mother in law up to [name of town], I was penalized. I lost all my transfer points … so another 3 years at [name of town] but we got my mother in law up, we got her into a miner's cottage and … I had treatment—we were able to organize treatment in [name of city]. Which was 2 hours away. So every three months I had to go for treatment in [name of city]. But I'm all clear now Melinda so there's a … light at the end of that sad tunnel. But you know just I probably had never been so stressed and … in my whole career as that time. A grey cloud had sat over our household for … a little while there but anyway … we dug ourselves out of that situation and went to Plan B and that worked, … I spoke with a counsellor, and told this counsellor all about the situation and … they helped me to build up again and I went into [name of city] and I confronted the supervisor and told – and just said to her you know 'Who questions you?" and I said you know 'I've been unfairly dealt with here ' I said 'I've never given you a reason to question my performance before ' and I said 'What you've done up—you've actually

broken any line of trust I now have with you, I won't be telling you anything anymore'. And … she said 'I'm uncomfortable with this conversation' and you know she terminated the meeting but that was all right, I was able to get out what I needed to get out and I think that was part of my healing … So yeah I didn't go in there with all guns blazing, because that's not me, … and you know … I don't go out of my way to damage relationships with anyone so I … always speak to people with respect but … she just didn't want to hear what I had to say …

## Analysis of Malcom's account

From Malcom's two accounts, feelings of fear were evident around themes of physical safety, issues of the unknown, feeling powerless and feeling unsupported.

### *Feeling fear for physical safety*

Malcom's fear for his own physical safety is evident in both of his accounts. In the first account of the assault, Malcom experienced both actual violence "… he actually grabbed my shirt and shoved me", and a potential threat of even more harm being inflicted on his person, had he not had the timely support of his deputy. This reflects a growing understanding about the risks of violence experienced by school leaders (Bloom, 2013; McAdams & Foster, 2008; Riley, 2016). To suffer violence or threatened violence is not out of the realm of possibility for a school leader: a sobering thought, particularly in a climate where a new generation of school leaders are being sought to replace a retiring demographic. Malcom's account demonstrates that these situations of violence can be fearful experiences for school leaders.

In Malcom's second narrative there is also a suggestion of harm to his physical wellbeing as the narrative is backgrounded against his own experience with cancer. Despite the different source (disease instead of violence) the perceived threat was

still real, as was Malcom's feeling of fear. This should not be surprising, as self-protection "is a natural human instinct" (Duncan-Andrade, 2007, p. 622). In addition, Malcom demonstrates concern for the wellbeing of family for whom he feels responsible. Not only maintaining his own wellbeing, but also the wellbeing of others for whom he cares—and the responsibility that that entails—is part of Malcom's experience of fear.

## *Feeling fear of the unknown*

The second theme that emerges from Malcom's accounts is the 'unknown'. For Malcom, an aspect of experiencing fear is not knowing what the future will hold. This is suggested when he recounts gratefully how his deputy came between him and his attacker: "I don't know…what would have transpired". Fear is in the unknown, the 'what if'? It is not just what presents itself, but the possibility of what might happen.

The fear of the unknown is also echoed in the second narrative, where Malcom emphasizes his frustration over the lack of clarity in the process of his job transfer. Again, the language is that of hiddenness and subterfuge, an 'unknowability' of the processes that lead to this decision: "wasn't transparent", "wasn't an open process", "a closed process", and "covering up her own tracks". Fear, for Malcom, was present in a situation where he felt that he did not know what was going on. It is ironic that this was happening against the backdrop of his own illness, a similarly 'unknowable' aspect of his lived experience at the time.

It has been noted that "restricted information" (Oestreich, 1995, p. 10) strengthens workplace fear. Schmidt advocates for as much knowledge as possible to enable leaders to deal with fears (Schmidt, 2009). Although her comments relate to broader

systemic and administrative contexts, they still apply to an individual context such as this: knowledge is indeed power, and knowledge has the potential to alleviate fear.

## *Feeling fear in powerlessness*

The third theme that comes through in Malcom's account is that of control. Part of each of his narratives of fear included a time when he felt that he had little or no control over the outcome and experienced feelings of powerlessness. In the first narrative, Malcom comments: "it just became out of control". This reflects a normative judgement on his part: that there is something abnormal or wrong about the situation in which he finds himself. One should surely not come to work expecting violence to be committed upon one's person: and yet, in Malcom's case, he found himself a victim of violence. A lack of control can also be detected in Malcom's second account (the job transfer), where his attempts to act—in order to produce a better work situation for himself—are thwarted by his supervisor. This creates a sense of powerlessness and helplessness for Malcom as he is caught up in systemic processes over which he has no control.

In both accounts, Malcom's reaction in response to fear was to exert some control over the situation. The language he used to describe his response in the first account is quite proactive, demonstrating Malcom's level of agency in the situation: "I terminated the interview", "I directed him off the premises", "I contacted the police…and the mining manager". These are decisive statements that show a sense of personal agency and a resumption of personal control, in contrast to the feelings of powerlessness and victimization that had occurred during the experience.

Moving away from a place of powerlessness is significant; as: “Helplessness in leadership is the shadow at its most obvious—productivity, achievement, winning—these are measures of leadership and the leader. Impotence, powerlessness, and helplessness in all their forms are worse than death for most school leaders” (Maslin-Ostrowski & Ackerman, 2000, p. 223). In this case, fear can be viewed as an emotion associated with ‘the shadow’ of leadership. Exerting a measure of control over the situation reduces fear and moves the leader back to a more positive emotional space.

## *Feeling fear when unsupported*

Lastly, a theme of support (its presence or absence) emerges from the narratives. The first narrative has a positive outcome, partially due to the support Malcom received from his deputy (“he stood up between us”) and the mining manager (“I never had any trouble again”). In contrast, the second narrative is one of a fearful situation that is exacerbated by a supervisor’s perceived lack of support. This is particularly hurtful for Malcom as there comes through the narrative an underlying expectation that supervisors will look out for, care for, or support their subordinates. In a time when Malcom is experiencing many fears—for example, his own health and the wellbeing of his immediate family—he feels unsupported from a source where he felt he had a right to expect support. In Malcom’s case, his second narrative demonstrates a link between feeling fear and feeling a sense of abandonment and betrayal. For him, abandonment and betrayal (lack of support) were part of his fear experience. Despite some reference to betrayal (Kelchtermans et al., 2011) and wounding (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004), this is not an area that has been dealt with extensively in literature. An unexpected yet important finding of my study is

the link between fear and a sense of abandonment or betrayal for school leaders that was felt when support did not come from expected sources.

Malcom's reaction to the experience of the second narrative was also to be proactive: first in taking initiative to organize his residence and job, and finally in confronting the person he felt had not supported him adequately. This conversation seemed to have importance for Malcom; he wanted to have a chance to express that he felt an injustice had been committed and advocate for himself: an act of powerful self-affirmation. Even though he had not been supported, he had found the support from somewhere else: himself.

During his interview, Malcom referred to techniques he used to manage situations where he felt anxiety or fear. These could be difficult meetings he had coming up; for example, with a parent who may be angry. These techniques constitute a way in which Malcom was involved in self-support; finding relief or strength from fear and anxiety with mindfulness techniques and emotional management strategies. Mindfulness techniques included:

1. "concentrate on my breathing",
2. "relax",
3. "… grab myself a cup of tea so just try and do something to take the focus off the here and now". Malcom referred to this as a "Thirdspace" (Soja, 1996, as cited in Halsey, 2007, p. 20).

These are examples of strategies of mindfulness, a popular notion for relieving stress for educational leaders (Mahfouz, 2018; Wells, 2013).

During a meeting, Malcom would also employ specific emotional management strategies in order to pre-empt and deflect anger. Firstly, he would “start the conversation off not on topic”. Whilst Malcom did not elaborate why, this technique would open a relational space, providing time for establishing goodwill before the difficult issue was raised. Secondly, if he detected a negative emotional state in the person he was talking to, he would acknowledge and openly address it: “I can see … that you’re upset and … hopefully together we can discuss this and you’ll be feeling a little better by the time we’re finished”. Emotional management strategies were a way in which Malcom practiced self-support.

As well as finding avenues for self-support, Malcom utilized the support of others in potentially difficult meetings by having a “witness” present. For Malcom, this meant bringing another person (his PA) into the meeting. Ostensibly this was to record notes, but, as Malcom said

> … so in actual fact what they’re there to do is to keep me calm and focused on the issue, and also to keep the parent calm, or the staff member calm. See a third person in the room really is quite a powerful thing.

He went on to explain how it affected his experience of fear: “… that’s a calming influence on me as well where I can sort of park the fear or the anxiety for a while and focus on the problem and not my perception of the problem … and my own feelings about it”. The phrase “park the fear or the anxiety” suggests having enough control over negative emotion to be able to distance himself from its effect, rather than being overwhelmed by it. Having another supportive person in the room helped relieve Malcom’s anxiety in these anxiety-producing encounters. Pragmatically, he

also highlighted the value of this strategy for his physical protection: as he said, "… particularly if the parent's aggressive it's also then a safety thing".

Malcom recounted a potentially difficult meeting in which he experienced support:

> I don't like talking to an irate parent … on the phone. I was discussing the Year 10 boy with the mother and the mother just—oh, she went feral on me. It was just you know—I wasn't expecting it—and … I don't think I handled it well on reflection. And I said to her, "Look, … I would really like to meet with you and your husband to … discuss this further". And then that meeting of course all the fear and the anxiety sort of built up a little bit and then I thought, "No". I had my PA in the room, and mum *and* dad came in, and dad was actually a calming influence on mum. And so … it was a very positive meeting and it ended with handshakes and smiles …

Malcom felt fear and anxiety because of the negativity of the previous encounter, and expresses dissatisfaction at his own handling of the situation. Facing the next meeting was, therefore, an anxiety producing experience. Malcom's fear is alleviated with the support of his personal assistant, as well as the student's father.

Malcom's accounts demonstrated several themes of feeling fear: fear for physical safety, fear of the unknown, fear with lack of control or powerlessness and fear when feeling unsupported. He had developed a range of strategies to help him in situations of fear. Many of the fear narratives ended on a positive note: how they had resolved or been opportunities for growth. Malcom was one of the few participants to present a positive view of fear: he acknowledged the inevitability of fear in his role, but viewed situations of fear as potential opportunities for learning or growth.

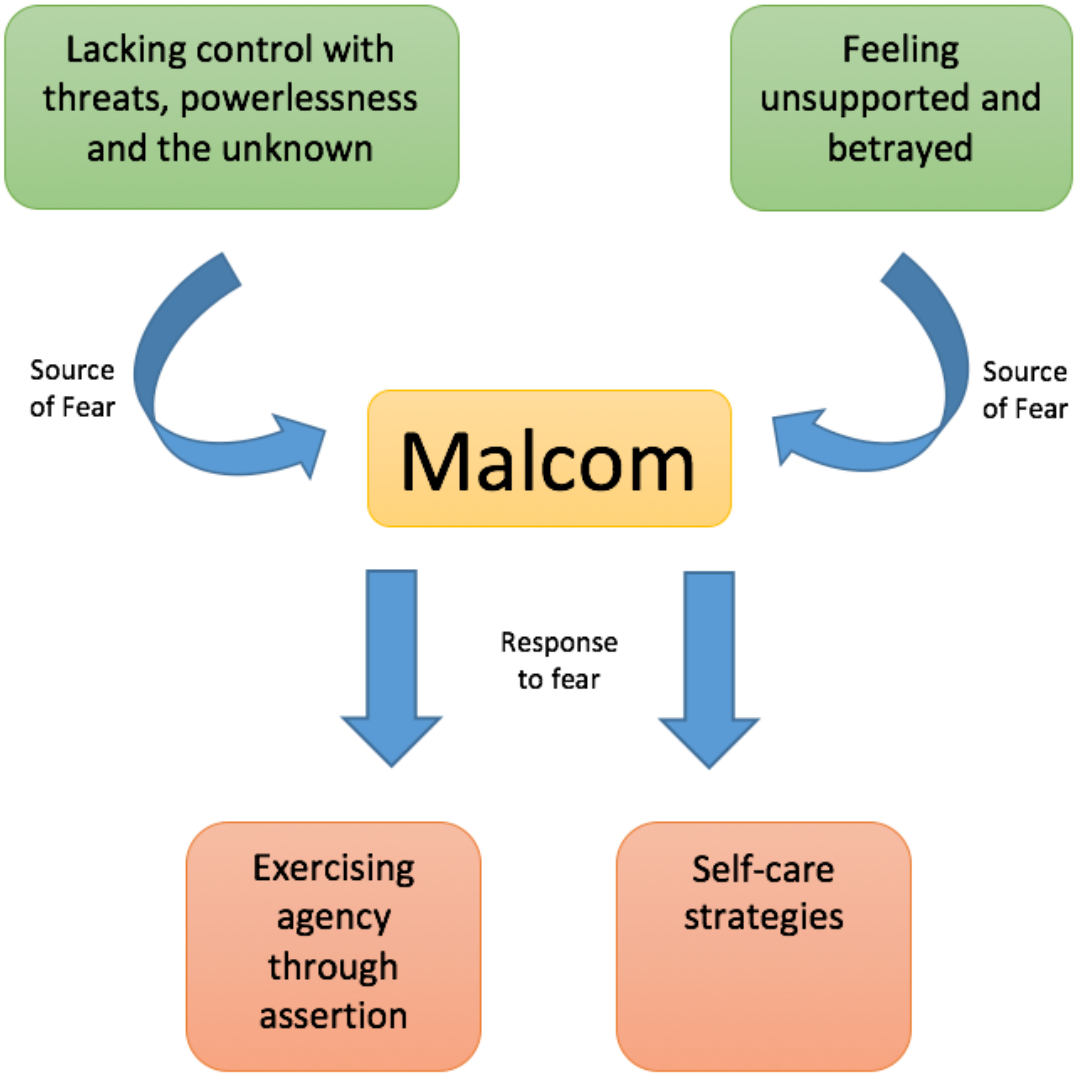


*Figure 3.* Dimensions of Malcom's fear experiences

# *Iona:* "… always second-guessing …"

## Introducing Iona

Iona is a retired principal with decades of teaching and leadership experience, some of it in a rural context. Iona came to the study as a result of snowball sampling. Iona had a quiet manner and focussed particularly on incidents from one school in which she had worked.

Iona's interview revolved mostly around her long term experience with a particular staff member. These interactions triggered feelings of fear for Iona. Whilst her interview contains specific narratives about encounters with this person, together these encounters represent an ongoing, chronic challenge faced by Iona in her leadership role. Iona's experience of fear went on for a period of years. Themes emerging from Iona's experiences of fear are: feeling fear as a woman in leadership and the emotional labour attached to the fear experience.

Iona took up a leadership position in a school where there had been a history of challenges for leaders: in particular, women leaders. She said that she "… was appointed with some trepidation on the part of the [name of the system] as to how the men would behave … and how I would handle the situation". Gender was a factor in her leadership from the beginning of her principalship: as she said, "… the fact that I was a female made it even worse".

## Iona's fear narratives

Iona highlighted her experience of feeling fear when dealing with the specific individual around whom many of her narratives revolved:

Int: Can I ask um when you had these confrontational conversations with him, what was that like for you? How did it make you feel?

Iona: Oh, I was very nervous. Frightened. I kept a diary; I kept a log of everything. I kept records of what I said. Um ... but … um I tried very hard for him *not* to be able to see that I was afraid. But I—I also kept it very focused, so … "I've told you that I would like you to tell me when you are in or out of the school. You need to let me know", so it was very very direct … there was a group … we had [a] shed at the back of the main building of the school, and I found that they were drinking after school down in the … shed. A group of the men. So, I told them that if they were going to drink, they had to drink alcohol in the staff room and nowhere else … then I found that they'd gone and the fellow who was the … manager of the senior school – he'd actually gone home, got things, driven his car around the back so that it couldn't be seen – and somebody saw them through a window and said "They're down in the shed drinking". So I went down and said, "I've told you that you're not to be drinking there. You need to leave or you need to come into the staff room". But I was scared stiff; I mean, I was shaking. Because these men were bigger than me …

Int: Shaking. Any other kind of physical symptoms/reactions?

Iona: Oh, just feeling sick in the stomach and that sort of stuff ... but I'm very stubborn. There was no way that throughout this whole thing that I was going to let him beat me. … Yeah, and that was at a personal cost; I mean I got very close to having a breakdown, but—wasn't going to let him see it.

On another occasion, Iona recounted the impact of long term stress upon her wellbeing:

> … there was one day—‘cause this went on for 4 years— … there was one day and … —I’d just had enough and I said to the girls in the front office “I’m going home, I’m going to have a—I’m going to have a cry and have a sleep”. And this was about 2 o’clock in the afternoon. Well, I went home and … the next thing was a phone call from one of the relievers who happened to drop into the school: “Are you all right? Do you want me to come around? Can I, you know, sit with you?” and so on and I said, “No, I’ll be fine”. Then I got up later in the afternoon and found there was a note slipped under my door from one of the—from the school counsellor? “We’re going down the pub for tea tonight, we’re going to save a place for you, come down and have tea with us”. … And I found out that by going home I really worried a lot of the staff. They were really concerned that I was all right. And it was easier for me to stay at school rather than worry them, so, that’s what I did.

Iona’s experience of fear led to changes in her behaviour, such as altering routines:

> I used to walk to school … um and my house was down one street, he had a [ ] property down—so I came to a T junction, he was—if I turned left and walked down that was where his property was, turn right and I had to go to school … I got to the stage about the fourth year where I’d find myself getting to the corner where I had to turn right to go to school and I’d look to see if his car was coming, and I’d work out: if I walk on the right hand side he can yell abuse at me, if I walk on the left hand side he could probably swerve his car towards me. So I stopped walking to school … I stopped going to get my mail at the post office … I used to do that after school … rather than run into him down the street or his wife, when she came back to work, … I would … get the SSOs to pick up my mail when they went to get the school mail ... So, you know, sort of behavioural things changed.

For Iona, part of experiencing fear was the need to always be alert and mentally engaged. She describes another scenario:

> And always second-guessing, you know, what's going to happen? … his office was next door to the staff female toilets and I got to the stage of checking his timetable to see whether he was in class or not before I went to the toilet rather than go to the toilet and have him … in his office.

Years later she is still feeling the effects of fear, rather like a PTSD victim: the sight of a car or a street name can provoke an unwanted reaction of fear:

> But it's really quite interesting because even the other day, I went up to [name of town] to [sporting activity] last Tuesday, and there was a [colour/make description of car] parked outside the … club and I just looked at it and then I thought, 'Oh, it can't be him'… So even now—and I drove past a street that had the same surname as him and I look—and I think—but it's not nearly as bad as it was.

## Analysis of Iona's account

From Iona's narratives, the following themes were identified: feeling fear connected with being a woman in leadership and the emotional labour associated with experiences of fear. A tension between feeling fear in threatening situations, and the need to maintain a strong leadership persona—regardless of feeling fearful—was evident in Iona's narratives. Her accounts also contained strategies to manage and mitigate fearful situations.

## *Feeling fear as a woman in leadership*

Iona took up a leadership position in a school where there had been a history of challenges for leaders: in particular, women leaders. Iona took on a situation which was already rife with the potential for failure and therefore the potential for fear: would she succeed? Gender was a factor in her leadership from the beginning of her principalship: as she said, "… the fact that I was a female made it even worse". Feelings of fear were evident for Iona when she experienced threats to her physical or emotional well-being; nevertheless, she felt that—despite these feelings of fear—she had to project a strong leadership persona in her professional role.

Iona's story of confronting the group of male staff who had been drinking in the shed illustrates Iona's fear for her physical and emotional wellbeing. She recounts: "I was scared stiff … because these men were bigger than me". Iona potentially put herself at risk of harm by confronting the men, but still felt that it was a necessary act of leadership. Women can feel pressure to exert power because of context: Iona is in a "rural community … where authority was closely associated with masculinity" (Blackmore, 2005, p. 188). It is tremendously important to Iona in this situation to not appear weak, and not to back down. For Iona, experiencing fear involved the physical symptom of "shaking": despite this, she confronted the men and demanded that they adhere to the school policy. Iona viewed challenges to her leadership incidents as a contest from which she is determined to walk away victorious. She has known from the start that there are extra obstacles she will have to surmount as a female leader, so it is particularly important to Iona that she prove herself, despite feeling fearful. This led to her placing herself in what could potentially have been a risky situation because of her perception of a leader as one who had to win any power struggles. It is also worth noting that, in a rural context, Iona lacked immediate

support of a supervisor or district official that she may have had available had she been working in an urban context. This put her at greater risk in carrying out her school leadership role.

Iona's experience is supported in another study on rural school leadership in Australia which found that, in the rural communities represented, "gendered stereotyping is a consistent feature" (Halsey, 2007, p. 70). By being a female in a leadership context, Iona is conscious of feeling "highly visible and subject to overt scrutiny" (Blackmore, 2010, p. 647). She works hard to succeed in this leadership position, sometimes against "those who have the power to deny legitimation of role, position and authority, viz the males and the secondary staff inside the school" (Halsey, 2007, p. 38). Women leaders face unique pressures in the exercising of leadership, and Iona was no exception.

## *Emotional labour*

For Iona, the emotional labour of masking her fear whilst being afraid is part of what school leadership requires of her. She feels that she must maintain an image of strength and hide overt emotional expression, as this may make her appear vulnerable. She described hiding her fear behind a "focused and direct'" approach with the group of male staff. In another instance, she decided not to go home after future stressful encounters, so her staff would not worry about her. Pressure on women leaders to appear unemotional has been identified in literature (Beatty, 2000; Wallace, 2010). Iona feels this kind of pressure: both to be—and to appear to be—professional, strong and in control. She cannot afford to show weakness or emotion because of her fears about how this will impact on others' perceptions of her leadership, or how it might affect their own emotional wellbeing. Added to this is the

burden of emotional labour that Iona is experiencing. Despite wanting to go home and vent her emotion, she feels she should put on a brave face and remain at work for the sake of her staff. In this way Iona is hampered by the visibility of a rural principal: "… always being watched and … always on show" (Halsey, 2007, p. 58). Hence, Iona's experience reflects a tension between feeling fear due to potential threats to her wellbeing, and the fear of being perceived to be a 'weak' leader should she reveal any feelings of fear.

For Iona, fear in the workplace extended to fear in her life outside of school. This situation was exacerbated by Iona's rural context: rural principals experience fluid boundaries between work and personal life, feeling like they are on display to the community and lacking separation between work and private life. As a rural principal in another study put it: "in a rural context, you don't have anonymity" (Halsey, 2007, p. 43). Elsewhere in the interview she mentioned experiencing insomnia as part of her fear experience. Years later she is still feeling the effects of fear, rather like a PTSD victim: the sight of a car or a street name can provoke an unwanted reaction of fear. For Iona, the experience of fear was pervasive and chronic, spreading both into her personal life and across the span of years, even after she had retired and moved away.

## *Strategies to manage fear-inducing situations*

Iona's narrative also indicated proactive responses that she exercised in the face of fear. Feeling fearful prompted careful strategizing and was the impetus for a determined struggle to successfully overcome difficult circumstances. It made her "more determined to see that justice was done". Fear led to a response of bravery and a commitment to justice. Part of Iona's response to fear was to employ strategic

techniques in order to self-protect. She altered some behaviours so as not to put herself at risk of unpleasant consequences: she stopped walking to work, collecting her mail and even moderating her bathroom visits. She was clearly aware of a need to protect herself through the use of documentation, being meticulous about keeping logs, diaries and records. Documenting and keeping records was a strategy to circumvent future accusations and damaging consequences. Clarity of communication was another way of minimizing the risk of potentially unpleasant situations occurring. For Iona, feeling fear meant taking on a very guarded posture in her dealings with people or situations that would have the potential to cause her physical, political or emotional harm. She lived with a heightened sense of mental alertness: “always second guessing”. The need for mental alertness is a gendered aspect of Iona’s leadership: “… gender as a basis … for differentiated treatment of females permeates and pervades the thinking and actions of female principals, and intrudes upon their private time” (Halsey, 2007, p. 117). The cumbersome nature of these measures demonstrates the significance of the fear experienced by Iona.

Iona’s fear experience encapsulates the interplay between notions of gender, leadership and emotional labour. She experienced fear in the context of being a female leader in a challenging rural environment in which she was under pressure to prove herself. Her narratives also demonstrate the experience of living with chronic and pervasive fear. Iona’s account provided examples of strategic ways in which she responded to fear.

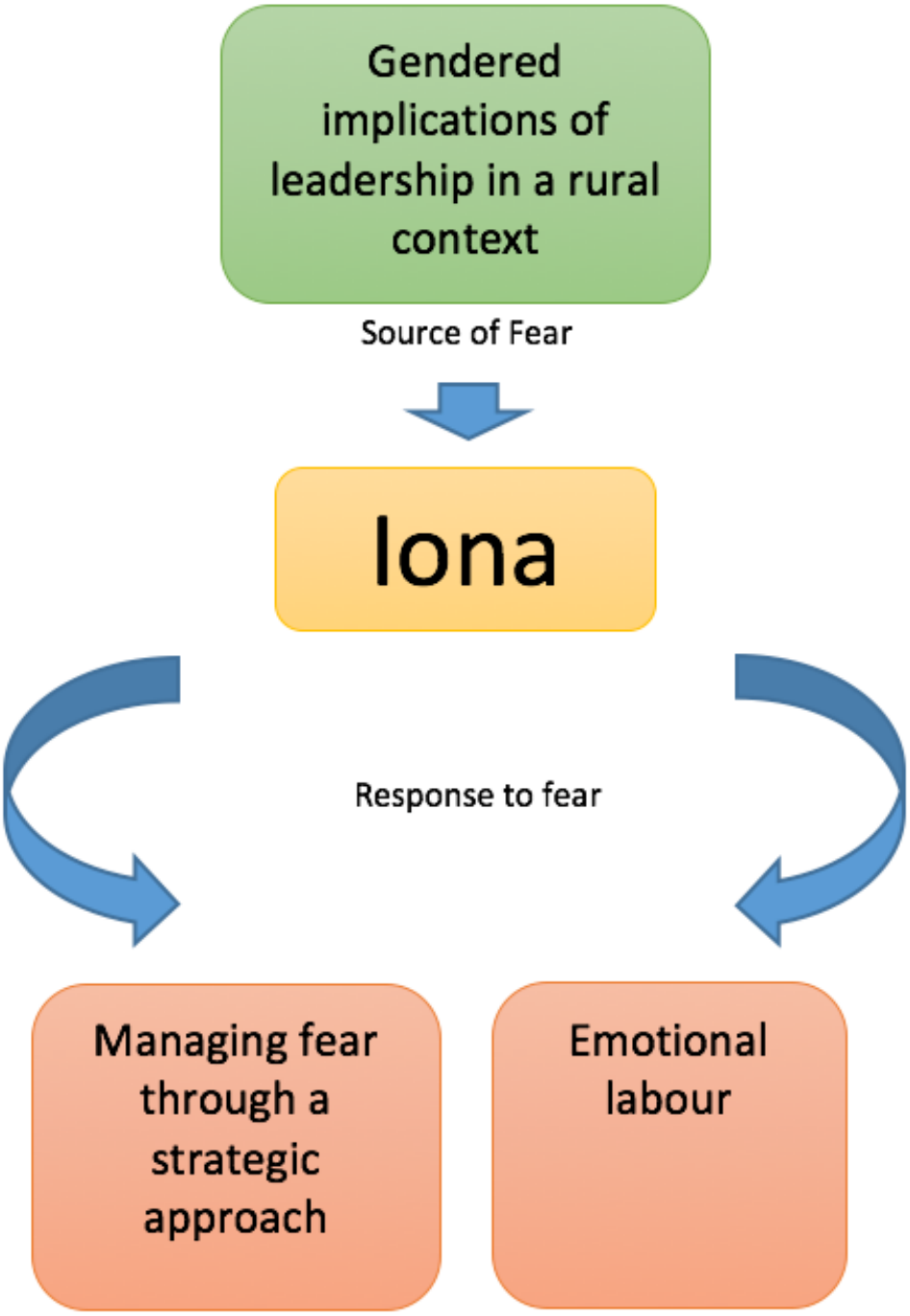


*Figure 4.* Dimensions of Iona's fear experiences

# *Brad:* "… fighting too many battles on too many fronts …"

## Introducing Brad …

Brad was a middle aged urban primary school principal a few years away from retirement at the time of interviewing. Brad was an assertive, passionate principal who advocated a relational approach to leadership. I approached Brad after his suitability as a participant was suggested to me by my supervisor. Brad's interview contained a range of anecdotes and commentary on in school and wider systemic issues. Brad's experience of fear was often described in terms of a conflict. Militaristic terminology fitted well with these experiences: he was "going into battle" for what he believed in. Fear was experienced when he was betrayed, attacked or unsupported. In contrast to this, was the powerfully relational nature of school leadership that came through in Brad's interview. It was in experiences of strained relationship that Brad experienced fear and anxiety. Controls were exerted as a way of managing fear.

## Brad's fear narratives

In response to the question about a fear experience, Brad recounted an incident at work where he wondered if he might be having a heart attack.

> … for the first 5 years in the school I had a deputy principal who'd been in the school for 12 years. Owned a lot. We were anchored in the past and so I was really limited. And so often, without being cruel, we had a very strong differing opinion about how the school should be operating. So, whilst he didn't do it deliberately, he undermined —most of the work that I was doing. And … it has taken a long time to recover from that. So, there was one stage when I was dealing with an aggressive governing

> council because we were changing the logo from the symbol that it had been for a long long time to up to what it's going to be and they were very aggressive about it. Surprisingly. And I remember sitting in my office in here and I've got governing council that night and then—so, the scenario was I'd been dealing and fighting too many battles on too many fronts with people I shouldn't have been having to fight battles with. So, rather than having the support of the deputy principal, rather than having the support of governing council to problem solve … I'm fighting these people. And of course you're dealing then with other parents you know the normal run of the mill parents, kids and teachers and SSOs [School Services Officers] and the rest of it ... and I remember sitting in this office and … I thought I was having a heart attack. … so yeah, I felt all the symptoms, I felt shortness of breath, I felt pains in my left hand side, I had tingling feelings in my left arm … So I went up to the doctor's and he said, 'Well, you're not having a heart attack'. What had happened was I'd strained myself exercising in the morning and the anxiety had caused the shortness of breath … and he wanted me to go home and rest for a couple of days—which I could not do. I had to come back and face this meeting.

Stressful events, involving conflict and perceived lack of support, coincide with physical symptoms for Brad. Together, these constitute a 'fear experience' for him.

The theme of betrayal is also evident in Brad's narratives. This described a conflict that ensued during a systemic authority representative's visit to Brad's school:

> So the previous deputy principal I told you about used to write public letters … outside of school but he/she would write them to the [systemic authority titles] cause … he/she was on some medication for depressants and … he/she mixed it with alcohol and he/she would do these stupid things. So one day I get a phone call: 'The [systemic authority representative] would like to come and visit and see the school.'—

> that's what I was told. And that [he'd/she'd] like to have a conversation with you. Which is pretty normal, getting a visit like that. So I arranged—it wasn't a day when (my deputy was a part time deputy at that stage and he/she wasn't in the school)—and I arranged for a tour of the school and then I arranged for the chairperson of the governing council and my … coordinator and business manager and I would meet the [systemic authority representative] and [his/her] support person and talk about our strengths and weaknesses and how we were going … and ... [he/she] came in and didn't want to do the tour. Which was interesting: like it was 'Thank you, I've seen enough' and we headed up to the meeting room, had a nice morning tea … and we were talking about some of the positives and ... [he/she] laid into me. [He/she] and I had an out and out argument. It wasn't pleasant and it wasn't polite. [He/she] copped it back as much as [he/she] got it from—gave it into me. But I was … literally a broken man. I don't think [he/she] walked out of here fully comfortable either.

