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Put on your Own Oxygen Mask First: Exploring School Principals' Stress and Workplace Well-being

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to highlight the importance of studying and promoting well-being to help manage stress and prevent burnout among school principals, examine potential gender disparities, and to consider implications for future practice. Grounded in a positive psychology framework, this study examined the correlations among school principals' workplace well-being, perceived stress, self-compassion, and intent to remain in their roles using a non-experimental, descriptive survey method. In Washington State, 124 school principals responded to an online survey over a span of 11 weeks. Descriptive, correlation, moderation, independent t-test analyses were performed on quantitative data, and qualitative data was analyzed through inductive content analysis. Results revealed that principals, although reporting moderate stress levels, exhibited suboptimal levels of workplace well-being and health. Well-being was a strong correlate of whether principals intended to remain in their roles the following year. Stress demonstrated strong negative correlations with workplace well-being and self-compassion, emphasizing the crucial role of stress management in fostering well-being. Self-compassion had a statistically significant relationship with well-being but did not moderate the effects of stress on well-being, nor did it have a statistically significant relationship with principals' intent to remain in their position. Gender-based differences were negligible; instead, qualitative findings unearthed more universal multifaceted stressors faced by principals, shedding light on the complex relationship between occupational stress and well-being in this sample. Implications for future research and practice based on the study findings are further discussed.

Keywords: school principals, well-being, school leadership, stress, positive psychology, self-compassion

"The wellness of a school community cannot exclude the personal health of its leaders."

(Lein, 2022)

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

In 2022, one out of two school leaders said they were considering a career change or retirement because their stress levels were so high, according to a national survey of school principals, conducted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) Foundation, 45% more principals in the United States were considering retiring early or finding a different profession in 2020-21 than prior to the pandemic (CDC, 2021). The numbers were already considered high prior to the outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19) as 42% of principals surveyed by the Learning Policy Institute in 2019 indicated they wanted to leave the profession (Levin et al., 2020) and post-COVID-19 the situation is even worse. In Washington State, where this researcher works and resides, almost 80% of school administrators surveyed in 2020 indicated they were dissatisfied with the job (Dawson & Nosworthy, 2021). Both school leaders and students report they needed help with their mental or emotional health last year at exceptionally high rates of 73% and 74% respectively (NASSP, 2022). When educational leaders leave because of stress, the skills, expertise and experience they bring to the job exit with them (Wells & Klocko, 2018).

Mahfouz (2018) reports that there has been a long-documented history of the increasing demands and stressors of being a school leader, but there is a significant dearth of studies on the use of strategies to deal with the demands during what could be deemed a “normal” school year and even fewer focusing on leader well-being during crises (Dawson & Nosworthy, 2021; Mahfouz, 2018). The body of research examining these stressors, impact of stress and administrators' coping strategies was small but growing

prior to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (Mahfouz, 2018; Urick et al., 2021; Wells & Klocko, 2018; Wicher, 2017). The pandemic, pandemic recovery, and its worldwide impacts on education have only exacerbated the stressors and shone a light on the need to address school administrator well-being not only to be able to perform their work effectively and support students and staff, but to prevent burnout and turn over at a critical time (Hauseman et al., 2020; Yan, 2020).

According to its website, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) has emphasized that there is a significant toll that secondary traumatic stress (STS) has on educators, and subsequently students, and focuses on the adoption of policy and procedures so that districts and schools can take meaningful steps in supporting their staff's health and well-being. By implementing policy through the strategic use of professional learning and a continuous improvement process, districts and schools can reduce staff turnover, increase student outcomes, and model healthy behaviors for the entire school community. Furthermore, OSPI now requires professional development every other school year for addressing students' social emotional learning needs, according to RCW 28A.150.415. The outbreak and recovery related to the coronavirus has led to an increase in the care work that school leaders must do for their students, staff and community (Anderson et al., 2020; DeMatthews et al., 2021a), and as this virus has reached the endemic stage, the ongoing recovery efforts will continue for the foreseeable future. The increase in care work falls heavily on the shoulders of women (Taylor, 2015), and female academic leaders in particular (Puliatte, 2021), so the unique impact of such a burden on female school leaders deserves attention.

It is important in this context to acknowledge that there is a long-standing culture of sacrifice and "soldiering on" through crises among school leaders (Mahfouz, 2018; Urick et al., 2021). This culture of sacrifice leads to inattention to or ignoring self-care completely. While returning to in-person schooling has reduced some of the major stressors for principals associated with remote learning early in the pandemic, it has additionally created the new challenge to fill the academic gaps as we are in a recovery phase (DeMatthews et al., 2021a). When districts mandated schools turn to remote learning or hybrid models — where students were in school for a portion of the day or week and remote for a portion — only a percentage of usually expected learning growth was achieved. That is, only 63-68% of typical reading growth and only 37-50% in math was achieved while students were in their remote classes (DeMatthews et al., 2021a). Schools are now expected to recover the learning loss in the shortest order possible. The challenge of learning recovery and the ongoing focus on the "achievement gap" adds to the already full plate of the administrator's docket.

Positive Psychology Framework

The study employs a Positive Psychology framework to examine leader well-being, because in order to have high functioning schools, schools need high functioning leaders (Kelloway et al., 2013; Ledesma, 2014). The goal of positive psychology is to seek, understand, and promote facilitating factors and opportunities for individuals, communities, and society to flourish (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Therefore, by utilizing this framework, leader well-being may be examined in a manner to promote optimal functioning of school leaders, and in turn, their schools.

Significance

The purpose of this study is to highlight the importance of studying and promoting well-being to help manage stress and prevent burnout among school principals, particularly women in the principalship, and to consider implications for future practice. Understanding and addressing principal well-being is crucial as school leaders profoundly influence the health, productivity, and overall culture of their educational organizations (Kelloway et al., 2013; Ledesma, 2014; Leithwood et al, 2020; Leithwood & Louis, 2012). Emotional labor, resilience, and effective coping strategies are vital for leaders, impacting not only their own well-being, but also significantly influencing the success and engagement of students as well as school improvement efforts (DeMatthews et al., 2021a; Ledesma, 2014). Understanding the effects that job demands and stress have on school leaders is important in order to inform decision makers who are concerned with positive school culture, as well as principal retention and resilience as they serve and care for students and staff. Additionally, the findings might help improve the positions and prospects of principals, particularly women in school leadership. This work examines principal well-being from a positive psychology perspective with a gendered lens to investigate the impacts of the demands of leading schools on male and female school leaders' well-being.

Overview

In order to obtain information describing the impact of stress on the well-being and job satisfaction of principals, especially female school leaders, a descriptive, non-experimental survey study design with a quantitative approach was conducted utilizing the PERMA Workplace Wellbeing Survey (PERMA-WWS; Kern, 2013) , the Perceived

Stress Scale (PSS-4: Cohen et al., 1983), and the Self-Compassion Scale Short Form (SCS-SF; Raes et al., 2011), as well as demographic questions and open ended questions to provide context. Questions were also added which were related to their intent to remain in their position, and job satisfaction and health since prior to the pandemic. The primary rationale for conducting a descriptive survey approach was to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of principals in leading K-12 schools, especially female principals at this point in time. This survey design allowed principals to self-report, revealing various aspects of their experiences, traits, thoughts, and feelings (Gall et al., 2007) as they relate to well-being, stress, and self-compassion in the context of their work and job satisfaction.

Definitions/keywords:

For the purposes of this study, the terms "principal," "school leader," and "administrator," will be used interchangeably to refer to the head, or assistant head of school with the direct authority and responsibility for running or managing a school serving students within the kindergarten through high school age and grade range, approximately 5-18 years of age. Here are some additional relevant definitions:

- **Burnout -** American Psychological Association's (APA) defines burnout as physical, emotional, or mental exhaustion accompanied by decrease motivation, lowered performance, and negative attitudes toward oneself and others.
- **Positive psychology** - an umbrella term used in the study of human conditions and processes that contribute to positive emotions, positive character traits, and factors of enabling optimal functioning (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Seligman et al., 2005).

- **Well-being -** a state of happiness and contentment, with low levels of distress, overall good physical and mental health and outlook, or good quality of life, (APA). According to Merriam Webster is “the state of being happy, healthy, or prosperous.
- **Stress** – the physiological or psychological response to internal or external stressors. Stress involves changes in nearly every system of the body, influencing how people feel and behave (APA).
- **Self-Compassion -** noncritical stance toward one’s perceived inadequacies and failures (APA), extending kindness to oneself, seeing one’s experiences as part of the larger human experience, and holding one’s painful thoughts in balance, (Neff, 2003).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 2 first establishes a rationale for studying the problem by discussing leadership impact on organizational health and the job demands associated with school principalship. Then a theoretical framework grounded in positive psychology is described through which the literature on school leaders' workplace stress, psychological well-being, and sense of self-compassion is critically reviewed and analyzed. Finally, gaps in literature and the purpose of this study seeking to address these gaps and enrich our understanding of school principals' well-being are outlined.

Leadership Impact on Organizational Health

Leaders impact the health and productivity of the organizations they lead (Kelloway et al., 2013; Ledesma, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2020; Leithwood & Louis, 2012). School leaders provide ongoing support to others in the educational context for a variety of stakeholders: students, staff, and community, (Klap et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020; Leithwood & Louis, 2012) which requires extensive emotional labor (Anderson et al., 2020; DeMatthews et al., 2021b; Maxwell & Riley, 2017; Reid, 2022; Urick et al., 2021). Burke and Dempsey (2021b) declared that "in order for leaders to implement changes in schools and to ensure that the well-being of their school community is put on their school agenda, they need to be well themselves and they need to have the time to do it" (p.165). Berkovich and Eyal (2015) added that leaders impact the health and productivity of those in their care and affect school improvement; they have a strong impact on the culture of student achievement and engagement. Ergo, educational organizations are increasingly being advised to select leaders who have high emotional

abilities and to develop leadership behaviors that have positive emotional effects on followers in order to promote desired educational outcomes (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015).

Moreover, resilient leaders are better equipped to create a culture of care where the well-being of students and staff is positively impacted (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Kern, 2020; Ledesma 2014). Ledesma (2014) pointed out that resilience in leaders impacts productivity and sustainability in the workplace as well. However, districts and principals have limited guidance on how to increase resilience and reduce burnout and engage in such practices as self-care and proactive, healthy coping strategies (DeMatthews et al., 2021a; Ray et al., 2020). The challenges faced by principals may then lead to high rates of turnover in principal leadership, which can subsequently have a negative effect on student achievement (Bartanen et al., 2019; DeMatthews et al., 2021a; Yan, 2020).

Job Demands

Leaders in K-12 education face a multitude of professional challenges. School leadership practices have changed considerably and maybe irreversibly because of COVID-19. As a result of the pandemic, school leadership has shifted on its axis and is unlikely to return to a previous understanding of ‘normal’ anytime soon, if ever at all. Research underlines that the principles of good leadership are constant i.e., having a clear vision, developing others, managing people, building capacity, etc. (Leithwood et al., 2020). Principals are constantly worried about making the right decisions and doing what is best for their schools while dealing with internal and external pressures to continuously improve their schools. One three-year longitudinal study (Marsh et al., 2023) in Australia examined job demands and resources as predictors of principals’ burnout and job

satisfaction as well as their general health and happiness in a large sample of over 3600 principals, assistant principals, and some other school leaders. They concluded that there is an ongoing “mutual intensification” of a reciprocal relationship between burnout and job demands. That is, as demands increase and resources diminish, both job-related outcomes and personal outcomes are negatively impacted (Marsh et al., 2023). Additionally, they found no support for inoculation effects, that is the Nietzsche effect of “that which does not kill you, makes you stronger,” (Marsh et al., 2023).

The demands of leading schools may create barriers to well-being for principals. Levin and Bradley (2019) researched possible issues school principals face, including continuing professional development, negative correlation between job demands and compensation, and lack of perceived control. Principals may also view their reach in teacher professional development, budget spending, and performance standards as limited and therefore face challenges associated with leadership (Yan, 2020). On average, principals spend 50-60 hours a week on school-related activities (Yan, 2020). Cubitt and Burt (2002) examined school principals' experiences of emotional exhaustion, professional isolation, and occupation stress. Due to job embedded demands, principals regularly compromise or deprioritize their own health and well-being. Principals are often expected to be selfless and are willing to put the needs of others in front of their own (DeMatthews et al., 2021a; DeMatthews et al., 2021b; Ray et al., 2020; Thornton, 2021). Principals experience higher emotional demands at work and significantly lower levels of well-being than the general population (Maxwell & Riley, 2017). Compared to the general population, principals are less healthy, experience higher levels of emotional demands, and have fewer well-being and self-care practices, which equates to increased

levels of burnout and stress (DeMatthews et al., 2021a, 2021b; Maxwell & Riley, 2017; Ray et al., 2020; Urick et al., 2021).

Theoretical Framework

The construct of positive psychology and specifically the PERMA framework is particularly appropriate when examining principal well-being, stress, and self-compassion. A strengths-based positive psychology approach may offer an alternative perspective for supporting and encouraging the well-being of school leaders at work. Furthermore, PERMA is a strengths-based multidimensional model that will allow for insights into well-being that other models may not offer; this model enables an examination of different aspects of principal well-being that may lead to understanding how principals might thrive and optimally function in their work roles as they support their school communities.

Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is the school of thought introduced in 1998 by Martin Seligman that mental well-being goes beyond treatment and reduction of pathological outcomes and negative mental health issues, but that the field of psychology should include identifying and building each individual's strengths (Seligman, 1998), and understanding how people flourish, thrive, and realize their best potential (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In other words, the goal of positive psychology is to seek, understand, and promote facilitating factors and opportunities for individuals, communities, and society to flourish (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) specifically argued the importance of studying positive emotional and cognitive states such as hope, wisdom, creativity, future mindedness,

courage, spirituality, responsibility, and perseverance along with the facets of life that make it worth living to help individuals live their best life. Linley and co-researchers (2009) described positive psychology as a means to develop the motivation necessary for optimal functioning. The enhancement of life factors such as individual strengths, finding meaning in one's life, ability to regulate emotions, effective coping skills, and cognitive appraisal provides for individuals to live in the moment and have a positive outlook for the future (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Positive psychology has been utilized in various domains. For example, in counseling interventions, positive psychology has been used to foster personal growth, autonomy, and better interpersonal relationships (Linley et al., 2009). Seligman (2019) discussed the application of positive psychology in the domain of education through three similarly designed studies in Bhutan, Mexico, and Peru that trained educators how to practice 10 positive life skills and incorporate them across the curriculum. They found that both academic performance and well-being were improved to varying degrees depending on the layer of separation, or dilution, of original trainers to students, (Seligman, 2019). That is, in the study in Bhutan, principals and teachers received training directly from Penn's Positive Psychology Center psychologists, how to practice a set of 10 skills grounded in positive psychology in their own lives, to teach the set of skills to students and to infuse their curriculum. When students' well-being and national standardized exam scores were examined after 15 months and again after another 12 months, both well-being and performance were significantly higher than in the comparison schools who received placebo training (Seligman, 2019). They attributed the higher examination results with student engagement and perseverance (Seligman, 2019).