Brad was taken by surprise when what he thought was going to be a convivial event unexpectedly turned into a confrontation. This represented an emotional threat for Brad. Elsewhere in his interview, Brad said, when asked about whether he had ever felt physically threatened in his job:

> Oh yeah, yeah, yeah … unfortunately too often. Not so much in the last 2 years, but before that, many times … I'm OK. I'm calm until I get home and then I fall in a heap. And then my wife picks me up. And my kids pick me up. And we walk on the beach and I calm down. And then I deal with the anxiety of a problem that doesn't exist. And once I get back into it I'm OK ... The closer I get to retirement the harder it is to think 'do I really WANT to come back into that?

Both potentially physical and emotional threats had the potential to trigger feelings of fear for Brad. Brad also discussed the connection between fear and the relational nature of his school leadership role:

> Interviewer.: … what emotions … do you find are associated with those [negative situations]?
>
> Brad: There's one. And there is only one. And from everything stems. For me. And that's anxiety. OK – as a relational leader, and you're relating to every issue and every person in your school community, when there's a breakdown of relationship to an issue or to a person, it creates anxiety. That anxiety might be seen in a fear to come to school. Or it might be a fear to front in a meeting. It might be in a fear to actually deal with an issue in a way that you think is going to be effective problem-solving because you're not dealing with the issue, you're dealing with the anxiety. You're dealing with the breakdown of the relationship. And, it's horrid.

It is no coincidence that Brad referred to the importance of relational leadership: for him, this is integral to his leadership. As he says early in the interview, "I would describe myself as a relational leader and therefore I relate to issues and I relate to people".

Another example of fear in a relational context was provided by Brad as he recounted a written and verbal conflict he had had with a staff member after he (Brad) had made a decision about moving a student to another class:

> And they wrote me the most horrific email. Now I didn't see it. My deputy saw it, because they cc'd her into it. And she could not sleep. She walked in here and I thought 'Wow, something's wrong. She is furious.' And she ripped into these 2 teachers because they were completely inappropriate and completely out of place.

> And when they spoke to the mother they understood what I was doing and they actually spoke to the teacher concerned and they understood what I was doing and then things started to settle. But um that morning the teachers actually had a go at me and we had this whole scenario, again if you're not a problem solver and you're aggressive you cop it back.

He reflected on the emotional impact of these situations on him as a school leader:

> So—but the anxiety is huge—but my deputy—and that's typical of what she and I will go through oftentimes because you can't deal with it instantly, sometimes you shouldn't deal with it instantly, but you live with this anxiety and it creates fear to do what you should be doing, it creates just a horror about how you feel that you can relate. I *know* I can't go into that staff room and have people relaxed and have a conversation. I've got to pick my topics with them because - I'm the principal and I'm the bottom line, and there's got to be you know—I don't like that, it's not how I want to be, but I'm OK with it because that makes them feel better.

Brad's comments reflect the emotional realities of practicing school leadership, when difficult encounters challenge harmonious working relationships. Brad reconciles this by reflecting upon what he feels is necessary for the purpose of his role and the welfare of the school community.

## Analysis of Brad's account

Brad's fear narratives contained themes of "feeling embattled and lacking support", "strained relationships" and "imposing controls".

## *Feeling fear and lacking support*

Central to Brad's first fear narrative was the sense of fighting a battle. He was engaged in struggles as part of his school leadership roles. Like some of the other participants, Brad mentioned that there had been times when he was physically threatened: this was referred to in an offhand way, as if (to Brad) it was a minor but inescapable aspect of being in school leadership. However, Brad's narrative emphasized the pain he experienced in emotional and political settings. Brad's narrative about his suspected heart attack is set against a backdrop of long-term undermining and political struggle. The experience of fear, for Brad, is like being under attack, both emotionally and politically: this is reflected in the use of militaristic language: "fighting", "battles", "fronts", "aggressive". He is besieged by pressure from multiple sources: his deputy, the governing council, parents, students, teachers and SSOs (what Brad refers to as "ordinary" stressors).

As well as pressure, Brad's fear experience contained a sensation of betrayal. The role of the deputy and the governing council are highlighted as sources of pressure. Conflict is an expected part of a school leadership role, but Brad's fear experience is noteworthy because of the source of the conflict. Brad is experiencing conflict with sources *from whom he felt he should have been able to expect support* (his deputy and the school council). Like Sandy and Malcom, Brad felt unsupported and betrayed because he had expected support from people from whom he did not receive it.

Brad was surprised when a positive visit turned into a confrontation; he experienced feelings of shock, betrayal and anger. The situation had been instigated by his deputy principal: one from whom Brad might reasonably have expected support. The culmination was a verbal tirade from the systemic authority, directed at Brad. In

addition, the verbal ‘attack’ came when they had been talking about the “positives” of his situation – for Brad this comes as a complete surprise that subsequently accentuates the negativity of the situation. The emotional impact on Brad was significant: he described himself as “a broken man”. It is worth noting that, despite being assertive in his handling of conflict (Brad wryly commented elsewhere during his interview “… if you are aggressive, then you’ll cop it back”), there was a special bitterness associated with experiences where he found himself under attack in situations where he had expected support. He had not received support from two individuals from whom he felt that he should have been able to expect support (his deputy and the systemic authority).

Brad’s experience is an example of the “wounding” described by Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski, as he has encountered a situation which could easily fit the “toxic confrontation” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, p. 313) descriptor of a wounding experience. His story also matches a description of betrayal: “the initial reaction to a trust violation is often stunned disbelief as the victim begins to come to terms with the breach of expectations. Victims report feeling confused and being left with a sense of unreality. On reflection, these feelings often turn to anger …” (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 71). Disbelief and anger were indeed aspects of Brad’s experience. “A broken man”, as Brad puts it, speaks to the depth of the hurt he has experienced with the challenge to his professional identity. A successful school leader’s “personal identity is intertwined with their leadership role” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, p. 321); hence, challenges to this can bring “fear of failure … of not measuring up” (p. 320) that can be “overwhelming” (p. 321).

Lack of support from an expected source is a theme shared with the rural leaders from the previous section. Brad's experiences personifies the "lucid loneliness of the gatekeeper" (Kelchtermans et al., 2011, p. 93) in the "emotion laden" (Patti, Holzer, Brackett, & Stern, 2015, p. 97) role of a school leader that he undertakes. It is worth noting a link with a US study on principal turnover: principals who felt supported by their school districts were more likely to stay, while principals who did not feel supported were more likely to leave the position (Rangel, 2018a). Being unsupported is, in a sense, being isolated and abandoned. For a school leader, this represents a fearful situation.

School leaders need to find support where they can. For Brad, family provided some of that support. Positive home relationships, a change of physical environment and mental processing provided the recharging that Brad needed to continue with his role. However, it is clear that the stresses of the job made Brad question how long his tenure in school leadership would last.

## *Feeling fear with strained relationships*

Brad also discussed the connection between fear and the relational nature of his school leadership role. For Brad, fear was a highly personalized emotion, interconnected with the people-centric nature of the school leadership role. It is no coincidence that Brad referred to the importance of relational leadership: for him, this is integral to his leadership. As he says early in the interview, "I would describe myself as a relational leader and therefore I relate to issues and I relate to people". Consequently, when things go wrong in the relational space, this creates anxiety and fear for Brad, and impacts a range of aspects of his leadership role. The power of this experience is conveyed through Brad's use of the word "horrid"; not merely

unpleasant, irritating or concerning, but significantly “wounding” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, p. 311). Fear manifests itself for Brad by hampering how he conducts his professional life; for example, by avoiding issues or by being distracted from an issue’s purpose, or simply in a desire not to be in the situation. Fear, for Brad, is paralyzing (in a professional sense) and debilitating.

Brad’s experience demonstrates the power of relationships in the professional life of a school leader. It is impossible to escape relationships because they are so integral to the nature of a school leaders’ work (Giles, Bell, Halsey, & Palmer, 2012). This could be why several of the participants in this study described people-related factors as both the most *and* the least enjoyable and energizing aspects of their school leadership role. Relationships, such a central aspect of a school leader’s experience, can be a source of stress and fear. Relationships have tremendous power to inspire life and meaning but also tremendous power to inflict hurt and damage (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004; Crawford, 2009). School leaders are vulnerable to both. Feeling fear can impact the professional functioning of a school leader: avoiding tasks and trigger situations. And yet, given the relational nature of school leadership, feeling fear is likely to be an inescapable aspect of a school leader’s role (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004). Brad, in fact, sees this relational breakdown as part of the role of being a school leader: he will, at times, be in an adversarial relationship with some of his staff and other work colleagues simply due to the nature of his job. Just as Darren had no choice in his toxic handler role, Brad, similarly, lives with relational angst because of his perception of his role responsibilities. Brad’s comments, though, give insight into the emotional experience of what it is like to live with the anxiety and fear of the consequence of his position. Unlike Sandy’s “emotionless” principal, Brad’s comments demonstrate greater awareness of the

emotional dynamic of school leadership: an unenviable scenario of fear and anxiety that is part of the lived experience of a school leader.

Nevertheless, there is a positive aspect that can be found in these experiences. Margaret Archer's work on emotions reflects the view that emotions provide clues as to what we care deeply about (Archer, 2015). The depth of emotion experienced by Brad is, to an extent, a reflection of his passion for his role and for the wellbeing of his school community. In this sense, feeling fear is the inevitable downside of a deep commitment to both Brad's leadership role and the community he leads.

## *Feeling fear and imposing controls*

Brad's reaction to fear involved imposing controls. It could be argued that standing up for himself in the situation with the systemic supervisor was an act of self-assertion to challenge the presiding paradigm and offer an alternative. In this way, he was imposing his own control over the narrative. Brad also adapted his reasoning; a kind of mental recalibration after his suspected heart attack. He reevaluated his assumptions and changed his ongoing behaviour in line with his new assumptions, for example: "I managed my health in the first instance and then um then I came back and managed and addressed the other issues…Nobody would die if we hadn't resolved the logo". In response to the anxiety caused by difficult relationships, he judged that relational tension and the distance it could put between himself and his staff was an inevitable part of his job: "… it's not how I want to be, but I'm OK with it because that makes them feel better". Throughout the interview Brad expressed a strong sense of agency over school issues, often based around a philosophy of learning: those in his school community were expected to be learners and "problem

solvers”. Establishing a paradigm for his school was an important aspect of his leadership role.

However, even during this experience the pressure to perform was unrelenting: as Brad says, he did not feel able to miss an important meeting even though his doctor had recommended it. Fear of not fulfilling expectations (whether these expectations came from himself or from others) was a driving force to push himself beyond his physical limits. Brad reflected later in the interview on how he challenged his own behaviours in this regard and learned to attend to his own wellbeing: for example, he mentioned another time when he allowed himself to stay home when he had a cold to recover, instead of coming to work regardless. Without this kind of reflection and action, fears of not being seen to be in charge (or in control) can exert significant, and potentially harmful, pressures on school leaders.

Brad’s experience of fear was often described in terms of a conflict. Militaristic terminology fitted well with these experiences: he was going into battle for what he believed in. Fear was experienced when he was betrayed, attacked or unsupported. In contrast to this is the powerfully relational nature of school leadership evident in Brad’s interview. It was in experiences of strained relationship that fear and anxiety existed for Brad. Controls were exerted as a way of managing fear.

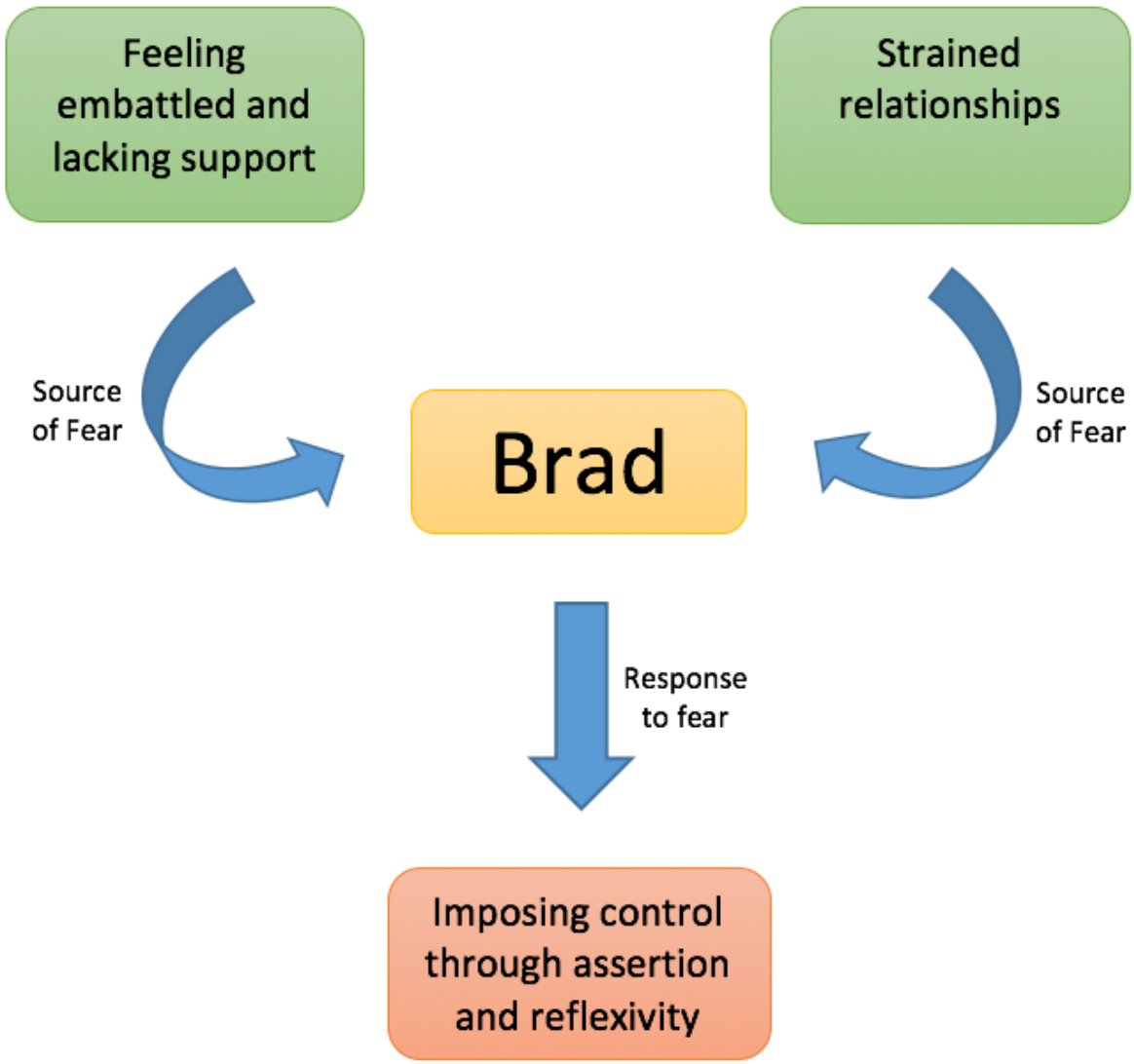


*Figure 5.* Dimensions of Brad's fear experiences.

# *Kevin:* "The external spotlight on your leadership"

## Introducing Kevin …

Kevin is a retired principal with decades of teaching and leadership experience, including para-school organizational work and international educational consulting. I had worked with Kevin and approached him to see if he would be interested in participating in my study. Unlike many of the other participants, Kevin's responses were often reflections upon his experiences, rather than a re-telling of the experience itself (this could be because of Kevin's postgraduate research experience). By interweaving narrative and reflection, Kevin's interview contained its own 'meaning making' within it.

Kevin's narratives portray the complexity and ambiguity of the interpersonal nature of school leadership, with its lack of easy answers and the emotional agility it requires from school leaders. Kevin's account demonstrates that both external and internal scrutiny have the potential to trigger fears linked with leadership performance for school leaders. Rational strategies of collaboration, separation and mental attitude were all used to manage fear and anxiety.

## Kevin's fear narratives

Kevin began by defining the parameters of what he wanted to discuss in relation to feeling fear, what he called "the most frequent sorts of stuff". He particularly noted the sleeplessness that fear caused:

> … you know it's the 3 o'clock in the morning thing … you wake up … and your mind's going a million to the dozen about … whatever the circumstance is and was

> …, at the time and in the processes there's all that stuff about … you feel a bit hot … and almost certainly there's a there's heart rate increase … so that's sort of … adrenalin induced activity physically ...

Like Darren and Sandy, Kevin's accounts demonstrate links between his perception of fear and situations which contain high levels of emotion. He talked about

> … the toughest stuff is no doubt about … the interpersonal … category … the emotional draining that comes with things like student deaths ... I had a student raped by another student … so those sort of things really … hit … in terms of the impact on the young people and the community … that you're dealing with and you're leading, so you take on this sense of responsibility

Kevin's narrative identifies an added complexity for a school leader: that of having to deal with these situations both as an individual, and as the leader of a school community. For Kevin, this seemed to represent a difficult tension:

> on one hand that … expectation that you have about leadership … 'I am the leader'; I've got to stand up here and work this through … and at the same time dealing with … other people's emotional … state of mind … and your own … so those sort of things get really, really tough.

When asked about unexpected aspects of his school leadership role, Kevin identified the "tough conversations":

> … that difficult stuff about an underperforming teacher … sometimes … to do with … very personal stuff in their lives … on other occasions it's the professional practice that's not where it should be … so … I always found that stuff really really hard to

> deal with … because you're dealing with people's very being … and … it's that tension about … you know we're all frail and we're all weak and we're all (rueful laughter) these things and here I am as the principal of the school saying to the teacher 'Well, you know … get your act together'. Well, you know, maybe there's some personal 'Get my own act together' in various ways so it's that sense of … the responsibilities that go with the position but at the same time that sense of acknowledgement about … you're dealing with really important relationships and people's lives and so on. That was far more extensive than I'd ever thought in the first instance that it would be.

Kevin also recalled experiencing fear when being evaluated by auditors:

> … the external spotlight on your leadership as a principal … is always an issue ... that sits there and … it has its peaks and troughs ... of course but … the sorts of things that … I'd put in that … category would be ... external reviews of school performance ... So outsiders who don't know the school intimately coming in to review and give feedback and so on … it's a bit like … you have visitors coming to your home, you want to make sure it's nice and tidy and clean, you know, not its usual junk heap (laughs). So … there's a certain bit of anxiety that goes with those sorts of things, and there are layers of that like … when ... the auditors come through to check on the finances ... not that I'd get into a panic about it because you'd be reasonably confident that things were OK but there was always this issue about … I hope they don't find something that I'm not aware of ...

Kevin also talked, during the interview, about the "mediation" role of a principal and the resultant ambiguity and complexity:

> The other one that comes to mind is … the angry parent on your doorstep … for whatever reason … As a school principal commonly in those circumstances is: what's the parent angry about? … It's something to do with their son or daughter. … it's also something to do - most likely something to do with what a teacher has done or not done. ... possibly to do with … something more general, you know, it might be like what another student's done and so on … school fights or whatever … and as the principal you're always in that … betwixt and between … If it's something to do with teacher performance, for example, you … are left ... in the position of defending the teacher … acknowledging the problem ... getting it fixed ... so … it's the multiple … and ... almost certainly it's never right/wrong. There's always ... different perspectives of any event and … so dealing with those sort of circumstances ... is complex and it's- the mediation role of principalship

Kevin noted the immensity of this role later in the interview, where he commented that, in certain schools,

> … those sort of relational issues … can become … time consuming … colleague principals in really tough schools talk about … 80% of their week … is spent mediating: between students, between students and parents, between teachers and students … so … it's a significant piece of the … picture".

Mediation and complexity link with fear and uncertainty, leaving a school leader open to emotional attack or potential criticism of their decisions.

Kevin's interview contained a wealth of practical strategies for coping with stress and anxiety in a school leadership role. These included: collaboration, separation and mental attitude.

## *Collaboration*

Kevin was a strong advocate for participation in learning communities:

> I was always an active participant in what you would call professional learning communities in one way, shape or form, so everything from being a member of the principal's association and getting onto its executive, to local meetings of principals, to working my own staff … all of those … working with colleagues in leadership teams …

Group contexts provide opportunities for exposure to other perspectives, social support and ongoing learning: a useful antidote to the isolation often experienced by school leaders (Kelchtermans et al., 2011).

## *Separation*

Kevin's narratives highlighted the importance of being able to temporarily "come apart" from a challenging workplace environment by creating a peaceful context for himself. Pouring himself a glass of wine when he got home at the end of the day provided this experience:

> I don't think I've got an alcohol problem … but what I DO know is that in a sense it's the ritual. … This is a high pressure job ... Principals on a daily basis are dealing with a hundred things at 2 minutes a time and it's all of that sort of bouncing around the place … Get home, relax, glass of wine ... in some ways it's a … symbol of separation

Similarly, he referred to exercise as providing a psychological space for reflection:

> … an early morning walk every morning of the week and … often with the radio in my ear … but … head clearing exercise as much of the physical stuff … and this doesn't apply for everybody, I'm sure … it was just something that I found was really useful … Get out first thing in the morning … go for a—usually 40 minutes—45 minute walk, have a listen to the radio … but that sense of solitude … a sense of … OK, what are the issues in front of me, what are the good things that I'm about to do today, you know—just preparing for the day …

"Grounding" was another strategy practiced by Kevin as a way of separating himself temporarily from a stressful situation:

> … if I was really sort of … 'God, what am I going to do about this?': Take a break, go from the office, go down to the Year 1 classroom, sit on the floor … with some kids or read or whatever or talk to them about their work or whatever … you know it's a *grounding* of what you're there for

This enabled Kevin to focus on the deep values that had led him into his work, and served to remind him of the overarching vision and purpose of education.

## *Mental attitude*

When asked about how he managed fear, Kevin's response was direct:

> How do I manage it? 'Get on with the job' sort of attitude … you know, if you smell trouble go towards it, sort of thing … (laughs). Deal with the issues and … don't …chew and stew over it too much … get on with it.

Kevin advocated a proactive approach to dealing with difficult situations, as they came with associated anxiety. He said

> if I was experiencing anxiety … about talking with a teacher about performance or some of those sorts of things … you generally get anxious … and worry about how you're going to do it … What did I do about it? Attend to it as soon as you possibly can. … cause the longer you leave it, the harder it gets and you know, use the poor performance as a teacher issue … performances don't get any better until they're addressed … If you smell trouble, go towards it.

He acknowledged the likelihood of making mistakes:

> don't be afraid to ... goof up (laughter) like when you make a mistake, you made a mistake, and everybody makes mistakes and be honest with yourself about it … I mean be honest with your colleagues as well … you know, I goofed up here … internalizing that OK … don't beat yourself up about it too much. At the same time, OK, do it differently next time … *be human*

He advocated honesty with self and others, and balancing a reflective attitude ("do it differently next time") with a compassionate one ("don't beat yourself up about it too much"). For Kevin, being a human leader is acknowledging personal limitations but remaining optimistic. Short of that, he had one more piece of advice:

> I often used to say … every principal needs … close to their office ... a very solid brick wall that they can go and … kick on occasions (chuckles) … let the frustration out!

Collaboration, separation and mental attitude were all strategies used by Kevin in his management of the stressful, and potentially fearful, situations encountered in his professional role.

## Analysis of Kevin's account

Kevin's experiences have been divided into four themes: "Feeling fear with the responsibility and expectations of leadership", "Feeling fear with the relational and interpersonal nature of leadership", "Feeling fear in complexity" and "Control strategies for managing fear". These will be discussed in the following section.

### *Feeling fear with the responsibility and expectations of leadership*

Kevin's narratives contained multiple references to the sense of responsibility he felt as a school leader. Through Kevin's account of dealing with a school community in 'crisis', it is clear that Kevin felt that his leadership role obligated him to play an active role in aiding the community's recovery. This is demonstrated when Kevin used the phrase: "I am the leader" as the rationale for his "I've got to stand up here and work this through". As a leader, Kevin felt he had an extra responsibility to guide the community through this difficult time, helping it to make meaning (Carter, Banfield, O'Donoghue, & Brennan, 2009) out of the tragedy. Kevin's account reflects a tension between his personal and public self: reflecting ambivalence about the strength, resolution and certainty he feels that he must express publicly (as a "leader") whilst his own emotional and relational reality is one of grief, pain and bewilderment.

The theme of responsibility also emerged from Kevin's narrative about being evaluated by auditors. He referred to it as "the external spotlight on your leadership".

The metaphor of the spotlight implies exposure and vulnerability, with nowhere to hide should something be discovered. Being exposed to this level of scrutiny means that the school leader can bear a sense of personal responsibility for deficits. If the auditors had found something that Kevin was not aware of, he would have felt that this reflected poorly on his leadership—why did he not know? Kevin feels that it is his job to be across the finances in his school leadership role: potentially triggering feelings of fear if this is proven not to be the case.

Kevin's account demonstrates the lived experience of fear around aspects of the leadership role itself: the responsibilities and how they are defined by both the 'leader' and by others who would judge their leadership. School leaders can experience fear around the possibility of being perceived to be (or actually being) unsatisfactory at their job. For a school leader, to not adequately manage the responsibilities of the role is to run the risk of experiencing fear. This means that, proportionate to their responsibilities, school leaders could often be confronted with potentially fear-inducing situations. It is also not just their own performance that leaders have to be concerned with: they can be supervising a number of people for whom they ultimately bear responsibility: as the saying goes, "the buck stops here". This is particularly difficult when school leaders can be responsible for a large number of staff: principals are "… liable for actions of staff members without even knowing whether they are doing anything wrong … That's a fairly frightening fact" (Gronn, 2009, p. 206). School leaders are held responsible for their own performance and for others' performance. In this way, responsibility and accountability can become breeding grounds for fear (Schmidt, 2009).

## *Feeling fear with the relational and interpersonal aspects of leadership*

As an experienced school leader, Kevin is aware of the people-centric nature of his role. He refers to the most significant challenge as coming from this “interpersonal” aspect. Kevin recognizes “the emotional and messy work of teaching and leading” (Blackmore, 2004, p. 339), and identifies these kinds of situations as ones in which there is the corresponding potential for a leader to feel fearful.

The kind of crisis situation Kevin referred to as “really, really tough” was dealing first hand with the victims and the communities. Kevin’s narrative conveys the delicate social complexity encompassed in being ‘in’ and responding to this situation as a school leader. He is a counsellor and confidante to the members of his community (“… dealing with other people’s emotional state of mind”), but he is also an individual who is responding on a personal level to the horror of what has happened (“and your own”). Kevin is dealing with his own emotions and with others’ emotions. He has to simultaneously process the situation for himself and help others to do the same: guiding others through the emotional terrain as he himself maps it.

Another interpersonal experience that Kevin referred to in his narratives was having “tough conversations”, particularly with underperforming staff members. He identified the emotional complexity of this situation as he had to simultaneously play the role of “the leader” in bringing staff to account, whilst empathizing with the sensitive nature of the circumstances and the individual concerned. Kevin feels fear about the potential of hurting another human being, which is why he links “tough conversations” with fear in this narrative. He recognizes that some of these conversations move beyond the professional to the personal, into the less predictable (and potentially less

‘safe’) realm of emotion. Kevin’s fear is actually indicative of the high esteem he has for the staff with whom he is dealing. Archer’s insights are valuable here: Kevin seems to be experiencing a similar degree of fear in proportion to the degree of care he feels for his staff members (Archer, 2015). He does not want to hurt people, and is afraid that he might.

The fear Kevin feels in these situations is not only about others, but about himself. Kevin’s is an egalitarian approach, so much so that having to identify the weaknesses in another leads Kevin to self-reflection about his own possible flaws. He fears being hypocritical – telling another person to overcome their weaknesses when, as he puts it, “maybe there’s some personal ‘get my own act together’”. Kevin is acknowledging the shared flawed humanity (“we’re all frail and we’re all weak”), but this leaves a leader with vulnerability because their own flaws may be exposed (even if only to themselves) in pointing out the flaws of others. Being put on the pedestal of leadership – with its corresponding requirement of judging others – leaves a leader in a vulnerable state as they recognize the truth that they, too, are flawed.

The relational component of leadership is critical (Giles et al., 2012). In Kevin’s handling of difficult interpersonal interactions, his fear reflects both his care for others and for himself. I would argue that Kevin is engaged in the act of being a highly relational leader. But what about situations in which there is no relationship, or shared understanding? The incident when his school was being audited (see previous section) was an example of this. For Kevin, despite his professionalism, there was nervousness associated with an experience of being judged by external auditors, described by him as “outsiders who don’t know the school intimately”. Part of Kevin’s fear was the scrutineer’s lack of knowledge of his context. In this sense,

there is no relationship. If “compassion … is the vital connection” (McLaren, 2011, p. 290), then external scrutiny carried out without knowledge, understanding and goodwill is a thing to be feared.

The relational/interpersonal aspect of school leadership was an area of fear for Kevin. This involved the sensitivity required in emotionally charged situations, and the possibility of hurt that could be done if a situation was not handled skillfully. These situations also reflected Kevin’s fear about his own levels of performance: was he himself ‘measuring up’, as he was asking others to do so? Lastly, the lack of relational connection could trigger fear in the case of outside judgement.

## *Feeling fear in the complexity of leadership*

Another theme that emerged from Kevin’s narratives was complexity. As a school leader, Kevin found himself leading mediations in which problems were often complex and people had differing viewpoints. He also noted the complexity and the fast pace of change in the administrative aspect of a school leader’s role. Kevin’s advice to other school leaders showed a proactive approach to managing fear, using agency to establish control over potentially threatening circumstances.

Kevin’s account of “the angry parent on your doorstep” echoed other participants’ narratives of dealing with emotionally charged situations (for example, Sandy, Malcom and Darren’s experiences). Kevin’s account, however, focused on a different aspect: for him the crux of the encounter appeared to be the mediation role and the complexity of navigating a mediating pathway between multiple viewpoints; as he put it, “betwixt and between”. For Kevin, the fear is not only in the potential for being in a situation of high emotion (he points out later in the interview that he believes parents

should advocate for their children), but in the *complexity* of the situation. Ambiguity is apparent and there are a range of points of view that have to be taken into consideration (Kevin identifies the student, the "parent", the "teacher" and the involvement of other students). As Kevin says, "There's always … different perspectives of any event". Conflict of opinion seems inevitable.

Complexity breeds fear, because situations that are ambiguous and contain competing viewpoints are unlikely to be resolved with a universally approved outcome. Risking displeasure and censure from any of the parties involved creates another "toxic handler" (Frost & Robinson, 1999, p. 98) experience for the school leader. The emotion work (Hochschild, 1983) involved in the complex process of mediation is also significant: as Kevin says "… you're trying to see both of these perspectives". Kevin noted that, for some school leaders, "80% of their week … is spent mediating". Mediation and complexity link with fear and uncertainty by leaving a school leader at risk of emotional exhaustion or experiencing negative feedback for their decisions.

Another aspect of school leadership that reflected complexity was the administrative or managerial aspect. Kevin referred to this as "the constantly changing demands, regulations … of the system … those management regulatory bits and pieces". Having to keep current with new forms and priorities in administration was something Kevin found challenging. Again, this represents another aspect of the complexity of the role – once a leader may think they have grasped how to do something, it changes. Change is a known climate for fear: "People feel anxious, fearful, confused, overwhelmed, deskilled, cautious …" (Fullan, 2007, p. 40). Kevin's comments on this aspect of school leadership indicated that he felt this was an ongoing issue.

## *Control strategies for managing fear*

In his interview, Kevin outlined strategies for controlling and managing/mitigating difficult, or fear-inducing situations that may arise for school leaders (collaboration, separation and mental attitude). These could be interpreted as ways in which Kevin exerted control and agency over negative circumstances and emotional difficulty (including fear).

### Collaboration

When advocating for professional learning communities (collaboration), Kevin is demonstrating the importance of relational support and advice. In this sense, Kevin reduced the danger of isolation that can be a part of leadership (Kelchtermans et al., 2011) by surrounding himself with a range of professional supports.

### Separation

As a way of coping with the demands of the job, Kevin talked about both alcohol and exercise as tools for distancing himself from the stress or immediacy of his work. Pouring himself a glass of wine was a ritual that provided a psychological escape for Kevin. Similarly, he referred to exercise as providing a psychological space for reflection, a “sense of solitude” that is a contrast to the stresses of the people-centric role, allowing him a space for reflection and focus—not unlike Nonaka’s “ba” or “context which harbors meaning” (Nonaka & Konno, 1998, p. 40). It is mental preparation to provide direction and minimize unpredictability (Kevin was formulating a plan for the day, or rehearsing strategies). This allowed him to exert a sense of control and agency over his activities, minimizing potential worry or fear.