The study in Mexico involved psychologists training people to be trainers who, in turn, taught principals and teachers the skills and curriculum. Again, results indicated higher student well-being and performance. They concluded that greater engagement and perseverance mediated the improved performance. Seligman (2019) states the academic effect was somewhat smaller than in Bhutan, which they attributed to "one more layer to dilute the training" (p. 17).

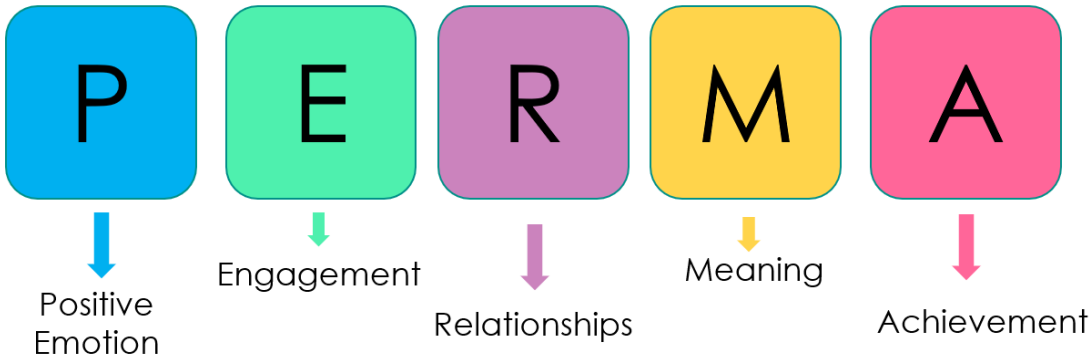
The next study which took place in Peru mirrored the studies in Mexico and Bhutan. The design was the same as in Mexico and Bhutan, and the curriculum was parallel to Mexico's (Seligman, 2019). However, an additional layer was added. Penn psychologists trained Peruvian trainers, who then trained local Peruvian trainers to work with principals and teachers. Again, while the effect on academic performance was significant, it was smaller (Seligman, 2019).

PERMA Framework for Well-being

The *Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment* (PERMA) model of well-being developed by Martin Seligman (2011) may be used as a framework to examine how leaders' well-being and how they flourish or thrive at work (Donaldson et al., 2022; Kern, 2020; Slavin et al., 2012). The PERMA theoretical framework may be useful specifically to observe the degree to which the elements of PERMA are present or absent in addressing the overall well-being of school principals, particularly those who identify as women. The model (Figure 1), from positive psychology, focuses on promoting personal and professional well-being and is an acronym for the elements in the model which lead to experiencing well-being.

Figure 1

PERMA Framework for Well-being



Note. Adapted from *Flourish: a visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*, by M. E. P. Seligman, 2011.

Positive Emotion refers to feelings such as joy, hope, curiosity, satisfaction, and contentment. *Engagement* is the experience of feeling attached, involved and an ability to concentrate or focus on activities, sometimes referred to as "flow" when one becomes absorbed, energized, and interested, sometimes becoming lost in the activity. The element of *Relationships* pertains to feeling connected, supported, and cared about. *Meaning* relates to feeling valued and connected to something greater than self. Finally, *Achievement* means progressing towards goals, feeling capable and a sense of accomplishment (Kern, 2020; Seligman, 2011; Slavin et al., 2012).

Seligman (2011) argues that each core element has both objective and subjective measures, that each can be pursued in its own right but that they are all interrelated. Butler and Kern (2016) developed the PERMA-Profiler as a measure of flourishing, and Kern (2020) later developed a workplace version of the profiler which adapts the original tool specifically to work life by changing the context of the survey questions to the work

context. For example, one of the questions on the PERMA-Profiler is, “how much of the time do you feel you are making progress towards accomplishing your goals?” which is adapted to ask, “how often do you feel you are making progress towards accomplishing your work-related goals?” The PERMA Workplace Wellness Survey is a potentially useful tool to measure educational leaders’ well-being in the context of leading their organizations. However, the tool has yet to be validated through a third-party peer-reviewed examination (Kern, 2020).

Burke and Dempsey (2021b) examined the well-being of over 800 (n = 861) primary school leaders, including teacher leaders, in Ireland during and after the breakout of Covid-19 using three psychological scales, one of which included the workplace PERMA profiler. They found that at the time of their study, teacher leaders experienced less stress than administrative leaders, but lower levels of personal well-being than administrators. Teacher leaders were more engaged, felt less lonely at work and considered themselves less accomplished than administrative leaders. Their findings indicated that not one educational leader was flourishing psychologically during the time of pandemic.

There is evidence that the PERMA model of leadership has been applied in private industry and at least recommended in the healthcare industry (Slavin et al., 2012; Yang et al., 2022), but there is little evidence the framework has been applied to understand school leaders’ experience in the K-12 setting in the United States. Utilizing the PERMA Workplace Wellness Survey (PERMA-WWS) developed by Butler and Kern (2016) as a tool for assessing well-being of school administrators could provide important

information to improve their lot, especially that of women in education administration and, by extension, those in their care.

Workplace Stress

Extreme stress is a commonly acknowledged factor affecting school leaders' wellness, (Boyland, 2011; Mahfouz et al., 2019; Marsh et al., 2023; Ray et al., 2020; Reid, 2022; Yan, 2020). Stress is the physiological or psychological response to internal or external pressures. Stress involves changes in nearly every system of the body, influencing how people feel and behave (APA). In 2018, Zarbova and Karabeliova conducted a study over a six-month period of 90 adults in a variety of occupations to identify any correlations between perceived levels of stress and well-being, as well as self-perception for feeling happiness and life satisfaction. Results indicated a statistically significant, but weak negative correlation between well-being and perceived stress. The results supported conventional knowledge that stress has a negative impact on well-being.

In a meta-analytical literature review of 50 articles, Hirschle and Gondim (2020) found that the main negative predictors of well-being at work (WBW) are stressors and lack of resources at work: pressure and overload, high demands and low control, monotony and low decision-making power, negative social interactions and lack of social support, and negative affective events at work. As noted above, principals have identified these same sources of stress (Bartanen et al., 2019; Beausaert et al., 2023; Boyland, 2011; DeMatthews et al., 2021a; Mahfouz et al., 2019; Marsh et al., 2023; Reid, 2022; Yan, 2020). Elomaa and colleagues (2021) studied 76 principals in Finland who identified workload, interpersonal conflict, lack of resources and internal pressures as primary

sources of stress. Ray and collaborators (2020) surveyed 473 practicing building principals and found that principals tend to become less capable of identifying their own physical, cognitive, and emotional overloads as they unknowingly grow accustomed to increasingly elevated levels of stress, so it is worth examining the impact of stress on their well-being.

Being a principal is a high stress profession (Beausaert et al., 2023; Boyland, 2011; Mahfouz et al., 2019; Reid, 2022; Yan, 2020) and stress can cause both physical illness and mental distress and in extreme cases; too much stress can lead to mental or physical illness, exhaustion, and burnout (Boyland, 2011). Stress is a well-established topic in education circles but has been marginalized in research in the field of educational leadership (DeMatthews et al., 2021a; Mahfouz, 2018). A principal's job performance and well-being are impacted by stress which can lead to job turnover and negatively impact school outcomes, (Bartanen et al., 2019; DeMatthews et al., 2021a; Mahfouz et al., 2019; Marsh et al., 2023; Yan, 2020).

Carr (1994) conducted an oft cited study in Australia that investigated the extent of stress in school principals through an examination of their levels of anxiety and depression. Carr (1994) found that 37.2% of the 94 participants surveyed had high levels of anxiety or depression. Carr (1994) followed up with those participants who identified high levels of stress to identify the factors contributing to these heightened states. The factors were found to be associated with sources of stress from work more than sources of stress in their personal lives. Feeling a lack of support from the Education Department and the union, feeling a lack of control over the work environment, and a managerial role being forced on the principal were associated with what Carr (1994) identified as the

result of being a member of a contradictory class. That is, principals feel like employees on the one hand with limited control over resources and policy. On the other hand, principals are perceived as agents of the employer and responsible for the activities and resourcing of the school. Bolman and Deal (2008) discuss the tension leaders in management positions experience being torn between being asked to take risks and being punished for making mistakes. In administrative circles, it is not unusual for principals to identify with the "pinch point" of an hourglass with either side being demands of the district, laws and policies, and the other side the demands of students, staff, and the community at the building level.

Self-compassion

Where stress has been associated with lower levels of well-being, self-compassion has been related to higher levels of well-being. Neff (2003) defines self-compassion as a noncritical stance toward one's perceived inadequacies and failures, extending kindness to oneself, seeing one's experiences as part of the larger human experience, and holding one's painful thoughts in balance. Specifically, Neff (2003) demonstrated that self-compassion has been associated with feelings of connectedness, life satisfaction, relatedness, and autonomy. In a study of 190 adults in the United States, McKay and Walker (2021) found that mindfulness (r =.73) and self-compassion (r =.73) each had a strong positive relationship with well-being. Yarnell and Neff (2013) also illustrated that self-compassionate people tended to experience less turmoil when resolving conflicts and tended to experience more feelings of authenticity. In their literature review, Allen and Leary (2010) found that self-compassion may be a valuable component in the process of coping and that self-compassion does not appear to relate to whether people try to change

their situation. Dev and team (2020), in their study of doctors, nurses, and medical students, found that self-compassion impacted the experience of stress and stress' correlates differently in these different groups, but it was unclear as to why this was the case. Zessin and fellow researchers (2015) performed a meta-analysis of the relationship between self-compassion and well-being and found a moderate magnitude of the relationship (r = .47) between self-compassion and well-being. The relationship was stronger for cognitive and psychological well-being compared to affective well-being. Additionally, the researchers (Zessin et al., 2015) found that there is evidence of a causal relationship between self-compassion and well-being. They concluded that self-compassion is an important factor for an individual's well-being.

Not only does research suggest that self-compassion is a robust predictor of psychological health (Neff & Dahm, 2015; Yarnell & Neff, 2013), self-compassion has been shown to promote healthy behaviors and is linked to physical well-being (Allen & Leary, 2010; Hall et al., 2013; Homan & Sirois, 2017, Phillips & Hine, 2021). For example, self-compassionate individuals are more intrinsically motivated to maintain health regimens such as diet and exercise and their goals were more related to personal health rather than social evaluations (Magnus et al., 2010; Mosewich et al., 2011). Magnus and colleagues (2010) studied 252 female exercisers and found that self-compassion was negatively related to social physique anxiety. Mosewich and co-researchers (2011) examined 151 young female athletes and found that self-compassion was negatively related to shame proneness, social physique anxiety, objectified body consciousness, fear of failure, and fear of negative evaluation.

While self-compassion has been associated with increased capacity for self-care (Mills, 2021; Neff & Dahm, 2015), the two concepts are distinctly different. Self-care is defined and distinguished from self-compassion as the active approach of using strategies to improve one's health and well-being, whereas self-compassion reflects one's internal cognitive process and views of one's own failures or inadequacies which may in turn increase one's capacity for self-care (Mills, 2021;; Neff & Dahm, 2015). Lee and Miller (2013) developed a model of self-care focusing on the field of social work which emphasized the need for self-care as a "critical means of maintaining professional competence," (p. 98). They further asserted that personal self-care and professional self-care are separate but related phenomena that together represent a comprehensive approach to exerting agency over one's health and well-being (Lee & Miller, 2013). Although self-care is important for one's well-being, this study will focus on self-compassion rather than self-care because self-compassion is an important component of coping processes (Allen & Leary, 2010), may be a predictor of self-care, and may be a means to self-care but is a broader concept which may mediate principal stress. Thus, an examination of principals' levels of self-compassion may shed light on their well-being as they lead their schools.

Gender Differences in Well-being, Stress, and Self-Compassion

Literature has suggested that the wellness of females in education tends to be more impacted than that of males (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Elliott & Blithe, 2021; Puliatte, 2021). Gendered power relations impact educational leaders' emotional experiences and their displays, which are related to social pressures for what is acceptable for men and women (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Elliott & Blithe, 2021). Berkovich and

Eyal (2015) conducted a literature review of studies that examined educational leaders' emotions and found that educational organizations appear to marginalize the "feminine emotional-oriented discourse" in a "masculine rational-oriented discourse" dominant field. For example, women are pressured to regulate their emotional experiences and expressions in order to be perceived as rational professionals (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015). Moreover, Berkovich and Eyal (2015) indicated that gendered social-cultural emotion rules are promoted informally and formally through a combination of socialization and training.

Elliott and Blithe (2021) surveyed faculty from a mid-sized public university designed to describe the work environment in terms of exposure to stressors, access to support, faculty mental health and job satisfaction. They found that female faculty had multiple disadvantages; that female faculty in academia tend to experience greater stress exposure and inequality that negatively impacts their well-being than their male counterparts. While both studies examined educators, Berkovich and Eyal (2015) compared burnout among teachers and head teachers and found no significant difference between the levels of stress and burnout but did point out that school leaders have unique structural isolation that is linked to *negative emotion*. They did not disaggregate for male and female teachers or head teachers, nor did they distinguish between school principals and other school leaders.

In 2019, Yarnell and team examined gender differences in self-compassion among undergraduate students (N=504) and a community sample (N=968) of the general population. They found that male participants had significantly higher levels of self-compassion than female participants which they attributed to socialization because results

consistently showed that the impact of self-identified gender on self-compassion was smaller than the impact of masculine gender role orientation. An earlier meta-analysis of gender differences in self-compassion conducted in 2015 by Yarnell and colleagues concluded that males had slightly higher levels of self-compassion than females, with a small effect size observed (d=.18). As mentioned above, self-compassion is associated with increased capacity for self-care and higher levels of mindfulness and professional quality of life. There is also a discrepancy between the level of compassion given to oneself versus to others that appears to be larger among women than men (Neff & Pommier, 2012). Thus, women in principalship may be at a greater risk of ill-being due to stress compared to male principals and may be more susceptible to burnout and exhaustion.