In another instance, Kevin referred to dealing with a buildup of stress by visiting a class of younger students to observe and be part of their learning, and to be refreshed by the enthusiasm they showed (he was principal of an R–12 school). In this way, Kevin was using a temporary separation from a stressful environment to ground himself. He visited another context in order to remind himself about his passion and purpose, and reconnect himself with his core values.

Kevin's accounts show that separation can be a significant tool for reducing stress for school leaders, and is a particularly practical strategy for an aspiring school leader to adapt to his/her own circumstances.

## Mental attitude

Kevin talked about the nuances of mental and emotional self-management in the context of unpredictability and imperfection. His advice about pro-actively managing situations is evidence of the importance of a sense of agency and control to tackle fear: "get on with the job: "if you smell trouble go towards it" and "attend to it as soon as you possibly can". He advocated honesty with self and others, and balancing a reflective attitude ("do it differently next time") with a compassionate one ("don't beat yourself up about it too much"). For Kevin, being a "human" leader is acknowledging personal limitations but remaining optimistic, reflective and pro-active.

Collaboration, separation and mental attitude were all strategies used by Kevin in his management of the stress and potentially fearful situations in his role. These rational strategies were in keeping with Kevin's perspective on fear: as he said, "Fear is disconcerting and … debilitating … because it challenges and interferes with clear rational thinking". Collaboration is a way of engaging support. Separation, attitude

and grounding are all ways in which control can be regained over the situation by exercising agency and emphasizing what Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski refer to as “a healthy and real sense of self in the face of a host of factors challenging that self” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, p. 312). Rational strategies, for Kevin, provide a helpful response to fear and provide a way in which to exert a degree of control over fear.

Kevin’s fears centred around the responsibility and expectations of his role, the interpersonal and relational aspects of leadership, and issues of complexity and control. Kevin’s account demonstrates that both external and internal scrutiny have the potential to trigger fears linked with leadership performance for school leaders. Rational strategies of collaboration, separation and mental attitude were used to manage feelings of fear and anxiety.

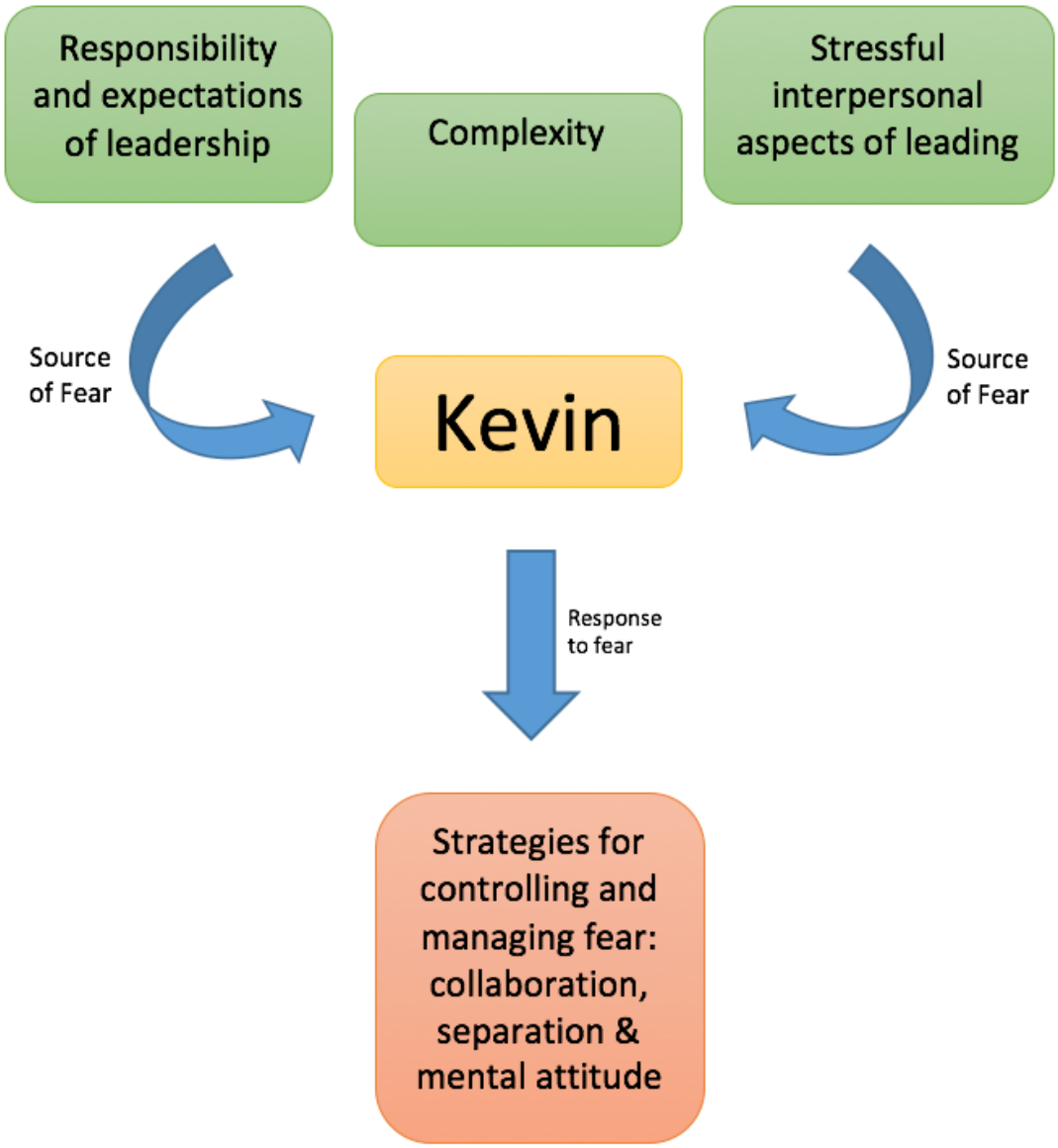


*Figure 6.* Dimensions of Kevin's fear experiences

# *Jane:* “Contingency plans”

## Introducing Jane…

Jane is a retired principal with many years of experience in urban, low socio-economic government schools. She came to the study through being a family acquaintance of the researcher. Jane was a forthright and long-serving principal, who still maintained relationships with many staff members and some parents from numerous schools even after retirement, attesting to the impact of her leadership and the quality of relationships she had developed.

Jane expressed initial ambivalence at connecting fear to her experience of being a principal. Not all school leaders are aware of feeling fear, at least not on a regular basis. However, as has been mentioned, Jane went on to recount many incidents that were worrying, of concern, or scary—providing ample evidence of enough fear to be useful for this study.

> My concern with the use of ‘fear’ in the topic was that that’s such a strong emotion … we had a very proactive school environment, we didn’t have a reactive one and that’s why the word ‘fear’ never crossed my mind until you sent the email and I read it and I thought ‘I never experienced fear’. I honestly don’t believe I did … I had plenty of situations which were worrying … and plenty that were scary … and some that made me downright angry but never fear.

In the interview, Jane emphasized the importance of a prior plan in knowing how to handle the situation and what to do—possibly playing a role in alleviating the fear. Jane’s reaction to a fearful situation is focused on the pragmatic aspects of handling the moment: what needs to be done, who to call, until it is resolved. Nevertheless,

there are clues as to feelings of vulnerability that these experiences can bring about: a question as to whether it is reasonable that these should be part of a normal work life: such as when Jane comments “unbelievable”, “I can’t cope with this”, “how stressful is that?”.

Reducing uncertainty through planning, communication and knowledge is also an obvious theme in Jane’s fear accounts. Many times she talks of the need for planning, and even attributes the lack of fear in her school to the strength of communication, culture and pre-prepared strategies. Jane’s interview contained many narratives (too many to include all of them in this work), consistent with her many years of experience. Three themes that emerged from her accounts were: the multiple threats to her physical and emotional wellbeing that occurred in her role as a principal, the presence or absence of support that she experienced in these stressful situations, and the importance of managing fear by being proactive and/or imposing levels of control on situations.

## Jane’s fear narratives

Jane had experienced many situations during her principalship in which her wellbeing was threatened. She had been yelled at, and even spat upon:

> … oh, I’ve lost count of the number of times where you get parents who just barge into the school office and just expect to speak to you there and then, and if you can’t they rant and rave – I mean, the number of times I’ve been spat in the face … I REALLY HATED THAT, really, really, I hated that.

She had to break up a fight between two parents:

> This is funny now but at the time it was a bit scary … it was about just after school had gone in, all the parents had gone and there was these two parents left in the carpark. One was a tall, skinny lady and one was a short … skinny lady. And they had a fisticuffs fight, like, punching fight, pull hair fight, really violent. And there was nobody around except me. So I went out there and I thought, 'What the heck am I going to do?' So I was trying to say 'Look, get ap[art]' and they wouldn't, so – I mean, I'm big, so I went and pushed my way in between them … and so I'm standing in the middle, and the little one was climbing on my back trying to punch the other one … Somehow or other I managed to get two arms up in the air [this referred to a pre-arranged signal Jane had with her staff if she needed them to get help]. But I mean that's the sort of thing that you encounter all the time.

The threats to Jane's safety became even more serious at other times. On one occasion she recounted a story about being

> … holed up inside the school front office while a gang of youths had a stone throwing fight on the lawn at the entrance. Or maybe, the night I had to call the cleaner and her husband to come to the school because I didn't feel safe to get to my car because of the constant thuds on the roof as youths moved around … Or perhaps, the time the louts climbed on the roof and pulled the tiles off and threw them as frisbees into the school yard while teachers were out and about in the yard after school

Jane learned to seek safety however she could:

> One more—this is the best! As principal in a low socio-economic area with high level transience in the community I found it prudent to be friendly to the local drug dealer, who was in a wheelchair. He moved through the school grounds on the perimeter frequently, and so I made it my business to say hello and to stop for an occasional

> chat. He always knew who had been on the school grounds after hours. One night when a section of the school was fenced off and guard dogs installed to protect the construction equipment I needed his support. Vandals brutalised the two dogs, accessed the secure section, started a Bob Cat [machinery] and drove it into the office, smashing the door and wrecking a wall. When I arrived there were many people who had come out and in the dark I couldn't see anyone who might have the school's best interests in mind. I saw the drug dealer on the peripheral and so I went and stood next to him, after chatting with him he moved with me to the vandalised area and waited with me until the police arrived. I knew I was safe with him by my side!

One of the strongest themes to emerge from Jane's interview was the issue of support for school leaders. Jane referred to support on multiple occasions: both how she gave support to and received support from her staff, but most often, how she felt a lack of support from those above her in the educational administrative hierarchy. After her story of coming between the fighting parents, Jane elaborated upon her views about the support process for school leaders who had experienced a potentially traumatic situation:

> The process then is to do a incident report to the [systemic body]. And you would hope that someone would ring you and say 'Are you OK?' but that never happened. Actually, it did happen sometimes but not all of the time. Whereas if you have an incident in the school—I had the same incident with two parents had a huge slinging match in the classroom—with a teacher, it was really distressing for the teacher … and I took her straight out of the classroom, she didn't go back into the classroom for about 2 hours, because she needed to be comforted—well, that's what's missing. That's what's missing for the direct person who's responsible for everything that

> happens in the school. We just don't get it reliably. If you get it, you're surprised by it. Not expecting it because it always comes.

In the next narrative, Jane recounted an incident where she had to appear in court over allegations of inadequately reporting child abuse. She was vindicated and she was never in any personal doubt as to her correct handling of the procedure, but overtones of fear are apparent in her account, not the least with her comments about the effects of these kinds of cases on schools and principals. The narrative has been reproduced in its entirety because of its impact:

> Anyway, we investigated it fully, and spoke with the parent, did everything right, thought it was handled. Next minute I get a phone call from the police telling me that I'm being charged with not … reporting child abuse. See, that didn't even bring fear to me. Because you know why? Because I knew I was right. I knew I was right. … And anyway, it went to a court case. I was the first person charged in [name of Australian state]. And do you know what? The [name of system] wiped me like I was a dirty rag. I was not allowed to talk to staff, they were not allowed to talk to me, it was just disgusting. It was really bad. And that brings me to my second element of what makes a successful principal: is I have great – and I'm not boasting about this, this is a fact of life. Like some people can play the piano, some people can do this – well I actually happen to have great emotional strength. And that's what got me through that. Because I had NONE—zilch—from the [name of system]. Nothing. Even the people who wanted to support me, couldn't. Mind you, my friends who were in other schools did, because they could come to the court case—well, they offered—I didn't ever want anyone there, but they were available to me whereas the people in the school site weren't. It went to court and it was thrown out because the kid was lying. It wasn't true, the poor old [tradesperson], he was beside himself because he had done nothing wrong, he did nothing wrong. Anyway, um …. end result of all of that, after it

> was all finished, it was all pal-sy pal-sy: 'Hey [Jane], what was your reaction? What happened?' You know, all being nice. [Central Office] even sent down what was then at the time [a senior officer of the system] for a school visit—[he/she] was—never went to school visits. Trying to appease me, I suppose. I don't know. But it was disgusting … a person with less emotional strength wouldn't have got through that.

A contingency plan also helped Jane in overcoming fear of not knowing what to do in the following account:

> Oh ... many many incidents of … almost unbelievable. I had a lady come into my office once, she was totally off her tree, she told me that I'd tried to cut her legs off. I'm thinking 'Oh my God, I've never seen you before'. I'd heard about this woman, because her child was a foster care child at our school but she was the actual mother, but she came on and she went on and on and on and I'm thinking, 'I can't cope with this'. Like, 'I don't know what to do'. So … hands up. [Colleague] rings the police. And at somehow or other the police must have known of this woman because they brought a support worker with them, who then talked to her, so then therefore took the problem away from me, but I never wanted to see her again.

On another occasion, Jane felt a need to take out a restraining order against a parent:

> … because he was such a pain-in-the-neck. Not just because of his verbal interactions but because of his physical … like, he would stand in a doorway so that staff members would *have* to squeeze past him. He was … not a nice man at all. And … not a nice person I would say. Just not a nice man. And it just got too much for staff, having him hang around, and then no matter what we did, he was on the school council, and it was just painful … And I didn't receive any assistance from the [system

> representative], and I thought 'I'm an individual. I have to look after my staff. I don't feel safe in my work environment.' So I went down to the police, gave all the incident reports and they said 'Yeah, you can have a restraining order against him'. So I had one done. … so that was a very worrying time because I was operating in isolation to do it.

Jane also talks about keeping records later in the interview. Having data readily available, or a "paper trail" as she called it, provided a sense of protection should future accusations arise:

> Contingency plan. I would always write a … ED-155 which is a … accident injury report form. Every single incident. Me—teachers—kids—if it involved conflict, or possible fear, and I would also do a security incident report to the department. I knew nothing was going to happen, but there was a paper trail. When I had the severe case of the child protection charge, which was dismissed, of course, I was going to the doctor every fortnight—just to have a paper trail. You know, get your blood pressure checked or whatever. And I would tell my teachers—'If this is stressful for you, go to your doctor and have it registered'. Because one thing it says, 'Hey, I care', number two it says 'Hey, look after yourself', and number three, 'Hey this might be a little way along the way to making you feel better'. And invariably it did. Because there is no external factor which will support you through all of that.

## Analysis of Jane's account

Jane's account contained themes of feeling fear when experiencing threats (to her physical and emotional wellbeing, or to her reputation), a perception of lacking support, and ways in which she managed or mitigated fear through controlling aspects of her professional life.

## *Feeling fear when threatened*

As an aspect of her school leadership role, Jane experienced threats to her physical and emotional wellbeing. She recounted several narratives about situations in which she was physically at risk. In addition, Jane experienced threats to reputation: both her own, and that of her school.

### Physical or emotional threats

Jane had experienced many situations during her principalship in which her wellbeing was threatened. She had been yelled at and even spat upon: the forcefulness of Jane's expression (repetition of the words "really" and "hated" in her re-telling of the account) expresses Jane's sense of indignation and stress at having to endure this. In addition, Jane risked physical harm on multiple occasions: when she came between the two fighting parents to try and stop the altercation ("It was a bit scary" is a good example of a typically Australian understatement that conveys the reality of her feelings of fear), when she could not leave her office at night without protection for fear of being injured, when roof tiles were being thrown onto the school premises, or when she chose to stand near the local drug dealer one night after the school had been vandalized.

Jane told these stories with a sense of enthusiasm for the dramatic impact that they held. Nevertheless, despite her nonchalance, each of these incidents represented a potential or actual threat to her safety that she was exposed to as part of her school leadership role. Like other participants in this study, Jane's experiences reflect the findings of other writing on the physical risks associated with Australian school leadership (Bloom, 2013; Hiatt, 2015; Riley, 2016; Williams, 2017). Multiple

encounters of this nature—and the resultant fear—is a part of some school leaders' experience. As Jane said, "that's the sort of thing you encounter all the time". According to Riley's study on Australian principals, "1 in 3" principals have experienced "actual physical violence" (Riley, 2016, p. 11). Jane's choice to include these narratives in the interview points to a concern about the risks to her safety that she experienced.

Along with physical and emotional threats, fear was also demonstrated in Jane's accounts about intangible issues of reputation and community security. This will be discussed in the following section.

## Threats to reputation

Some references in Jane's interview demonstrated another area of fear: that of threat to reputation. This could be Jane's reputation as a leader, or how her school was perceived. Jane recounted an incident when she had publicly confronted an intimidating parent (who was part of a motorcycle gang). When I asked if she was frightened to do that, Jane replied, "No. Because I had all my teachers and my students around me. And if I hadn't done it, they would have thought I was weak, and then if the next person did that would have got away with it".

Jane does not feel fear in a potentially fear-inducing situation because she feels supported by her community ("I had all my teachers and students around me"): the presence of a crowd minimized the possibility of threat for Jane as there were too many witnesses. It is clear that Jane *does*, however, feel a type of fear in this situation: fear of the consequences to her leadership and to the community if she does not address the problem successfully. Jane fears damage to her reputation as a

leader (“they would have thought I was weak”) which surpasses any fear she may have of confronting an intimidating person. As she said, “you’ve got to know what your moral platform is, you have to know what your standards are, that you will and will not accept”. Elsewhere in the interview she talks about her belief that “… the principalship is more to do with the character or personality of the person” and highlights the importance of clear rules and expectations. If she had not challenged this parent, then this would have affected how the community perceived the rules and also their perception of her leadership. This is a more fearful situation for Jane than the risk to her safety.

Jane is experiencing the pressure on school leaders to “Show no weakness” (Gallant & Riley, 2013, p. 85). The perception that “strength is a hallmark of leadership” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, p. 321) is a common one, and Jane feels fearful of the consequences to her leadership should she not be demonstrating that strength.

The risk of incidents having a negative impact on the school community was also a fear for Jane. She was concerned that unpredictable or bizarre incidents were managed because of the potential negative impact on the community, as she described in the incident where the parent removed their clothing at the school door and walked inside.

Jane’s fear is not in the management of an unpredictable situation—as she says, she has the support of her staff—but it is what the impact might be should this damage the school’s reputation. This is a fear of which Jane is acutely aware. Similarly, in an

incident where there was a streaker on the school oval and the police were brought in, Jane recalled:

> This was at ten to three in the afternoon … So I was worrying my head off, saying 'Look, can you please hurry up and cover her up. Or at least put her in the car before the parents come!' Because this sort of thing explodes in a community when it happens.

Jane is fearful of the community reaction to these kind of events, and the subsequent damage to the school's reputation. A feeling of responsibility is a noted factor of the principalship (Hall et al., 2003; Spillane & Lee, 2014): in this case Jane feels responsible for maintaining both the school's reputation and her own. When recounting a story about how she had a disagreement with the systemic supervisor over a fence being erected around Jane's school at her initiative, she acknowledged that those in the system also feared bad publicity: "… realistically, the people in the [system office] want to avoid it being on the front page of the [name of newspaper]". Fear of reputational damage is evident at both individual and systemic levels.

For school leaders, fear is experienced in threats to their wellbeing and in threats to their reputation. Jane's account demonstrates how frequent of these kinds of experiences can be in a school leaders' professional experience.

## *Feeling fear and lacking support*

One of the strongest themes to emerge from Jane's interview was the issue of support for school leaders. Jane referred to support on multiple occasions: both how

she gave support to and received support from her staff, but most often, how she felt a lack of support from those above her in the educational administrative hierarchy.

In Jane's interview, she frequently mentioned feeling unsupported. She links fear with a lack of support on three other occasions in the interview:

> … what [was] concerning was that I wouldn't get support. And I don't mean practical support, I mean moral support

and

> … that was a very worrying time because I was operating in isolation

and

> And that's why the principal's job can be very isolationist because if the principal isn't supported, he/she stands alone.

Despite Jane's inclination to look after others under her charge, she did not feel she had received the same kind of support from the system of which she was a part: instead she felt isolated and unsupported. As she said, "if you get it, you're surprised by it". After another incident in which there had been a complaint from a community member to her systemic supervisor, Jane wryly commented "… it was never 'Yes, [Jane], you're right'… Never! You are *never right*".

Jane's sense of isolation is particularly poignantly expressed in the narrative of her court case. Whilst fear over the outcome of the hearing is not evident (Jane remains convinced that she has acted professionally and is vindicated by the court's findings), nevertheless, her experience of fear was to feel alone and unsupported in a time of crisis. She was even cut off from those (her staff) who wanted to support her. Previously in the interview Jane referred to her strong relationship with her supportive

staff, demonstrating how significant a role staff support played for Jane. She commented elsewhere in the interview: “And that’s why the principal’s job can be very isolationist because if the principal isn’t supported, they stand alone. And so you look for your support from your staff”. At this crucial time, Jane has been denied one of her strong sources of support. What makes this more wounding for Jane is that she was denied support by those from whom she expected it (the system). Not only was Jane separated from her staff and the support that they may have provided for her, she felt abandoned by the system that she believed should have been supporting her during this time. Her comment “they wiped me like I was a dirty rag” shows the depth of the rejection she felt, treated as though she had become unclean. Feelings of aloneness, anger and betrayal are strongly evident. In Jane’s re-telling, she is helped through the situation by her own sense of inner strength, but this does not ease the betrayal she feels at being left alone at her time of need, contrasting with the response of support that came too late. The experience leaves Jane embittered and feeling emotionally disenfranchised from the system of which she is a part.

Support is essential to school leaders because of the innate loneliness of the position (Kelchtermans et al., 2011). With so much focus on the demands of school leadership, particularly the courage that is demanded of leaders (Schmidt, 2009), there needs to be a corresponding focus on how school leaders might feel supported, in order to enable them to meet these demands. Themes of “isolation” and “vulnerability” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, pp. 316-318) are evident in Jane’s account, despite the strong support she felt from her staff. Jane feels isolated from the system itself. Jane’s response is to find support from the only avenue available to her—herself. She talks about her “inner strength” that, in her view,

enabled her to survive the ordeal. Like Malcom, she reached inward in order to cope with a fearful situation. Being able to draw on inner resources is an important tool for helping school leaders deal with fear.

Both the presence and the absence of support are strong themes in Jane's fear narratives, pointing to their importance when discussing issues of school leadership. Support is raised in the context of feeling isolated, of the perceived injustice of giving but not receiving support, of being denied support in a time of crisis and of the ultimate sense of disillusionment with the system's inability to protect her. This is a fearful thing for Jane; as it challenges deeply held assumptions of systems or structures as powerful, benevolent and protective. Instead, she is encountering them as arbitrary and ineffectual. In this sense, Jane's fear is a fear of isolation: she feels truly left alone.

## *Managing fear using proactive strategies*

Rather than a description of what it was like to feel fear, Jane's narratives centred around managing situations to avoid feelings of fear and powerlessness. For Jane, exerting a sense of agency and control over circumstances was an important part of avoiding feelings of fear. She lessened the possibility of fear-inducing situations by preventing or minimizing their occurrence: enacting Ginsberg's "prepare yourself" strategy (Ginsberg, 2008, p. 296) in order to cope with potential feelings of fear. Jane's interview contained several ways in which she exercised agency over her circumstances: having "contingency plans", taking out a restraining order and building a strong school culture.

## Contingency plans

In her interview, Jane said: "… one of the things that comes from being a principal … successfully is to have contingency plans". Contingency plans alleviated fear for Jane because they clarified a path of action and guaranteed a level of immediate support. For Jane, having a contingency plan was a way of exerting control over a situation that was unknown, dangerous or fear-inducing. Jane's contingency plan came about after a situation when she and a staff member found a naked individual running around the school oval, and were forced to call the police. As she explained it,

> So after that we had a contingency plan that whenever I was outside and if I put both my hands up in the air like that (demonstrates by raising both hands above head) the office staff knew immediately (gestures for emphasis) call the police. Don't ask, don't question, don't send anyone else, just call the police. And do you know what? It worked. It worked really well.

For Jane, a fearful situation is one which lacks predictability, and having a contingency plan was a way of managing the fear. Several of Jane's narratives contained situations with a high degree of unpredictability. The creation of a contingency plan was an attempt to bring a level of control to any crisis that might ensue, providing Jane and her staff with the reassurance of an action plan and minimizing feelings of fear or worry. Jane was able to impose a level of control over an unpredictable situation by being proactive in her preparation. Another form of contingency plan referred to by Jane was keeping written records, or a "paper trail". Jane kept these herself, and recommended that her staff did too. Doctors' visits were made so a record of the individual's health could be kept. In this way, the keeping of records became a protective measure. Potential accusations can be refuted with

concrete evidence, providing an alleviation of anxiety about the future for the individual concerned.

## Restraining order

Jane acted with agency in a fear-inducing situation when she took out a restraining order against a parent. In her account, Jane felt threatened and intimidated ("I don't feel safe in my work environment") and successfully applied for a restraining order against the offending individual. She points out that this was not only for herself, but also to protect the others involved. To deal with the fearful situation, Jane takes matters into her own hands by organizing the restraining order, exercising a measure of control over the situation and acting to protect others in her school community. As she says: "That is a little family group there, no matter how big that school site is, and you have to look after it. It's the most precious thing that you have to do".

## Building a strong culture

Jane proactively managed fear by exerting influence over the school climate. When talking about how she joked with her staff about some of the difficult situations they encountered, she said

> this is how we jolly ourselves along … which *I* think is an important part of not creating fear within the school that—you know, *we're* in charge, not the other person, you know? You have to be in charge of what the climate's going to be like in your school; you can't let other people dictate it.

Convincing her staff that they held some autonomy over situations was, for Jane, an important way of counteracting fear. In this way, a positive and proactive culture was a strong antidote to fear. As Jane said,

> we had a very proactive school environment, we didn't have a reactive and that's why the word 'fear' never ever crossed my mind until you sent the email

Jane credited clear communication and expectations with building this environment. She had worked hard to develop a workplace culture (Schein, 2009) of strong community and low ambiguity which, in her view, minimized fear.

Jane's interview was laden with stories from years of leadership experience. Despite her initial reluctance to identify fear in her work life, Jane provided many stories in which fear played a part. She felt fear in response to threats to her physical and emotional safety, as well as in situations where the reputation of her school or of her own leadership was at stake. She perceived a strong lack of support from the system for which she worked: this, for Jane, was deeply disillusioning and disappointing. Jane's strategy to minimize fear was to put "contingency plans" in place, such as emergency procedures and documentation to protect her or her staff. In addition, she worked hard to build a workplace climate that was strong in clarity, communication and relationships to minimize ambiguity and fear. Strong relationships with her staff were a source of support for Jane in times of uncertainty.

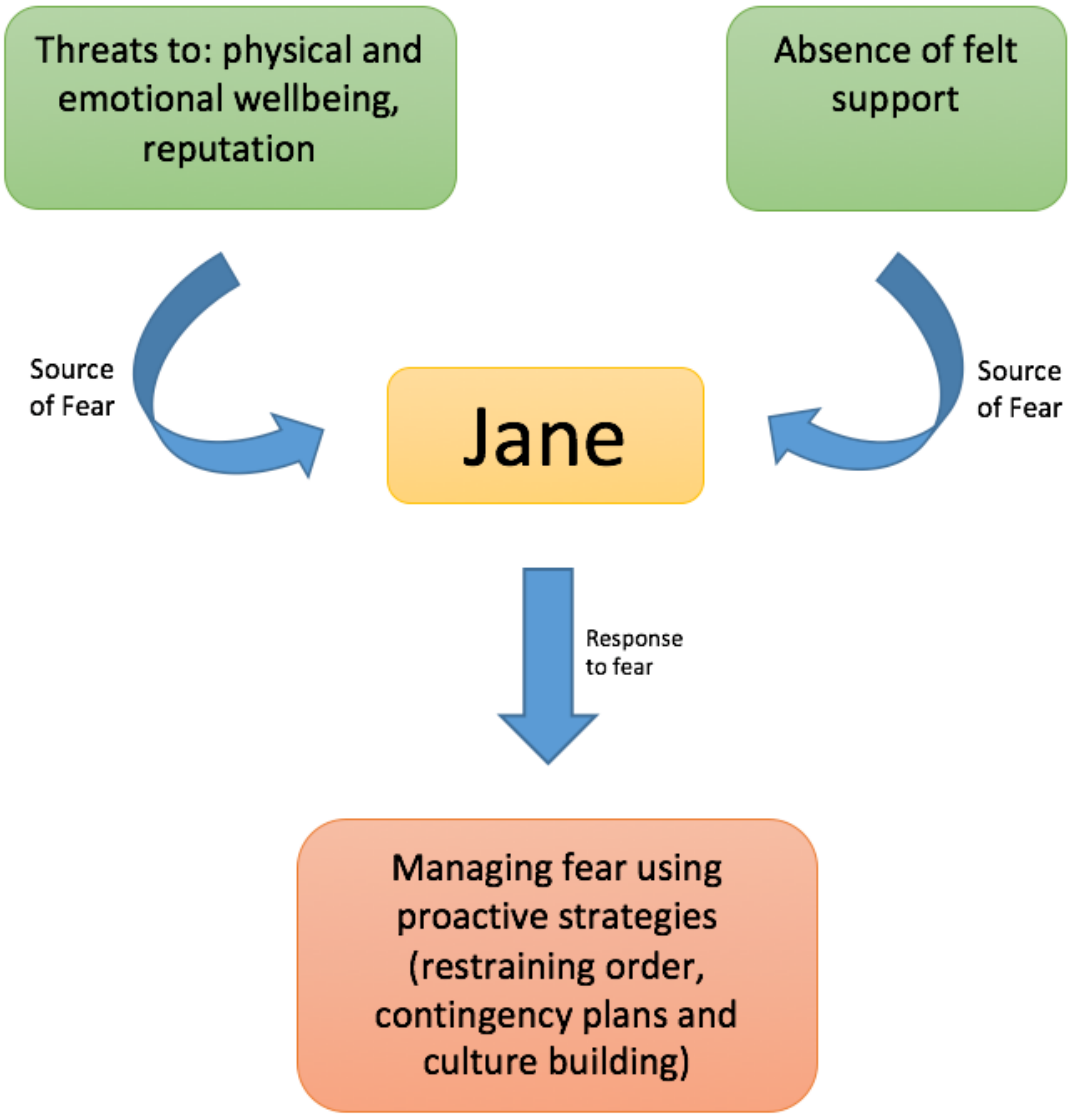


*Figure 7.* Dimensions of Jane's fear experiences

# *Simon:* "You cannot please everyone"

## Introducing Simon …

Simon was an experienced school principal who was not working in that role at the time of the interview. I connected with Simon through a conference for researchers in education. Simon described himself as "a bit subversive" in his educational leadership role. He emphasized adhering to the spirit (rather than the letter) of policy if this achieved worthy educational outcomes for his school community. During the interview he remarked: "A friend of mine once said, 'policy exists for the guidance of the strong and blind adherence of the weak'. Needless to say, I didn't like 'weak' and I didn't like 'weakness' in others". A post graduate student himself, Simon was engaged in reflecting on his experiences during the interview, providing a blend of narrative and self-analysis in his comments. Themes emerging from Simon's interview were the link between fear and the relational and complex nature of the principalship, the link between fear and control, and strategies he had found useful in managing fear.