Administrators who do too much for too long are at high risk for professional burnout due to high levels of stress over time, and women report higher levels of emotional exhaustion due to stress than men (Dicke et al., 2022; Howard-Hamilton et al., 1998). When Puliatte (2021) examined the self-care practices of female educational leaders, she found that none of the women in her study practiced self-care during the pandemic crisis and they identified feelings of exhaustion and pressure to care for others. Stress can lead to emotional exhaustion and can be associated with ill-being (Dicke et al., 2022), and experienced female leaders report chronic exhaustion (Dicke et al., 2022).

Gaps in Literature

While there is widespread concern for student well-being, there has only recently been interest in supporting the adults who serve children in schools: teachers, and to an even lesser extent principals. There is a substantial gap in the availability of studies

focused on the professional and personal impacts of stress on well-being of building leaders (Beausaert et al., 2023; Burke & Dempsey, 2021a; Dawson & Nosworthy, 2021; DeMatthews et al., 2021a; Mahfouz, 2018; Urick et al., 2021), and almost none focused on the impacts on women in the principal role. Well-being for leaders has held its place in the corporate world for years but is only recently of interest in education leadership (Mahfouz, 2018; Urick et al., 2021). Furthermore, the research literature on the well-being of school leaders that does exist has not been parsed to specifically examine female leaders' well-being (Puliatte, 2021). None of the studies reviewed specifically addressed the well-being of female school principals in K-12 schools. Recently, a small number of longitudinal studies have emerged regarding principal well-being (Beausaert et al., 2021; Marsh et al., 2023), but, again, do not specifically examine leaders' well-being with a gendered lens. The majority of school principals in the U.S. happen to be women (NCES, 2022), so job demands, stress and inattention to well-being may continue to especially impact women in the profession. An examination of principal well-being, stress and self-compassion is merited.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this study is to understand school leaders' perceived stress, well-being and self-compassion following the recent global coronavirus pandemic and examine potential gender differences. Furthermore, the study will explore the potential associations between these variables – stress, well-being, and self-compassion – and school principals' intention to stay in their jobs. Given the paucity of research in this area, the present study is primarily exploratory. General research questions have been developed, and specific hypotheses have not been formulated.

Research Questions

The study will explore the following questions:

1. What is the current state of K-12 school principals in terms of their stress levels, self-compassion, and well-being in Washington State while leading schools through the years of the global pandemic and recovery?
2. Is there a correlation among workplace well-being, perceived stress, self-compassion, and plans to remain in the position for school principals?
3. Does self-compassion moderate the effect of perceived stress on school principals' sense of well-being?
4. Are there gender differences in level of stress, self-compassion, and well-being among school leaders?
5. Are there gender specific considerations for professional well-being of male and female leaders in terms of each of the domains of PERMA?

Chapter 3: Method

This chapter describes the research design, sampling, data collection procedure, the instruments, and the data analysis plan to address the following research questions:

1. What is the current state of K-12 school principals in terms of their stress levels, self-compassion, and well-being in Washington State while leading schools through the years of the global pandemic and recovery?
2. Is there a correlation among workplace well-being, perceived stress, self-compassion, and plans to remain in the position for school principals?
3. Does self-compassion moderate the effect of perceived stress on school principals' sense of well-being?
4. Are there gender differences in levels of stress, self-compassion, and well-being among school leaders?
5. Are there gender specific considerations for professional well-being of male and female leaders in terms of each of the domains of PERMA?

Research Design

A descriptive, non-experimental survey study design with a quantitative approach was implemented for this research. The primary rationale for conducting a descriptive survey approach was to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of principals in leading K-12 schools, especially female principals at this point in time. Understanding the effects that job demands and stress have on school leaders is important in order to inform decision makers who are concerned with positive school culture, student performance, as well as principal retention and resilience as they serve and care for students and staff. See survey questions in Appendix A.

Overall health, stress and well-being can be measured both objectively and subjectively, (Seligman, 2011; Slavin et al., 2012), so it was appropriate to conduct a survey design descriptive study specifically assessing the impact of stress and level of well-being for men and women in school leadership roles. It was most feasible and timely to collect survey data at one point in time. Since this is an area that has not been prevalent in the research (Mahfouz, 2018), a survey approach gives insight into the state of principals in terms of well-being, stress, and self-compassion and whether there are differences based on gender (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It can also be a useful examination to determine what specific areas of well-being administrators, female administrators in particular, need or desire.

Population, Sampling, and Participants

This study examined K-12 school principals' workplace well-being. According to the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) there are 3,656 principals in Washington State, 57.96% identify as female and 42.04% as male (C. Smith, personal communication February 15, 2023). Approximately 99% of these leaders are members of AWSP (M. Bruhy, personal communication, January 24, 2023) that served as the sampling frame for the present study. AWSP allowed this researcher to recruit participants from their membership by including a link in its weekly communications. In addition, flyers with the survey link were distributed to members at the AWSP summer conference. To encourage participation in the survey, a drawing was conducted through an online number generator, "Magic Hat" (2023), for those respondents who signed up through a separate link to a google form and two received $25 Amazon gift cards.

The final sample comprises 124 school leaders: 36 male and 86 female participants as well as two who preferred not to disclose their gender. Although demographic questions included gender identities, non-binary or "choose not to share" responses, released OSPI data does not include gender identity other than male and female. According to AWSP data, only a handful of principals identify as non-binary. Respondents in this survey only identified as male or female or "prefer not to disclose," so only the two who did not identify as male or female were excluded on this basis for the gender comparison portion of the study. See more details about participants' demographics in Table 1.

The final sample size of 124 participants met the expectations to control for Type I/Type II error for achieving a medium effect size for moderation, and correlation. For the independent *t*-test analysis, the total number of participants and the number of female participants met the expectation, but the number of male participants fell short. Details for each power analysis are described for each analysis later in this chapter.

Instruments and Measures

Demographic, quantitative, and qualitative data were concurrently collected via survey, utilizing the platform Qualtrics, to allow for thorough examination of leaders' experiences. The features of the survey included a collection of demographic data, perception data using Likert scale items, and open-ended questions. Demographic questions collected information such as gender identity, type of administrative role, race/ethnicity, years of experience, district and school information, school level (primary or secondary), and family responsibilities such as child or eldercare. Perception data were collected using questions that solicited answers on a Likert scale from the PERMA

Workplace Well-being Survey (PERMA-WWS; Kern, 2013), the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-4; Cohen et al., 1983), and the Self-Compassion Scale Short Form (SCS-SF; Raes et al., 2011). In addition, principals were asked about their intent to remain in their position next year, their job satisfaction, and whether they were considering leaving school administration. For the purposes of examining the quantitative data in this study, the dependent variables were the PERMA components of well-being, overall stress level, and overall well-being. The grouping/demographic variables were gender identity (female, male). Self-compassion was examined as a possible moderator of well-being.

Scores were averaged for all study variables. Higher scores mean a stronger magnitude of the concept. For instance, a higher score on the PERMA measure means a higher level of well-being, and higher scores on the PSS-4 mean higher perceived levels of stress. Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each of the measures to check reliability. Mean scores were computed for each measure for further analyses in this study.

PERMA Workplace Well-being Survey

Butler and Kern (2016) developed the PERMA-Profiler as a measure of flourishing as introduced by Seligman in 2011, which has been used as a measurement tool in a variety of settings and studies such as Burke and Dempsey's studies examining school leaders in Ireland (2021a, 2021b), for example. In their study, Goodman and colleagues (2017) established reliability for the subscales were within acceptable ranges: (P)ositive emotions ($\alpha = 0.90$), (E)ngagement ($\alpha = .58$), (R)elationships ($\alpha = 0.86$), (M)eaning ($\alpha = 0.91$), and (A)accomplishment ($\alpha = 0.79$). The PERMA-Profiler subscales have demonstrated acceptable reliability, test-retest stability, and construct validity (Butler & Kern, 2016: Goodman et al., 2017).

Kern (2013) also developed a workplace version of the profiler which adapts the original tool specifically to work life. The PERMA-WWS is a 23-item metric that provides data on each of the elements of well-being, an overall well-being score, a *negative emotion* Score, as well as data for *health* and *loneliness* by having participants respond to the questions on an 11-point Likert scale. The questions on the profiler (Kern 2013) are focused on stress related impacts and coping mechanisms. For example, "At work, how often do you feel anxious?" and "In general, how would you say your health is?" (Kern, 2013).

The overall well-being score is the average of 16 component scores, not including *health, negative emotion,* or *loneliness*. Kern (n.d.) indicated that there are no clear cutoffs for the levels of functioning, or well-being. Well-being measures usually are skewed toward the positive end (Kern, n.d.), so the midpoint becomes 6.5 to 7.5, thus the following is recommended for interpretation: Very high functioning = 9 and above (0 to 1 for negative emotion), High functioning = 8-8.9 (1.1 to 3 for negative emotion), Normal functioning = 6.5 to 7.9 (3 to 5 for negative emotion), Sub-optimal functioning = 5 to 6.4 (5.1 to 6.5 for negative emotion), and Languishing = below 5 (above 6.5 for negative emotion).

Watanabe and fellow researchers (2018) found that the Japanese version of PERMA-WWS demonstrated adequate reliability and validity when used to assess Japanese worker well-being. Cronbach's alphas and interclass correlation coefficients (ICCs) of the Japanese Workplace PERMA-Profiler ranged from 0.75 to 0.96. Confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the 5-factor model demonstrated a marginally acceptable fit; X^2 (80) = 351.30, CFI = 0.892, TLI = 0.858, RMSEA = 0.105, SRMR =

0.051). Overall well-being and the five PERMA domains had moderate-to-strong correlations with job satisfaction, psychological distress (inversely), and work-related factors (Watanabe et al., 2018). However, when Jimenez and the rest of the research team (2021) performed a cross-cultural study of the profiler, the measure exhibited metric (i.e., weak) invariance across samples of participants from the U.S. (N = 284) and China (N = 420). Additionally, for participants who responded to both the Workplace PERMA Profiler and the performance measures, there was a general pattern of positive PERMA–performance relationships across both samples ($N_{\text{U.S.}}$ = 147; N_{China} = 202).

According to Kern (2020), the PERMA-WWS may be statistically problematic but is a useful tool in examining professional wellness (Kern, 2020; Kern et al., 2014). The PERMA-WWS is a useful tool to measure principal well-being in the context of leading their organizations. For this study, Cronbach's alpha was within acceptable ranges for the PERMA-WWS: overall workplace well-being (α = .926), positive emotion (α =.857), engagement (α = .623), relationships (α = .818), meaning (α = .860), achievement (α = .731) and health (α = .795).

Self-Compassion Scale

The SCS-SF is a 12-item survey instrument that asks respondents to consider feelings of caring and understanding toward themselves in relation to their failures or inadequacies on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Almost Never*, 5 = *Almost Always*). For example, participants are asked to rate "When I fail at something important to me, I become consumed by feelings of inadequacy," and "I try to see my failings as part of the human condition." Average overall self-compassion scores tend to be around 3.0 on the 1-5 scale (Raes et al., 2011). As a rough guide: 1-2.5 for overall self-compassion score

indicates low self-compassion, 2.5-3.5 moderate, 3.5-5.0 high. Higher scores for the Self-Judgment, Isolation, and Over-Identification subscales indicate less self-compassion, while lower scores on these dimensions are indicative of more self-compassion; these subscales were reverse-coded when overall self-compassion score was calculated (Raes et al., 2011).

The SCS-SF demonstrated adequate internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha ≥ .86 in all samples) and a near-perfect correlation with the long form SCS (r ≥ .97 all samples; Raes et al., 2011). The SCS-SF is a reliable alternative to the long form SCS, especially when looking at overall self-compassion scores (Raes et al., 2011). The reliability of subscales is lower than in the long form, but this study will not examine self-compassion sub-scales, so subscale reliability is not a concern at this time. In the present study, reliability was within acceptable ranges at (α = .867).

Perceived Stress Scale

The PSS-4 (Cohen et al., 1983) is a psychological instrument used to measure perception of stress. The 4-item version is a revision of the original published 14-item and 10-item versions (Cohen & Williamson, 1988). Participants are asked about thoughts and feelings during the last month and assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = *never* to 4 = *very often*) the degree to which they appraise their life as stressful, specifically, life perceived as unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded. Sample items of the PSS-4 include "In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?" In this study, the PSS-4 score is the mean of the four components. Scores considered "low," "moderate," and "high" can vary based on context, research, and population; there are not universally accepted cut offs or ranges,

but generally speaking, higher scores indicate higher perceived stress levels (Cohen et al., 1983).

The PSS-4 is known as a valid measure of stress in the general population in different countries (Cohen & Williamson, 1988; Vallejo et al., 2018). Cohen and collaborators (1983) examined three samples to validate the measure, two samples of college students and one from the general population (N = 510) psychometric property validation consistent with an internal consistency score of .84, 85, and .86 for each of the three samples. Cohen and Williamson (1988) used a general population sample of 2,387 with an internal consistency score of .81. Warttig and colleagues (2013) further concluded that the PSS-4 items correlated well with each other, and correlations with each item and the total score were all in the upper range (r > 0.73). The four items were also examined for internal consistency (α = 0.77). Thus, the scale can be considered reliable. Cronbach's alpha for the current study was within acceptable range at (α = .796).

Demographic Questions

In addition to the measures above, the survey included multiple choice demographic questions such as race, gender, leadership role, and school level. See Appendix for full survey questions.

Intent to Stay and Job Satisfaction

Additionally, questions were added to solicit information on principals' intent to remain in their positions, and changes in their job satisfaction and health since before the pandemic. The PERMA-WWS questions that make up the *relationship* component did not include relationships with a supervisor, so two questions were added to the survey

that paralleled the *relationship* questions about colleagues and were not calculated with other PERMA-WWS components to ensure fidelity to the measure, but to provide additional information about principals' experience with workplace relationships. One question was used to assess whether principals were considering leaving administration; they were asked about whether they intend to remain in their position next year with a yes, no, maybe response. Likert scale questions related to job satisfaction, relationships with supervisors, changes in well-being and health since pre-pandemic, as well as open-ended questions were administered to provide any additional information participants chose to share that may provide more context to their answers. For example, one question was "How likely are you to remain in your position next year?" on a 5-point scale (0 = *being very unlikely* to 4 = *being very likely*). That is, if someone responded with a "0," it was implied that they were very unlikely to return to their current position in the following school year. Follow up open ended questions regarding reasoning for their responses were asked as well. Qualitative responses to the open-ended questions were examined for themes and patterns in the data.

Procedure for Data Collection

Approval to collect data was received from Seattle Pacific University's Institutional Review Board. In partnership with AWSP, an anonymous structured-survey (Appendix) was administered through Qualtrics (2023) to K-12 school principals and assistant principals in Washington State and used to examine work related pressures, well-being, and self-compassion of K-12 male and female principals within the context of leading schools through recovery approximately one school year after the state of emergency of the Covid-19 pandemic was lifted. One hundred thirty-nine Participants

responded to the survey between April 26th and July 12, 2023. Of respondents, 124 identified as principals or assistant principals and completed the survey.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data

There were four essential components of the data analysis: description, correlation, moderation, and group comparison. All data was screened and transformed as needed prior to analysis. Per measure instructions, items were reverse coded for the PSS-4 (items: 2, 3) and SCS-SF (items: 1, 4, 8, 9, 11, 12). The PERMA-WWS measure does not require reverse coding prior to other calculations. It is also important to note that *health, negative emotion,* and *loneliness* are not calculated for the PERMA-WWS Overall Well-being score according to Kern's (2013) instructions.

Screening of raw data included reviewing data for outliers and missing values. All quantitative data analyses were performed through IBM SPSS 29.01 for Windows. To address the issue of missing data, a missing values analysis was conducted to assess the extent and pattern of missing data in the dataset in IBM SPSS 29.01. This analysis is crucial for evaluating the potential impact of missing data on the subsequent statistical analyses and results interpretation. Series mean substitution – one of the imputation methods in SPSS – was used to replace the missing values. That is, utilizing a method discussed by Ender (2010), mean imputation is often used by researchers to minimize the impact of missing data by replacing the missing values with the average score of the available case data. Mean score replacement was used for a small percentage of missing data. Assumption checks were also conducted for each type of analysis. Demographic information and all variables used in this study were analyzed via descriptive analysis

(e.g., mean, standard deviation). Cronbach's alpha for each survey measure, based on the current sample, was analyzed to check for internal consistency and reported earlier in this Chapter. The first research question was addressed through descriptive statistics gathered for each of the PERMA factors, overall well-being, *health*, *negative emotion*, and *loneliness*, as well as Perceived Stress scores and Self-Compassion scores.

The second research question was addressed by performing a correlation analysis to determine if there are correlations among workplace well-being, perceived stress, self-compassion and plans to remain in the position. Assumptions were met for the correlation analysis: (a) the variables were continuous (interval), (b) there was a linear relationship between the variables, (c) there were no significant outliers, and (d) the variables were approximately normally distributed, (Laerd Statistics, 2019). To control for Type I/Type II errors, a power analysis for correlation analysis was performed in G*Power Version 3.1.9.6 (Faul et al., 2007). To achieve a medium effect size (r = .3) and 80% power, which is considered acceptable for social science research, a total sample size of 84 was needed and met for a correlation study. The present study met this sample size expectation with 124 respondents.

Third, a moderation analysis was conducted in SPSS to examine whether self-compassion moderated the effect of perceived stress on workplace well-being. Assumptions were met on this analysis: (a) there was one dependent variable which is continuous (interval), (b) the independent variable was continuous (interval), (c) there was independence of observations (residuals), (d) there was a linear relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variable for each group, (e) data showed homoscedasticity, (f) no multicollinearity present, (g) there were no significant outliers,

high leverage points or highly influential points, (Laerd Statistics, 2019). To control for Type I/Type II errors, a power analysis for moderation analysis was performed in G*Power Version 3.1.9.6 (Faul et al., 2007). To achieve a medium effect size (r = .15) and 80% power, a sample size of 55 would be required. The current sample size met this expectation.

The fourth research question was addressed by conducting independent *t-tests* using the mean scores for workplace well-being, perceived stress, and self-compassion to compare female to male leaders' results. Assumptions were met for each independent *t*-test: (a) there was one dependent variable, (b) the independent variable was categorical with two groups (c) there was independence of observations, (d) there were no problematic outliers, and (e) the dependent variable was approximately normally distributed for each group of the independent variable (Laerd Statistics, 2019). To control for Type I/Type II error for the fourth question, power analysis for independent sample t-test was performed in G*Power Version 3.1.9.6 (Faul et al., 2007). To achieve a medium effect size (r=.5) and 80% power, which is a common standard in social science research, a total sample size of 104 (43 male, 61 female) is needed. The current sample size was 36 male and 86 female, so the total sample was more than required, had more than enough female participants, but fell short of the requirement for male participants.

Finally, the fifth research question was addressed by examining the statistics gathered for each of the PERMA factors, Overall Workplace Well-Being, Health, and Loneliness. Independent samples *t*-tests were run first for each PERMA component to compare by gender (female, male). Results were examined to describe any areas of

relative highs and lows in each of the PERMA domains and to compare by gender (female, male).

Qualitative Data

An inductive approach to conventional content (text) analysis was performed to analyze the qualitative data collected for individual responses in order to provide a descriptive picture of principal well-being. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), conventional content analysis is generally utilized in studies where the goal is to describe a phenomenon, such as the examination of stress and well-being in this study. Data analyzed was in electronic text format obtained through open-ended responses to the survey, so conventional content/text analysis is an appropriate method to examine the responses (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Participants directly entered text answers to the questions in their own words based on their own perspectives, and experiences and an inductive approach to analysis allowed for topics and themes to emerge and reflect the views of the participants, (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), conventional content analysis has the advantage of "gaining direct information from study participants without imposing preconceived categories or theoretical perspectives," (p. 1279-80).

Text submitted by principals in 565 comments was examined by the researcher through multiple phases, to look for meaning and patterns as well as processed through a qualitative analysis tool in Qualtrics' TEXTIQ feature. Creswell and Creswell (2018) refer to this as a spiral approach to qualitative analysis. In conventional content analysis, coding categories are derived directly from the text (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Results were reviewed multiple times for the researcher to achieve an overall impression, then

text was more closely examined to organically derive initial codes by tagging text. For instance, the comment “I’ve had to go on medication for migraines and insomnia…” was coded for “medication” and “insomnia.” The coded data was then examined for patterns, for example codes like “lack of sleep,” and “mental health challenges” were recognized as forming a pattern related to health impacts. These patterns were synthesized into broader themes. The pattern recognizing chronic health issues, mental health challenges, and lack of sleep coalesced into the emergent them of “Impact on Health.” The coded data was compared between male and female subjects. For instance, codes related to stress like “exhaustion” and “fatigue” were analyzed comparatively to understand potential gender-specific concepts. The researcher revisited the codes, patterns, and themes in order to iteratively refine them. Table 2 provides a visual reference for the emergent theme of “Impact on Health.” This spiral content analysis approach, involving continuous iterations and refinement, allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the textual data, ensuring depth and accuracy in theme development.

In this study, the findings were critically examined and discussed with a peer debriefer, who was not involved in the study design or recruitment of participants. The role of a peer debriefer is to employ an independent coding process to enhance the rigor and reliability as well as to further reduce the possibility of researcher bias in the qualitative data analysis of the open-ended questions on the survey. The peer debriefer is a recent doctoral graduate in the same program as the researcher and was invited because of their training in qualitative research and their lived experience as a former school principal.

The peer debriefer had access to the anonymized qualitative data set to review and act as an independent coder as well as providing feedback on the analysis process for the researcher to consider. The researcher met with the peer debriefer initially to introduce them to the research objectives, context, and nuances of the data set. The debriefer then operated independently to delve into the dataset, identifying themes based on the content. This autonomous exploration facilitated the emergence of themes according to the debriefer's interpretation. Subsequently, the researcher and debriefer met to discuss themes that were independently identified. This collaborative session allowed for the comparison of themes, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the data. During the feedback session, the researcher and debriefer compared the identified themes and despite minor differences in wording, the overarching themes, such as "overwork" and "heavy workload," were found to align, indicating a high level of consistency and reliability in the thematic analysis. While minor variations in the wording were noted, discrepancies were discussed and resolved through mutual agreement. The aim was to ensure semantic consistency without compromising the essence of the themes.

The involvement of the peer debriefer in the qualitative data analysis proved invaluable. Their independent perspective, coupled with collaborative discussions, enhanced the credibility of the identified themes. The absence of notable discrepancies in the themes, except for minor wording distinctions, underscored the robustness of the analysis, validating the reliability of the qualitative findings. The peer debriefing process contributed significantly to the overall rigor of the research study.

Chapter 4: Results

The present study examined perceived stress, workplace well-being, self-compassion, and job satisfaction among school principals, with a particular interest in female school leaders. The purpose of this chapter is to summarize current findings. First, data screening and assumption checks are addressed, then results related to the current state of principal in terms of their stress, self-compassion and workplace well-being are shown. Next, the outcomes of the examination of correlation among workplace well-being, perceived stress, self-compassion, and intent to remain in the position, as well as the results of whether self-compassion moderates the effect of perceived stress on workplace well-being are shared. Finally, gender differences in stress, self-compassion, overall workplace well-being and elements of PERMA-WWS are presented. The chapter concludes with a summary of the qualitative findings.

Data Screening

Participants' characteristics information is exhibited in Table 1 and Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each measure were reported in Chapter 3. Data screening was conducted to assess survey completion, reliability of the measures and missing values.

Participant Flow

The data was screened to ensure the participants were part of the intended target population. Data was screened for administrative role, survey completion, and gender identification. Role: respondents must have identified themselves as principals or assistant principals (also identified as "associate" or "vice" principals). Survey completion: they had to have completed at least one of the three measures to have adequate data to analyze. Finally, to be included in the gender comparisons and analysis,

participants must have identified themselves as male or female. All respondents identified as principals or assistant principals completed at least two of the three measures, so were included in quantitative data analysis for the first three research questions, which relate to all school leaders. Those who also identified as female or male were included in the analysis for research questions four and five. None of the participants identified as non-binary, transgender, or other.

Prior to analysis there were 139 participants, of whom 15 did not complete at least one of the three primary measures, thus not meeting the inclusion criteria. Two participants who did not disclose their gender were excluded only for gender comparison analysis but were included in the analyses involving the group of principals as a whole. Thus, a total of 124 participants were included for the descriptive, moderation, and correlation analyses, whereas 122 were included for the independent *t*-tests to examine gender differences.

Missing Values Analysis

To address the issue of missing data, a missing values analysis was conducted to assess the extent and pattern of missing data in the dataset in IBM SPSS 29.01. The missing values analysis indicated a relatively low percentage of missing data. Of the total N = 124 participants, three cases had more than 1% missing data points, the percentage of missingness for these cases was 2.4%. Those three cases showed missing data in tabulated patterns specifically on the Self-Compassion Scale. There were no cases that showed missing data over multiple measures. Generally speaking, it is important to acknowledge the limitations introduced by missing data and to interpret the results with caution. However, the percentage of missing values was very small.

Assumption Checks

Assumptions checks were performed for each quantitative analysis: correlation, moderation, and independent *t*-tests. The assumptions for the correlation analysis are the following. First, the variables should be continuous; each variable is a scale/interval variable. Next, there is a linear relationship among the variables, there are no problematic outliers, and the variables are approximately normally distributed (Laerd Statistics, 2019). The assumptions for the moderation analysis include the following: (a) there is one dependent variable which is continuous (interval), (b) the independent variable is continuous (interval), (c) there was independence of observations (residuals), (d) there is a linear relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variable, data shows homoscedasticity, (f) no multicollinearity present, (g) there are no significant outliers, high leverage points or highly influential points (Laerd Statistics, 2019). Finally, the assumptions for an independent t-test analysis include (a) there is one dependent variable for each comparison, (b) the independent variable is categorical with two groups, (c) there is independence of observations, (d) there are no problematic outliers, and the dependent variable is approximately normally distributed for each group of the independent variable (Laerd Statistics, 2019). The following section describes how the dataset met the criteria for these assumptions.

Variable Characteristics. There was one continuous scale dependent variable for both the correlation test and each of the independent *t*-tests. That is, the measures perceived stress PSS-4 (0-16), self-compassion SCS-SF (1-5), and workplace well-being, PERMA-WWS (0-10), job satisfaction (0-4) and intent to remain in the position (0-4) were each continuous scales for correlation. For the *t*-tests, each of the PERMA-WWS

components were compared individually, so there was one dependent variable for each *t*-test. Gender was utilized as a grouping variable, so the independent variable was categorical with two groups - male and female respondents. For the moderation analysis, the dependent variable workplace well-being (PERMA-WWS) was continuous (interval), and the independent variable perceived stress (PSS-4) was continuous (interval) as well.

Independence of Observations. There was independence of observations, survey responses were collected anonymously and confidentially. Participants received a link to the survey via e-mail, were asked to complete the survey only once, and were assured that their individual responses will not be disclosed, which reduces the likelihood of external influences or dependencies between responses.

Outliers. Outlier detection procedures were applied to the dataset to identify and address any data points that could potentially bias the results. It is noteworthy that no problematic outliers were detected in the dataset. Descriptive statistics and graphical analyses revealed that the data points fell within expected ranges, and no problematic values were observed. As a result, no data points were removed or transformed due to outliers, ensuring the integrity of the statistical analysis.

Homogeneity of Variance. The assumption of homogeneity of variance was assessed using Levene's test for equality of variances which demonstrated there was no statistically significant difference in variances between female and male respondents in all but two variables: relationships (PERMA-WWS) at $p = .049$. and relationship with supervisor at $p = .012$. The results of the Levene's test for each survey measure to be tested for were as follows: PERMA-WWS for well-being ($p = .087$), PSS-4 for perceived stress ($p = .850$), and SCS-SF for self-compassion ($p = .253$). Levene's test results for the

rest of the variables that did not show statistically significant differences are as follows: positive emotion (p = .160), engagement (p = .138), meaning (p = .168), achievement (p = .897), happiness (p = .146), loneliness (p = .641), negative emotion (p = .766), health from the PERMA-WWS measure (p = .074), change in health since pre-pandemic (p = .468), job satisfaction since pre-pandemic (p = .348), and intent to remain in position the following year (p = .983).

Normality. Normality assessments were computed for all variables to be analyzed in correlation and independent *t*-tests: first, skewness and kurtosis were examined to assess normality. According to Field (2018), values between -1 and +1 for skewness are often considered as indicating approximately symmetric (normally distributed) data, and values between -2 and +2 are considered typical for a normal distribution in kurtosis. All variables for this test fell within Normal limits (Table 3), except principals' reported intent to remain in their position was slightly negatively skewed (-1.036). This was not necessarily unexpected. Next, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test was conducted to further assess normality.