## Simon's fear narratives

Simon provided a narrative about a difficult encounter with a parent:

> In my … final year where we actually had a parent who was mentally unwell … disability pension. And he'd caused a bit of a ruckus. Now … I'd actually worked with his mum, he'd played footy with the deputy ... but he was known to the police, he was known to the member, I think at the time the local member may have been the premier and … adding a layer of complexity – and he was great mates with the premier … Oh well, he liked to think he was because they were very much along the party lines and … anyway, because he'd caused this ruckus (?) in the second week

> of the school year we'd managed him OK there'd been time – was there a time when I was fearful or terrified? The only possible time was when someone raced into my office with – regarding this fellow – and said that he and this other parent are in a fight … and … I'm 173cm and he's 192 so- both of them – so I'm thinking (wry sounds and tone) : 'Stepping in between them? We'll see how we go!'… so that's the situation we had to deal with

As Simon's narrative continued, the focus of the fear changed from fear for his personal safety, to managing the complex relational nature of the incident:

> … And so … I thought we had separated his child from the children of the parents he had the ding dongs with. And you've got to remember the child—this is prep age too … you know—the sins of the father can't be visited on the child, so … we have to do the right thing and anyway, we published the list that we'd made the error—we hadn't seen that we had this error. And I got an email that night from one of the parents who … basically said—you promised me this wouldn't happen. And so while I could say that had—and it's mostly that guy because you're going *how* did that happen? *how* am I going to fix this? Because to fix it required a bit of political manipulation and control and then the first thing I did when I walked in the door the next day—here's this fellow sitting outside my office and I thought 'I'm going to cut him off' and I said—I don't remember his name, whatever it was—I said, 'We've got this sorted'—'cause I thought he was there to see me—'We've got this sorted; it was an error. No need to worry.' … And he just flew off the handle. He … several things, wrote very long letters and emails, which I get, I … was never frightened like that, because I understood that yes we'd made a mistake, we could fix it, it would be OK. But then goes—you know, at what point is he going, 'Am I going to get the premier office on the phone saying what's going on? ... It all worked out. But that was possibly the most anxious ridden—

> and those moments repeat … Not to that extent, but they repeat because—it goes back to what we said, you cannot please everyone.

Simon reflected on his response to the situation later in the interview, identifying the way in which fear was driving his response:

> … the fear also occurs *I'll get in before they get in*. And that may have been where that parent sitting in the library before I walked in—*I'll cut him off before he leaps to his feet*. Probably it was fear talking. While I didn't feel fearful, it was the fear of what might happen that thought, *I'll cut him off*.

Later in the interview, Simon talked about the issue of bullying and how it is a situation of high complexity and potentially high emotion:

> A parent comes and sits down and says *my child is being bullied.* And, I've been around long enough to know that that's possible. But it's often the case, and you're on really thin ice here as a Principal, it's possible that the child has just been bullied. It's MORE likely that the child has engaged in a round of banter with another child and has come off 2nd best and they've lost, so now they're whinging. And that's very common. You still have to deal with the situation and you can't dismiss that. Just because *I* think that you've come off 2nd best and that's why you're whinging. It might be that it's a case of pure bullying, and you've got to investigate. And you've got to take it seriously.

Simon refers to the frequency of these complex situations: "There's always something that you're having to deal with where there's no clear-cut solution ... And the approach you take has to take time. And it has to be done with every individual that confronts it".

Simon described assemblies as contexts in which he felt apprehensive about a situation getting out of control:

> … I would be apprehensive running an assembly. Because standing up in front of people. The concern was "that something is going to go wrong that I can't control." But you believe in systems and that others can solve it. So in all the years—we had one—just after the world trade tower crashes—I remember we had a Muslim family at the School and a local mosque in Brisbane had been fire-bombed. So we decided as a School that we would raise money to help the mosque restore itself. And through the parent, to the parents at the Muslim School, we got the Imam from that mosque to come out and talk to us. So, apprehension is—and I thought this would be good, we'll have it, we'll present him with money, we'll say a few words. And it never twigged to me *what will he say?* He stood up and said *I'd like to talk.* As he stood up there and was about to talk, I thought to myself, *okay—this could be the end of my career.* Because, what he may or may not say. In the end, it was parents were coming up to him crying, because his message was so powerful and appreciated. So, the apprehension you have—okay I may have just made a really silly error, but it was no more than that.

Fortunately for Simon, his fears were unfounded, as the assembly went well.

Separation strategies formed a part of Simon's response to anxiety. He said:

> I'd get out of the car and park the car a few hundred metres from the school and walk. And in that walk I did ask myself—not what I have to do—not my to do list—it became my what will I *be* list? What *type* of principal will I *be* today? One of the anxiety producing effects is when you've got to have a difficult conversation with someone … I would have that walk—today I need to talk to this person—what is the tone to

> adopt? … that was that walk to work so that I wasn't angry in those conversations; but I was strong and I'd be assertive.

Over the course of the interview, Simon mentioned some "embodied" aspects of his experiences of fear: feelings of shock and surprise, taking deep breaths and insomnia. These physical manifestations of fear were an aspect of Simon's lived experience.

Lastly, Simon advocated the need for emotion to be incorporated into principal preparation programmes. He advocated emotional awareness and acknowledgement for school leaders: in particular, for men.

> … having the ability to understand your emotions is really important, and I think it's an under-valued aspect of principalship – misunderstood … perhaps the reason I didn't acknowledge fear or terror is because, as a male, and as a Principal, there was no place for fear and terror in my role—that's how I'd been socialized—I have to be brave. I can't show emotion. So *I* understand how debilitating the emotional toll is now.

and

> once you know that these emotions are telling you something, then you can be a little proactive. You can hear the emotion as it comes up and maybe say, *okay, what's this telling me?* You may still get angry and still do stupid things but then, in a deeper moment, you can also think through it. *What would I do next time?* So in terms of preparing for the principalship, I think there's a lot that can be done; particularly in the area of studying emotions. One of them is to make it okay, particularly for males to say, yes I am experiencing this emotion. Without them thinking I'm (or they're) being

> a big sook. Sport is an example—it's a moral for so many people in life. Over the last 2 or 3 years, we've had Phillip Hughes' death, Phil Walsh's death, where that has made it okay for people to say I'm feeling *this* way. So, the time is right.

Simon's comments provide insight into the gendered nature of expectations around emotional expression in the context of school leadership.

## Analysis of Simon's account

Themes emerging from Simon's interview were the link between fear and the relational and complex nature of the principalship, the link between fear and control, and strategies he had found useful in managing fear.

### *Visibility and vulnerability: feeling fear in the relational, public and complex arena of school leadership*

In Simon's first narrative he raises fear connected with a physical threat: the possibility of having to intervene in an altercation and the risk that might pose to his own wellbeing. As the narrative continues, the focus of Simon's fear changes to managing the complex relational nature of the incident. He faces anxiety over the repercussions: how the mistake was going to be rectified, dealing with the highly emotional response of the parent, and considering the possibility that the problem might take on a public and/or political dimension. I have discussed Simon's fear experiences under the following sub themes: public, relationships and complexity.

#### Public

Simon experienced fear linked with the visibility of his role as a principal. The administrative error in that highly specific context is frightening for Simon. Not only is

he wondering how the error could have been made ("… how did that happen?"), he is then concerned with the ramifications of solving the error ("… a bit of political manipulation and control"), as well as considering wider risks if the situation escalated. Would this result in damaging negative publicity for the school? Or possibly, for Simon's own reputation? Simon experienced fear linked with the risk of public or high level censure ("… at what point is he going, 'Am I going to get the premier office on the phone saying what's going on?").

The public nature of a school leader's role is also highlighted in Simon's account of school assemblies. He identifies assemblies as a fear trigger, because of the possibility, as he puts it, that "something is going to go wrong that I can't control". Here, Simon is held accountable for not only his own response, but the response of others (which is outside his control).

Gronn highlights this vulnerability when discussing the issue of risk, where he describes school leaders as "a handful of identifiable individuals who become objects of public blame and possible humiliation" (Gronn, 2009, p. 199). Due to the responsibility demanded of them, situations such as this have the potential to create fear for school leaders.

## Relationships and complexity

For Simon, fear was related to the relational aspect of his role. The narrative with the angry parent demonstrates situations where dealing with people and their emotions He talked about having to make unpopular decisions and work through them in situations where parents might not want their child in a particular class. As he said "… those moments repeat … because you cannot please everyone".

Although he downplays his level of fear, Simon is the target of verbal and written tirades ("… he just flew off the handle … wrote very long letters and emails"). Like other participants in this study, Simon is engaged in the role of being a toxic handler (Frost & Robinson, 1999) as he seeks to navigate his way through this situation. It is the school leader who bears the emotional brunt of others' reactions. In this way, relational issues are clearly linked to fear in the lived experience of a school leader. Relational tension, in this case, seems almost inevitable.

Complexity was also noticeable in Simon's account. His account of the angry parent involves him working through a situation that calls for managing multiple perspectives and attempting to bring some resolution to a complex situation. Elsewhere, Simon refers to the frequency of these complex situations: "There's always something that you're having to deal with where there's no clear–cut solution ...". Dealing with difficult issues and ambiguous outcomes are hallmarks of a school leader's role. School leadership is a nuanced practice, fraught with the possibility of misinterpretation, error and judgement.

Bottery talks about principals dealing with competing demands from opposing forces – adding another layer of complexity (Bottery, 2006). Sogunro (2012) also justifies the link between complexity and fear: "… because principals generally work with varying stakeholders, needs, and responsibilities, they are easily predisposed to stressful situations, prompting them to act with heightened tension that does not abate easily" (p. 665). Complexity brings ambiguity to situations, and this itself can be a breeding ground for fear: "People want clear rules, honesty and mutual trust" (Maccoby, Gittell, & Ledeen, 2004, p. 14). Clarity can be hard to find in dynamic and

complex contexts. Hence, school leaders experience complexity—and the resultant anxiety that goes with it—because of the inherently social nature of the organizations in which they work.

These complex and relational situations were common across the school leaders' accounts in this study, showing that fear of the breakdown of relationship is a significant issue for school leaders. As Ginsberg says, "Leaders are human. They continually face emotion-laden situations, and they often agonize over decisions and worry incessantly about the repercussions of what they decide" (Ginsberg, 2008, p. 293). School leadership is a relational and complex exercise (Bottery, 2006; Giles et al., 2012) that can leave a school leader open to public critique (Gronn, 2009). In other words, school leaders have to continually navigate a complex landscape of people and emotions, whilst fully aware that, even with the best of intentions, their words and actions may be misinterpreted or harshly judged. Simon's experiences demonstrate the highly relational and highly complex nature of school leadership.

## *Lacking control and imposing control through agency*

Simon acknowledged that fear arises from a sense of not being in control. He referred to this at several points in his interview: being physically threatened ("stepping in between them? We'll see how we go …."), when leading assemblies ("something is going to go wrong that I can't control") or dealing with complex situations ("… there's no clear-cut solution"), as have been discussed. During the interview, he identified strategies which could be described as ways to control frightening or threatening situations in advance, in order to take a "proactive" stance (as Simon referred to it) to deal with feelings of anxiety or fear.

Crisis situations for leaders have been linked with a lack of control (Maslin-Ostrowski & Ackerman, 2000). Leaders can feel under pressure from expectations that they will always appear to be in control (Gallant & Riley, 2013), yet Simon's narrative clearly demonstrates that this expectation is unrealistic. School leaders cannot control every aspect of a school, as Simon's account shows. Nevertheless, he feels a level of fear about the potential consequences of inflammatory remarks upon his school community or himself.

In addition to experiencing a lack of control about aspects of his work, Simon also discussed ways in which he could impose a level of control in order to manage work-related anxiety. These strategies demonstrated Simon's agency: regularly attending to his incoming work ("I never left work with anything in my inbox"), separation strategies and emotional awareness. Simon felt less anxious when he had completed his part of the work: as he said "I've got that under control. You may have resolved the situation or may not, but you know it's in hand". Conversely, "relying on other people and their response" heightened anxiety for Simon, whereas "if it's just what I have to do then it's OK". If fear is experienced in situations where there is a lack of control, then Simon's actions make sense: by imposing control over tasks he is regaining a measure of predictability and agency. For him, this minimizes fear.

Separation strategies also formed a part of Simon's response to anxiety. As with Kevin, morning walks offered an opportunity to reflect on his role or mentally rehearse difficult conversations. Simon demonstrated control in the form of agency, ensuring he can reflect and prepare how he wishes to act (as he says, who he will "be" in a particular situation). He emphasized reflection as a particularly useful strategy, despite the lack of time that school leaders have to devote to this. Another

separation strategy used by Simon was playing and singing along to music in his car on the way home from work. He referred to this (and the morning walks) as be a type of “Thirdspace” strategy, where leaders allow themselves opportunity to have time between their professional role and their home life (Schuck, Kearney, & Burden, 2017; Soja, 1996).

## *Not expressing fear*

A powerful theme of being unable to express fear can be identified in Simon’s narratives. He discusses the dissonance he felt between his personal experience of feelings of fear on one hand (at one point Simon described negative emotions as ones that “sit more heavily”), and his perception of the “suitability” of these feelings within his notions of leadership and gender. Simon calls for a change in attitudes towards emotional expression for school leaders, in particular, men. For Simon, it is problematic that fear must be denied, repressed and silenced in order to conform to an idealized image of leadership.

Simon’s account reflected two defining aspects of his reluctance to acknowledge or discuss fear: that of being a male, and that of being a principal. As he says, “as a male, and as a Principal, there was no place for fear and terror in my role—that’s how I’d been socialized—I have to be brave. I can’t show emotion”. For Simon, to express fear did not align with either of these roles with which he identified. Because of Simon’s identification with both roles, he felt constrained about expression of emotions that, to him, did not ‘fit’ with the stereotype.

The emotional labour described by Hochschild (Hochschild, 1983) could be a useful framework through which to interpret Simon’s account, where he felt that he had to

mask certain emotions, such as fear, and, instead, project others, such as confidence, in the service of his role. Simon felt that masking emotions was a necessary aspect of his leadership practice. This view has been supported in literature: a study by Lewis (2000) has found that male leaders who displayed a "non gender-endorsed emotion" (p. 225) were rated as "less effective" (p. 225) than their counterparts who did not display emotion. Likewise, in a study on emotional display in political candidates, it was noted that "… people … think that men *should not* become emotional or show weakness" (Brooks, 2011, p. 599). Emotional display has consequences for both men and women in public roles. In this way, Simon's fears are substantiated; emotional display in a leadership role can be a risky undertaking.

And yet, in Simon's account, he hints at the longer-term negative consequences that repressing emotions may have had for him: "So *I* understand how debilitating the emotional toll is now". Simon did not elaborate upon the effects of the "emotional toll" upon himself, but the implication from his comment is that he felt that there was a significant personal cost ("debilitating") to feeling unable to admit to negative feelings, such as fear, when performing his role over time. In response, Simon advocated greater emotional awareness for school leaders: in particular, for male school leaders.

Lastly, Simon advocated the need for emotion to be incorporated into principal preparation programmes. He described the necessity for school leaders to be able to understand their own emotions as "an undervalued aspect of principalship". Other authors concur, calling for greater attention to be paid to the idea of emotions in leadership, particularly for principal preparation programmes (Beatty, 2000; Samier & Schmidt, 2010). Simon's account specifically supports the inclusion of fear as one of

these emotions; due to the silence on fear within some entrenched notions of educational leadership. If fear is indeed an aspect of school leadership, then discussions of fear can potentially enlighten and inform aspiring school leaders, preparing them for the realities of school leadership. Coping strategies and supports can then be identified and form a part of principal preparation, in order to better equip new leaders.

Simon's experiences of fear demonstrated the relational, public and complex nature of feeling fear as a school leader. His accounts highlighted the pressure felt by school leaders due to the visibility of their role. Fear was experienced in the context of the relational nature of school leadership: dealing with people prompted feelings of fear. Simon was forced to face the inevitability of disappointing others, and the subsequent emotional pain that caused. Lastly, there was the complexity of situations and the mental and emotional burden of dealing with these complex problems.

Simon was philosophical about the experiences; his reaction to a fearful situation was to recognize his limitations and exercise a reflexive approach to create solutions upon which he could act. As in the case of other participants, a strong sense of personal agency is demonstrated. Simon dealt with fear through exerting control as a means of agency, such as keeping up to date on his work and distancing himself to provide a context in which to reflect and prepare. Simon identified with the tension between the realities of feeling fear in his role, and an idealized image of school leadership with which he was enculturated: a façade of bravery in which fear did not have a place. After experiencing this, he was a strong advocate for the emotional dimension of school leadership to be included in principal preparation programmes.


*Figure 8.* Dimensions of Simon's fear experiences

# *Phil:* "Little things became the big things"

## Introducing Phil

Phil was a middle aged, retired primary school deputy principal with decades of teaching experience in both urban and rural contexts. I asked Phil if he would be interested in participating in the study when we met studying a course together. We discovered a personal connection; his brother had been a former primary school teacher of mine. Phil was an engaging and open conversationalist with a flamboyant gift of storytelling and a witty sense of humour, providing a range of narratives and reflections based on his years of leadership experience. He had taken an early retirement because of psychological stresses he was experiencing. Themes arising from Phil's interview included: being a "toxic handler", the importance of a sense of control (and how this intersected with notions of leadership), and managing fear in leadership.

## Phil's fear narratives

Phil provided a range of experiences about experiencing fear in leadership. They have been categorized as: dealing with angry parents, a vehicle accident on a school trip, the path to a stress illness and strategizing.

### *Dealing with angry parents*

The following incident happened to Phil when he was a deputy principal. It has been included in its full length because of the impact of the narrative:

> … two parents, both of whom were significant drug users … flew off the handle, OK, and they had altercations at the traffic lights where the kids were all there. And it was

a dangerous situation anyway. One of them comes in with her daughter to complain about that whole situation and wondering what the f— I'm going to do about it. I'm sitting in the interview room which is a glass room, front office there, us here, I'm sitting in the interview room, next to the door. She's sitting with child screaming the house down. Who should walk into the office? But the person she's really really angry at. So—and she sees her there—eye contact and all of a sudden I'm in a situation now where I'm there, she's screaming at me, and then all of a sudden she sees her and starts screaming even louder with more expletives and stuff like that than you could count. I don't know how you can fit that many in a sentence, but she did…

So anyway, she's hearing it so she's standing there and she's talking to the person in the office … the secretary there, and … so they're eying each other … and she wants to kill her. And I'm there and I'm trying as hard as I can to do all the diffusing stuff that I can do … I'm listening to her. It was just going well until this woman came in, I'd got her down to the calm stage then all of a sudden, completely lost control. Because loss of control is: 'I'm no longer in the room'. This was between them. All I am is the person standing in front of the door. And if I wasn't standing in front of the door, there would be fisticuffs … so … between these two ladies who were … off their faces …

Anyway, so that was an irrational situation which I had to deal with, and I can say all the things that I did which was all the things that I talked about before, which was the listening, the talking, the empathizing, the explaining the legal aspects of it, and as soon as – and she was OK with that to start with … but then it tipped over the edge when this person came in. And so I basically had to stall for time. I basically stalled for time and I just kept saying 'OK, OK, It's OK, It's OK. Relax; it's OK' …

So anyway, the other person left … and then her anger at that person was then directed at me. 'This f–ing school' and all that sort of stuff. So, yeah, '*you*', '*you* need to', '*you* have to' 'I want you to' and 'I want you to do this to her and I want this and if

this', you know and then she just tore off. Screaming as she walked out the door. And I just stood … there in the doorway and [name of assistant] said to me 'Are you all right?'. Second time she's said that. And I said, ah, 'No'. And … I said, 'I think I might ring the police'. And anyway so I rang my superior down at [name of system office] and told him what had actually happened … went through the whole thing and eventually this sort of mini-counselling session and … I was the only person there in leadership so I had to take the whole brunt of it … it was really awful and it was … quite a moment.

So I had done everything I possibly could to deal with it but it wasn't enough because … with a person with a significant drug problem there's no rational outcome … Although I didn't blame myself, I was powerless in that situation, it's one of the times I've felt … vulnerable.

… As it all ended up, after all that, her husband rang the school … when that moment occurred, when the husband rang the school, or when [receptionist] said (foreboding tone) 'It's Mike [pseudonym]' … *that* was the time that I just went cold … cause I thought this guy, who I know is a big fella, is going to come down here … you know … and something bad's going to happen. Anyway, so … I … picked up the phone and he said …

'Is that [Phil]?'

'Yes'.

'Mike here'.

'Hi Mike'.

'Look, I'm really sorry …'

(pause while Phil and interviewer laugh as the relief of this statement becomes evident)

but you know … after … the conversation which was an apology … you know, she's not herself at the moment ... blah blah blah and anyway she's in the background

> screaming still (chuckles) I said … 'She needs to understand, Mike, that she can't come into the school and swear … in a mixed community. You can't do that'. OK, so I was really calm … and … really supportive of him.
>
> Then I got off the phone and I went after that and … had … coffee or something in the staffroom and went home and … didn't sleep most of that night because I was *really angry* … I was really angry at being subjected to that tirade by somebody who I would, in normal life, not choose to deal with. I just, it's not my choice to be with people like that … but … the job's defined that I would be … So yeah … that was a significant one because I don't think I've ever felt as outraged about anything that had happened to me in a situation like that.

Phil's account reflects a complex range of intense emotional experiences including his own fear and anger; simultaneously he is involved in managing the effects of others' emotions towards a desired outcome.

## *Events leading up to a stress illness*

Elsewhere, Phil described in detail the lead up to a stress illness that resulted in him taking an early retirement from teaching:

> I remember a situation which heralded the end of my time … was a day when one of these people who was … [a] serial pest at our school. Little kid, but a serial pest and just could not stay out of violence ... I got *angry* – for … virtually the first time in my career. *Absolutely*—stonewall—angry at this kid. (pauses) and I was *afraid* of what was going to happen next. And so eventually … I got him inside, I got him into the interview room, and I went up to the person at the desk and I just looked at her and

> she said, ‘Are you alright?’ And I said, ‘*No*.’ (reluctant chuckle). And that was a week before … my episode where I collapsed.

He continued describing another stage of his experiences:

> And then I ended up being—going to school, and … my principal said “If I didn’t know you better I would swear you were about to start crying’. And I said … ’Don’t say that … or I will’ … and—she got me into the car and took me straight up to hospital and … all the symptoms of what I was going through at that particular time—was palpitations and stuff like that, were probably to do with other problems, but it was … a starting point towards a stress-related illness or whatever … I suppose they might have called it an ‘anxiety illness’ or an ‘anxiety attack’. I had an anxiety attack and it was just around the time when all of a sudden the cup was starting to fill up and I was going straight from dealing with problems. I was always the one who dealt with problems, and I did it really well, but what was not apparent to other people was that it was having an effect on me. Because, I’m a good actor. And I covered it up … I took some time off and I came back to work, and then the same thing resurfaced again. And this time it manifested itself in a collapse.

Phil reflected on the self-observations prior to his “collapse”:

> So, it all went around that whole anxiety thing of … not sleeping … you know hardly sleeping at all. Worrying about little things. Little things became the big things … and I went into this zone where I suddenly went from completely rational to angry with that kid. And the other thing that I started to do was hiding. I started not being there when I heard someone in the office or someone being brought to the office. I started leaving it to people around me to deal with those people. So … whether it was a parent or whether it was whatever; and I’d just disappear. And then that’s when I decided

> something was wrong ... And then after the … collapse … I took … sick leave and went and saw somebody about it. So I spoke to a psychologist about the whole thing, and that led me to … take an early retirement. I thought … 'No, my health's more important than this'.

Phil's collapse is surprising to him because of the unexpectedness. He had always been a competent deputy: as he said, he "did it really well". At another point in the interview he elaborated on this:

> And I did it *really well* and my principal *hated* losing me because she relied on what I was doing. The point with me was, it just got too much. And I didn't know it. It just happened. And … one day I was the most relied on person, and the next day I was gone. You know, and … it can happen that quickly.

And elsewhere:

> that's I guess where the apprehension, concern, anxiety and worry and all those sorts of things had never affected me and I was as strong as a stone wall, and then … all of a sudden—bang! Unheralded. Just, bang! That was … it. So then I decided to leave teaching.

Phil came to a point where he no longer felt that it was advisable for his health and wellbeing to continue in his role: hence, he took an early retirement.

## *Strategising*

Phil spoke of managing a situation of fear where he had to deal with an angry parent:

> … the fear that I'm experiencing when that person has got raging eyes and they're sitting opposite me. So … how I dealt with it and how I would deal with it is **strategic**. And that way, that fear and playing dodgem cars with that fear is a really really important thing and so that's what I mean by, 'it's how you respond to it'. And … how you respond to it is absolutely everything. It's the bottom line test for your ability to be able to manage a conflict situation. Is … to diffuse and to … get it onto rational terms, because without it, they'll just tear you apart. (chuckles ruefully) because that's what they want to do. They want someone blamed.

His response was to turn the situation into a game of strategy: as he explained it later, by leveraging the fear: "the fear that you're feeling is: What's the worst possible outcome? And how do I NOT get to that outcome?" For Phil, one of the strategies he used was to ask a series of questions in order to get the emotional person to begin to reflect on the situation.

> I'll come with that strategy of actually working it through with them, getting them talking. If they make a suggestion, which is a positive suggestion, I've won. It's a game, and I've won. As soon as they start you know proposing something that's reasonable, then I know the situation's diffused ... As soon as they start reflecting then … the rational side of them steps in.

Having a supportive individual to talk things over with was important for Phil. He said later:

> what you *can't* do, you *can't internalize it*. You have to debrief … the things that got on top of me eventually were things that I internalized. And I didn't have or didn't feel like I had enough people around me to empathize with what I was going through.

> … and that's really important that you don't bind it all inside yourself because it will have nowhere else to come out except emotionally. And … that's the truth of it … So yeah, I'd say … you can do all those other things: you can talk with people, talk with colleagues, wife, staff …

Phil's account highlights the necessity of strong supports for school leaders, particularly those who have a good understanding of the nature of a school leaders' experience.

## Analysis of Phil's account

Phil's account contained themes of emotion management, feeling fear when lacking a sense of control, and the importance of support.

### *Feeling fear and emotion management*

Because of his role as a deputy, Phil is placed in the situation of having to manage situations that are emotionally confronting: ones in which he may feel out of control, threatened and unsupported. This may involve Phil acting as a "toxic handler" (Frost & Robinson, 1999, p. 98) as he manages others' emotions, whilst undertaking emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) to manages both his own and others' emotions. In the narrative about the angry parent, Phil feels fear for his physical safety: in addition, he is the target of yelling and verbal abuse, leaving him vulnerable to feelings of fear and anger. Phil is further frustrated by the challenges to his sense of personal agency: he cannot remove himself from these difficult situations (even though he would prefer not to deal with them) because they are part of his job.

## Emotional labour

Phil is required by his role to carry out emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) in combination with toxic handling (Frost & Robinson, 1999): communicating calm and supportiveness, when his own emotions are very different. In addition, Phil's comments about his conversation with the difficult parent's partner: "I was really calm and really supportive" contrast dramatically with his expression of being "*really angry*" that night, once the crisis is over and the incident has been dealt with. Grandey, Rupp and Brice (2015, p. 778) identify anger as an outcome from emotional labor:

> … when employees perceive that harm has been caused (to themselves …), that the actions could have been avoided, and that the behaviours displayed violate universal norms of ethical interpersonal treatment, that they experience "moral outrage" (typically manifested as anger) …

As he reflected on the incident, Phil experienced "moral outrage": for him, it was anger over how he had been treated and the lack of personal agency he felt at having to deal with that person. Expectations of emotional labor can violate individual dignity by causing some emotions to remain unacknowledged: "Emotions are signals to ourselves and others about our situation, and it is disrespectful for half a dyad to be expected to ignore those signals" (Grandey et al., 2015, p. 780). The longer term consequences of emotional labor will be discussed in the following sections, as well as in Chapter Five.

Despite feeling angry or afraid, Phil had to present a façade of calm, reasonable professionalism to Mike in the phone conversation. He feels that one of his responsibilities is to act as an emotional sounding board or buffer for those in the

school community. Later in the interview Phil described his leadership role as follows: “I’m the calming raft over all of the fears”. For Phil, managing others’ emotions is his responsibility and is part of his school leadership role.

In describing emotional labor, Hochschild refers to “separations of ‘me’ from my face and my feeling” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 37). In his interactions, Phil is experiencing this phenomenon of emotional labor. Despite feelings of fear and anger, he must respond with calm, concern and rationality. This situation was not the only instance of emotional labor that Phil raised during the interview; elsewhere he had described a time when he was beginning to show symptoms of a stress illness and felt tremendous anger towards a student (he describes it as “absolutely stonewall angry”). This incident occurred a week before Phil himself experienced a collapse. For Phil, managing the power of his own emotion became emotional labour. Despite his strong anger (“I was afraid of what was going to happen next”) he has to manage the situation professionally (“I got him into the interview room”). Phil’s narratives demonstrate the reality of emotional labor in his school leadership experience in situations where Phil experienced fear.

Emotional labor was also a part of Phil’s experience when he was in charge of a trip where there was a car accident involving students. He described his response like this: “So the fear of the situation … and the anxiety of the situation had to be put aside. And just do the process”. He talks about how the expectations of his job and what he knew he had to do directed his emotional expression: “And so my job was—it just all took over, the lock-in, lack of emotion, ‘just do it’ … so it was ‘just do it’ for 7 hours”. In reference to this, Phil also used the phrase “‘go into automatic pilot”, as he was detaching himself from the situation in order to focus on what needed to be

done. He acknowledged the tensions between emotion and his understanding of professionalism:

> So yeah, that was another situation of just (draws a breath) remaining calm and not letting the situation get to you … although it *should* yeah … you just *don't* because you're the one they're looking to. So that's the leadership part of it; you've got to show it. Now's the time.

Phil is needing to undertake emotional labour in order to perform his leadership role – that of remaining calm in a crisis. This is a conflicting emotional experience for Phil: he reflects that it is a situation that "should" be disturbing ("although it *should* [get to you]"), but he will not allow himself to entertain these emotions because of his leadership role. Phil's leadership role supersedes his own emotional reaction, which must be suppressed, or at least postponed, until the crisis is handled. Leadership required of him a communal responsibility which he experienced in parallel to his individual emotional reaction. These instances are times of emotional labour for school leaders, and an experience of tension between the public and private face of emotion. It is important to examine the effect of long term emotional labor, or toxic handling, on the school leader.

## The negative effects of emotional labour

Phil's interview contained his experience of an anxiety related illness that led to him taking an early retirement from his job. Phil makes the link between the "problems" with which he had to deal and his collapse: "… all the symptoms of what I was going through at that particular time … was … a starting point towards a stress-related illness or … an 'anxiety illness' or an 'anxiety attack". Phil identifies a feeling that he

was reaching the limits of what he could manage ("the cup was starting to fill up"). His subsequent collapse is surprising to him because of its unexpectedness. He had always been a competent deputy: as he said, he "did it really well". At another point in the interview he elaborated on this:

> And I did it *really well* and my principal *hated* losing me because she relied on what I was doing. The point with me was, it just got too much. And I didn't know it. It just happened. And … one day I was the most relied on person, and the next day I was gone. You know, and … it can happen that quickly.

He uses "strong as a stone wall" as a metaphor to describe his functioning as a deputy, and contrasts this with the suddenness of his collapse: "Unheralded. Just, bang! That was it". Phil's account is a call to take seriously the impact that negative emotional stressors can have upon school leaders. In Phil's case, it led to him taking early retirement.

In this case, a useful focus for any other school leaders who may be operating under these kinds of stressors, could be to learn from Phil's experience by identifying any similar early warning symptoms in their own context. Phil identifies "not sleeping", "worrying about little things", emotional instability and task avoidance—as he called it, "hiding". Phil no longer feels the ability or emotional strength to engage in acts of emotional labor, such as dealing with conflict, managing the emotions of others, or masking his own emotions. He is as surprised as anybody with the suddenness and intensity of the stress illness that he experienced.