The K-S assumption for normality was violated for all variables except self-compassion, overall workplace well-being, and *achievement*. According to Field (2018), however, in larger sample sizes, caution should be used in regard to the K-S test and Shapiro-Wilks tests because they are more sensitive to small deviations in normality the larger the sample, which can result in a statistically significant result that may be misleading. Rather, he recommends visually assessing normality through graphical methods. See Figure 2 for Q-Q plots for study variables. Q-Q plots indicate that each variable is within acceptable limits for normal distribution for the purposes of this study.

When variables were assessed further for normality in gender comparisons, those variables related to female participants fell within Normal limits (Table 4) for skewness and kurtosis, except for intent to remain in position (-1.009) which is slightly negatively skewed and parallels the population sample as a whole. Multiple variables for female principals violated K-S assumptions: perceived stress ($p = .003$), engagement($p = .002$), relationships ($p = .013$), happiness ($p < .001$), loneliness ($p < .001$), change in health since pandemic, ($p < .001$), intent to remain in position ($p < .001$), job satisfaction ($p < .001$), and relationship with supervisor ($p < .001$).

For male participants (Table 5), the K-S value was statistically significant for multiple variables as well: perceived stress ($p = .036$), achievement ($p = .015$), happiness ($p < .001$), loneliness ($p < .001$), intent to remain in position ($p < .001$), health since pre-pandemic ($p < .001$), and job satisfaction since pre-pandemic ($p = .002$).

As in the tests for the population as a whole, variables for female and male principals were further examined graphically to assess normality (Field, 2018). To provide visualization of normal distributions, Figure 3 shows Q-Q plots for male and female workplace well-being, perceived stress, self-compassion as well as the PERMA-WWS elements, perceived changes in health and job satisfaction, intent to remain in the position, and relationship with supervisor. Visual checks suggest that the data generally fall within theoretical (normal) distributions, with slightly heavier tails on *loneliness,* and intent to remain in position for both groups, *relationships* in the female participant group, and *health* since pre-pandemic in the male participant group.

Linearity and Multicollinearity. Pearson's correlation analysis (Table 7) for perceived stress, self-compassion, and workplace well-being all indicated a statistically

significant linear relationship. Additionally, the correlation coefficients for these variables were all lower than .8 so they were not likely to have collinearity (Field, 2018). The assumption of multicollinearity was assessed to examine the potential presence of high correlations between the predictor values of perceived stress and self-compassion. Through an examination of the correlation matrix (Table 7) a high negative correlation (r = -.552, p <.001), between perceived stress and self-compassion in this population sample was established. Relationship with supervisor did not have a statistically significant correlation with health (PERMA-WWS) at (r = .072, p = .472) nor did change in health since the pandemic at (r = .179, p = .108). None of the other correlations exceeded the threshold of statistical significance (p < .05) or (p < .001). To further assess multicollinearity, tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) values were examined. Tolerance values range from 0-1, with higher values indicating lower multicollinearity. VIF values indicate concerns if substantially greater than 1.0 or over 10. Tolerance and VIF fell within acceptable ranges for stress and self-compassion, tolerance= .95 and VIF = 1.054, indicating the absence of multicollinearity.

Main Analyses

Descriptive Analysis

To address the first research question concerning the current state of K-12 school principals in terms of their stress levels, self-compassion, and workplace well-being while leading schools approximately one year after the state of emergency for the Covid-19 pandemic was lifted, descriptive analysis was performed to identify mean and standard deviation for each measure. Table 6 includes the descriptive statistics for the variables researched in this study.

Stress. In terms of perceived stress, school leaders reported the current levels of stress in their lives, as well as how often they felt or thought a certain way about possible sources of stress in the month preceding the survey. They also rated how they perceived stressors in terms of under their control, or overwhelming. The mean PSS-4 score was 1.99 (*SD* = .77) on a 0-4 scale. There are no universally recognized cut scores for the PSS-4, and there is no previous study for comparison in this population.

Self-Compassion. Principals also considered their feelings of caring and understanding toward themselves in relation to their failures or inadequacies, on a 5-point Likert scale, through questions from the Self-Compassion Scale -Short Form. Principals' mean SCS-SF score was 3.14 (*SD* =.069). According to Raes and co-authors (2011), the mean score of 3.14 falls into the "moderate" range for self-compassion. These findings shed light on the principals' perceived self-compassion, which is an important aspect of their well-being and coping mechanisms. Principals were not specifically asked to comment on their self-compassion ratings in open-ended questions.

Workplace Well-Being. Overall workplace well-being was examined through the PERMA-WWS questions. Principals' mean well-being was 5.96 (*SD* = 1.50). The overall PERMA mean of 5.96 coupled with the *loneliness* mean of 5.79 (*SD* = 3.31) indicate sub-optimal functioning in the realm of workplace well-being for principals. Additionally, response frequencies revealed that only one of the participants fell within the "Very High Functioning" range for overall well-being, while 25.8% of the participants fell within the "Languishing" range (Figure 4).

It is noteworthy, though, that the mean score for the *meaning* component, at 6.87 (*SD* = 2.06), and the *negative emotion* mean of 4.86 (*SD* = 1.99) fell within the range

considered indicative of normal functioning (Kern, n.d.). *Loneliness* has some "heavy tails," suggesting that the data points are not normally distributed. While this does not impact other statistical analyses in this study, it is interesting to note that 63.0% of respondents rated themselves generally high on feelings of *loneliness* at 6.0 or above.

One series of questions in the PERMA-WWS profiler provides information on physical health but was not calculated into the overall workplace well-being score, per the measure's design. In addition to the PERMA-WWS health questions, principals were asked to both rate their physical health compared to before the pandemic and to provide any additional comments or details related to their health. The mean rating for PERMA-WWS related health questions was 5.0 which is the lowest cutoff for suboptimal functioning, just above languishing (Kern, 2013). The mean for principal's health compared to pre-pandemic was 1.56 - between about the same and somewhat worse. When the response frequencies are observed more closely, 49.2% of participants indicated that their health was somewhat or significantly worse, 32.3% said it was about the same, and 15.3% said it was somewhat or significantly better. Four (3.2%) did not answer the question.

Intent to Remain in the Position and Job Satisfaction. When asked whether they were considering leaving school administration (Figure 5), only 38% percent of survey respondents said they were not considering leaving. The percentage of principals answering "Maybe" was 28% and "Yes" was 34%. Combined, that is 62% of the participants indicated they were considering leaving to some degree. Principals were also asked to indicate their level of job satisfaction compared to before the pandemic and "To

what degree do you intent to remain in your position next year?" in addition to whether they were considering leaving administration.

When this data was broken down for female and male respondents, the majority of female principals indicated to some degree they were considering leaving administration (33.7% said "Yes" and 26.7% said "Maybe"). Only 39.5% indicated no intent to leave administration. Male principals had evenly distributed responses across all three possible answers (Yes, No, Maybe) at 33.3% each. In other words, the majority (66.3%) of men were thinking about leaving administration to some degree.

Responses regarding principals' degree of intent to remain in position the following year and their job satisfaction compared to pre-pandemic, were examined more closely by whether they said they were considering leaving administration (Figure 6). Not surprisingly, for those who were not considering leaving at the time of the survey, the mean degree of their intent to remain in the position was 3.48 indicating strong intent to stay in their current position. The mean job satisfaction compared to prior to the pandemic (2.20) indicated satisfaction is about the same. Among this group, 27.7% indicated they were somewhat less or significantly less satisfied and 40.4% indicated they were somewhat more or significantly more satisfied.

Principals who said they were considering leaving school administration had a mean score of 2.03 for intent to stay, and a mean score of 1.06 for job satisfaction. Their mean job satisfaction compared to before the pandemic of 1.06, indicated overall they were less satisfied. The percentage of those who were somewhat or significantly less satisfied in this group was 71.5%, whereas 9.6%. indicated they were somewhat more, or significantly more satisfied.

Principals who said they may be considering leaving administration had a mean score of 2.88 for intent to stay and a mean score of 1.22 for job satisfaction. Notably, none of those who answered "Maybe" indicated they were more satisfied in any way. Rather 34.3% indicated that their job satisfaction was about the same, and 65.7% indicated they were somewhat less or significantly less satisfied than prior to the pandemic.

As previously noted, mean job satisfaction compared to prior to the pandemic was (1.55) indicating principals are generally less satisfied with their jobs as challenges of pandemic recovery persist. Again, intent to remain in position had some heavy tails suggesting the data may not have been normally distributed.

Correlation Analysis

To address the second research question, whether there is a correlation among workplace well-being, perceived stress, self-compassion, and plans to remain in the position for school principals, Pearson's correlation was performed to assess whether there is a relationship among workplace well-being, perceived stress, and school principals' intent to remain in their positions the following year. The correlations among this group of study variables were summarized in Table 7.

When the strengths of the correlations were assessed based on Pearson's *r* (Field, 2018), perceived stress demonstrated a strong negative correlation with self-compassion ($r = -.556$, $p < .001$), and workplace well-being ($r = -.607$, $p < .001$), and a moderate negative correlation with job satisfaction compared to pre-pandemic ($r = -.428$, $p < .001$), and intent to remain in position ($r = -.338$, $p < .001$). Self-compassion had a moderately positive relationship with workplace well-being ($r = .459$, $p < .001$), and a weak positive

relationship with job satisfaction compared to pre-pandemic (r = .192, p = .033). Self-compassion had no statistically significant relationship with intent to remain in position (r = .153, p = .105). Workplace well-being had a strong positive relationship with job satisfaction compared to pre-pandemic (r = .544, p < .001), and intent to remain in position (r = .549, p < .001). Job satisfaction compared to pre-pandemic had a moderate positive relationship with intent to remain (r = .435, p < .001). The variables for this analysis that did not have statistically significant correlations for this population were self-compassion and intent to remain in the position (r = .153, p = .105).

As reported above, perceived stress has a negative correlation with each of the other variables indicating that elevated levels of perceived stress among school principals are associated with lower levels of self-compassion, reduced well-being, diminished job satisfaction since prior to the pandemic, and a decreased inclination to remain in their current positions. Principals' workplace well-being had a strong correlation with their level of job satisfaction since pre-pandemic, and a moderate correlation with their intent to remain in their positions the following year.

Moderation Analysis

In order to explore whether self-compassion buffers against the effect of perceived stress on principals' workplace well-being, a moderation analysis was conducted with self-compassion as the moderator, perceived stress as the predictor variable and well-being as the outcome variable. Moderation involves analyzing whether there is an interaction effect between two variables on the outcome (Field, 2018), in this case, whether there is an interaction effect between perceived stress and self-compassion on the outcome of well-being.

Based on the correlation analysis previously introduced, it is clear that perceived stress has a strong negative relationship with workplace well-being and that self-compassion has a moderate positive relationship with workplace well-being. The next step is to see whether self-compassion moderates the effect of perceived stress on workplace well-being.

The main effect of perceived stress on well-being in this group of principals was statistically significant; $\beta = -1.15$, $SE = .14$, $t(121) = -8.005$, $p < .001$. Meanwhile, the interaction effect between perceived stress and self-compassion on well-being was not statistically significant; $\beta = .091$, $SE = .10$, $t(121) = -.905$, $p = .367$. The moderation analysis, as summarized in Table 9 suggests that the relationship between perceived stress and well-being among school leaders is not moderated by self-compassion.

Gender Comparison

In order to examine whether there are gender differences in the level of stress, self-compassion, and workplace well-being among school leaders, independent *t*-tests were conducted using the mean scores for workplace well-being, perceived stress, and self-compassion to compare female to male leaders' results. Test assumptions fell within acceptable ranges except as noted earlier in this chapter.

Independent Samples t-test Results

This analysis examined whether there was a difference between female and male principals in the areas of self-compassion, perceived stress, and well-being. The assumption of homogeneity of variances was met, except for the Relationship mean ($p = .049$) and supervisor relationship mean ($p = .012$), so equal variances were not assumed for those variables. In an independent samples *t*-test comparing mean self-compassion,

female principals (M = 3.13, SD = .73) demonstrated no statistically significant difference from male principals (M = 3.14, SD = .59); $t(120)$ = -.06, p = .952, d = -.01, 95% CI [-.28, .26]. Similar results followed for perceived stress and well-being. In mean perceived stress, female principals (M = 1.83, SD = .77) also showed no statistically significant difference from male principals (M = 2.04, SD = .76); $t(120)$ = .456, p = .649, d = .09, 95% CI [-.23, .38]. Lastly, female principals' mean well-being (M = 6.05, SD = 1.59) was not statistically different from the mean well-being of male principals (M = 5.72, SD = 1.26); $t(120)$ = 1.114, p = .267, d = .22, 95% CI [-.26, .92]. Results of t-tests are summarized in Table 10. While anticipated results were expected to show a difference between female leaders' and male leaders' perceived stress, self-compassion and workplace well-being, the differences in means were negligible and not statistically significant, nor did effect sizes indicate practical significance as Cohen's d results were all in the small range.

The final research question delves into whether there are gender specific considerations for professional well-being based on the domains of the PERMA-WWS. When we examine the components of well-being with the PERMA framework differences in mean were not statistically significant. In addition to overall workplace well-being explained above, none of the differences in individual components were statistically significant, nor were the differences in health and job satisfaction compared to pre-pandemic, intent to remain in the position, or relationship with supervisor.

Both male and female leaders have similar data patterns for each category (Figure 7 and Figure 8). Thus, there does not appear to be a need for gender specific professional well-being considerations in this group of principals. However, when we look at the

patterns that emerge for this group as a whole, *meaning* and *achievement* categories had the highest means, denotating the most positive areas. Whereas *health* had the lowest mean among the components. While there was not a statistically significant difference, it is interesting to note that the means for multiple areas were slightly higher for female leaders than their male counterparts, which was unexpected. Moreover, as explained earlier in this chapter, the only areas where principals in this group show levels of normal functioning are in the areas of *meaning* and *negative emotion*, suggesting several areas needing attention and consideration, which is further discussed in Chapter 5.

Looking at the correlation analysis for the PERMA elements (Table 8), we see that the components that had the strongest positive relationship with overall workplace well-being were meaning (r = .839) and positive emotion (r = .835). Examining the remaining components from strongest to weakest positive correlations, we see the following: happiness (r = .792), achievement (r = .752), relationships (r = .750), then engagement (r = .712). The strongest negative correlation is negative emotion (r = -.629) followed by loneliness (r = -.533). Remarkably, while health (PERMA-WWS) had the lowest mean and a moderately positive relationship with overall workplace well-being (r = .442), it also had the weakest correlation amongst all the PERMA components with overall workplace well-being. Also, while it is not considered a component of PERMA, relationship with supervisor had a strong positive correlation with workplace well-being (r = .619).

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data gathered from open-ended responses of school principals were analyzed, providing a deep understanding of the factors shaping their well-being.

The narratives reveal a complex interplay of emotions, challenges, and motivations. The qualitative analysis revealed several key themes, such as principals' passion and dedication to education and community – expressing loving or enjoying the work, feeling overworked and a lack of support, financial constraints, lack of resources as well as pressures from the current polarized political climate. Principals mostly perceived a negative impact on their health, and several expressed gratitude that their well-being was being explored. While there were some positive themes, even those who expressed positives also identified multiple sources of stress and doubt about sustainability in their role.

Passion and Dedication

The theme of passion and dedication emerged strongly among principals whether they intended to remain in their positions or not, revealing a profound commitment to their school community. Sentiments reflected a deep love for their work and the impact they have on students, families, and the broader school community. Several principals expressed their dedication through their love for their staff and students. One principal stated, “I will stay because I love my staff and students. Students make this job so worth it and the part of staff that is truly a team.” Another said, “I love my staff, students, and families. I enjoy going to work every day because of the people I work with. Our school staff have been together for a very long time and we share a unique school family bond.”

Principals further emphasized their passion for supporting students and families throughout their educational journeys. One respondent shared, “I love supporting students and families as they navigate their education experience. Leading a community is engaging and interesting work.” These statements highlight the dynamic nature of their

role, involving active engagement with the community and a commitment to guiding students and families through their educational experiences.

Additionally, some educational leaders found fulfillment in their ability to make a positive difference in students' lives. One principal expressed, "If I remain it will be because I believe that I can make a positive impact for the children at the school I serve." Another principal described the rewarding aspect of their job, underscoring the principal's role as advocate and mentor, and the importance of providing support to students facing challenges, stating:

> The relationships I build with students, and I deal with all discipline so these are the tough kids, are rewarding. Those students need a champion in their life [sic] and I try to be that person. That's what motivates me to continue to do the best I can in this position.

Unsustainable Working Conditions

The most dominant theme across principal responses to multiple answers was the relentless nature of their work, depicting and overwhelming sense of a heavy workload, and lack of support. Financial constraints related to compensation also came up when asked about plans to remain in the position. One leader expressed, "The job has become unmanageable and there is little or sporadic support in my role as Principal." This sentiment was underscored by numerous others who articulated the high levels of stress resulting from the immense workload. As one principal remarked, "The level of stress is high and work-life balance is weighted to work. The pay is less than many teachers I supervise per diem." Another relayed, "The responsibilities have increased to the degree

that I, as a lone administrator, am unable to be effective in all areas of the job. This has led to frustration and a lack of job satisfaction." Still another iterated:

> It was already a challenge, and nearly an impossible job to do before covid. There was already too much on the plate and only more being piled on, but it seems all the negative aspects have been amplified without much in the way of positive changes.

Comments regarding a lack of support permeated the narratives, highlighting the principals' sense of isolation in their roles. Many described feeling unsupported in their endeavors and specifically voiced challenges with district level support of the work. One noted, "Need for district level systems to support building level work… Unmanageable work demands." One principal remarked, "No support from district leadership. They talk about self-care, and how important it is that we do it, but they are just words. Not backed up by action." Another captured the topic this way:

> I feel like a punching bag for everyone - particularly staff. There are so many issues - mental health, diversity, student exposure on devices, threats to schools- it's all so intense. The problems and issues are always big and difficult to figure out. We need more support but we don't have it.

Financial constraints emerged as a significant factor influencing principal decisions to remain in their roles. A principal, reflecting on the prospect of changing jobs, stated, "I love being a school principal. I am in the same situation as many principals that are in this stage of their career. Changing careers isn't an option financially." The same principal added:

> Changing jobs for me at this stage in my career is virtually impossible. I have invested my entire life into education and have about ten years until retirement. The reality is there is no way to leave because of the financial side of the equation.

Another principal revealed, “I have to stay for the money. I am a single mom and I can’t afford to go back to the classroom. I wish I had another option.”

Impact of Political Climate

The political climate and subsequent increased demands emerged as significant stressors contributing to principals’ decisions to leave or stay in their roles. Principals touched upon the intensification of political dynamics within their educational communities. They noted a growing polarization of perspectives and a decline in the collective focus on student well-being, as one respondent remarked, “It just feels impossible to work with the varying political views of our parents/community. I think adults are focused on their own agenda and it's not about the students anymore.” This theme underscores that external factors pose tremendous challenges for principals in their roles as educational leaders.

Principals grapple with the impact of the political climate, a theme that was expressed in myriad ways throughout the survey, underscoring the delicate balance they must maintain amid external pressures. Principals asserted the impact of politics on education as a concern, one stating, “The extreme politics have infected the school system, my school board and the new superintendent they hired are more concerned with supporting extremely conservative views over nurturing and educating the diverse children.”

Principals highlighted the changing landscape of education, particularly in the context of the pandemic and recovery. Principals remarked on the increased complexities and challenges that had arisen, with one principal expressing:

> Education has changed. This is my 21st year in education and it has been the most taxing. I loved teaching and I loved being a principal, but I am unhappy. For the first time, I have been looking for other jobs outside of education. If I find one where I could make comparable money, I will leave the profession. It breaks my heart to even type that.

Their accounts illustrated the dynamic nature of the educational environment and the strains experienced by school leaders in adapting to evolving circumstances.

This captures the pervasive influence of politics, seeping into the educational policies and decisions, complicating the already intricate landscape of school leadership. External demands placed on principals create an environment rife with stress and complexity. Principals find themselves caught between conflicting expectations, as expressed by one administrator, “Pressure from different stakeholders to do more than what is realistic for one person to accomplish.” This pressure was repeated by others who expressed feeling overwhelmed by the incessant demands from various quarters. One articulated, “There are too many bad adult behaviors. I am not treated as a professional or trusted to do the important work of supporting my staff and students.” Principals indicated that they feel burdened by this confluence of expectations, adding layers of stress to their roles. The current polarized political climate influences behavior of stakeholders principals interact with daily, one expounded, “Adult behaviors are more confrontational, less solution focused, and everyone wants to complain about everyone

else... all the time!" The sense of an erosion of trust and collegiality is keenly felt by principals, hampers effective communication, and contributes significantly to the emotional toll experienced by principals in their daily interactions.

Another political theme that arose in addition to the challenges posed by the external environment principals shared, was a sense of disappointment in a lack of progress. As one principal observed, "I am disheartened that we did not use the pandemic to fix what we know is broken." The sense of missed opportunity underscores the urgency for systemic change and comprehensive support for educational leaders.

Health Impacts

Responses from principals paint a stark picture of the detrimental impact of stress on their physical health. When asked to elaborate on their health-related ratings in the survey, principals shared frank insights into the impact of their roles on their physical and mental well-being. One leader admitted:

> The job demands have been a barrier to healthy habits like exercising and eating well, which always helped with my state of mind and mental health. Now, I have gained weight, I feel more anxiety, I dread going to work, I have multiple stress related health conditions, cracked teeth, headaches, fatigue...

This example reflects a cycle wherein job-related stress impedes self-care, leading to myriad health issues. While principals were asked specifically about their physical health and changes since prior to the pandemic, many commented on the distressing toll on mental health as well. Principals spoke of their struggles with anxiety and sleep disorders, highlighting the emotional turmoil they endure. One principal revealed:

> I've had to go on medication for migraines and insomnia. I know it is directly related to the amount of stress I have at work. It's getting harder and harder to make it all day when you feel physically ill part of the time.

The persistent stressors of the role not only disrupt sleep patterns but also trigger debilitating anxiety, leaving these educational leaders emotionally drained and physically exhausted.

Several principals detailed how the pressures of the position resulted in weight gain and loss of physical fitness. One mentioned that during the pandemic, “I had lost 75 pounds. I've gained almost all of it back.” They also expressed that job demands leave little time for exercise or healthy eating, leading to significant weight fluctuations and a decline in overall fitness levels. Principals identified that established health routines were disrupted, leading to a decline in well-being. As one respondent remarked:

> I am unable to keep up on my fitness routines during the school year and my health always changes throughout the school year. I have data from 5 years showing weight loss over the course of the school year, and resting heart rate increasing steadily from October-June, then going back down when I am able to work out regularly again.

One participant shared that, despite these challenges, some principals endeavored to maintain healthy habits and self-care and that they were able to maintain or improve their health. Some reported increased exercise and the adoption of healthier habits, although these improvements often coexisted with persistent stress. One respondent noted:

> During Covid I got a peloton and have committed to using it (running, cycling, strength training) every day. My physical health is at the best it has ever been;

> however, the consistent stress is stopping me from reaching my goals. My cortisol levels are through the rough [sic] and short of "removing stress" from my life as my doctor suggests, I don't have a way to improve it.

Need for Social Emotional Support and Validation

A recurring theme throughout the responses was the need for social and emotional support, not only for students but also for educators themselves. Principals recognized the toll the pandemic has taken on the emotional well-being of students and staff, emphasizing the importance of interventions and support systems. For example, one principal noted, "I think that Adults need some SEL attention. The pandemic has pushed some to a point that they still have not recovered, which scares me because they may not recover…" This theme resonated with the broader call for holistic well-being in educational settings.

Principals expressed concerns regarding the considerable needs they encountered amidst limited resources. They reported challenges related to student and staff well-being, with one principal noting, "Students, staff, and families are still struggling post-pandemic and many have more intensive needs than pre-pandemic. Needs include ways to deal with anxiety and stress…" Another noted, "The pandemic was really hard on adults, and this does not get acknowledged enough. Also - The district office experienced PROFOUND turn-over, and the associated chaos both make it difficult to lead a school building."

While principals talked about supporting their staff and students, they also demonstrated a need for their own support. For example, one leader stated, "Work-related stress is impacting all aspects of my life in a negative way." Another added:

> I am emotionally and mentally tired ... There doesn't seem to be a reprieve or light at the end of the tunnel. I reconsider that moving to a principal position would better any aspect of my exhaustion. There used to be bright moments, but it feels like every day somebody is angry and even though I am rarely the reason, I am ALWAYS the sounding board.

Themes across the survey data were notably the same for both male and female leaders and survey respondents were not specifically asked to comment on their experiences related to being a specific gender. However, there was one female principal who noted experiencing a level of sexism in the workplace, commenting on a specific type of district support that is missing, stating:

> Prior to the pandemic, our district focused on relationships among the district admin team. That is no longer the case. Some men at the district office interrupt women when they speak, will visit a building and not stop by the female administrators[sic] office, but make a point to visit with the male administrators. Staff are noticing this change in behavior and are starting to question and resent the people at the district level, many times simply because they don't know them very well. We had had a lot of turnover in the last few years.

Several principals expressed gratitude for the opportunity to participate in this study and to have their well-being and stress levels examined. Their comments reflected appreciation for the research, as well as acknowledgement of the importance of addressing the well-being of educational leaders. For example, one principal said:

> Thank you for researching this topic. Principals need healthy working conditions so they can support students and staff. The behaviors are more alarming in our

> young students than in previous years and adult behaviors are more confrontational, less solution focused and everyone wants to complain about everyone else... all the time!

Another simply said, “I appreciate you taking the time to ask. It's a hard f* job.”

Summary

The quantitative and qualitative findings in this chapter reveal the intricate nature of the roles undertaken by K-12 school principals. They indicate that principals identify stress as a significant factor affecting their job satisfaction compared to before the pandemic and their overall well-being. It’s worth noting that their self-reported stress levels may fall within what might be considered moderate ranges. The absence of universally recognized benchmarks for stress perception makes the qualitative data especially valuable in understanding principals' experiences. Additionally, principals in this study reported moderate levels of self-compassion. However, their workplace well-being was found to be suboptimal, and their health ratings were notably low. Many principals attributed these health concerns to the impact of stress on both their physical and mental well-being.

The analyses also unveiled correlations among perceived stress, self-compassion, workplace well-being, and intent to remain in the position within this population of principals. Perceived stress was negatively correlated with self-compassion, workplace well-being, job satisfaction compared to pre-pandemic levels, and intentions to remain in their positions. Workplace well-being strongly related to job satisfaction since the pandemic and had a statistically significant influence principals’ intent to stay in their current roles. Self-compassion had a statistically significant impact on workplace well-

being, yet it did not moderate the relationship between perceived stress and well-being. This suggests that perceived stress, while not the sole predictor, may be an important independent predictor of workplace well-being among principals.

Gender-based analysis revealed no statistically significant differences between female and male principals concerning workplace well-being, perceived stress, self-compassion, or the components of the PERMA framework. However, the data features areas that warrant attention for all school leaders in terms of their overall well-being and the components outlined in the PERMA framework.

Lastly, themes that arose through the content analysis of principal narratives included passion and dedication to education and the community, unsustainable working conditions, the impact of political climate and external demands, health impacts of stress, and finally, the need for social and emotional support and validation. The selected quotes conveyed the sentiments and challenges faced by principals, shedding light on the intricate relationship between work-related stress, well-being, and their perceptions of their roles.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this research was to highlight the importance of studying and promoting well-being to help manage stress and prevent burnout among school principals, particularly women in the principalship, and to consider implications for future practice. Understanding and addressing principal well-being is crucial as school leaders profoundly influence the health, productivity, and overall culture of their educational organizations (Kelloway et al., 2013; Ledesma, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2020; Leithwood & Louis, 2012). Emotional labor, resilience, and effective coping strategies are vital for leaders, impacting not only their own well-being, but also significantly influencing the success and engagement of students as well as school improvement efforts (DeMatthews et al., 2021a; Ledesma, 2014). This study utilized a structured survey design to ascertain how principals perceive their workplace well-being, stress, self-compassion, perceived job satisfaction compared to before the pandemic, and their intent to remain in their current position. In the results, stress and self-compassion were statistically significant correlates of workplace well-being with stress having the strongest correlation. Surprisingly, principals identified moderate levels of stress and close to, but below, normal functioning levels of workplace well-being despite identifying multiple sources of stress in their open-ended responses to the survey questions. Overall well-being had statistically significant positive relationships with intent to remain in the position and job satisfaction compared to pre-pandemic. The findings of this study, which underscore several critical points that warrant attention and additional exploration, will be further discussed in this section.