The nature of a school leader's role will inevitably lead to encounters where they will be involved in emotion management: both managing their own emotions, and in

managing emotional encounters with others. Being the brunt of negative emotion from others, whether that is directed at them or at others, is stressful for school leaders and can induce feelings of fear. For a school leader, one response to being in a “toxic handler” situation can be to carry out emotional labour, masking his/her own emotions in order to present a professional face. The impact of being a toxic handler does not only have immediate consequences to the individual; Phil’s case shows there can be long term negative impacts as well.

## *Feeling fear with lack of control*

Phil’s main fear during the incident, however, appears to be about the lack of control he feels in his attempt to manage the situation. As he puts it, “loss of control is: I’m no longer in the room”. Phil is speaking metaphorically about his impact on the situation: as a leader he feels that he should be managing the incident, and it is frightening to him to recognize that he has little control over what may happen.

Feeling powerless can be “worse than death” (Maslin-Ostrowski & Ackerman, 2000, p. 223) for school leaders. Implicit in powerlessness is the fear of not having the capacity to manage the situation. In this way, powerlessness is the antithesis of leadership: if leadership is to have influence, powerlessness is to lack influence—and therefore to call into question whether leadership is indeed happening. Phil said “I had done everything I possible could to deal with it but it wasn’t enough … I was powerless in that situation; it’s one of the times I’ve felt vulnerable”. For Phil, fear is about losing control or influence over the situation. This threatens his identity as a leader.

Earlier in the interview Phil used the metaphor of the “shepherd” to describe leadership, as one who looks after the wellbeing of the school community. His notion of leadership was strongly linked with agency: that is, having influence and making a difference. As he said, “Because you can say all you like but it’s what you *do*, and how you make people feel around you, that’s the really important thing about being a leader”. He also referred to being “in front of” those he led. If Phil finds himself in a situation in which he lacks control, he runs the risk of judging himself to be an inadequate or underperforming leader. This is threatening to his leadership identity—a cause for fear. In challenging situations, Phil can feel that he has reached the end of his (considerable) resources. This leaves him experiencing fear on a number of levels: not only the fear about the successful resolution of the situation itself, or about his own safety, but an element of self-doubt and questioning about his own leadership.

Later in the interview Phil identified the powerful link between fear and a desire for control, and how it relates to ideas of leadership:

> And so the trepidation that I fear – feel with … anything to do with leadership is the *credibility*. So if my credibility’s on the line, for any—it’s all about me making sure that my credibility’s not on the line. Because if it is on the line, then people don’t look to you. They’ll look to other sources. And sometimes they’re a negative source. So if they – if you are allowing them to look for alternatives in leadership, then you’re not doing your job. So … you’ve got to make sure you’re in front of it. And … you know I can go back to, oh, it’s ‘violence in the school yard’ or it’s ‘dangerous parents’ or its ‘confrontations’ that … really … put my guts in a knot, but *really*, in terms of the job, the things that trigger the fear and apprehension are my loss of control of the job. So

> that's … to me … far stronger than any, physical you know or anything like that, or emotional, it's my loss of self-esteem. So … my loss of credibility.

Phil directly states that the greatest fear in his role is "loss of self-esteem" and "loss of credibility". These are deep fears that drive a school leader's behaviour, highlighted by Phil's use of the visceral metaphor "put my guts in a knot". He is affected by this fear at his very center. For him, this fear is the culmination of all of his other professional fears. The fear of losing credibility and self-esteem explains why control is such a significant issue for school leaders, and, conversely, why so many of the fear narratives in this study have a felt loss of control at their center. Linked with lack of control are threats to security, predictability, credibility and felt competence as a leader. Others will judge them, and leaders will judge themselves, based on the control they appear to have over their role. It is no wonder that such determined efforts are made by school leaders to enact control in the ways in which they are able, establishing agency and influence over events, circumstances and people. The consequences of not being perceived to be in control can pose a significant risk to a leader and to his/her leadership.

Agency and power are concepts commonly associated with leadership. Whether it is bringing change (Bush, 2008; Cuban, 1988), influencing (Yukl & Yukl, 2002) or managing vision (Murphy & Torre, 2015), many definitions of leadership essentially involve some kind of action. To lack influence or action, therefore, is somehow antithetical to the idea of leadership. In other words, to be ineffective is to not exercise leadership. Phil's comment of "I'm no longer in the room" reflects this: he feels useless and invisible in the situation. In his mind, that does not match with his perception of leadership practice: hence, losing control triggers fear for Phil both in

the immediate handling of the situation and in the implications it contains about his perception of his leadership capabilities.

## *Imposing control by utilizing a strategic approach*

Phil identifies several ways in which he responded to situations in which he felt fearful. Consistent with the previous themes, these ways often contained measures to regain control or exert influence within a situation. They included a strategic approach to diffusing situations.

Phil has reduced his own fear in the situation by approaching it as a game to be won, or a challenge he can overcome through clever strategizing. This lightens his attitude to a tense situation and, for him, reduces the fear. It also provides a measure of felt success: as he says, “It’s a game, and I’ve won”. Winning emphasizes Phil’s agency in the situation, he has made a difference by diffusing the emotion. This bolsters his self-efficacy as a leader. He has also brought the situation into a “rational” space, an area of greater predictability and, therefore, less fear.

Phil’s approach with angry parents was also to “reassure” them of his support, offer them a coffee, and aim to get them to “empathize with the people they’re angry at”. This is high level, nuanced work, requiring a degree of emotional awareness and is, in itself, a form of emotional labour. To be carrying this out whilst managing one’s own emotions in the situation is a testament to the skill level of school leaders who manage these situations on a regular basis. Enacting strategic approaches to tense situations was a way in which Phil could exercise agency and control.

## *Feeling fear and the importance of support*

Phil sought support to help mitigate the effects of fear. This was necessary because of the isolating nature of his leadership role. Supports included supervisory assistance, the police, family and peers.

### Feelings of isolation

Phil referred multiple times to the feelings of isolation he experienced as a leader. In the narrative of the angry parents, he mentions being left alone: “I was the only person there in leadership so I had to take the whole brunt of it”. Referring to another incident, he explained: “… you might have an explosive parent. You might have an explosive student. … where you’re the person who has to deal with it and … all of a sudden it’s you, that person – everyone else is out of the office … how am I going to handle this?” Associated with this is his observation about the loneliness of leadership and the responsibility placed on the individual (“all of a sudden it’s you”). Feeling left alone, powerless and in an unpredictable situation was a fearful experience for Phil: as he said, “I didn’t have or didn’t feel like I had enough people around me to empathize with what I was going through”. As well as the challenges of school leadership, feeling alone and unsupported can add another dimension to the fear that school leaders experience. Phil’s narrative reflects his experience of these feelings of isolation.

### Seeking support

Despite feelings of isolation, Phil’s narrative contained references to a range of support networks that he utilized. Phil’s reaction to the situation with the angry parent was to contact his systemic supervisor and have what he described as a “mini-

counselling session”: seeking support in response to experiencing fear. He also referred in the interview to a school support officer who worked closely with him, and how they would use humour to diffuse the impact of problematic situations. Having a supportive individual to talk things over with was important for Phil. As he said later, “… the things that got on top of me eventually were things that I internalized”. Phil’s account demonstrates the crucial need for perceived support in the school leader’s role. Support for school leaders is widely advocated in literature (Barnett & Shoho, 2010; Brennan & Mac Ruairc, 2011) and the participant experiences, such as Phil’s, from this study also bear out the need for school leaders to feel supported in their roles. Part of this support could also entail greater awareness of the role that emotions play in school leadership, and building capacity around emotion management for school leaders (Wallace, 2010).

Phil’s narratives of fear reveal his role of the toxic handler and the carrying out of emotional labour. Control is also a central theme in the narratives, reflecting notions of leadership connected with fears of being ineffective. Strategizing is a way in which control over the situation is regained. Absence of support is evident in Phil’s fear narrative, but more often, supports are present and are a way to manage or mitigate fear. Phil’s account is especially poignant, not only because of the depth of emotion expressed, but also because of the final outcome of his stress illness and early retirement.

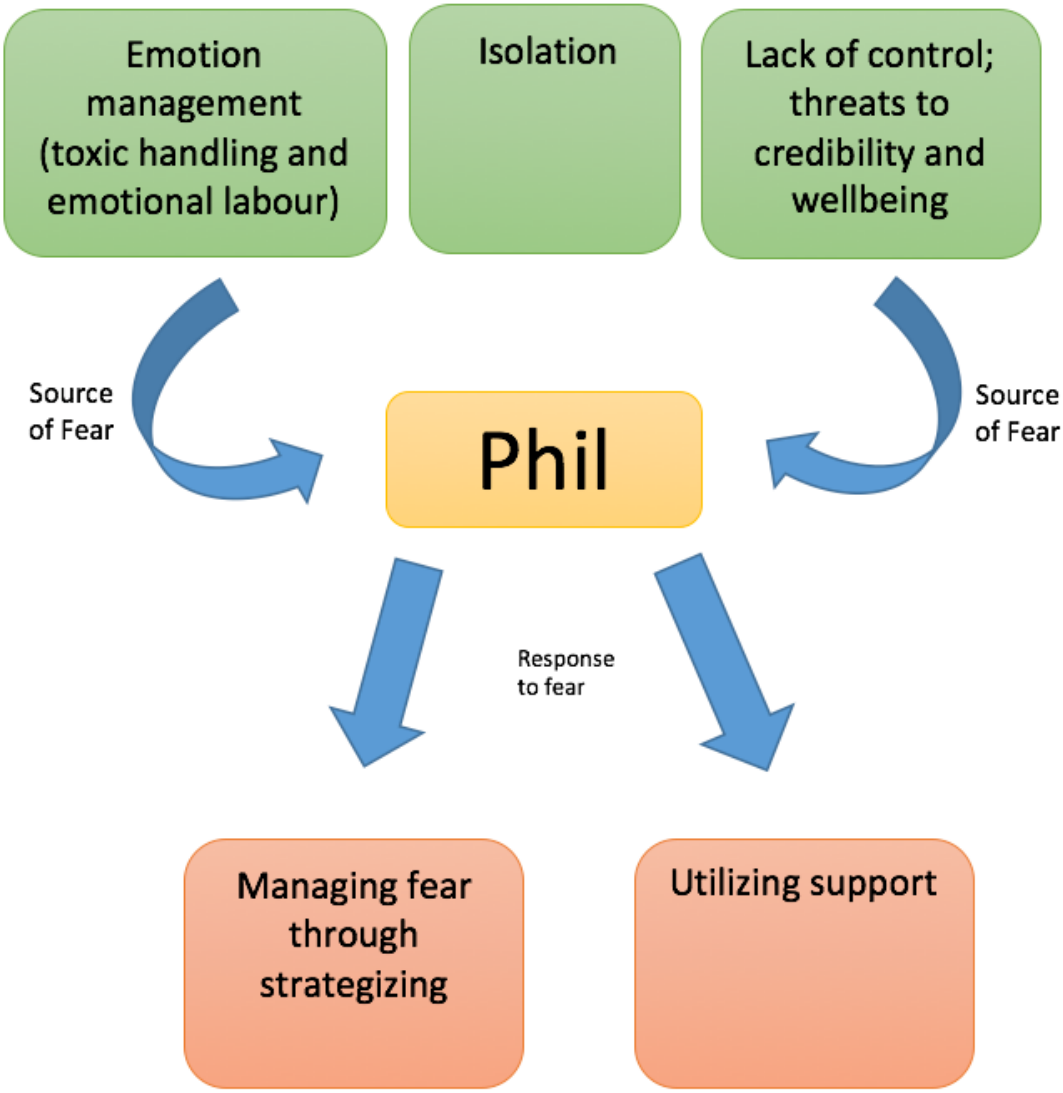


*Figure 9.* Dimensions of Phil's fear experiences

# Chapter 5 — The nature of fear for school leaders

## *Introduction*

Up until this point, the study's main analytical focus has been on describing and representing each participant's experience of fear. The focus will broaden in this chapter, as patterns emerging across the full range of participant accounts will be identified and discussed. Detecting patterns across cases is common practice in IPA studies (Semlyen, Ali, & Flowers, 2017; Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999; Virginia, Jonathan, & Rachel, 2008), sometimes described as identifying "group themes" (Smith, 2015, p. 46). Selection criteria can include the prevalence of data, or particular depth or relevance of an aspect (Smith, 2015). These criteria were used to select the group themes represented in this chapter. This is not to lessen the significance of less represented themes: simply to notice that some themes are more widely shared than others. The group themes discussed in the following chapter include:

1. Control
2. Responsibility and expectations
3. The presence or absence of support

Theoretical references have been incorporated into this discussion (as they were in the previous chapter) in order to link the identified themes to the wider body of literature.

## *Control*

Control was a frequently occurring theme in the fear narratives: lacking control, losing control or imposing control. A number of participants experienced feelings of fear in situations where they had lost control or felt they were in danger of losing control. This was particularly evident in the situations that posed a threat to their wellbeing (either physical or emotional), or where they faced an 'out of control' situation (for example, Phil's story of the car accident, or the verbally abusive parents). In a number of the fear narratives, the participants identified a fear-inducing experience as having to deal with people who were exhibiting strong emotions. The complexity of a school leader's role was a theme that was evident in the participants' accounts of fear. The participants often responded by exercising their own sense of agency: imposing elements of control where they could, in order to re-establish a sense of control and minimize feelings of fear. The theme of control has been discussed under the following subheadings: "Threats to wellbeing", "Unpredictability and emotionality" and "Using control to manage and mitigate fear".

# Threats to wellbeing

*Men in rage strike those that wish them best.*
William Shakespeare, *Othello* (2.3.206)

A common group theme emerging from the participant accounts was that feeling fear involved being 'under attack': be it physical, verbal or emotional. As a researcher, I found this surprising. Prior to commencing interviews, I had expected that school leaders would voice fears that were more abstract or conceptual in nature (such as the future direction of education, or the responsibility of their position). I was not, however, prepared to hear so many stories about threats to individuals' safety and wellbeing. Nevertheless, these stories regularly emerged during interviews, and have featured significantly in the participant accounts. Whether it was experiencing a threat of violence upon their person, being the target of actual violence, or bearing the brunt of a verbal tirade: being subjected to these kinds of threats was a common experience for the school leaders in this study, and clearly one which the leaders identified with feeling fearful. Leaders were subject to physical and emotional vulnerabilities because of their work-related roles; in this sense they lacked an element of control over their own wellbeing.

## *Fear arising from threats to physical wellbeing*

When asked to recount an experience of fear, a number of the participants described one in which they perceived their physical safety to be threatened. In Malcom's case, there was the experience of an actual assault. Similarly, Darren had a knife held to his throat by a student, and was worried whether an irate parent would "pick up a chair and … hit me over the face" or "smack me into tomorrow". Iona felt physically intimidated by a group ("these men were bigger than me") and by an individual ("he could probably swerve his car towards me"). Jane physically intervened in a fight

between two parents, was spat upon and was trapped in her office at night when fearing for her safety. Simon was also fearful at the prospect of having to step in to stop a fight between two parents, both of whom were taller than he. Sandy experienced a sense of intimidation when she had to deal with a group of fifty "massive teenagers … all round" who were possibly "aggressive".

The situations of vulnerability and fear experienced by the participants are not uncommon; there is wider evidence that Australian principals may find themselves victims of physical assault. Hiatt's article in *The West Australian* from 22nd October, 2015, entitled "WA principal bashed", describes a principal who was on leave after being "punched repeatedly in the face and chest by a parent and another adult". In addition, a newspaper article from 15th February 2017 in *The Advertiser* states that "The proportion of SA principals who were victims of workplace violence last year rose from 24 per cent to 36 per cent" and "Parents were responsible for a third of attacks" (Williams, 2017, p. 1). The research upon which the above article was based—Riley's (2016) report for 'The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Well-Being Survey'—indicates that school principals may be exposed to threats of violence or actual violence. In 2016 "close to 1 in 2 principals receiv[ed] a threat" (Riley, 2016, p. 11) and "1 in 3 principals" (p. 11) experienced "actual physical violence" (p. 11). Riley says that "The steadily increasing levels of offensive behaviour across the country in schools of all types should give us pause" (Riley, 2016, p. 13). The narratives in this study support these worrying statistics: that situations of threatened or actual physical violence are indeed part of the lived experience of Australian school leaders. This study adds to Riley's findings by describing the nature of the feelings of fear that go along with these experiences for school leaders. To be repeatedly at risk of danger is indeed a fearful thing.

## *Fear arising from threats to emotional wellbeing*

Fear does not only come as a result of threats to physical safety: emotional vulnerability also has the capacity to cause feelings of fear. In many of the fear narratives there was reference to an emotionally charged situation that a school leader had to handle—often on their own. Usually this was a confrontation with an angry parent or staff member. Often the incident involved raised voices, high emotion and anger. School leaders suffered verbal barrages (involving shouting, screaming, blame or threats).

The prevalence of these emotionally-charged scenarios in the participants' fear narratives indicates a link between feeling fear and experiencing others' negative emotions. Malcom recounts a narrative where a parent was "screaming". Darren talks about encountering a parent who was "like a raging bull … swearing profusely". Jane had a parent who "was totally off her tree, she told me that I'd tried to cut her legs off …" and another who was swearing in front of the students. Simon had to deal with a parent who "just flew off the handle". Kevin mentions "the angry parent on your doorstep … for whatever reason" and the complex mediation necessary to deal with these situations of heightened emotion. Sandy talks about encounters with a staff member and a parent who were "yelling" or "being incredibly obnoxious". Brad talked about the teachers who "had a go at me"; Phil about an encounter with a parent when "she was screaming at me" and later, "her anger at that person was then directed at me". These accounts all contain a common experience: a leader bearing the onslaught of another's negative emotion. Being the target of these attacks, or being in the presence of someone who is expressing vehement anger, can be a fear-inducing experience for school leaders.

Negative emotion is frequently directed at a school leader (Ginsberg, 2008; Sogunro, 2012; Wallace, 2010), and, by the nature of their role, the school leader is expected to "absorb" and diffuse the emotion of the situation by acting calmly and rationally (Huff, 1991). Experiencing (and often, being expected to manage) others' extreme emotions can be fatiguing, stressful and threatening (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004). Principals often deal with negative emotions of their staff (Crawford, 2009; Izhak & Ori, 2016). In addition, they are often called upon to deal with the negative emotions of parents from their school communities, playing the role of a "toxic handler" (Frost & Robinson, 1999, p. 98). The theoretical construct of the "toxic handler" describes the role played by organizational members when they take on negative emotion from their community. This will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

## *The "toxic handler"*

Writing about the business world, Frost and Robinson (1999) articulate the concept of the "toxic handler" (p. 98): a senior individual in a company who takes the "role of absorbing and softening the emotional pain of his organization" (p. 98) and "who voluntarily shoulders the sadness, frustration, bitterness, and anger that are endemic to organizational life" (p. 98). This person may be the manager to whom subordinates can vent frustrations about senior leadership, or may be the person who acts as an intermediary between the two groups. Toxic handlers can carry out a number of roles: to "listen empathetically" (p. 99), "suggest solutions"(p. 99), "work behind the scenes to prevent pain"(p. 99), "carry the confidences of others" (p. 99) and "reframe difficult messages" (p. 99).

This study's findings show that school leaders take on a similar role: both in weathering intense emotion and having to direct it to a positive outcome for the person and the organization (as in Phil's, Darren's, Jane's, Sandy's and Simon's accounts). School leaders, depending upon their position, can be dealing with negative emotions from staff, parents, school council members or other stakeholders.

One example of the toxic handler role for school leaders that emerged repeatedly in this study was in interactions with parents. School leaders often deal with situations in which people are highly emotional: as Phil says, "everyone's child is their family jewels, you know, they are the most important thing". Sandy's experience showed the fear-inducing aspect of being in that kind of situation of heightened emotion. This can become wearisome: Brad commented about negative aspects of his role: "The closer I get to retirement the harder it is to think 'do I really WANT to come back into that?'" Unfortunately, being a toxic handler, according to Frost and Robinson, has negative consequences for the individual: more often "burnout, both psychological and professional" but also taking "a physical toll" (Frost & Robinson, 1999, p. 100).

Whilst Frost and Robinsons' "toxic handler" concept refers predominantly to managers within an organization who are a sounding board for staff negative emotion, I would argue that school leaders play an expanded version of this role in their dealings with the wider school community, and that school leaders have *little choice* about having to take on the toxic handler role. Darren's situation is an example; he must endure another person's anger and bring some sort of resolution to the situation. For Frost and Robinson's toxic handler, their role was voluntary. These managers fielded staff complaints and negative emotion because of perceived necessity (perhaps because they genuinely wanted to help others, or perhaps they

perceived it was for the overall good of the organization). However, for school leaders, I would argue that the role of toxic handler is not voluntary, but rather, is a prescribed aspect of the position. Darren's leadership role requires that he be present in this situation and 'manage' it as best as he could. He does not have a choice. The inescapability of dealing with negative emotion is a sobering aspect of school leadership that is worth considering.

School leaders are not alone in experiencing the negative effects of being subjected to others' negative emotions. The harmful effects of dealing with negative emotion can also be seen to be deleterious to staff in the healthcare industry. The risks associated are worrying: in a study entitled "Pharmacy students' perceptions and emotional responses to aggressive incidents in pharmacy practice", Rahim and Shah (2010) link the fear and anxiety experienced in aggressive work encounters with "poor job satisfaction and burnout" (p. 5). In a study on resident doctors in Japan, it is noted that: "Perceived abuse or harassment during residency has a negative impact on residents' health and well-being" (Nagata-Kobayashi, Maeno, Yoshizu, & Shimbo, 2009, p. 628).

Educational leaders can, in the same way, feel stress because of the emotional intensity of their role. In her study on stress and Delaware principals, Huff recounts that verbal abuse or threats of violence "brought enormous stress to the principal" (Huff, 1991, p. 93). This bears out Gronn's (2009) assertion that "dealing with angry parents" (p. 206) is "a principal role-associated hazard" (p. 206). Fear and anxiety arising out of situations of aggression and abuse can, therefore, have negative consequences for the school leader.

## *Emotional labour*

School leadership also involved fear-inducing situations in which participants had to engage in “emotional labour” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 9) in order to carry out their role. Evidence of school leaders enacting both “emotional work” and “emotional labour” (Ginsberg, 2008, p. 3) were identified in the participant accounts of their experiences of fear. Phil had to work hard to control his feelings when the force of his anger surprised him:

> ... I got *angry*—for the—virtually the first time in my career. *Absolutely*—stonewall—angry at this kid (pauses) and I was *afraid* of what was going to happen next. And so eventually … I got him inside, I got him into the interview room, and I went up to the person at the desk and I just looked at her and she said, ‘Are you alright?’ And I said, ‘*No*.’

Phil is performing emotion work in suppressing his feelings of rage at a student. The depth of his emotion is surprising to him, and the situation has a substantial emotional impact. To manage one’s own emotion is a necessary aspect of professional life, yet this is not always easy for school leaders.

Feeling fear—and yet having to portray courage—is another experience that could be construed as “emotional labour”. These situations are common for school leaders. Hochschild illustrates this with her examples of flight attendants feeling a particular emotion and having to express a different one to the passengers. The notion of acting and presenting a persona is also discussed by Goffman (1978) in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. In the same way, school leaders may be feeling fear, but are under pressure to simultaneously convey a sense of courage

and serenity to others around them. Phil had to suppress his fear in order to manage a crisis situation after the car accident. Iona wanted to go home to “have a cry and have a sleep” but instead stayed at school so she would not worry her staff. In these instances, the school leader is forced to act in a way that is not congruent with his/her feelings. The effort required by the individual to act in such a way reflects the level of acting and emotional labor that school leaders may undertake as part of their professional roles, and demonstrates the relevance of Goffman’s (1978) and Hochschild’s (1983) insights in the realm of school leadership.

Both emotion work and emotional labour, then, are evident in the lived experiences of school leaders. This seems unlikely to change in such an intensely human-centric occupation as educational leadership: “Too often, leaders in educational organisations experience a tension between the perceived need to present a public face untroubled by emotion and the emotional labour (Fineman, 1993) that is an inevitable part of the work of administration …” (Wallace, 2010, p. 595).

Nevertheless, it is worth noting Ginsberg’s caution about the long-term effects of the practice of emotional labour: “Other experts suggest that this gets especially tedious when one has to express emotions that clash with inner feelings. It can lead to negative attitudes about work, emotional overload, burnout, physical ailments or withdrawal” (Ginsberg, 2008, p. 3). Similarly, dangers listed from prolonged exposure to emotional labour can be: “job dissatisfaction, job burnout, work-family conflict, somatic symptoms, as well as hindering employees from effective task and citizenship performance” (Grandey et al., 2015, p. 772).

In Phil's case, his emotional absence was a sign of his own emotional exhaustion. Phil's reflections indicate a long history of work-related emotional labour:

> I was always the one who dealt with problems, and I did it really well, but what was not apparent to other people was that it was having an effect on me. (I: yes) Because, I'm a good actor. And I covered it up.

It seems that more attention needs to be paid to the emotional wellbeing of school leaders, who may—on the surface—appear to be coping well, but are internally struggling with the long-term emotional demands of their role. Emotional labour is carried out by school leaders when they feel pressure to downplay their feelings of fear and present a public face of confidence and strength.

School leaders felt fear when they perceived that they were under attack. Situations that posed a threat to the participants' sense of safety—whether it was physical or emotional—were a common theme in the fear narratives. It may not have been fear they could express to others or even allow themselves to fully feel at the time; they may have been actively engaged in 'professionally' and 'successfully' managing the situation—and yet, their choice to include these particular stories in their accounts demonstrates that verbally abusive or physically threatening situations *are* indeed a source of fear and stress for leaders, no matter how well they may cope or may appear to be coping. The frequent occurrence of these kind of threatening situations in a school leader's work is sobering; particularly, as Jane said, "that's the sort of thing that happens all the time". Having a leadership position does not protect school leaders from emotional attack; if anything, it increases their risk. It is worth noting that "managing the pain of others … is hard work. It needs to be given the attention and

support it deserves for everyone's benefit" (Frost & Robinson, 1999, p. 106). And, as Phil's account shows, there may be a limit to how much one human being can take.

## *A way forward?*

More recently, violent and abusive behaviour has been directed at principals and teachers (Caro, 2019): so much so, that some Australian states are taking preventative action, as has been pointed out by Fyfe and Cook (2019):

> Victoria has recently set up the Australia-first Independent Office for School Dispute Resolution to resolve toxic disputes between parents and schools. And last December, a new school community charter was rolled out across New South Wales, essentially a guide to respectful, timely and "polite" communication between parents, staff and students.

The threats are real for school leaders; as are the feelings of fear they can engender.

Questions arise about how aspirant school leaders can, or should, be prepared for these kinds of experiences. School leadership programmes can offer strategies and protocols that are aimed at protecting school leaders in these kinds of situations and providing guidance on how to act. However, the emotional preparation is a more problematic issue. As Malcom said, "… no matter how much training you've had … I wasn't prepared to have my shirt grabbed and be shoved … and be yelled at and threatened—you can't be prepared for that!" How school leaders can be prepared to deal with the emotional consequences of this kind of situation is an issue worthy of future research and consideration by those who construct leadership training programmes. Barnett and Shoho point out that "conflict" (Barnett & Shoho, 2010, p.

574) is an area for which some new principals feel unprepared in beginning their roles. Perhaps a first step is simply to acknowledge the emotional dimension of school leadership. I would support Wallace's call for leadership preparation that also involves discussion of the emotional component of leading (Wallace, 2010) for a more holistic approach to preparing school leaders.

Grandey et al. (2015), when discussing the dangers of emotional labour, advocate for "humanistic practices" (p. 778) that protect the worker and hold all parties to account for their own behaviour towards others. These include to "fairly compensate emotional effort" (p. 778), "support and buffer the emotional effort" (p. 778) and "communicate value for employees' emotions" (p. 778). Whilst it could be argued that school leaders' financial compensation is more in line with their work in this regard than that of the service industry workers that are used as examples (Grandey et al., 2015; Hochschild, 1983), the areas of support and value are highly relevant to a school leader's professional role. These include: "training employees' emotion regulation skills" (Grandey et al., 2015, p. 780), "mindfulness" (p. 780) and providing opportunities to separate from the situation (Grandey et al., 2015). Value is communicated by an expectation of respectful behaviour in all interactions. Participants from this study give evidence of this to an extent through their management protocols. As Malcom said: "I directed him off the premises", Darren refusing to talk to the parent until they were treating him respectfully, Phil reinforcing behaviour expectations in his conversation with the partner of an abusive parent. These behaviours need to be encouraged for school leaders as it asserts a sense of self and the "autonomy" (Grandey et al., 2015, p. 779) that is necessary. Ensuring established safety protocols for potentially harmful situations is clearly essential. Providing practicing leaders with supportive contexts is also necessary: "leaders

themselves need a forum of trust and safety within which to reflect upon their experiences" (Beatty, 2000, p. 335). Acknowledgement, protocols and support are useful ways in which systemic or policy groups might continue to address the issue of fear and anxiety in school leadership.

## Unpredictability, complexity and emotionality

*In fiction: we find the predictable boring. In real life: we find the unpredictable terrifying*.
— Mokokoma Mokhonoana

Being taken by surprise was a common theme in the participants' fear narratives. Fear was often experienced in situations where they were unprepared or unaware that a challenging situation was about to present itself. Unpredictability was therefore a theme linked with the school leaders' experience of fear. Correspondingly, some leaders emphasized planning or preparation as a strategy, where possible, to avoid or protect against these fearful situations. Complexity was also a theme that emerged from several participants' narratives: navigating the nuanced social/emotional landscape that regularly factored into school leaders' professional practice could be a discomforting experience for them. Emotionality was also a theme that was common to several participants: they recalled situations in which they were dealing with high levels of emotion (that is, others' emotions) as being ones in which they experienced fear. The unpredictable nature of emotion links emotionality with unpredictability. Often school leaders seemed uncomfortable with these kinds of situations, and were quick to try and move them into rational and controlled encounters (Sachs & Blackmore, 1998).

## *Unpredictability*

Unpredictability was a recurring factor in the participants' fear accounts. Surprise and fear are connected: research has shown that reactions of fear and surprise can often be confused in studies because of the similarity in facial cues (Roy-Charland, Perron, Beaudry, & Eady, 2014). Participants frequently described situations in which they were taken by surprise; "blindsided" by an event that they did not see coming. They were unaware of the fear-inducing situation that was about to happen; usually they were taken aback by the experience that caused fear for them. This left them vulnerable to "attack". The many situations involving school leaders dealing with heightened emotional contexts could represent a fear of lack of control, as is indicated by repeated references about leaders attempting to manage fear-inducing situations by moving it back into the realm of the rational.

In the participant accounts, feeling fear was often associated with being in a situation of minimal control or high unpredictability. This is demonstrated by comments such as: it "just became out of hand" (Malcom) and "I thought I had it in hand but I didn't" (Simon), as well as Sandy's emphasis on the surprise she felt when encountering the irate parent. Jane mentioned the unpredictability and felt lack of control when dealing with members of the school community who were under the influence of drugs. These situations demonstrate that, as a school leader, it is difficult to know what will come next, and therefore difficult to control what will happen next.

## *Complexity*

*If you're not confused, you're not paying attention*.
— Tom Peters

Situations involving people—repeatedly, in the case of these interviews—are not always resolved neatly and tidily. Leaders' actions may be misinterpreted and misjudged. Ambiguity and fear coexist, and it is unlikely that ambiguity will ever be fully absent from a school leaders' role. Anxiety was associated with situations that were complicated, ambiguous and contained a multiplicity of viewpoints. These situations defied easy or straightforward resolutions, and hence, were less easy to control. Complexity was referred to by several participants: notably Kevin, Simon and Jane.