Overall Workplace Well-Being and Subscales of Well-Being

Most notably, results indicated principal workplace well-being and health are currently below levels considered within range for normal functioning. None of the means for the components of well-being (PERMA-WWS) fell into ranges considered high or very high functioning. Of the principals in this study, 60.5% had ratings below normal functioning ranges, which may be concerning. Stress emerged as a significant negative correlate (r = -.607) in predicting overall workplace well-being and how principals rated their job satisfaction compared to before the Covid-19 pandemic. This is no surprise as stress is a commonly acknowledged factor impacting individual's well-being (Hirschle & Gondim, 2020; Zarbova & Karabeliova, 2018) including that of school leaders, (Boyland, 2011; Mahfouz et al., 2019; Marsh et al., 2023; Ray et al., 2020; Reid, 2022; Yan, 2020). Qualitative findings suggest that the stressors in the current study are similar to those reported in previous studies on workplace well-being: pressure, overload, negative interactions, lack of support and resources, among them (Bartanen et al., 2019; Boyland, 2011; DeMatthews et al., 2021a; Elomaa et al., 2021; Hirschle & Gondim, 2020; Mahfouz et al., 2019; Reid, 2022; Yan, 2020).

Self-compassion had a statistically significant positive correlation (r = .459) with overall well-being in this sample. Principals rated themselves at a moderate level of self-compassion. These results support previous studies indicating self-compassion is an important predictor of well-being (Allen & Leary, 2010; McKay & Walker, 2021; Zessin et al., 2015). These findings also shed light on the principals' perceived self-compassion, which is an important aspect of their well-being and coping mechanisms (Allen & Leary,

2010). A closer look at self-compassion and its effects on stress and well-being are discussed later in this chapter.

Analysis of the well-being subscales revealed that all but *meaning* and *negative emotion* fell below levels for normal functioning, and none of the means fell into high or very high functioning ranges. Perceived stress had a moderate negative correlation (r = -.466) with *meaning*, and mean ratings for *meaning* were consistent with the themes that emerged in principals' responses to open-ended responses, where they voiced strong sentiments that illustrate the deeply ingrained dedication that drives them to continue their vital work within their school communities, despite the possible sacrifice to their well-being. This finding suggests that passion and dedication demonstrated by these principals extend beyond their professional responsibilities. They expressed commitment to their staff, students, and the wider school community which showcases a genuine love for their work, a sense of purpose in guiding students, and a fulfillment derived from making a positive impact on the lives of those they serve. Perhaps these principals find meaning because the work they do with students is important and fulfilling, as they voiced in their responses, such as when one characterized work as, "the important work of supporting my staff and students." The quantitative findings, such as a moderate relationship (r = .453) between *meaning* and principals' ratings of *job satisfaction* compared to before the pandemic, corroborate the qualitative findings.

Negative emotion was also rated within the normal range of functioning. Negative emotions are not inherently bad and are part of the human experience as natural reactions to certain situations and the PERMA-WWS measures tendencies toward feeling sad, anxious, or angry (Kern, 2013). This might indicate that principals are experiencing

relatively moderate levels of these emotions in the workplace, or that they may be generally managing the negative emotions associated with stress and work frustrations. Principals are expected to perform emotional labor to support their schools (Anderson et al., 2020; DeMatthews et al., 2021b; Maxwell & Riley, 2017; Reid, 2022; Urick et al., 2021), and may have moderate or high levels of emotional intelligence (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015) to help mitigate their negative emotions in the workplace. A more concerning finding, however, is that principals in this sample reported being below the normal functioning range of *positive emotions.* While they may be effectively managing negative stress and emotions, they are not experiencing joy or other *positive emotions* that could contribute to their well-being in the workplace. This discrepancy warrants further exploration.

As noted in Chapter 4, *loneliness* stood out in the PERMA-WWS measure as 63.0% of respondents rated themselves generally high on feelings of loneliness, which is concerning because it has implications for school culture. *Loneliness* also had a strong correlation with stress and a strong negative correlation with well-being. The statistical analysis showed that *loneliness* might not be normally distributed, so caution should be used in considering the correlation. A relationship between *loneliness* and stress or *negative emotion* is logical. The distribution is skewed because this group of principals may experience unusually high levels of loneliness and isolation, exacerbated by the pandemic. Principals can experience isolation in their positions if they are the only ones in their buildings, if they don't have the opportunity to connect with other principal colleagues, or due to other organizational factors. This finding has significant implications for school culture, as a principal's sense of loneliness might mean they

struggle to foster a sense of community among staff, or to foster an inclusive environment, (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Kern, 2020; Ledesma, 2014). There were no clear reasons that emerged from this study, so further research is needed. For example, future studies may include an examination of principals' perceptions of loneliness or isolation and what factors may contribute, such as whether they work in larger urban, or smaller rural schools, and whether their districts sponsor principal learning communities or other opportunities to connect with other leaders.

The results uncovered a surprising discrepancy between the moderate level of self-reported stress and sub-optimal scores on workplace well-being measures and health among principals. Given the multifaceted challenges they face as evidenced by their suboptimal scores on the PERMA-WWS scale for workplace well-being and the themes that emerged from the qualitative data, such as negative health impacts, need for social emotional support, and unsustainable working conditions, preliminary evidence suggested that participants will report much higher level of stress. When principals make statements like, "I am tired. I am stressed. I don't always know how to support my staff when I am struggling with increased accountability and fewer resources," it indicates challenges which seem to be incongruous with their assessment of their levels of stress. It is possible that principals who participated in this study may have become desensitized and have grown accustomed to increasingly elevated levels of stress (Ray et al., 2020), even though they describe multiple stressors, frustrations, and a negative impact on their health. While self-reported stress levels fell within moderate ranges, the absence of universal benchmarks emphasized the value of qualitative data in understanding principal's experiences. A closer look at the principals' open-ended responses revealed

that principals in this study experienced a tremendous amount of stress from a variety of sources as noted here:

> There is more stress now, it seems like pressure to achieve is greater. Student behaviors have increased. Teacher dissatisfaction has increased. District demands on all staff are higher.…we are dealing with everyone's stress and frustration, they come to us to vent and ask for support. I am happy to help but sometimes the constant flow of negativity from students, staff, and parents feels overwhelming. I tend to be an optimistic and happy person and laugh off most things so to get so much negative input throughout the day… is very taxing.

The findings of this research also appear to support those of previous studies where principals regularly deprioritize their own health and well-being (Cubitt & Burt, 2002) and that sacrifice may be inherent to the profession (Mahfouz, 2018; Marsh et al., 2023; Urick et al., 2021). This comment from one principal demonstrates this deprioritization:

> There are days I don't eat, go to the bathroom or sit down from the time I walk in the door until everyone leaves 8 hours later. The stress of our job put my partner principal out on 12 week medical leave. I do my job because I love it, but is it worth it.

The demands of their roles create barriers to well-being (Levin & Bradley, 2019) and principals put the needs of others before their own and are expected to be selfless (DeMatthews et al., 2021a, 2021b; Marsh et al., 2023; Ray et al., 2020; Thornton, 2021). Unfortunately, this may directly impact their physical and mental health as indicated by

their low ratings of their health and the comments regarding such stress related problems such as high blood pressure, cracked teeth, headaches, and weight concerns.

Job Satisfaction and Intent to Remain

Job satisfaction is one important key to understanding professional fulfillment. The current study revealed a perceived decline in principal job satisfaction, with a substantial portion contemplating leaving school administration. It is striking that only 38% percent of respondents expressed that they were not considering leaving school administration. This finding underscores a significant level of dissatisfaction and potential burnout within the cohort. The substantial portion of principals in this cohort who are considering leaving administration further emphasizes the urgency of addressing these challenges to bolster well-being and job-satisfaction for purposes of principal retention. The strong correlation (r = .544) between well-being and job satisfaction compared to pre-pandemic and between well-being and intent to remain in the position (r = .529) supports that addressing concerns with principals' lower levels well-being may help improve job satisfaction and thus reduce burnout and flight from the profession (Marsh et al., 2023).

Well-being was the strongest correlate for this group's intent to remain in their positions as well. Well-being may act as a protective factor, bolstering principals' resolve and dedication to remain, and when well-being is not at normal functioning, it might not have as strong a protective or buffering effect on that resolve (Bartanen et al., 2019; Beausaert et al., 2023; DeMatthews et al., 2021a; Mahfouz et al., 2019; Marsh et al., 2023; Yan, 2020).

Role of Self-Compassion

Even though the effect size is small, principals in this sample with higher self-compassion tended to have lower perceived stress, higher workplace well-being, and higher job satisfaction. These results are consistent with previous studies indicating that self-compassion is an important aspect of well-being (Allen & Leary, 2010; McKay & Walker, 2021; Yarnell & Neff, 2013; Zessin et al., 2015). However, it appears that an attitudinal factor such as self-compassion may not be as strong a predictor of overall workplace well-being as more immediate factors, such as current perceived stress among this group of principals.

The fact that moderate level of principal self-compassion did not have a statistically significant correlation to their intent to remain in the positions, nor did it moderate the effect of stress on well-being for this cohort, appears to support the notion that there is a culture of sacrifice in educational leadership. There may be unique aspects of the education profession, or characteristics of those who go into principalship, that curtain the function of self-compassion. Dev and colleagues (2020) found that there are different impacts of self-compassion among different professional roles within medical professionals. That is, they found that self-compassion moderated the relationship between stress and burnout in nurses, but not in doctors or medical students. The actual stress experienced by the respondents might be higher than what they reported in the survey (Beausaert et al., 2023; Boyland, 2011; Mahfouz et al., 2019; Marsh et al., 2023; Ray et al., 2020; Reid, 2022; Urick et al., 2021; Yan, 2020). The multiple stressors, such as lack of support and heavy workload identified by the respondents might be beyond

what self-compassion can mitigate (Boyland, 2011; Mahfouz et al., 2019; Marsh et al., 2023; Ray et al., 2020; Reid, 2022; Yan, 2020).

It is possible that organizational culture and the expectations of the role of principal are fundamentally at odds with self-compassion. The pressures to constantly meet high standards, handle crises, and manage difficult situations (Boyland, 2011; Cubitt & Burt, 2002; Doyle Fosco, 2022; Hirschle & Gondim, 2020; Levin & Bradley, 2019; Marsh et al., 2023; Maxwell & Riley, 2017; Urick et al., 2021; Yan, 2020) might not leave much room for self-compassion to effectively operate. If the organizational culture does not prioritize well-being in tangible ways, not just playing "lip-service," as one principal remarked, if there is a lack of support for stress management initiatives, self-compassion might not be able to effectively counterbalance these factors. If principals have not had the opportunity to develop a strong self-compassion practice before or during their tenure as school leaders, its moderating effect might be limited. Further investigations are needed to explore whether there are unique aspects of the principal role that render self-compassion less effective than other protective factors relating to workplace well-being and their intent to remain in their roles.

Gender Disparities

Gender-based comparison revealed only marginal differences in average scores of study variables that were not statistically significant. In other words, experiences of workplace well-being, perceived stress, self-compassion, and the various components of the PERMA framework were similar among female and male principals. These results challenge perceptions related to gender differences found in previous studies (Dicke et al., 2022; Elliotte & Blithe, 2021; Howard-Hamilton et al., 1998; Neff & Pommier, 2012;

Yarnell et al., 2019) and may suggest a more universal need for well-being support irrespective of gender. Principals, regardless of gender, may face similar demands and expectations in their roles. Participant responses to open ended questions did not produce unique themes according to their gender, so the nature of the job, including responsibilities, work hours, political climate, and the level of stress might be relatively uniform across genders. Principals are required to have similar educational backgrounds and levels of experience, which could contribute to similar workplace experiences and stress responses. Experience and training may have similar influence on female and male principals and outweigh any gender-related factors in this context. It's also possible that individuals who choose to become principals, regardless of gender, have characteristics or personality traits that impact their resilience, leading to similar workplace well-being and stress levels, for example.

A close examination of the PERMA-WWS variables in this study showed that regardless of gender, principals' well-being is below normal functioning for most PERMA components, which suggests that a large portion of principals are not performing to their full potential. It is possible that performance, well-being, productivity, and the health of organizations they lead can only be below normal, or moderate at best, if these principals are not fully equipped to create the culture of care where the well-being of students and staff is positively impacted (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Kern, 2020; Ledesma, 2014). Therefore, a strategic focus on improving workplace well-being is needed for all, regardless of gender.

In summary, findings from this study underscore the importance of addressing well-being strategies and stress management to support principals' job satisfaction and

retention, particularly in times of increased stress, such as the recovery from a global pandemic (DeMatthews et al., 2021a; Marsh et al., 2023; Ray et al., 2020). The findings of the current study are similar to those reported in previous study findings (e.g., Marsh et al., 2023), in which there is a vicious and escalating cycle of burnout and intensification of job dissatisfaction. Nonetheless, interventions and strategies in reducing burnout are likely to improve leaders' experiences (Bazargan-Hejazi et al., 2021; Donaldson et al., 2019a, 2019b; Doyle Fosco et al., 2023; Liu, 2020; Klap et al., 2021; Marsh et al., 2023; Wells & Klocko, 2018).

Strengths of Current Study

Several strengths are present in the current study enhancing its significance and reliability. Utilizing a descriptive survey design provided a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the experiences and perceptions of K-12 school principals at an important time regarding their well-being and outlook on their futures in the principal role. The current study was conducted in the context of recovery from the COVID-19 global pandemic making the findings historically relevant, providing a snapshot of principals' well-being during a critical period of educational recovery.

The anonymous design of the survey allowed participants to provide more authentic responses and perceptions of themselves and their experiences with assured confidentiality, giving them an outlet to speak and be heard. By incorporating both closed and open-ended questions, the study captured nuanced insights. Responses to the open-ended questions provided additional context to statistical analysis, revealing myriad stressors that principals face, ranging from overwork and lack of support to financial constraints, among them. These stressors, voiced by principals themselves provide

qualitative depth to the quantitative findings, providing a comprehensive depiction of the challenges that impact their well-being at this point in time.

Instruments and measures utilized for the study were established as reliable prior to this study; internal reliability analysis in this study further indicated high reliability for this sample, thus providing a robust foundation for the study's quantitative analysis. Using established frameworks and measures, such as PERMA, the PERMA workplace profiler, PSS-4, and SCS-SF enhanced both the rigor of the methodology and reliability of the results. Use of these measures may also contribute to future comparison studies regarding occupational health and well-being, especially for school principals in an underexplored area in the literature.