Kevin neatly described the work of a principal as "betwixt and between". He talks about complexity in terms of the amount of time a principal will spend in a mediation role: having to see many points of view in an interpretation of a situation: "… it's the multiple … and ... you know … almost certainly it's never right/wrong. There's always … you know … different perspectives of any event and … so dealing with those sort of circumstances ... is complex".

In the same way, Simon talks about the fallacy of expecting a "100% right or 100% wrong" outcome or judgement on any situation. Kevin also refers to this in his interview. Simon has to deal with difficult and intricate situations: attempting to integrate multiple perspectives, resolve issues (so the different parties feel heard and respected) and face unknown or damaging consequences: "There's always something that is … that you're having to deal with … there is no clear cut solution, right? to them. And that approach you take has to take time … and … it has to be done with every individual that confronts it". School leaders are doing this complex task in an unforgiving environment where, as he points out, people want instant solutions—but "the approach you take has to take time". For Simon, fear is part of

this experience: “On thin ice” is his chosen metaphor, implying a risky or threatening situation. Jane referred to the complexity of the situations principals have to deal with, and the amount of time required for dealing with sensitive issues.

Bottery talks about principals dealing with competing demands from opposing forces—adding another layer of complexity (Bottery, 2006). Sogunro (2012) also justifies the link between complexity and fear: “… because principals generally work with varying stakeholders, needs, and responsibilities, they are easily predisposed to stressful situations, prompting them to act with heightened tension that does not abate easily” (Sogunro, 2012, p. 665). Complexity brings ambiguity to situations, and this itself can be a breeding ground for fear: “People want clear rules, honesty and mutual trust” (Maccoby et al., 2004, p. 14). Clarity can be hard to find in dynamic and complex contexts. Hence, school leaders experience complexity—and the resultant anxiety that goes with it—because of the inherently social nature of the organizations in which they work.

## *Emotionality*

A general distrust of emotion seemed to pervade the participant’s accounts, as though it were a quality asynchronous with leadership. This is unusual, because school leadership is an emotion laden exercise (Beatty, 2000; Blackmore, 2004; Blase & Blase, 1997).

A negative attitude to emotional display was evident across the participant accounts, regardless of the gender of the school leader. Sandy felt that she was a less successful leader because of the depth of her emotional reaction and Iona felt that she had to hide her emotions to maintain a façade of strong leadership. Darren also saw his emotion as a liability—in his case, he perceived the emotion of fear interfering with his ability to reason.

Malcom is the exception in this regard. He is more accepting of his own emotions, describing the process by which he worked through them in the second narrative, although in the first narrative the language he uses to describe how he handled a highly emotional situation was very guarded and neutral (emotion free). This perhaps implies a perception that for a situation to be handled 'professionally', it must be handled unemotionally. Sandy, and other participants, are reflecting a masculinized perception that privileges rationality by aspiring to a posture of emotional detachment in the pursuit of "good" leadership practice.

It is no coincidence that two of the participants in the above examples were women. The conceptualization of emotions as feminized and standing in opposition to the rational perspective has been extensively discussed (Sachs & Blackmore, 1998). Sandy and Iona are both highly attuned to the dangers that accompany feeling and expressing emotions in the context of being a woman in a rural school leadership position, in a context where gender can be a factor used "by some members of the community as a basis for … rejection, or at least for questioning of her suitability for principalship" (Halsey, 2007, p. 66).

Fear itself (as an emotion) was, overall, viewed negatively by the study's participants, as something to be avoided and overcome. Darren's desire to return to "rational" thinking instead of being paralyzed with fear demonstrates that fear and rationality are seen by him to be incompatible. Similarly, Kevin defined fear as "… disconcerting and debilitating because it challenges and interferes with clear thinking". Malcom commented: "… fear is like a roadblock to the mind because it reduces rational thought". Overall, the participants viewed emotion with suspicion or distrust. It should be pointed out, however, that the conception of the emotionless leader has been challenged in literature: for example, Blackmore talks about "the emotional and messy work of … leading" (Blackmore, 2004, p.

439) and Crawford says "… emotion is with leaders all the time, whether they acknowledge this consciously or not" (Crawford, 2009, p. 15).

## Using control to manage and mitigate fear

Participants often tried to exert some level of control over events in order to minimize their feelings of fear. In his encounter with the verbally abusive parent, Darren imposed control by setting behavioural boundaries: he refused to engage until appropriate conversational norms had been reestablished. In this way, Darren controlled an aspect of the situation that was within his scope: he could not control how the other person spoke to him, but he could control whether the conversation happened, and in doing so, how it happened. This protected Darren's esteem, as he demanded to be spoken to respectfully in the situation. Darren's emphasis on knowledge, planning and preparation also highlighted a need for control over elements of his job: in this way, the fear was lessened.

Other participants also exerted control over their situations in various ways. Sandy's choice about whether she chose to pursue a more senior leadership role demonstrated a sense of control over her personal time, which she felt may have been threatened were she to pursue this role. Malcom experienced both a lack of control over events, then re-established aspects of control by distancing himself and confronting aggressors. Jane's formulation of contingency plans fulfilled the purpose of reducing ambiguity, thereby minimizing the potential for negative outcomes, and hence, the associated fear. Her focus on building a strong school culture was a strategic approach to control unwanted chaos and ambiguity.

Iona's response to fear was in increased mental alertness and keeping records: an attempt to impose a level of control on a situation even though she could not control

the actions of other ‘players’. In this way she exercised agency and put safeguards in place to protect herself against future risk. Kevin’s strategies of separation and grounding were also ways in which he could exert control to protect himself: whilst he could not control circumstances that may arise, or the actions of others, he could exert control over his own protection and personal wellbeing. Phil also found a sense of agency in a difficult situation by reframing it as a “game”. As leaders, they attempted to exert control over situations and, in so doing, to manage their feelings of fear.

Loss of control can also be associated with powerlessness, a theme arising out of the literature (Maslin-Ostrowski & Ackerman, 2000; Whitaker, 1996): “There is nothing that frightens school leaders as much as feeling helpless and impotent” (Maslin-Ostrowski & Ackerman, 2000, p. 223). The socially situated nature of leadership added another dimension to the desire to control: not just as an individual but as a “leader” (with all the political implications that are implied).

The participants in this study are simultaneously individuals and “leaders”; therefore, situations can be fear-inducing from an individual perspective, or from a leadership perspective. Fineman talks about “… when a leader’s fear of losing control can thrust him/her to the centre of the organizational stage, to be held there by followers’ needs and anxieties” (Fineman, 2000, p. 7). It is worth examining how much a leader’s anxiety about needing to be in control is a product of the wider system/expectations of which they are a part. Emotions are socially constructed (Beatty, 2007; Hargreaves, 1998; Zorn & Boler, 2007). Leaders fear a lack of control because of perceptions that a leader is always in control; hence, if leaders feel that they have lost control, then their identity as a leader is called into question. As Phil said, losing

control was the most “frightening” aspect of his job. More will be discussed about fear and leadership expectations in the subsequent theme of “expectations”.

For school leaders, however, control appears uncertain and unpredictability the norm: as Thomson says: “… no matter how good the plan or the head’s skills there are some things which just can’t be controlled and/or predicted, is absolutely the reality” (Thomson, 2009, p. 96). Beatty points out that “The handling of the fear of loss of control can be a significant part of the emotional experience of a leader” (Beatty, 2000, p. 347). This is an area of growth potential for both aspirant and practicing leaders.

In a study of doctors entitled “Fear of future violence at work and job burnout”, it was found that “employees with a greater sense of agency or control in their work were less likely to translate anxiety about future violence into emotional exhaustion” (Portoghese et al., 2017, p. 44). This indicates that a useful focus of school leadership support and training programmes should be finding strategies that school leaders could employ in order to minimize their feelings of fear. In the same way that Jane had a specific contingency plan and a strong collaborative culture—both of which minimized fear—exploring the identification, development and use of similar strategies could prove beneficial for both aspirant and experienced leaders.

# *Responsibility and expectations: feeling visible and vulnerable*

*Keep your fears to yourself, but share your courage with others.*
— Robert Louis Stevenson

School leadership is an increasingly scrutinized position (Ball, 2003; Harris, 2008; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008) and the participants in this study were aware that aspects of their professional practice were conducted in a public, visible forum, frequently open to criticism and comment. School leaders lead in an environment where they are subject to expectations about the quality of their leadership, both from others and from themselves. Idealized notions of leadership were reflected in participants' behaviours and attitudes. Fear had little place in ideas of being, or appearing, professional: both for the participants themselves and for their perception of their followers' expectations. Participants experienced fear at the possibility of their leadership being found 'wanting', of failing or making mistakes. Idealized notions of leadership (high expectations) could prove helpful for participants by providing a 'road map' for action in situations where they felt vulnerable. However, I contend that aspirational notions of leadership contain a 'dark side' when they ignore lived aspects of leadership, such as fear, and leave such emotions outside of the prevailing discourse.

## Visibility and expectations

School leadership is a public position: in it, school leaders conduct their working lives as highly visible members of a community. The visible nature of school leadership means that leaders are fearful of being judged. School leadership is a public forum, and leaders are open to judgements from many stakeholders (parents, students, staff, council or board members, systemic supervisors, the community and even the

media). Being “in the spotlight” was a recurring theme across the participants’ fear narratives. As Barnet and Shoho point out, principals feel that “their words and actions” were “constantly ‘under a microscope’” (Barnett & Shoho, 2010, p. 583).

Kevin also expressed the tension that he felt when having someone external to the school come and observe, or judge, the school’s performance. School inspections themselves  can be a source of fear (Penninckx & Vanhoof, 2015), although in Australia they may be less high stakes in nature than in other parts of the world. Kevin talks about “the external spotlight on your leadership as a principal”. Kevin experienced fear in relation to the possibility of an external auditor discovering something that he, Kevin, did not know about. Gronn elaborates on this fear: ‘The principal is accountable for everybody on the work site … liable for actions of staff members without even knowing whether they are doing anything wrong … That’s a fairly frightening fact’ (Gronn, 2009, p. 206). Similarly, Simon was concerned that an ‘in house’ altercation with a parent may draw retribution from a higher source.

Sandy’s account also reflects elements of others’ expectations: amidst the delight that she felt at receiving an educational leadership award, she was also aware of a lurking fear that reality might show that she was not, in fact, a good leader. Who would be the judge of this? Herself—she says “you’ve got to prove it”—and others “… there will be members of staff that are watching, going ‘why did she win it?’” She also referred to the high standards to which leaders are held:

> … some people are very unforgiving for leadership as well, like you have to be … almost like royalty. You can’t make a mistake. You’ve got to do everything the right way. And it’s just not possible …

Yet Sandy acknowledged the amount of effort that she expended on a daily basis to mitigate against this— “often I’m trying to work to make sure that it *doesn’t* happen”— to do her job well and avoid mistakes. Through no fault of her own and despite considerable effort, Sandy recognized that negative repercussions would inevitably ensue. Similarly, Simon realised that no matter how hard he might work or how well he might prepare, these potentially threatening situations lurked like landmines. There was always the risk of disappointing someone, getting a negative or emotional reaction, or even facing threat to one’s physical safety. As he said: “you cannot please everyone”.

Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002) describe the pressure of these expectations as “the powerful and subtle projections followers tend to place on their leaders” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002b, p. 6). As well as expectations about the nature of their leadership, school leaders are under pressure to perform error free (as Sandy explained). In other words, school leaders live with the risk of “getting it wrong” in a job that contains high expectations of “getting it right”. Leading in this environment is a fearful thing: one is aware that one’s own performance is being constantly judged and publicly or privately critiqued (the ‘arena’ is an apt metaphor). For the participants, anticipating the judgement of others (for example, staff) was a source of anxiety, particularly because of the inevitability of mistakes, and the likelihood that they would be judged for them. In this way, their fears were grounded. Leaders do not lead in isolation; their leadership is shaped by others’ expectations. Emotions are the forum in which this is played out (Beatty, 2000; Zorn & Boler, 2007).

It is helpful here to consider DeRue and Ashford's work on the three aspects on the construction of a leadership identity. They posit a model which emphasizes the socially constructed nature of leadership as a process involving individuals who "claim" leadership and others who "grant" their claim. They chart the course of the formation of a leader through three stages: these are "individual internalization, relational recognition, and collective endorsement" (DeRue & Ashford, 2010, p. 629). An individual accepts the idea of themselves as a leader, others recognize and affirm this, and the compound effect of this is to produce the wider confirmation of the leader's role and position through the endorsement of others. The leader accepts leadership and the others around them accept the idea that this person is "a leader"—for the time being at least. The transience of this process is an important aspect of this model that will not be elaborated on here.

The participant responses in this study demonstrated an underlying acknowledgement that, for them, leadership was a socially constructed phenomenon. It was clear that both their own expectations of their leadership and their awareness of others' expectations of their leadership were significant. Fear was experienced when they worried about not living up to their own expectations of leadership, or worried that they might not live up to others' expectations. A leader is only a leader with the ongoing, continued affirmation of the 'followers'. Meeting expectations is, therefore, a high stakes motivator for school leaders. Hence, the prospect of not meeting expectations leads to fear, as the participant accounts demonstrate.

Kevin's expectations of himself as a leader are a consequence of "individual internalization"—he has accepted a leadership identity and therefore, seeks to emulate leadership behaviours according to his internal ideas of how a leader should

react. This leads to a self-imposed standard against which he measures his behaviour. For example, he is not only processing his own grief, but is aware of leading his community through the grieving process. Kevin referred to this when he said "… that sort of expectation that you have about leadership … 'I am the leader', I've got to stand up here and work this through". Kevin operates with a set of "mental models" (Senge, 1990, p. 8) about how a leader should behave: this could be described as an internal standard of leadership. Sandy feels fearful, but acts authoritatively regardless of her feelings because of the leadership identity she has assumed ("You're the deputy principal, get on with it"). Iona wants to go home "for a cry and a sleep" but stays at work so as not to worry others. Leaders hold themselves up to an internal standard of what leadership is, and what "a leader" should do, which involves projecting an image of control.

As well as "individual internalization", being recognized as a leader is incumbent upon the response of those being led. If leadership is socially constructed (Blackmore, 2010; Harding & Pribram, 2004), then the responses of others is as much a part of leadership as is the individual "leader's" response. DeRue and Ashford refer to this as "relational recognition" and "collective endorsement"(DeRue & Ashford, 2010, p. 631). A leader needs to not only locate a leadership identity within him/herself, but this needs to be affirmed by others. This means that others' expectations of leadership represent another identity that must be taken into consideration in the practice of school leadership. How others in the community perceive leadership will add another level of expectation upon the school leader, and the potential for feeling fear exists in not meeting expectations both at an individual and a collective level. In other words, school leaders can fall prey to the fear letting themselves down, or the fear of the reaction that will come from the community if

they feel that their expectations of “leadership” have not been met. It is no wonder that controlling the wider narrative becomes such a significant aspect of school leadership.

This was borne out in the participants’ accounts. Phil used the word “expectation” in a broader sense as he referred to how others view leaders (the external standard of leadership):

> It’s the expectation. It goes back to the expectation. The expectation is that when you suddenly rise to this position you’re ‘in front of’ what everybody else does … And if you don’t stay in front of them, then they’re going to ask why. And so the trepidation that I … feel … with anything to do with leadership is the credibility. Because if it is on the line, then people don’t look to you. … if you are allowing them to look for alternatives in leadership, then you’re not doing your job.

Fear is experienced at the prospect of losing others’ endorsement in one’s leadership role—for without “collective endorsement” (DeRue & Ashford, 2010, p. 631) there is no recognition of leadership. Similarly, Iona’s responses—of staying at work despite being upset, or confronting the men who were drinking in the shed despite her personal fear—are showing her awareness of the importance of the public persona of the principal that she is presenting. The fear of damage to reputation can trump fear for personal wellbeing for some school leaders.

The visibility of a school leader’s role increases the stakes for both success and failure. This echoes Fineman’s claim that “fear of loss of face, prestige, position, favour, fortune or job” (Fineman, 2000, p. 4) can affect someone’s behaviour or attitudes at work. Maslin-Ostrowski also describe “… the fear of failure … and the

fear of being judged and criticized" (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, p. 320). It is not difficult to see how fear of failure can be a significant part of a school leader's experience, as it happens on such a public level. The experiences of this study's participants bore this out.

## Idealized images of leadership

Participants' own perceptions of leadership were reflected as they recounted their narratives. Often participants had aspirational views of leadership, ascribing "heroic" (Drysdale, Bennett, Murakami, Johansson, & Gurr, 2014, p. 785) qualities to leaders, which they then sought to emulate in their own leadership practice. Powerful and agentic aspect of leadership (for example, strength and control) were often emphasized.

I have identified some phrases to describe leadership that came out of the participant accounts. Participant behaviours reflected these statements:

- "a leader is a role model" (Kevin)
- "a leader displays great emotional strength" (Phil, Iona and Jane)
- "a good leader attends meetings, even with poor health" (Brad) (Brad later came to the conclusion that his thinking was based on "false assumptions", as he called them: nevertheless, he was aware that he was being driven by this expectation at the time).

These descriptors reflect some of the qualities of heroism described by Drysdale et al. (2014), such as "inspiring others", "duty" and "uncommon commitment" (Drysdale et al., 2014, p. 785). They are aspirational (Giles et al., 2012, p. 30) in nature, and the participants' narratives reflected similar qualities in their own perceptions of how

leaders should behave. Many factors (too many to discuss here) contribute to the formation of leaders' mental models (Senge, 1990) regarding leadership, so how these mental models of leadership are formed will not be a focus of discussion. Nevertheless, the participant accounts demonstrated that ideas of strength and control were significant in how leaders perceived "good" leadership.

Heroic expectations proved helpful for some of the study's participants. They provided a guide for a leader in times of fear and crisis: adhering to a pre-determined, abstract idea of what a leader 'should' do is a way through a crisis or challenge (I just did it because I had to, since 'I am the leader'). Phil described this when he recounted being left in charge after a vehicle accident on a school camp: "And so my job was—it just all took over, the lock-in, lack of emotion, 'just do it'….so the fear of the situation …and the anxiety of the situation had to be put aside. And just do the process". He knew he was in charge and had a job to do, therefore emotional considerations were minimized. Sandy's phrase: "I'm the deputy principal, get on with it"—illustrates how her understanding of her role responsibilities enabled her to overcome the intimidation of being surrounded by a group of students. Jane dealt with personally confronting situations because it was what she felt she needed to do to carry out her job role. Enacting idealized leadership behaviour is a way to cope with, or overcome, fear by establishing control and agency in a situation. In this way, expectations can be useful for school leaders in enabling their professional practice.

As has been mentioned, power and agency were qualities that participants often associated with leadership. In particular, the expectation that a leader should be *strong* and *in control* was borne out in the participant accounts. Phil suppressed his

emotion in order to fulfill the role of a “leader” in managing the aftermath of the car accident. Kevin, elsewhere in his interview, stated “… that sort of expectation that you have about leadership … and … ‘I am the leader’ I’ve got to stand up here and work this through”. There are clues in Iona’s account that she had to show strength as a leader even in the face of unacceptable behavior by a staff member: “… that was at a personal cost; I mean I got very close to having a breakdown, but—wasn’t going to let him see it”. In relation to her staff, she says: “… it was easier for me to stay at school rather than worry them, so, that’s what I did”. Brad felt pressure to attend a meeting even though he was unwell: “... [Brad’s doctor] wanted me to go home and rest for a couple of days—which I could not do. I had to come back and face this meeting”. These accounts reflect an understanding of leadership by the participants: leaders are strong and agentic, carrying out their leadership role despite personal stressors.

Leaders expect to, and are expected to, exercise agency and control. A leader will drive change and transform a school. The “strategic” description of the Australian Principal Standards says that principals will “ optimis[e] … thinking to effect and monitor change, in order to realise short and long term school goals” (AITSL, 2014, p. 25). Verbs such as “effect” and “realise” have overtones of accomplishment and agency: suggesting an image of a leader who has the ability to exert control over a situation by influencing it in some way. Leaders therefore expect that they will—and should—be able to exercise a level of control over events and people. Not being able to do this could be seen as a refutation of their leadership: however, “most school leaders are surprised at how little real power they have” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, p. 322). Unfortunately, as pointed out by Maslin-Ostrowski and

Ackerman (2000, p. 223), being seen to lack power or agency can bring about feelings of fear for leaders:

> … because many school leaders are rarely aware of what fragile power they have accumulated, they can scarcely admit to themselves or others how much powerlessness and helplessness or fear of helplessness influences them. Helplessness in leadership is the shadow at its most obvious – productivity, achievement, winning – these are measures of leadership and the leader. Impotence, powerlessness, and helplessness in all their forms are worse than death for most school leaders.

In the case of school leadership, strength and control may potentially be more powerful concepts in the abstract than they are in reality.

Women leaders faced particular challenges in respect to the presentation of a powerful leadership image. The themes of power, agency, and appearing strong were evident in the accounts from the women leaders. Enacting the visible and scrutinized role of a school leader, they seemed particularly attuned to situations in which their leadership was challenged. These situations stood out in their fear narratives. For them, managing the fear involved ensuring that they were presenting a public image of strong or competent leadership.

It is worth considering the way in which themes of strength and control were evident in the accounts of women school leaders. Sandy, Jane and Iona were concerned with presenting a public image of strong or competent leadership. After winning her leadership award, Sandy's comment to herself was "you've got to prove it". Jane recounts a time when she overcame a personal fear to stand up to a parent because

“… if I hadn’t done it, they would have thought I was weak”. Iona gives a similar reason for hiding her fears from the perpetrator: “I got very close to having a breakdown, but – wasn’t going to let him see it”. She had to portray an image of strength and control to others in the school community: “it was easier for me to stay at school rather than worry them, so, that’s what I did”. As a female leader in particular, she could not afford to appear weak.

The pressure to appear strong, and in control, could potentially have had damaging consequences for some of the women leaders, as they risked their own physical or emotional wellbeing to enact a stance of power. Any demonstration of weakness in leadership was to be feared, because it cast aspersions on the quality of the leadership. By being women in a leadership context, Sandy, Iona and Jane are conscious of feeling the fear of being “highly visible and subject to overt scrutiny” (Blackmore, 2010, p. 647). Their fears may be well founded, as Bongiorno et al. point out: “Women who fail to show agency in leadership are swiftly singled out for disapproval, whereas this does not occur for men” (Bongiorno, Bain, & David, 2014, p. 231).

Despite more recent writings on women in leadership and the feminized leadership qualities such as “relational” and “spiritual” that are emphasized (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010, pp. 6-13), Jane and Iona both felt it was necessary to demonstrate their authority in the situation by engaging in a kind of ‘fronting off’: a traditionally masculinized, confrontational power struggle. If they do not engage in this, they fear that they will be perceived as weak, and that their leadership reputation will suffer. These fears are evidence that the realities of school leadership are still, to an extent, underpinned by masculinized images of leadership, and emotional responses and

subsequent behaviours are triggered accordingly. In addition, their experience is another reflection of Goffman's (1959) "impression management" (p. 238)—as the women leaders in this study were highly motivated to present a powerful leadership image.

School leaders experience fear and anxiety in the context of living up to expectations of idealized leadership performance. The women leaders in this study felt fearful that they would be perceived as weak, responding with behaviours that emphasized their leadership strength. In general, the participants had high expectations of strength and control, and fear (certainly publicly demonstrated fear) had little place in these expectations. This is an area for close observation in future; will school leaders' expectations about their emotional experience change? What could constitute a 'safe space' for school leaders in which these emotions can be expressed?

## The problem of expectations

Aspirational expectations of leaders can also prove to be unhelpful for school leaders. They play a role in school leaders' judgement of their own leadership performance and behavior, as well as external judgement.

To feel fear can seem opposed to demonstrating strength, control and the other "heroic" attributes commonly associated with leadership. The participants' accounts in this study acted according to a type of idealized leadership *in which fear did not have a place*: or at least a visible demonstration of fear, should they be feeling it. Sandy reveres her principal, who was "cool as a cucumber" and "not much bothers him". For Sandy, the principal is demonstrating ideal leadership because he does not appear to feel fear in the face of an emotionally charged situation. This is a quality

that Sandy seeks to emulate: her goal is to remain unaffected and fear-free in dealing with the situation. To her, that is best practice of leadership.

And yet, going by other information emerging from this study's participant accounts, it is clear that school leaders do, from time to time, feel fear. Particularly in a situation of heightened emotion, feeling fear may be more normal than Sandy realizes. Perhaps it is time to bring into question normative assumptions about school leaders' emotional experiences. It may be unrealistic for leaders to expect that they will not themselves be emotionally affected (in this case, with fear, worry or anxiety) when dealing with these kinds of emotionally charged situations. "We expect our leaders to be fearless and most leaders agree, however it is a reckless expectation" (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, p. 322).

Murphy (2000, p. 30) points out the danger in minimizing the discussion of fear within the context of leadership:

> The image of the leader as hero can also undermine conscientious administrators who think that they should live up to these expectations. If leaders are supposed to have all the answers, for example, how do administrators respond when they are totally confused about what to do? **If they have learned that leaders are consistently strong, what do administrators think of themselves when they are terrified about handling a difficult situation**? (emphasis mine)

The potential risk arising from this is that leaders may begin to doubt their own leadership abilities because of the presence of emotions (such as fear) that are not, in their minds, in line with their perceptions of leadership. If this is the case, it may explain why "leaders are often prey to living up to a heroic mythology rather than their

own truth and circumstance" (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, p. 316). Worse still, potential future leaders may be put off leadership, thinking that it is not for them. This attitude can perpetuate an "exceptionalism" view of leadership (Gronn, 2003a, p. 281):

> Leadership that is exceptional is presumed to be manifest behaviourally in individual deeds of heroic proportions … Exceptional leadership, then, is individually 'focused' leadership and in this sense is the antithesis of distributed leadership.

If future leaders do not believe that they encapsulate or possess heroic attributes, they may, therefore, believe that they do not have the potential to be school leaders: potentially robbing the field of talent.

Nir's work calls attention to another unhelpful aspect of heroic leadership ideas: principals not seeking formal help because of "the threat implied in exposing one's weaknesses" (Nir, 2009, p. 176). To seek help is tacitly admitting a lack of control and power in a situation. If living up to an imagined leadership script stops leaders from seeking help, then this is potentially damaging to the leader's wellbeing. Generally, seeking counselling was not referred to by the study's participants. One exception was Phil, who mentioned seeing a psychologist towards the end of his career. A better outcome would be that school leaders would not have to avoid seeking required professional help due to any perceived impact on their leadership credibility. For school leaders, expectations can be both unhelpful and helpful: unhelpful when they promote unrealistic standards, or helpful when they provide a framework and motivation for action.

In summary, the visibility of a school leader's role increases the stakes for both success and failure. This echoes Fineman's claim that "fear of loss of face, prestige, position, favour, fortune or job" (Fineman, 2000, p. 4) can affect someone's behaviour or attitudes at work. Maslin-Ostrowski also describe "… the fear of failure … and the fear of being judged and criticized" (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, p. 320). Fear of failure can be a significant part of a school leader's experience, as it happens on such a public level. The experiences of this study's participants bore this out.

# *Feeling the presence or absence of support*

*No one is useless in this world who lightens the burdens of another*.
— Charles Dickens

Support was a broad theme that emerged strongly across the participants' fear narratives. Both the presence and the absence of support were evident in school leader's experiences. School leaders often had to come to terms with feelings of isolation as part of their leadership role. To feel unsupported was a "'wounding' experience" (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, p. 311) for school leaders, particularly in situations where they had expected support from certain sources. In these situations, school leaders experienced a breach of trust and feelings of anger or betrayal ensued. Conversely, the importance and value of support that *was* received by school leaders was emphasized. When school leaders are in situations where they feel fearful, the importance of support is crucial. To receive support is comforting; to not receive support is deeply hurtful.

## Feeling supported

Although a perceived lack of support was strongly evident in the accounts, it was clear that there were many sources of support from whom school leaders benefitted. These included staff, family, friends, supervisors and law enforcement. These sources of support played a protecting, consoling or advising role for the school leader in the midst or the aftermath of the fear experience. Sometimes they worked closely with the participant (a deputy or assistant) and sometimes they were more removed (a systemic supervisor or psychologist). The support could be in handling the situation and removing the threat (for example, the police), in providing a

sounding board (supervisor, psychologist), or of post-traumatic emotional care (family, staff).

Being able to call on law enforcement was an important way of mitigating fear for school leaders. This is shown by the multiple instances in the accounts in which the police were called to help deal with a crisis situation. Malcom called the police after he was assaulted, Jane called the police on multiple occasions and Phil called the police after he was subjected to the verbal tirade from a parent. The importance of law enforcement in mitigating fear is also inversely reflected in Jane's frustration when she reached the limit of law enforcement's capacity to help: "And you call the police and they come but nothing ever happened to the person, they just kept on doing it. Because there isn't any recourse … There's no recourse …". There would be no cause for frustration if there were not a corresponding expectation that the police *should* be able to do something to protect her. Across the participants' accounts, law enforcement usually provided a support for school leaders in their times of fear, although Jane felt that, at times, its power was limited in the provision of long term solutions.

Strong work relationships and culture also buffered school leaders in fearful situations. Malcom had his deputy physically protect him: "My deputy was in the room at the time and he stood up between us. I don't know if he hadn't have done that what would have transpired". Iona experienced care and concern from members of her school community through a phone call from a teacher concerned for her welfare and an invitation to dinner from staff members. This is similar to another study involving a female rural principal, who found support networks to be invaluable: "… really strong networks of colleagues through the district and cluster leadership which

has been the saving grace. I mean, that's what kept me sane all last year for sure" (Halsey, 2007, p. 43). Jane said, about a stressful incident at her school: "It wasn't stressful to us, the people who worked in the office, because we all knew one another and we knew what to do to handle it and we could laugh about it afterwards". Simon talks about the value of his deputy principal and the chairman of the school board as sounding boards in a difficult situation, Sandy values the mentorship of her principal, Brad refers to his deputy principal defending him to other staff and Phil speaks positively of his assistant and principal, both of whom seem able to empathize with his emotional state.

The benefits of positive workplace culture have been well documented, for example a culture that contains trust (Blackmore, 2010; Oestreich, 1995). The importance of trust for the school environment in particular is emphasized by Tschannen-Moran, who comments "Trustworthy leadership is at the heart of productive schools" (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 14). Trust is discussed in more detail further on. Beginning principals have found "internal support" (Barnett & Shoho, 2010, p. 569) important for the quality of their work life.

The presence of supportive people, both inside and outside work contexts and in a variety of roles, emerged as an important part of the participants' experiences. Talking with supervisors or counsellors (or others) could provide school leaders with many beneficial opportunities: for emotional release, for reflection, as a catalyst for change or as part of a process of ongoing self-awareness and learning (Sogunro, 2012; Sorenson, 2007; Whitaker, 1996). Support can be linked with better coping in the role: "social support … enables organizational members to remain engaged in their jobs rather than drained, automatic and disengaged" (Kahn, 1993, p. 540).

Whitaker identifies the need for support, and how “support systems assist principals in feeling more comfortable in their roles and not feeling ‘flawed’ if they do not know everything” (Whitaker, 1996, p. 67). Peer sharing and reflecting was also highlighted as a necessary support for school principals, as Phil and Kevin confirmed in their references to peer conversation as a useful aspect of support in their work. Jane and Malcom found support from within to bolster themselves when they did not feel supported from other sources, suggesting that leadership training programmes may highlight the necessity for school leaders to develop their inner resilience.

Family support was important in the emotional wellbeing of educational leaders. Brad and Phil both mentioned support from a spouse in helping them deal with work stress: as Brad said, “I’m calm until I get home and then I fall in a heap. And then my wife picks me up. And my kids pick me up”. The reference to family support was a theme that emerged from multiple participants. This echoes another of Riley’s findings about the importance of family as a support for school leaders. Partners and family members rank significantly in support factors for school principals (Barnett & Shoho, 2010; Riley, 2016).

Support during or following their “fear experience” was a significant aspect of the experience of feeling fear for the participants in this study. Supports were both internal and external to the workplace, including both professional and personal relationships. Support is critical for school leaders (Gallant & Riley, 2013; Kish-Gephart et al., 2009; Slater, 2005) and is an important focus for leadership development programmes in order to better equip future leaders. As more Australian school leaders retire and younger leaders step into leadership roles, with potential decades of school leadership practice ahead of them, making the role sustainable in

the long term should be considered an area of tremendous importance (V. Fernandes, personal communication, March 16, 2020).

## Isolation and relational tension

*The dominant feeling of the battlefield is loneliness*
-William Slim

There was considerable evidence in this study to suggest that there is a link between experiences of loneliness and feelings of fear for school leaders. Although none of the participants had been specifically prompted to discuss loneliness in the interview, loneliness emerged as a strong theme in several of the fear narratives. Phil and Darren's fear experiences both involved being left alone to deal with the irate parents and it was a significant theme of Malcom's second narrative (his sense of disappointment due to the perceived unsupportiveness of his line manager). Darren used self-talk as a tool to manage anxiety: "it doesn't just happen to me! I'm not the only one in the world that this happens to". If he can convince himself that he is not alone, the fear is allayed.

Isolation is a known component of school leadership (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002b; Kelchtermans et al., 2011); school leaders can be left "… feeling isolated and alone in a world of conflict" (Whitaker, 1996, p. 67). Isolation is also evident in the first four of Jane's narratives, again through lack of perceived support from her system or line manager(s). Finally, Brad's recount of fighting battles he "shouldn't have to fight" represents loneliness. These findings bear out the idea of the "structural loneliness" (Kelchtermans et al., 2011, p. 101) of the principalship.

Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002a), in their work on the wounded leader, found: “Fear usually found its way into the crisis stories we gathered, sometimes as a central theme, other times as a corollary to issues of isolation …” (p. 17) . Loneliness and isolation have been widely discussed in the literature in connection with school leadership (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002a; Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Kelchtermans et al., 2011; López, Ahumada, Galdames, & Madrid, 2012). Draper and McMichael (2000) link loneliness with responsibility: “Loneliness was mentioned by several new heads … produced by the knowledge that the buck stopped with them” (p. 466). Keltchermans, Piot and Ballet (2011) talk of the school leader’s isolation in terms of their role as a gatekeeper . O’Connor (2006) also talks of the loneliness in her study on Irish school principals. It seems likely that loneliness will be an ongoing aspect of school leadership; this study’s contribution to further understanding this loneliness is to identify the links between loneliness and fear.

The study’s participants were often highly attuned to the relational sensitivities of their work, and were emotionally affected in their dealings with people. Brad described this vividly when he spoke of the “horrid” relational anxiety that he experienced as part of his job, and the relational tension that caused between him and his staff. His frustration was in not being able to be himself—to “go into the staffroom and relate” because of the relational angst caused by his role. Kevin’s relational concerns also center around his leadership responsibilities. In Kevin’s case, he worried about hypocrisy—the potential of representing himself as something he was not.

Kevin and Brad are both experiencing the “struggle between loneliness and belonging” (Kelchtermans et al., 2011, p. 101) experienced by principals, where the

desire for camaraderie is thwarted by the responsibilities of their role. These relational frustrations can also be explained in terms of identity, where neither individual is free to relate how he would like because of the constraints of his leadership position. He cannot just be himself: rather, he is “the leader”.

In this sense, school leaders present a leadership “performance” (Goffman, 1959, p. 17) in order to fulfill the expectations of their roles. To do this requires emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), as aspects of emotions must, at times, be repressed in carrying out their leadership roles. Feelings of fear and anxiety are part of this experience. The expectations inherent in their roles place demands upon leaders to act in certain ways (for example, challenging staff or making unpopular decisions); nevertheless, it is worth noting that this is a process which is sometimes at odds with the actual emotions that leaders experience, requiring a degree of emotional labor for them to maintain. Expectations of school leaders (coming both from the community and from the leaders themselves) are influenced by idealized, individualistic, heroic metaphors (Murphy, 2000). The notion of distributed leadership has challenged this somewhat (Gronn, 2003b), but it is clear from this study that both leaders themselves, and their communities, have high expectations about the nature of a school leader’s role and an unquestioning acceptance of the significant emotional pressure that that can place on an individual.

Acceptance of this condition was evident: as Brad said “I don’t like that, it’s not how I want to be, but I’m OK with it because that makes them feel better”. For him, as for many school leaders, emotional distance was inescapable and, therefore, some relational anxiety was unavoidable. It is indeed “lonely at the top” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, p. 318).

School leaders experienced fear and anxiety in situations that involved either relational tension, or the potential for relational tension. In his interview, Kevin commented that “the toughest stuff … could be captured by the interpersonal … category”. People and relationships are central to the educational context (Giles et al., 2012), and this can be both rewarding and “wounding” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, p. 311) for school leaders. Writing about an educational administrator who was asked what kept her up at night, Wallace gives her response: “What keeps me up at nights are the people conflicts, the people issues, those who are hurting and have been hurt by others” (Wallace, 2010, p. 595).

It may seem redundant—in the context of study on school leadership—to point out that every fear experience raised in this study involved an encounter with other people: people who were hurting, angry, injured, irrational, recalcitrant, supportive, judgmental or vulnerable. And the school leader was the one who was trying to solve, calm, mediate, fix, advocate or manage in these situations. Because of their leadership positions (and the associated frequency of undertaking mediation between others), they were often in situations that posed a threat to relationships with staff, parents or students, bringing about isolation and loneliness. A desire to be a “relational leader” (Giles et al., 2012) can exacerbate a school leader’s sense of isolation and loneliness when relationships are tested.

## Trust and betrayal

The participants’ experiences of betrayal seemed to indicate a felt violation of trust: they would not have felt let down had they not expected to be supported by ‘the system’. In other words, events that caused them to experience fear were associated

with a prior expectation of being 'looked after' that was not fulfilled. This is identified in Tschannen-Moran and Hoy's (1998b) observation that: "… the nature of a trusting relationship can be altered almost instantaneously with … a decision that violates the sense of care one has expected of another" (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998b, p. 335). In this case, the school leaders expected care from the system to which they were answerable, and several did not feel that they had received it. It left them in an emotional space of feeling unsupported and alone. This reflected a poignant sense of betrayal that added another dimension to the fearful experiences: not just that school leaders felt alone or unsupported, but that they felt alone unsupported *at a time or in a situation when they had expected support*.

Although not all of the participants expressed disappointment at a perceived lack of support (Phil, for example, described support he had received from his supervisor and his principal), a perceived lack of support was evident in several of the participant's narratives. Jane, in particular, had a strong sense of responsibility for her school community, and this made the lack of support she felt from her supervisors all the more hurtful: in her words, "disgusting … they wiped me like I was a dirty rag". The lack of care she felt she had received contrasted with the high level of care that she felt it her responsibility to provide for her community. In the same way, Malcom's second fear narrative revolved around the lack of a leader's perceived support for him in a time of personal crisis. There is disbelief in the tone of his account. Brad talks of "fighting too many battles on too many fronts with people I shouldn't have been having to fight battles with". Sandy tells of a time when a parent harangued her in the staffroom after school, and her initial feelings of anger at her principal at not stepping in and defending her (although, after reflection, she

acknowledged that there was justification for his action). A feeling of unjustified betrayal echoes through all of these accounts.

It comes as little surprise, then, that examples of trust violations were present in the fear accounts of Jane, Malcom and Brad in this study. In Jane's case, her frustration does not seem to be directed at a specific individual; instead, she felt betrayed and unsupported by the 'system' and individuals who represented the system (for example, the head who attended her school for a visit). Jane's experience of a trust violation falls into both of Bies and Trip's (1996) categories of trust violations: "damaged sense of civic order" (p. 338) and "social identity and reputation" (Bies & Tripp, 1996, p. 338). Jane's reaction to feeling let down implies a "damaged sense of civic order" (p. 338): in her eyes, her system had not lived up to an obligation of care and support for her. Jane's situation of feeling abandoned and unsupported in her trial also had implications for her "social identity and reputation" (p. 338), further complicating the nature of the trust violation she experienced. Unlike Jane, Malcom's trust violation was centred around his treatment at the hands of a particular individual, his systemic supervisor. Malcom had expected an attitude of care and consideration from this person in his time of difficulty, but instead felt that he did not receive this, resulting in a violation of trust. Like Jane, Malcom's trust violation was also in the area of a "damaged sense of civic order" (p. 338) as he felt that his supervisor had not provided the support that he expected. It is not clear from Malcom's interview about the depth of his relationship with his supervisor prior to the trust violation, but, as Macduffie (2011) argues: "high trust in a relationship" (p. 39) makes "a perceived betrayal to have a larger impact" (p. 39). Brad expected that his board and a systemic representative would support him, but he found instead that this did not happen. The combative tone of Brad's response indicates the truth of

Tschannen-Moran and Hoy's (1998b) statement about the consequences of trust violations: "transaction costs increase in a climate of distrust, as actors seek to protect their interests and guard against opportunistic behaviour" (p. 350).

Malcom, Jane and Brad's experiences also align with the breaking of a psychological contract. Each had expected protection and benevolent treatment from an employer in the case of personal crisis or danger. When they did not perceive that this had eventuated, they each experienced a sense of betrayal. Malcom, Jane and Brad had expected either support or protection from an organization, and in each case felt fearful, betrayed and angry when their expectations were not met: "When an individual perceives that the organization has neglected to fulfil its promises, the psychological contract is breached" (Kakarika, González-Gómez, & Dimitriades, 2017, p. 44). The emotional depth felt by Malcom, Jane and Brad in response to their circumstances is evident, and aligns with the "intense emotional and attitudinal responses" (Rousseau, 1989, p. 136) that come with a perceived violation of a psychological contract. Jane's case, in particular, highlighted the depth of abandonment she had felt in stark contrast to her complete commitment to looking after and protecting her own staff and school. Such breaches of trust have ongoing effects: less job satisfaction and the decrease in trust that eventuates. They note particularly the effect this has on people who are attuned to relationships (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994), as the school leaders in this study all seemed to be. Violations of trust are particularly painful—as Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2004) would put it, another "wounding" (p. 311) experience for school leaders.

What all three of these participant experiences have in common is a sense of woundedness, surprise and betrayal at their perceived treatment from the system, or

from its representatives. If the qualities of trust include benevolence, reliability, honesty, competence and openness (Brooks, 2015; Tschannen-Moran, 2014), then it was often a perceived lack of benevolence that was evident in the accounts from Jane, Malcom and Brad. In another study on trust between principals and superintendents, it was found that “principal’s perceptions of superintendents’ benevolence and openness were relatively less positive than were their perceptions of competence, honesty and reliability” (Hatchel, 2012, p. iii). Fear was experienced when trust was violated and benevolence (from superiors) was lacking. This left school leaders feeling abandoned, uncared for and fearful.

The link between betrayal and fear was evident in the participants’ responses. As has been discussed, school leaders undertake significant emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) in caring for the welfare of others: students, staff and even members of the wider school community and beyond. The participants in this study seemed to accept this as part of their role: as Jane commented, “That is a little family group there, no matter how big that school site is, and you have to look after it. It’s the most precious thing that you have to do”. Part of being a school leader is looking after the community. This acceptance indicates a “mental model” (Senge, 1990, p. 190) held by the participants about leadership: *leaders care for those they lead*. This may go some way towards explaining the bitterness expressed by the participants when they felt that they themselves had not received this care: if they had invested so much of themselves in caring for others, surely they should be entitled to expect the same care from their supervisors. It is not difficult to see the link to fear: being left in a situation where expected support did not eventuate left participants feeling alone, insecure, fearful and often angry.

Not only did leaders feel isolated; they felt bereft of a source of support, someone to come to their aid. In some of the cases it was interesting to see the participants work though this 'unsupported' crisis of fear in their narrative and come to some kind of resolution, often by drawing from within for a sense of support and agency. Bereft of the support of others, they turned inward for strength. Jane says "I actually happen to have great emotional strength.  And that's what got me through that. Because I had NONE – zilch – from the [name of system]. Nothing". Likewise, Malcom explained: "A grey cloud had sat over our household for … a little while there but anyway we um we dug ourselves out of that situation and went to Plan B and that worked". In both of these cases the participants looked for support from other sources: finding support from within themselves or from others (note the use of the pronoun 'we' in Malcom's account).

## A way forward?

The above discussion illustrates the links between school leaders' experiences of fear and, in particular, violations of trust—whether this be in the form of damaged expectations or of breached psychological contracts. The school leaders from this study felt deeply betrayed by superiors or organizations when they did not perceive that they had been cared for adequately. Being relationally aware (as Brad mentioned about his style of leadership) or deeply protective of others (as was Jane) made them, it seems, particularly sensitive to this kind of breach of trust, and demonstrated the high expectations of benevolence and protection that they held for those in authority. This highlights the importance of ongoing communication between school leaders and systemic representatives, and continued inquiry into support mechanisms that both establish and build trust for school leaders. It is also worth noting the importance of prioritizing high quality, established relationships between

these parties, because “trust, communication and collaboration are impeded when strangers work and interact with other strangers” (Lawson et al., 2017, p. 60).

Measures of general support are also important for school leaders are they undertake their roles. Whitaker (1996), in her article on “Causes of principal burnout”, called for greater help for principals who feel this lack of support: “With the perceived lack of central office backing and understanding felt by some principals, networks are needed to provide principals with systems of support” (p. 67). Some of the help that Whitaker suggests includes: opportunities for “talking, reflecting, and sharing problems and concerns” (p. 67), “support systems” (p. 67) and “mentoring” (p. 67). Blackmore highlights the problems of a changing context of Australian school leadership: “In education, site-based or self-management effectively downloaded increased responsibilities and, therefore, risk onto individual schools and principals as they made difficult choices with often fewer resources and *minimal system support”* (Blackmore, 2004, p. 440) (emphasis mine). The experiences of this study’s participants, then, may reflect a wider systemic issue that continues to need addressing.

Support was a prevalent pattern in the accounts. There were many instances of school leaders experiencing support from a range of sources: family, colleagues, supervisors and others. Loneliness and betrayal from an unexpected source featured in the accounts as times when support was lacking. Whilst receiving support was important for school leaders, a perceived lack of support was deeply wounding—particularly when support did not come from an anticipated source.

## *Summary*

Feelings of fear in their professional role were commonly experienced by the study's participants, regardless of age, gender or location. School leaders experienced fear in a range of contexts and in response to a range of factors. Some group themes that emerged from the study on feeling fear were: the notion of control (lacking control or imposing control), in response to expectations and the significance of the presence or absence of support.

Most leaders felt fearful in situations where they were not in control. At times, school leaders felt genuine fear for their own physical safety. In addition, they were subjected to emotional pressures from absorbing and managing others' anger, playing the role of a "toxic handler" (Frost & Robinson, 1999, p. 98). School leaders often felt fearful in situations which were unpredictable, in which they had no time to pre-prepare their response. In response to feeling fear, school leaders attempted to impose a variety of strategies of control. This minimized their fears and allowed them to exert some agency in managing the situation.

The visible nature of their role entailed fear for school leaders because of the high stakes consequences of mistakes in terms of public perception of their leadership. Both a leader's own expectations about leadership, and the expectations they perceived from others, influenced a school leader's perception of his/her own leadership behaviour. This could prove helpful when these expectations motivated and guided a leader in a time of difficulty; however, they did not allow for acknowledgement of circumstances or emotions that fell outside the parameters of these expectations. Leaders expected to portray strength and control as part of being

a leader. Fears of being perceived as a weak leader were evident, particularly with women leaders.

Relational tension, and the associated feelings of fear, were part of a school leader's positional isolation. School leaders experienced fear when they were betrayed by those from whom they had expected support; conversely, their fears were allayed by the support of others.

Perhaps it is time to "… accept that leadership involves emotional experiences. Realize that these are inevitable" (Ginsberg, 2008, p. 5). Fear certainly seems to be an inevitable experience of school leadership. Malcom, when referring to Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski's concept of wounding, said: "it's inescapable; it's part of the job". If fear is inevitable, then describing it, demystifying it, discussing it and even discovering ways to leverage it is a useful exercise for school leaders and researchers alike.

**Quotations in Chapter 5 section headings retrieved March 2nd, 2021, from* www.goodreads.com/quotes *and* www.brainyquote.com/quotes.

# Chapter 6 — Conclusion

## *Reflecting on fear*

In phenomenological research, “Our quest is … not to prove or disprove, not to provide irrefutable evidence but rather to provoke thinking towards the mystery of what ‘is’” (Smythe et al., 2008, p. 1391). In this study, I set out to examine the lived experience of fear for Australian school leaders. As Flam (2002) observes, much management literature on fear tends to focus on the fear of the subordinate, not the fear of the manager. This study helps to redress this imbalance in educational administration literature by examining nine school leaders’ perceptions of fear in their professional experience, and articulating “the impression gained” (Smythe et al., 2008, p. 1396) from these perceptions.

Quantitative studies linked to the psychological health and wellbeing of school leaders abound (Bredeson, 1993; Dicke et al., 2018; Klocko & Wells, 2015; Maxwell & Riley, 2017; Riley, 2016). This study adds to this domain by providing a qualitative approach to the study of the lived experience of fear. The purpose is not, as in other quantitative studies, to generalize the findings. Instead, the purpose is to add to the body of knowledge on school leaders’ emotional experiences by providing thick, rich data on how school leaders recognize, acknowledge and deal with fears. By doing this, it provides a useful addition to the qualitative research that already exists in this area (Maslin-Ostrowski & Ackerman, 2000; Sogunro, 2012).

Literature on fear and school leadership was reviewed and an overarching research question was proposed:

How do Australian school leaders experience and respond to fear when performing their roles?

For the purposes of the interviews, the school leaders themselves defined fear: it was their interpretation of 'fear', and the narratives that it inspired, that directed the data. This is appropriate for a study such as this, where the focus was the school leaders' *perceptions* of their experiences of fear. As is perhaps to be expected from the phenomenological nature of a study such as this, the individual accounts presented a more complex and nuanced picture of fear than the categories described in the literature review. The value of this study is that it presents a picture of the emotional world of the leader: it is experientially and emotionally based rather than being focused around a single issue. Data gained from interviews with nine Australian school leaders were utilized and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

The study's findings revealed insights into the complex nature of school leaders' perceptions of fear. In relation to the dualisms of fear discussed in Chapter 1, the participants sometimes acknowledged the positive or motivating effects of fear; however, fear was more frequently represented in their accounts as a negative or unpleasant experience. School leaders experienced fear in regard to their physical safety or their emotional wellbeing. Fear was linked in some way with loss of control, and ran counter to any sense of mastery over the environment and the battle against chaos. Fear pushed leaders to seek refuge in planning, structure, order or predictability. Fear was linked to complexity, possibly because complexity raised levels of the unknown. The fears of school leaders were often linked with their

leadership performance. Fear was allayed through strong social networks and culture and through the use of humour. Fear seems to be a relatively inescapable aspect of being a school leader. The vast range of these experiences should tell us something: that fear itself is not bound by context; it is an idiographic phenomenon that cannot be pinned down to a specific event.

Perhaps it is time to move past the “reckless expectation” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002b, p. 19) that fear will not be a significant component of school leadership, and instead begin to see fear as something that can at least be “acknowledged” (p. 19) and “accepted” (p. 19), or perhaps even “embraced” (p. 19). Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002b) offer a challenge: “To be fully present, passionate and committed in a real and personal way with all of one’s fears and desires in tow is among the greatest challenges of leadership life” (p. 19).

## *Findings*

The experiences of fear for nine Australian school leaders were presented in such a way as to allow for an appreciation of each individual’s unique story. Like separate paintings in a gallery, each leader’s narratives can be viewed and appreciated as a discrete entity: each reflecting a different way to understand the experience of fear in a school leader’s professional life. This purpose underlies the presentation of the participant accounts in chapter four. From this, we can gain an appreciation of the idiographic nature of emotional experience. The accounts were often stories of crisis points, involving highly charged emotional encounters, or threats of potential violence. They were war stories; not impersonal and abstract, but representing an emotional experience that had clearly been burned into their psyche, in the way that

deeply emotional encounters are. Some highlighted immediate and situational experiences: Jane's and Iona's accounts of harassment, the attempted assaults upon Malcom and Darren and Phil being the target of verbal abuse. Others were more reflective and general in nature. But usually they were tales of survival featuring the school leader as the protagonist who had to find a way through to a resolution. Participants rarely described feeling fear itself as a positive experience, even though the resolution of the experience may have been represented as an accomplishment.

It was also possible to identify some common patterns (group themes) emerging across the participants' interviews about their perceptions of their experience of fear in their professional role. Identifying patterns across cases is an accepted IPA practice (Smith et al., 2009). Group themes were identified in Chapter Five, regarding the lived experience of fear for school leaders. Three group themes were discussed: the role of expectations, the presence or absence of support, and control.

The major findings of the study are summarized as follows:

1. School leaders experience fear in relation to threats to their physical safety. This fits with a traditional psychological definition of fear, where fear is a reaction to a threat to safety (Ekman, 2007), and supports Riley's findings on the prevalence of physical threat to Australian school principals (Riley, 2016).
2. School leaders experience fear when dealing with situations of high emotion, for example, being exposed to a verbal tirade from a staff member or parent. Being the target of others' negative emotions was a common theme in the participants' fear narratives. In absorbing the negativity and helping others process their emotions, school leaders can be seen to be adopting the role of a "toxic handler" (Frost & Robinson, 1999, p. 98). Whilst Frost and Robinson

(1999), describe toxic handlers as those who “voluntarily shoulder the sadness and the anger that are endemic to organizational life” (p. 98), I would argue that, from the evidence in this study, school leaders often adopt this role as an aspect of their professional practice that is far from voluntary.

3. School leaders’ work frequently places them in positions which requires them to undertake “emotional labor” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 9) or “emotion work” (Wong, Tschan, & Semmer, 2017, p. 68). Suppressing grief and horror in order to manage a situation (Phil) or adopting an assertive attitude despite feeling afraid (Iona and Sandy) are examples of emotional labor required in situations of fear for school leaders. In this way, emotional labour was a strategy employed by school leaders to manage fear.
4. Both the presence and absence of perceived support was evident in the fear narratives. It was evident that the participants valued support during or after a fearful experience. This support could come from a wide range of sources, including: family, law enforcement, colleagues, supervisors or health professionals. However, the absence of felt support could be deeply “wounding” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, p. 311) for school leaders. This was due to the nature of their leadership work, which often placed them in opposition to others’ interests, leading to tense relational situations that resulted in a sense of isolation from others (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002b; Kelchtermans et al., 2011). In these situations, leaders felt that they needed to present a particular leadership persona, despite their wish to maintain positive and harmonious relationships with others. School leaders also felt fearful in situations where they perceived: not merely an absence of support, but a sense of betrayal or a breach of trust, such as the perceived breaking of a psychological contract. This was particularly the case when they

did not receive support from a source where they had expected to receive support, for example, a systemic authority figure or supervisor. This was experienced as a violation of trust – particularly pertinent and deeply felt because of the protectiveness of school leaders towards their own school communities.

5. School leaders often experienced fear in unpredictable or surprising situations. The nature of these situations does not allow for elements of control, such as preparation or planning. School leaders' efforts to regain a sense of control and predictability were also evident in their accounts as a way to manage or diffuse the fear-inducing experience. Similarly, complexity was linked to feelings of fear for the study's participants: situations typical to their practice involved an ambiguity that defied easy and precise answers.
6. School leaders' fear narratives uncovered an expectation that they should be strong and in control. Control is a significant element in school leaders' perceptions of their own leadership. Heroic self-expectations of leadership (Allison et al., 2016) are evident in the participants' accounts. This is exacerbated in practice by the public and visible nature of school leadership, which is open to scrutiny from systemic authorities, school communities and the media who hold school leaders to high standards. It seemed that women leaders, in particular, felt pressure to publicly portray an image of strength, although men also felt constrained by similar expectations. However, these heroic expectations contrast with some of the lived experiences of fear recounted during the study, where powerlessness or loss of control is identified. The fear narratives presented an interesting paradox: fear does not seem to fit the image of a heroic leader held by either the participants or those they lead, and yet, fear was undeniably experienced by the majority, if not all,

of the study's participants—some of whom had been publicly recognized for their leadership ability. Participants had high expectations of the level of control and power that they had as leaders, and fear had little place in these expectations, despite the reality of experiencing fear in their leadership practice. If fear is part of the human experience (Jericó, 2009), then it follows that it will equally be part of a school leaders' experience. Reconciling this with the public perception of fearlessness that they felt they were expected to exhibit (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004) was problematic for school leaders. Emotion itself was viewed with some distrust by school leaders, particularly in relation to emotional display in the practice of their leadership. Sometimes school leaders also corralled helpful internal expectations linked to the heroic nature of their perception of leadership: this could entail presenting an image of a heroic leader through the exercise of emotional labor, even when it was far from what they were actually feeling.

7. Participants used control as a way of managing and mitigating fear. Through planning and strategizing, or self-care strategies such as grounding and separation, participants imposed a level of control on their environment. Some of the responses mentioned by participants include: talking, exercise, use of alcohol, planning, keeping records, avoidance, gamification and humour. They often turned inward for strength to support them in the shadow of a fearful experience, seeking to assert a measure of self in order to cope with in an intimidating situation.

The emergent themes from this study around school leaders' experiences of fear are represented in the diagram below. The role of expectations, the presence or absence of support, and issues surrounding control were all factors associated with fear

experiences for the school leaders in this study. Their responses to fear involved imposing control through strategizing, emotional labour and a variety of coping strategies.


*Figure 10.* School leaders' experiences of fear

## *Recommendations*

Policy makers and postgraduate educators should consider the emotional aspects of school leadership in framing policy and developing school leadership preparation programmes. This could involve further investigation into identifying support frameworks and emotional self-care strategies for school leaders, in order to help mitigate against any potential harmful effects that may arise from this aspect of their work. In addition, the clarification of expectations around supports that school leaders can reasonably expect from their employers would be beneficial.

Unpredictability is an unavoidable aspect of school leadership, so school leadership preparation programmes cannot entirely prepare school leaders for all eventualities. Nevertheless, providing a forum in which narratives and stories (such as the ones included in this study) can be shared will allow for both practicing school leaders and aspirant leaders to recognize the nature of a wide range of situations that may eventuate in the practice of school leadership. This will arm them with potential strategies, or, at the very least, encourage them in the knowledge that other school leaders are also having to improvise solutions to unexpected problems, making this type of forum an additional source of support for practicing school leaders. When their own experiences of fear caused by unpredictable events occur—as no doubt they will—they will know that this is, in some sense, “normal”. By being aware of the experiences of others, they will feel an identification with a community of school leaders and ex school leaders which will provide, even though abstract and intangible, a sense of support and that they are not alone in the fears they face.
One of study’s participants (Phil) spoke of the value of peer interaction in leadership development: he spoke forcefully about the importance of preparing leaders rather

than expecting them to ‘learn on the job’. He recounted being asked to go to leadership training by his principal after he had won a leadership position (the quotation has been included in its entirety because of its depth and relevance to the issue):

> it was a room full of new leaders. And we just threw stories around. It was a really really good day and swapped strategies and things like that about how to deal with – the sort of things you might be [coming up against]. So that was a really good thing. But they don’t do that anymore, that I know of … Sink or swim only ever leads to cramps, you know … I just *don’t* think it works. I think plonking somebody in the situation and saying ‘All right, you’ve won the job, show me why’ is not necessarily a good thing to do because it doesn’t actually grow the leader and you need to grow in the job as well. You need to become a better leader, not just because you’ve been hit on the back … with a cricket bat so many times that you learn to dodge it. It’s more of: here are some helpful strategies …

For Phil, this was a rewarding experience. It is worth investigating how to harness the collective experience of retired school leaders in these kinds of initiatives, as they may form a willing and ready resource to mentor and train developing school leaders. The South Australian Secondary Principals’ Association has begun this work by creating a dedicated space on their website (SASPA, 2020).

Finally, the emotions of school leadership (including fear) should be an accepted aspect of leadership discourse. As Simon (a participant) said: “to make it okay … to say, yes I am experiencing this emotion”. I heartily concur. If nothing else, these kinds of discussions should reassure aspirant or practicing leaders that fear is, in fact, a ‘normal’ part of the emotional fabric of school leadership practice.

It is pleasing to see that some measures already being taken to improve and protect the health and safety of Australian school leaders are in alignment with the findings of this study. NESLI (the National Excellence in School Leadership Institute) conducts a Principal's Wellbeing program which includes specific sessions on "Organisational Wellbeing & Psychological Safety", "Managing Emotional Demands" and "Coping Strategies" (NESLI, 2019). This links well with this study's findings: that feelings of fear can be connected with physical and emotional threats, dealing with situations of heightened emotion and managing and mitigating fear through a number of strategies. In this way, some of the significant findings of this study are already making their way into the broader conversation around school leadership.

Another example of an increased focus on principal wellbeing at a state level in Australia is in South Australia. In February 2019, the South Australian government launched a Principal Wellbeing Programme (also in conjunction with NESLI) in order "to support site leaders to manage the significant emotional demands of their roles" (Department for Education, 2019). In addition, the Department is also putting in place the following measures to protect principals' health and wellbeing:

- "psychological wellchecks for high risk groups" (p. 1),
- "enhanced post incident support" (p. 1) for "incidents involving psychological trauma" (p. 1),
- "specialist psychology consultation" (p. 1) for leaders "involving psychological safety and psychological hazard management" (p. 1) and
- "The implementation of a Staff Wellbeing Toolkit" (p. 2) in order "to support leaders, teachers and other staff to understand and proactively manage their own and the team's psychological health and wellbeing" (p. 2).

Such wide ranging strategies underscore the importance of protecting the health and wellbeing of our educators, and are evidence that this is an issue for serious and timely consideration, as well as ongoing action.

## *Limitations and delimitations*

A delimitation of this study is that both principals and deputy principals were included under the heading of “school leaders”. This means that the findings cannot be ascribed to principals only, and the leadership roles of principals and deputy principals can, at times, be different in nature. However, both roles involve dealing with a diverse range of groups within the school community, making the perspective and insights from both principals and deputy principals important for better understanding the day to day work of educational leaders. It cannot be denied that school leadership is exercised by both principal and deputy principal roles, albeit different in nature depending on context and circumstance. The nature of the fear they experience is the same, regardless of the job title they may hold.

In addition, only the perspective of school leaders themselves was included in this study. There would be much to be gained from future investigations into the area of fear and school leadership by empirical work that encompasses the perspectives of other educational stakeholders (for example, staff, systemic representatives or affiliated community members) to add to the depth of the findings on school leaders’ experiences of fear.

In addition, the sampling was from a group of leaders with no criteria beyond having experienced school leadership. While I have previously justified this as a purposive sample, as fear was considered to be a ubiquitous experience for school leaders

(see p. 79), a future study could obtain more information around the fear experiences of participants prior to selection; for example, a sample of participants with a documented history of workplace-based trauma could be selected for an alternative approach to study on fear and school leadership.

The emphasis of this study is on the actual experience of fear, and not how it more broadly impacts the rest of the participants' lives, as can be found in other IPA studies (Marriott & Thompson, 2008). This is because the study's focus was on work-related experience: I was asking about fear at a professional level, rather than the ramifications of how it impacted them holistically. The focus of both the interviewing and the analysis was around the participants' more powerful experiences of fear. Respect for the participants and their emotional wellbeing meant that interview questions focused on fear in the context of 'professional' life over 'personal' life. These specific stories (that became the framework of the case studies) were selected both because of their strong emotional impact upon the reader and because of the way in which they represented the "lived experience" of the participant. I was conscious of van Manen's (2016) dictum that phenomenology had to have its roots in actual events and experiences: the "experiential material" (p. 253). The re-formatted interview structure favoured gaining data about "lived experience" with the question: "Tell me about your experience of fear in your professional life…". This may be why there is a greater focus on the participants' experience of fear itself in the interview data, and less of an emphasis on how the participant made sense of fear in his/her broader experience and in his/her relationships.

A more detailed focus on the participants' reflections about how the experience of fear fitted into and impacted upon their personal worlds was lacking in this study, and

could be an area for greater focus in a future study. This could be done by including additional probe questions that went beyond gaining information about the lived experience of fear, and instead looked more specifically about the long term effects on other aspects of their lives, for example: how it affected their other relationships, and if they perceived this experience differently in hindsight compared to the time at which it was experienced. Nevertheless, with the study's current questioning format, some deeply personal insights were still gained: Phil's breakdown, Iona's victimization and Jane's isolation during the court case were all deeply personal experiences for the individuals themselves that impacted them beyond their workplaces.

Both the iterative nature of the processes of analysis and interpretation, and the time over which the study was conducted, constituted a challenge in recording and determining which aspects warranted a more detailed focus and which were more peripheral. The researcher's in-depth knowledge of the interview data and judgements formed the basis for determining themes. Maintaining detailed records of the progress of thematic development as it evolved over the course of the study has been difficult given the duration of the study and the constantly shifting nature of the process. A greater focus on the interview as a whole and a stronger thematic emphasis, undertaking a more rigorous process for identification of themes and a simplification of the overarching themes could have occurred; nevertheless, Smith (2011) says that "Themes should suitably reflect the most salient meanings within the participant's narrative" (p. 226), and I believe that the final themes selected do reflect some 'salient meanings' in the participants' experiences. Identifying the 'salient meanings' I found to be an intuitive process; hence, my observations in Chapters 4 and 5 reflected my attempt to enter into the world of the participant and understand

the nature of his/her fear experience. In addition, my inclusion of abundant quotations from the transcripts ensures a level of rigor: it should be relatively easy for a reader to see why I have drawn the conclusions I have and made the interpretations that I have made. This is in line with the use of “strong data which is liberally drawn on to support the themes” (Smith, 2011, p. 22). The identification of specific themes was also confirmed during the research process by my supervisors, adding to the rigor of the process.

The integration of literature into each stage of the analysis, whilst providing useful insights into the participants’ experiences, is not a common practice in IPA (Bramley & Eatough, 2005; Dickson et al., 2007). In future, an increased focus on the interpretative aspect of IPA at the expense of the descriptive element could be considered, particularly in the earlier stages of a study.

The idiographic nature of the study’s method (phenomenology) means that results are not generalizable; however, the richness of the data provides a useful contribution to the field. The bracketing or bridling utilized in a phenomenological study provides a way in which any potential bias of the researcher can be limited.

Additionally, there is scope for future empirical investigation into the notion of a “culture of fear” (Furedi, 2006, p. xiv) within organizations: in particular, the influence of societal and global fears upon specific organizational cultures.

## *Future research*

Over half of Australian school leaders will retire in the coming years (Horwood, Parker, & Riley, 2020). This means that younger school leaders will be coming to the

job of principal, and, potentially, remaining in it for more years than their previous counterparts. This exposes them to higher risks of long term stress and the potential emotional and physical toll of school leadership (V. Fernandes, personal communication). They are also coming to an educational career where there are great pressures of accountability (Schmidt, 2009) and performativity (Ball, 2003). Is it worth considering career pathways which would allow for breaks from the high stresses of principalship? Can aspiring school leaders be better prepared to monitor their own wellbeing? Can systems and communities better support school leaders in their endeavors? It is an opportune time to be considering how future school leaders can be better prepared emotionally for the task they will undertake. This is important, not just for their own wellbeing, but for the wellbeing of the communities they serve.

As this is a preliminary study in a potentially emerging field, there is much scope for future investigation. This study has looked at the lived experience of school leaders; more specific investigations into what school leaders fear and how school leaders cope with fear would be warranted. A closer look into the relational aspects of fear and school leadership would also yield much of interest: where is fear most often felt for school leaders? How significant is the impact of the relationship between teachers and leadership on leaders' fear? As Beatty says: "the more secure and empowered the teacher, the more threatened, insecure and anxious the leader" (Beatty, 2000, p. 336). Or, do parent interactions, stakeholder interactions or the relationship with supervisors provide arenas that generate more fear for educational leaders? Put more broadly, there is also room for a wider investigation into the notion of how workplaces may be affected by a broader, societally based "culture of fear" (Furedi, 2006, p. xiv), rather than the individualized perspective of fear that this study has provided.

Whilst the focus of this study has been to understand the experience of fear, there is also room for work on resilience and optimal functioning for school leaders in the face of the complexity, pressure, visibility and high demands of their roles. Also, whether personal and professional fears can actually be separated in the study of fear and school leadership could warrant further study. As has been pointed out: “Human fears lurk below the leadership surface and are apt to emerge to haunt or help a leader during crisis” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, p. 320).

The issue of gender and school leadership has not been a primary focus of this study, but a more detailed look into the interrelationship between leadership, gender, idealized gender roles and fear would be one of great interest. Lastly, the possibility of incorporating specific material on the emotional dimensions of school leadership into educational leadership and management training programmes is an area that could reap future rewards. It is worth noting with Fineman, though, that our approach to studying emotion in organizations in the future may benefit from a degree of academic/methodological creativity: “Do we thrust emotion into the old, paradigmatic pots, or do we break the moulds?” (Fineman, 2000, p. 278). Whatever this might mean for the future of research into fear and school leadership, I concur with his view, namely: “There is much work to be done” (Fineman, 2000, p. 279).

A different theoretical model from the traditional hierarchical structures will also warrant further research. If school leaders are experiencing fear and stress with the pressure of having to be perceived as being “in control” in organizations that are growing rapidly more complex, is it time (as some have been suggesting) for a different way of thinking about and “doing” leadership (Gronn, 2003b)? Recent

decades have seen a proliferation of literature on alternative approaches to how we think about organizational structure and leadership itself. Distributed leadership has been utilized in some schools, shifting the focus away from the single leader mentality that has resided in the traditional role of the principal (Ross, Lutfi, & Hope, 2016). Organizational theorists such as Margaret Wheatley are advocating for an organic, rather than a mechanistic, approach to understanding how organizations actually function (Wheatley, 2007). Future research can examine the impact of these changes in ontological perceptions of leadership, and whether they lead to greater emotional wellbeing for the school leaders themselves.

# *Conclusion*

Malcom (one of the participants) remarked, about fear:

> You've got to be a little bit pragmatic about the fact that it's part of the role. We're not immune to fear; we're not immune to wounds, it's part of our life. It's an unwelcome, inescapable aspect of our life but it's also an opportunity to learn and to grow and it's also an opportunity to … give hope.

I began this study by pointing out the widespread and ongoing issues with recruitment of school leaders. The insights provided by this study about school leaders' perceptions of their fear experiences will, I hope, deepen the collective understanding about the significant emotional challenges involved in school leadership, highlighting both the personal and professional risks of leadership, as well as the tremendous courage and resilience shown by school leaders, such as the ones in this study, and the entire profession, who turn up day after day to carry out their roles. It is sobering to note that school leadership has both physical and emotional casualties, such as Phil recounted in his experiences. As a researcher, to

be privy to these kinds of accounts was a humbling and sobering experience: they were “graced moments” (Smythe et al., 2008, p. 1396), as I experienced a sense of deep empathy for the participant. This is a timely reminder to think deeply about the nature of leadership and to understand what people are being asked to undertake when they accept these roles is a necessary undertaking, particularly if the purpose of this discussion is the care and welfare of the people themselves. It is a worthwhile goal to consider how school leadership can be a career in which people do not simply survive, but thrive. Hopefully this study has gone some way towards achieving this: whether it be by contributing to the public conversation about emotions in school leadership, or by outlining some of the areas in which leaders have experienced fear and how they have encountered and moved through these situations. At the very least, other school leaders who read these accounts and have experienced similar things themselves, will be encouraged that they are not alone in their struggles.

Murphy (2000) also advocates embracing the emotions within leadership: “Paradoxically, the more a leader acknowledges and accepts personal weaknesses and feelings, the more effective he or she becomes” (pp. 33-34). Perhaps unsurprisingly, acknowledging emotions can be seen to be encouraging of others and their own self-expression of authenticity: “We suggest that displaying emotions that deviate from role norms that leaders typically tend to suppress (e.g., shame, fear) may enhance followers’ authenticity because the leader’s authenticity signals to followers that unconventional self-presentation is acceptable, and that impression management is not necessary for achieving important goals” (Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2014, pp. 61-62). There is an indication here that emotions and leadership do not have to be antithetical.

Perhaps an awareness of the emotional aspects of leadership will, more and more, become part of school leadership training programmes (Wallace, 2010) and professional development. And lastly, it is my hope that this has opened up new avenues of research into the emotional aspects of school leadership, particularly those related to feeling fear. With the aid of these advancements, it is hoped that people will continue to both aspire to, or be encouraged in their current practice of, school leadership.

Finally, this study is only another part of the ongoing conversation around emotion and school leadership. I "… offer [my] thinking in humility knowing it is as good as it could be, yet lacking" and that it will hopefully have provided "… tentative solutions, hints of possibilities" and "discussion to open more questions to 'wonder'" (Smythe et al., 2008, p. 1391). This is an important conversation to continue: both for the good of our school leaders, and for those whom they lead.

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# Appendix 1 Initial list of interview questions

## Interview Questions (a guide)

**Thank you for taking the time to answer the following questions. Experiencing emotion is something we all do. Our professional/work 'life' is no exception to this. Your feedback on your experience of emotions in your professional role will be useful to help others gain insight into the 'hidden' complexities of educational leadership. In turn, this may help in the creation of better training programmes for aspiring leaders, or better support mechanisms for incumbent leaders.**

1. What brought you to this point in your career?
    a. How did you become a principal?
    b. What made you want to become a teacher? A principal?
    c. Has the job (of a principal/leader) differed from your expectations?
    d. What experiences/influences have been formative in making you the leader you are?

2. What are the 3 most enjoyable (energizing) aspects of your role? What are the 3 least enjoyable (draining) aspects?
    a. What emotions do you associate with the least enjoyable aspects of your leadership role?
    b. Do any of the emotions you have just described have an element, or basis, of fear?

3. Thinking about fear:

   a. Place the following emotions associated with fear on a continuum from weakest to strongest: anxiety, worry, terror, concern, apprehension, fear. *Which do you feel most often in your work?**
   b. Complete the following sentence: 'Fear is…..because……'

4. Think of a situation in your professional life that triggered feelings of apprehension/fear. Reflect on this experience for a moment.
   a. What physical sensations were you aware of (eg heart pounding, dry mouth, increased alertness etc)?
   b. How did you handle/manage this situation?
   c. Do other kinds of experiences in your professional life trigger feelings of fear/apprehension? If so, what are they?

5. Managing anxiety:
   a. How do you handle/manage your own feelings of work-related anxiety, apprehension, fear or concern?
   b. Are there particular strategies that you find useful, or that you would recommend to others facing similar situations?
   c. Can you leverage fear?

6. Could you have been prepared more effectively before you took on your leadership role for encountering and dealing with these situations? How so?

7. Can you describe a work-related situation in which you have experienced a complete lack of (or minimal) anxiety, fear, worry or concern?
   a. How did you feel?
   b. What physical sensations were you aware of?

8. Take a minute to turn your attention outwards to your school community (in particular staff, parents and other stakeholders). What (education-related) fears significantly affect them? In what way?

9. Is fear ever a positive or useful thing? If so, can you describe some situations in which this may be the case?

10. Is the education sector (as a whole) unduly influenced by fear today?
    a. If not, why not?
    b. If so, how? What is the 'way forward' for schools in a fear-affected society? What is the 'way forward' for educational leaders? What strategies could they employ?

| |
|---|
| Thank you for participating in this interview/series of interviews. If any troubling issues or emotions have been raised through answering these questions and you feel that you would like to discuss them further with someone, BeyondBlue provides a helpline on 1300 22 4636. |

*NB This list was used early in the interview process, but as the study continued I stopped using this list and instead began interviews with a general phrase such as 'Tell me about experiencing fear in your professional role…'. This was to allow the participants to interpret fear, and their fear experience, in the way they chose – without my questions imposing any pre-concieved ideas that, as the researcher, I may have had about what would constitute a fear experience for a school leader.

# Appendix 2 Ethics approval

MONASH University
Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC)
Research Office

**Human Ethics Certificate of Approval**

This is to certify that the project below was considered by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee. The Committee was satisfied that the proposal meets the requirements of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* and has granted approval.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Project Number:** | CF15/1270 - 2015000602 | |
| **Project Title:** | The impact of fear upon school leaders | |
| **Chief Investigator:** | Dr Paddy O'Toole | |
| **Approved:** | **From:** 27 May 2015 | **To:** 27 May 2020 |

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**Terms of approval** - ***Failure to comply with the terms below is in breach of your approval and the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research.***

1. The Chief investigator is responsible for ensuring that permission letters are obtained, if relevant, before any data collection can occur at the specified organisation.
2. Approval is only valid whilst you hold a position at Monash University.
3. It is the responsibility of the Chief Investigator to ensure that all investigators are aware of the terms of approval and to ensure the project is conducted as approved by MUHREC.
4. You should notify MUHREC immediately of any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events affecting the ethical acceptability of the project.
5. The Explanatory Statement must be on Monash University letterhead and the Monash University complaints clause must include your project number.
6. **Amendments to the approved project (including changes in personnel):** Require the submission of a Request for Amendment form to MUHREC and must not begin without written approval from MUHREC. Substantial variations may require a new application.
7. **Future correspondence:** Please quote the project number and project title above in any further correspondence.
8. **Annual reports:** Continued approval of this project is dependent on the submission of an Annual Report. This is determined by the date of your letter of approval.
9. **Final report:** A Final Report should be provided at the conclusion of the project. MUHREC should be notified if the project is discontinued before the expected date of completion.
10. **Monitoring:** Projects may be subject to an audit or any other form of monitoring by MUHREC at any time.
11. **Retention and storage of data:** The Chief Investigator is responsible for the storage and retention of original data pertaining to a project for a minimum period of five years.

Professor Nip Thomson
Chair, MUHREC

cc: Ms Melinda Thambi

# Appendix 3 — Alternative case study and cross-case comparison

The participant analysis in this study (see Chapter 4) was interwoven with references to the relevant literature, as a way of highlighting links between the emerging themes and the current insights in the field of emotion and educational leadership. Other examples of IPA traditionally focus the analysis solely on the participant's experiences, only bringing in broader perspectives from the literature at a later point in the study's development (Bramley & Eatough, 2005; Marriott & Thompson, 2008). This section provides an alternative approach to analysis and interpretation in line with the above emphasis.

Throughout the course of the analysis of Iona's data, a number of themes were identified. This is consistent with the approach of Marriott and Thompson (2008), who organized their results around sub-ordinate themes and a smaller number of super-ordinate themes. These were written in the left hand column of the transcript, and have been summarized in the table below:

| **Sub-ordinate themes from Iona's transcript** |
|---|
| Gender and leadership |
| Plans to deal with a challenging situation |
| Challenges to authority |
| Wide number of groups who were fearful |
| Powerlessness |
| Fear for personal safety |
| Documentation: 'careful with words' |

| |
|---|
| Emotions |
| Don't show fear |
| Direct and clear communication |
| Physical reaction |
| How she survived / won / maintained power |
| Has to be a positive end to the narrative |
| Avoidance behaviour as a response to fear |
| Different groups affected by fear |
| Effects of fear: physical, second guessing |
| What doesn't constitute fear |
| Long term effect |

These sub themes have been grouped together for discussion under the following broader themes: "the saga of fear", "gender, leadership and fear", "fear as abnormality", "the embodied nature of fear" and "outcomes of fear". Sub-themes of "wider number of groups who were fearful" and "different groups affected by fear" are not discussed, as I decided that there was sufficient (and better) material to limit the focus to Iona herself (this was a decision that was applied across the entire study).

| **Themes and sub-themes for Iona's case study** |
|---|
| 1. **Fear as a saga**<br>*SUB-ORDINATE THEMES*: Long term effect; what doesn't constitute fear; documentation |
| 2. **Gender, leadership and fear**<br>*SUB-ORDINATE THEMES*: Gender and leadership; challenges to authority; powerlessness; has to be a positive end to the narrative; don't show fear; emotions |

| | |
|---|---|
| 3. | **Fear as abnormality**<br>*SUB-ORDINATE THEMES*: What doesn't constitute fear |
| 4. | **The embodied nature of fear**<br>*SUB-ORDINATE THEMES*: Fear for personal safety; avoidance behaviour as a response to fear; effects of fear: physical safety |
| 5. | **Outcomes of fear**<br>*SUB-ORDINATE THEMES*: Documentation; plans to deal with a challenging situation |

The following extract was from an earlier analysis I had written during the study summarizing Iona's experiences. It was originally entitled: "What is Iona's lived experience of fear? What does fear mean to her?" In this analysis I was aiming to represent the breadth of her experience of fear, with a deeply phenomenological focus. The writing was carried out with the intent of representing Iona's experiences without reference to other cases or to extant literature. I felt that this writing was closer to the tone of the writing in other IPA studies (see Marriott & Thompson, 2008 and Bramley & Eatough, 2005) due to its deeply personal focus. For the case study below I also added another theme of "Gender, leadership and fear" to maintain consistency with the themes in the table above. At times, I included excerpts from the current analysis of Iona's account (see Chapter 4) if I considered that they contributed to the interpretation. The analysis of Iona's experience of fear in the following extract shares some similarities with 'Beth' in Bramley and Eatough's (2005) study on the experience of living with Parkinson's disease. They describe aspect of Beth's experiences under specific themes, and utlize direct quotes to support their interpretations. Whilst they focus on themes of 'mind and body' (p. 226) and 'self and agency' (p. 228), I have organized the analysis of Iona's account into

“The saga of fear”’; “Gender, leadership and fear”; “Fear as abnormality”; “The embodied nature of fear” and “Outcomes of fear”.

# *Case study – Iona’s account*

*For Iona, her experience of fear was centered around encounters with one difficult individual. Experiencing fear had individual and corporate elements for Iona; she was aware of its impact on her, and the perceived impact upon others in her school. It is the impact on Iona herself that will form the basis for the following analysis. Iona’s experience of fear will be discussed under the following headings: “The saga of fear”’; “Gender, leadership and fear”; “Fear as abnormality”; “The embodied nature of fear” and “Outcomes of fear”.*

## The saga of fear

*A metaphor for Iona’s experience of fear is the “saga”: for her, fear was not a contained experience but one that stretched over days and years. It affected her in the workplace and out of the workplace (as a rural principal, Iona was particularly vulnerable to a lack of separation between her work and home life). In Iona’s case, fear is an overarching and ever-present, chronic experience. She worked for four years in a fearful atmosphere. Iona perceived a threat - always in the background, always there - against which she felt she had to be ever-vigilant in order to protect herself. She did this by strategizing, keeping records and altering her behaviour. The extent to which this affected her was shown by her comments about the time after*

*this person had left the school. She describes the changed situation as "relaxed", with "no second-guessing". It even extended beyond her own experience to that of her school community: "a definite difference of atmosphere in the whole place", "people know that this is how we behave", "everybody knew what the boundaries were". The unknown is minimized. There is a shared and accepted knowledge about codes of behaviour. Fear was partially about the unknown and about a lack of shared acceptance of workplace etiquette. At an individual level, Iona no longer has to scrutinize her every action, she is "relaxed". This is the opposite to an atmosphere of fear, where she had to keep records. Even though the situation resolved itself, an element of fear continues on. Iona says*

*I've still got all that paperwork and documentation because I'm too frightened to throw it away in case it rears its head again.*

*Even though the main threat is over, the fear and subsequent vigilance continues, albeit on a less intense level. Even post-trauma like symptoms described by Iona, although not as strong as they previously were, continue to this day. Like a saga, fear continues on.*

## Gender, leadership and fear

*Gender was another theme emerging from Iona's account in relation to feeling fear. When discussing the attitude of the 'difficult' staff member, Iona comments " … the fact that I was a female made it even worse". She noted the concern expressed by those who appointed her to the position because of the organization's negative history with women in leadership; Iona entered an environment where she knew that*

*challenges lay ahead. Fear was experienced through intimidation: Iona describes a scene where she was acutely aware that she was less physically powerful than a group of men she had to reprimand, and felt fearful as a result of being in that position: " … I was scared stiff; I mean, I was shaking … Because these men were bigger than me". Iona was acutely aware of the difference in physical power and this led to feelings of fear. This was exacerbated by Iona being on her own.*

*However, Iona's reaction to the frightening circumstances was to ensure she displayed strength : " … I'm very stubborn…There was no way that throughout this whole thing that I was going to let him beat me". It is particularly important to Iona that she prove herself, despite feeling fearful—even if it meant placing herself in a risky situation. Iona viewed challenges to her leadership as a contest from which she was determined to walk away victorious. The need to demonstrate agency was also illustrated in another incident Iona described, where she left school one day to go home for "a cry and a sleep" as a response to the ongoing stresses of the position. The concerned reaction from her staff convinced Iona that she could not appear to be overwhelmed by her role; so she decided that in future "it was easier for me to stay at school rather than worry them, so that's what I did". Iona experiences fear, but is determined that, above all, she must present an image of strength and agency. As a woman in leadership, she must not be overwhelmed by the circumstances. Whilst feeling fear, she must not give in to fear. She must be the winner at the end of the story. This is expanded upon later in the section on the hero/crusader.*

## Fear as abnormality

*Another aspect of fear from Iona's account is that she does not perceive fear to be a normal state of affairs. Here, the metaphor for fear is the spectre of abnormality (dysfunctional, abnormal). For Iona, this situation was an undesirable part of her principalship, despite her having been aware when she began the job that difficulties may occur. She described, with some humour, how during this difficult time her file was continually 'on the desk' of her line manager in head office. When it ended, her file was returned to storage. And when it ended, she describes life without fear as "normal". She was no longer the focus of attention for her line managers. A state of fear, therefore, is an intruder: a warping of the normality of a school leader's experience rather than an expected aspect of it. She said " … once that release of tension and fear occurred it became normal everywhere … or more normal. I wasn't a source of concern, it was other people and other places". Another clue to her perception of fear as abnormal came when asked about other minor fears that had been part of her leadership. She did not class things such as concern that an excursion went "smoothly" as fear. For her, then, fear was a specific, unique and unusual phenomenon in her school leadership experience.*

## The embodied nature of fear

*Feeling fear, for Iona, was also a bodily experience. She describes 'shaking', 'feeling sick in the stomach', 'physical churning of the stomach', 'trying to keep your voice even', 'inability to sleep' and pallor (the latter was her description of a frightened colleague). In addition, fear was experienced on an emotional level: 'very nervous', 'frightened', 'always second guessing', 'I got very close to having a breakdown'. Avoidance behaviours were triggered in her daily routines, both in and outside of work, showing the profound impact of living with fear: "I stopped walking to school …*

*I stopped going to get my mail at the post office …". Fear was evidenced in the specific effects upon Iona's body and in the alteration to her routines. In this way, Iona's life was significantly affected by fear. Some of these effects were 'in the moment', whilst others displayed themselves as chronic, ongoing consequences.*

## Outcomes of fear

*What does feeling fear prompt, in terms of behaviour? In Iona's case, it prompted careful strategizing (the strategist) and was the impetus for a determined struggle (the crusader). She refers to strategizing and planning multiple times in her account, from even before she began her job ('I walked into a situation … I addressed that by ... '). She makes references to keeping records and documents ('I kept a log of everything'). Even Iona's reference to "direct", clear communication is evidence of a strategy to pursue a successful outcome.*

*The metaphor of the hero/crusader emerges from Iona's account. She did not show her fear outwardly, in particular to the person who was its cause: 'I tried very hard for him not to be able to see that I was afraid' or that her hands were shaking. Also, for Iona, feeling fear was, in a way, empowering. It made her 'more determined to see that justice was done'. Fear led to a response of bravery and a commitment to justice. Unlike some of Iona's other experiences, this was a positive aspect of her fear. It spurred her on to pursue a successful outcome.*

In this extract, I have attempted to represent the complexity and breadth of the fear experience for Iona. It contains many references to the interview transcript, for example: "I kept a log of everything" but also is positioned within my own

interpretative framework, for example, “Fear led to a response of bravery and a commitment to justice” and “fear was an ongoing saga”. I have intentionally not included reference to literature in this section, as previously explained.

## *Cross-case comparisons*

In this section I have developed 2 themes using cross-case comparisons: “Fear, gender and power” and “Emotional expression and leadership”. I have identified both convergence and divergence in the participant accounts and developed interpretative conclusions out of the examination of the different participants’ experiences. I have intentionally left out any reference to extant literature in this section, as is consistent with IPA practice (Dickson et al, 2007)

### Fear, gender and power

*Displaying power was an emerging theme in some of the participant accounts. In particular, overt demonstrations of strength were evident across the cases of the female participants. Female leaders seemed to be highly sensitive to the need to appear powerful. Iona placed herself in a potentially risky situation, motivated by the need to assert her leadership with the group of men who were drinking in the Ag. shed. In the same way, Sandy felt that she had to stand up to the male staff member who was antagonizing her: “ … if I’d sat there and taken it I don’t think I could because … it’s that female/male role where I’m being really passive and letting him talk to me like that whereas I was like – gonna shove it back at you  because you can’t talk to me like that” (Sandy). Both Iona and Sandy, as female leaders, seemed to feel pressure to assert themselves in a way that was not evident in the accounts of*

*the study's male participants. This suggests a unique pressure on female school leaders to appear strong in order to justify or prove themselves as effective leaders.*

*Similarly, Jane recounted a situation in which she stood up to an intimidating parent. Her rationale behind this was the need to appear strong for her staff and to uphold principles of acceptable behaviour in the school community: " … if I hadn't done it, they would have thought I was weak, and then if the next person did would have got away with it". Rarely was there an emphasis on proving power of the same strength in the accounts from the male participants in the study. In this way, the female participants in the study seemed to be highly attuned to the perception of their leadership and whether others would judge them as effective leaders. This meant that, for the female leaders, there was a preoccupation with appearing strong and assertive, or 'winning' a power struggle, in order to demonstrate their power and prove their leadership ability. It is as though the female leaders felt that they needed to prove that they belonged in their leadership position, whilst there was little evidence that the male participants in this study felt a similar need.*

*Another similarity in the three accounts was the way in which their bold demonstrations of power occurred in situations where there was a strong moral imperative at stake. Each female leader encountered a situation where they felt there was something intrinsically inappropriate: hence, their decision to push back could be construed as having an element of moral justice as a motivating force. As Jane said, " … if I hadn't done it … the next person … would have got away with it". Iona was responding to a group of staff who were acting in direct violation of school rules by drinking in the Ag. Shed. Sandy was the victim of rudeness. Each of these situations represented something that was perceived as a stand against an injustice. In this*

*way, the female leaders were simultaneously demonstrating power, not just for their own edification, but in order to uphold a moral imperative that each felt was important. It seems, then, that there were two motivations for the female leaders' need to appear strong: firstly, to demonstrate leadership, and secondly, to defend an important principle. Both of these were motivating factors in shows of power evident in all three of the study's female participants.*

*One way in which Sandy's account diverged from the other female participants was in her emphasis around the relational nature of leadership, and what that meant for her as a female leader. She mentioned a continual "struggle" with balancing assertiveness and being relational. As she said, "…I have to assert my power, but I have to…look after the relationship … Because I always worry about: I don't want to damage the relationship". Sandy felt that this was a tension that was unique to female leaders. In her mind, male leaders did not have the same kind of struggle: "I do wonder if male leaders worry about that too … do male leaders go, whatever, I'll just do what I want? I don't know." Sandy perceived that male leaders were less troubled by a need to maintain a relationship in their exercise of power, whilst she herself was acutely aware of the burden she carried by being pulled in two directions, as it were, between assertiveness and tenderness. Sandy's attitude could highlight a unique burden of leadership for women who enact their leadership within societal expectations of women as relationally-focussed. It is worth noting here, though, that Brad's comments shed some light upon Sandy's question about whether men are concerned about maintaining relationships as they lead. As a male leader, Brad described himself specifically as "a relational leader". He spoke openly of the difficulties in balancing leadership with a desire to be relational, and the tension that that brought about for him:*

> *… as a relational leader … you're relating to every issue and every person in your school community, when there's a breakdown of relationship to an issue or to a person, it creates anxiety … You're dealing with the breakdown of the relationship. And, it's horrid.*

*Brad's comments demonstrate the centrality of relationships for himself as a male leader, and the way in which relational tensions have a negative emotional impact on him. His choice of the vivid word 'horrid' demonstrates the depth of the emotional impact he feels in these situations, pointing to the angst generated by these kinds of situations. Brad's insight suggests that the anxiety produced when balancing relationality and assertiveness may not just be experienced by female leaders, but by male leaders as well. Fear and anxiety can be experienced by male or female school leaders in the context of interactions with others, particularly where those interactions can be ones which cause conflict.*

## Emotional expression and leadership

*There was a distinct tension between experiencing fear and the notion of leadership: in particular, what level of emotional expression was appropriate or safe for a leader to display. Some participants felt constrained in regards to any form of emotional expression in their leadership practice (whether it were of fear or any other type of emotion). Sandy in particular saw emotional expression as a potential liability to her leadership. She describes her mentor as "cool as a cucumber" and able to react to critical incidents without demonstrating emotion in his response. To Sandy, this level of emotional self-control represents the epitome of leadership – even of personhood.*

*As she said, "… my shortcomings that I'm trying to address to help me be a better leader and a better person …". In this way, Sandy casts the experience of emotion as negative: something to be avoided or overcome. Iona showed a similar attitude when she decided to stay at school rather than go home when she was upset, in order not to worry her staff. Hiding her emotions was part of her leadership practices: "I tried very hard for him not to be able to see that I was afraid" and later "I got very close to having a breakdown, but - wasn't going to let him see it". Phil also talked of masking the long term impact of job-related stressors: " … what was not apparent to other people was that it was having an effect on me … Because, I'm a good actor. And I covered it up". At another point in his narrative, Phil described a crisis event, where his fear had to be compartmentalized and put on hold in order for him to focus on dealing with the crisis. He described it this way:*

> *… remaining calm and not letting the situation get to you … although it should … you just don't because you're the one they're looking to. So that's the leadership part of it; you've got to show it. Now's the time. You wanted it? You've got it!*

*In this case, Phil is having to suppress the emotion of fear in the service of leadership. The idea of rising above or remaining unaffected by fear seemed to be linked in the participants' minds with a perception of leadership. Kevin's account contained a similar attitude:*

> *…that … expectation that you have about leadership … 'I am the leader' … I've got to stand up here and work this through … and at the same time*

> *dealing with … other people's emotional …state of mind and … your own …so those sort of things get really really tough.*

*For Phil and Kevin, leadership was about courage and agency in the face of challenges, and dealing with their own emotional state was not a priority. Phil attributed his stress illness partly to the long term effect of dealing with stressors, suggesting that it would be helpful for leaders to consider ways of processing emotion that are congruent with their leadership position. This was also advocated by Simon in his plea for greater emotional awareness, particularly for male school leaders:*

> *So in terms of preparing for the principalship, I think there's a lot that can be done; particularly in the area of studying emotions. One of them is to make it okay, particularly for males to say, yes, I am experiencing this emotion. Without them thinking I'm … a big sook.*

*Not all of the participants discussed emotional suppression in their leadership practice. Unlike the other female leaders, Jane's account contained no references to needing to suppress emotion or lacking emotional control. She seemed disinclined to be upset or "rattled" by interactions with others. In contrast, she identified what she called "emotional strength" as a quality that she felt she possessed and which had sustained her through challenging times. Jane's account shows that personality factors could explain the variation in the participants' responses, some people may be more comfortable with expressing emotion or may be less self-reflective.*

*It seems that some school leaders perceive their emotional display as affecting how others judge their leadership. This means that, for some school leaders, emotions can be suppressed or ignored in the practice of leadership in order to fulfil expectations of being 'a good leader'. An inability to process fear can pose a risk to the wellbeing of school leaders. Leaders are often trapped in a script of 'leadership' in which feeling fear or expressing fear (or other unwanted emotions) can be seen to be detrimental to their standing as a leader. It is likely that education about emotional awareness will play an important ongoing role in the emotional health of Australian school leaders.*

This example of another cross-case comparison has dealt with two themes: "Fear, gender and power" and "Emotional expression in leadership". Unlike the work in the body of the text, these thematic discussions specifically highlight aspects of convergence and divergence between the cases, and contain no reference to extant literature.