This study addresses a current gap in the literature and extends understanding and awareness of principals' stress levels, sources of stress, well-being, self-compassion and how they perceive their job satisfaction and outlook for their continued work. Findings contribute to a currently small amount of existing work by chronicling the associations among stress, well-being, and self-compassion among school principals, especially the impacts of stress on health and well-being. Insights from this research provide multiple avenues for future research and can guide policy makers, administrators, and researchers in developing targeted interventions tailored to the current needs of school leaders.

Addressing Limitations through Future Research

There are several limitations associated with the current study that may be addressed through future research. This study's implications for research, practice, and training are substantial. Implications for research include comprehensively defining principal well-being, exploring and evaluating positive psychology interventions, delving

into contextual factors specific to school leadership that influence well-being. Implications for practice may include implementation of systemic well-being interventions (Marsh et al., 2023) that consider principal voice and agency to design effective programs. Bolman & Deal (2008) discuss that when high performing people are hired, but are not performing at high levels, it is a systems issue. Districts must actively work to build supportive school leadership culture and work to transform the prevailing culture of sacrifice so principals can prioritize their own well-being without guilt. Principal organizations such as AWSP and NASSP continue to take an active role in supporting the well-being of their members by implementing well-being initiatives. Implications for training and professional development include principal preparation programs including mandatory modules on stress management, self-care and well-being, integrating in-service training with interactive well-being sessions which focus on building resilience, fostering *positive emotion*, and developing effective coping mechanisms, and incorporating principal voice and input into such training modules.

One limitation typical of survey design which may be associated with this study includes the use of convenience sampling of participants and selection bias. There may be limited diversity in terms of demographic, in particular. While the population of principals in Washington State is not as diverse as the general population, or the population they serve, neither was this sample as diverse as the general population of principals in the state. So, some critical perspectives may be missing. This limited diversity in the group based on race/ethnic group, for example, means that there is limited opportunity to analyze subgroups in a meaningful way. Future research studies should examine principal well-being with a racial lens, for example, as those who do not identify

as white may experience different or additional stressors that impact their well-being. Additionally, there may have been some selection bias, the end of the school year is typically very busy and principals, especially those who may have been most impacted by stressors such as those related to Covid-19, might not have had time or bandwidth to participate.

One of the areas of focus in this study was gender, and only 36 male principals responded compared to 96 female principals, which may have impacted the results as it did not meet the G*power estimate to have sufficient statistical power for detecting a real effect through the independent samples *t*-tests. As the study has sought to examine differences in male and female gendered leaders, if respondents chose not to share their gender it reduced the number of responses that could have been examined with a gendered lens. However, only two respondents chose not to disclose and there were no respondents who identified gender other than male, female, or "prefer not to disclose." To address selection bias and these demographic and diversity limitations, future research could include targeted outreach strategies or a follow-up study using a more stratified sampling approach (Gall et al., 2007) to ensure diversity of perspectives.

The timing and length of the survey may have affected responses. Specifically, timing may have influenced the rating on principals' intent to remain in the position next year. The survey was conducted at a time of year when principals are expected to know whether they were returning to their positions, due to the cyclical nature of hiring principals and administrative contracts beginning annually on July First. So, it is actually possible that their responses regarding their intent to remain in the position next year were higher than they might be otherwise since most principals have signed their

contracts for the following year already. Most administrative positions are hired in the spring, prior to the end of the school year. Principals were not asked whether they were actively seeking a new role, which may have added more perspective and is worth considering in future research.

The length of the survey may have impacted completion of the survey for some participants. The questions related to self-compassion were toward the end of the survey, and there were a handful of participants who did not complete that section, so one possibility is that participants did not have time to complete it. Order effects, that is, the order of the questions may have influenced participants answers, or whether they answered questions later in the survey at all (Krosnick & Presser, 2010). Survey fatigue may have also reduced the number of principals willing to participate in the first place (Rasinski et al., 2012). AWSP (S. Seaman, personal communication, February 21, 2023) acknowledged that principals have been surveyed multiple times during the timeframe of this study and may have had an overall level of survey fatigue that impacted the number of principals who were willing to participate in the survey at all.

This survey represents one period in time and since there are no pre-pandemic scores, interpretation of the means scores is limited. A longitudinal study examining principal stress, well-being, and self-compassion either over the course of a school year or several years could provide important insights into the experiences of principals over time and what possible interventions or supports might be merited.

Other possible areas for consideration in future research include comparative studies with other states or countries such as Australia or Ireland (Beausaert et al., 2023; Klap et al., 2021; Marsh et al., 2023) where there has been some attention to well-being

in research and may provide broader insights. For those concerned about student performance, future research may be needed to specifically measure whether there is a change in student well-being and performance in districts that have implemented a PERMA based systems level intervention for principals, such as those Seligman (2019) described from Bhutan, Mexico, and Peru.

Further studies should focus on comprehensively defining and operationalizing principal well-being. This includes developing clear metrics, possibly utilizing multifactor scales like PERMA, that encompass various aspects such as district support, workload, time pressure, and job satisfaction (Fox et al., 2023). Initiatives promoting *positive emotion* and stress management in the workplace support are vital. Future research should delve into the effectiveness of specific well-being interventions and explore additional contextual factors influencing principal well-being.

Subsequent studies should also delve into the effectiveness of specific positive psychology interventions (PPI) tailored to school principals and explore additional contextual factors influencing principal well-being. Research should explore how factors like leadership agility, crisis management, and specific stressors in the educational environment impact principals' overall well-being. Understanding these nuances can guide targeted supports and interventions. Professional development to train principals to address stress management through healthy coping mechanisms should be examined, as not only might this impact stress, but improve physical health as well, particularly in this group where their perception of their health is strikingly low.

Additional investigation should explore strategies to engage school leaders in the development and implementation of well-being interventions (Doyle Fosco et al., 2023).

Principals in this study demonstrated a need for their voices to be heard through their expressions of gratitude that their well-being was being explored and could provide important insights for their own learning in this area. Implications for future training, professional development, and research.

Implications for Practice

Implications of this study for practice include, but are not limited to, the need to address the school leadership culture of sacrifice (Anderson et al., 2020; Urick et al., 2021), as well as the role of the principal and working conditions. District leaders and policy makers should consider improving efforts to establish and maintain a culture where principals feel connected and valued. Primary and secondary educational systems that have building level administrators may benefit from employing a PERMA framework to ensure that those responsible for supporting staff and students in the system are healthy (Seligman, 2019). School leaders must put their own health and wellbeing first, so that they will be able to help others, (Anderson et al., 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020, Klap et al., 2021). If Washington State or local districts value positive school culture and student performance, then they must implement policies and practices that attend to the wellbeing of educational leaders, including job-imbedded structures that support leaders' well-being (Burke & Dempsey, 2021a, 2021b; Mahfouz, 2018). One possible way to accomplish this is through PPI. Districts must consider adopting policies and practices that effectively support principal well-being and efficacy, which relies heavily on principals being high performing. There may be principals who are performing well, but the fact that this group of principals is not currently at normal

functioning levels of well-being may indicate that they might be more effective and higher functioning if their health and well-being were improved.

The suboptimal workplace well-being and notably low health ratings underscored a pressing need for supportive interventions. The Marsh and colleagues (2023) study cited earlier concluded that principals may need timely information and feedback to support identification and monitoring of their stress levels, including "red flag warnings" suggesting principals consider seeking professional help and the results of this study may support that need considering the discrepancy between there moderate perceived stress levels and their lower health and well-being means.

Two studies that can inform considerations for future intervention include one among medical professionals that found that implementation of PERMA for reducing burnout increasing well-being experienced more success with system directed intervention in the medical arena (Bazargan-Hejazi et al., 2023). In Washington State there has been no such systemically implemented or evaluated program among school principals. The other study concludes that the effectiveness of an intervention, in this case a mindfulness program, may need to include principal voice and input. According to Doyle Fosco and colleagues (2023), the acceptability of a mindfulness-based professional development program was inconsistent for educational leaders; it's important to identify ways to get buy in and support leader agency regarding their needs and possibly include integrating into pre-service education to have greater impact.

Positive Psychology Intervention for School Principals

Of the PERMA components, *positive emotion* had the strongest correlation with overall workplace well-being and the lowest mean among principals; while health had the

lowest mean, it also had a lower correlation to overall workplace well-being than other PERMA components. These relationships indicate that an intervention that prioritizes supporting school principals in *positive emotion* may provide an important and strategic avenue for increased well-being, getting the most bang for the buck, so to speak. According to PositivePsychology.com, a respected resource for positive psychology practices, *positive emotion* can be improved through such practices as gratitude, mindfulness, and meditation. A PPI focused on well-being might impact leaders' experience of the *positive emotion* aspects of PERMA in particular and could be measured before and after the intervention utilizing one of the PERMA measurement tools. Kelloway and colleagues (2013) found that an increasing ratio of *positive* to *negative emotion*s is one key to enhancing well-being. The implications for interventions to enhance well-being and mitigating negative effects of workplace stress might have an important role in leadership development.

In a small-scale study utilizing semi-structured interviews, Gillard and fellow researchers (2021) demonstrated that a strengths-based tool may improve the well-being of school leaders. Similarly, there have been a few studies with promising results related to principal professional development in mindfulness, gratitude, and self-care which show that this kind of professional development may have a positive impact on administrator well-being (Klap et al., 2021; Liu, 2020; Trom & Burke, 2022; Wells & Klocko, 2018). Such interventions can mitigate stress factors and improve leader well-being (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Donaldson et al., 2019a; Gillard et al., 2021; Trom & Burke, 2022). The PERMA framework has been applied in schools for both students and teachers to examine and promote well-being and positive culture (Balica, 2023; Cadima

et al., 2021; Kern et al., 2014; Kern, 2020; Lai et al., 2018; Seligman, 2019) and may be a good framework to approach principal well-being too. Interventions utilizing PERMA and workplace variations of the original model, such as PERMA-H and PERMA+4 have had positive effects on employee outcomes (Donaldson et al., 2019a, 2019b; Gillard et al., 2021) and may be a possible model for supporting principals as well.

Other Professional Development Opportunities

There are multiple implications for training and professional development; principals' leadership agility and success in their current work as well as during future crises could benefit from understanding and meeting their professional development needs through the PERMA model. Principal organizations (e.g., NASSP and the National Association of Elementary School Principles) and state associations (e.g., AWSP) may contribute through offering professional development focused on well-being and self-care. While there have been workshops in the past, the workshop design means that the interventions have not been integral to a principal's workday, and this study suggests that there may not have been significant impacts on district systems at this time.

Professional development to train principals to address stress management through healthy coping mechanisms should be examined, as not only might this impact stress, but improve physical health as well, particularly in this group where their perception of their health is strikingly low. The fact that they appreciated being asked about their perspectives and experiences suggests that there needs to be a time and space for school leaders to pause, talk to each other, process, and reflect on their experiences. This could be an area for future district-wide professional development.

Principals' dedication to their roles, despite sacrifices, underscores their passion and commitment. To enhance workplace well-being and retain effective leaders, interventions should focus on stress management, fostering positive emotion, and mitigating loneliness. District-wide professional development programs should create spaces for principals to share experiences, reflect, and strategize. Moreover, the study suggests adopting multifaceted scales, like PERMA, encompassing district support, workload, time pressure, and job satisfaction, for a comprehensive evaluation of principal well-being.

Most principal preparation programs do not currently include formal requirements or training in stress management or well-being in order to prepare them for the realities of the job (DeMatthews, 2021a, 2021b; Harris & Jones, 2020; Mahfouz, 2018). As new principals enter the field, institutions must consider supporting their wellbeing, for example through integrating strategies into the various required curricula, or providing seminars, to foster healthy school cultures and help avoid burnout and turnover (Burke & Dempsey, 2021b; DeMatthews, 2021b).

Conclusions

In the ever-evolving landscape of education, the role of school principals is to shape not only the academic foundations, but also the well-being of their staff and students, and culture of their institutions. This comprehensive research explored the current state of K-12 school principals to emphasize the importance of studying and promoting their well-being and stress management in order to prevent burnout. This investigation unearthed pivotal insights that demand urgent attention and strategic action.

Findings illuminated the intricate relationships among stress, self-compassion, workplace well-being, and the intent of principals to persist in their roles. Principals, although reporting moderate stress levels, exhibited suboptimal workplace well-being and health, echoing the struggles of their profession. Their narratives, laden with stress-induced health issues and the burden of unsustainable work conditions, painted a vivid picture of the challenges they face daily. This misalignment between self-reported stress levels and the multifaceted challenges they endure highlighted the necessity of qualitative data, providing depth to the quantitative findings.

Moreover, the study unveiled a surprising absence of gender disparities, challenging existing perceptions. Female and male principals in this sample faced parallel challenges, emphasizing the universal need for well-being support, irrespective of gender. The revelation indicates a common ground where all principals require targeted interventions to prevent burnout.

The role of self-compassion in buffering the impact of stress on well-being was not statistically significant in this study. It also did not significantly influence principals' intent to remain in their current positions. The function or impact of principals' own self-compassion might be limited by the overwhelming organizational expectations, multiple stressors, and an ingrained culture of sacrifice within educational leadership. This particular finding points to the necessity of a holistic transformation, where organizational cultures prioritize well-being and offer tangible support for stress management initiatives.

High functioning schools need high-functioning invigorated leaders (Kelloway et al., 2013; Ledesma, 2014). This study demonstrates further need for change in the

educational landscape. The fact that school leaders in Washington State are mandated to attend to the social emotional well-being of their students means there is a challenge to maintain culture of service, but not a culture of sacrifice, so that all stakeholders in the system benefit. Initiatives advocating well-being, stress management, and self-compassion should be integrated into educational systems. Implementing a positive psychology approach, such as the PERMA framework could fortify the foundation of well-being, ensuring that leaders can effectively support themselves, their staff, and students. Professional development programs, centered on stress management and healthy coping mechanisms, should be a cornerstone, potentially enhancing not only well-being but also the physical health of principals.

The study's implications extend beyond research into the heart of educational policy and practice. Acknowledging the sacrifices inherent in the principalship, policies must prioritize the well-being of educational leaders. Districts and states must weave supportive policies and practices into the fabric of educational leadership, recognizing the critical role of principals in shaping the schools they lead. Implementing policies and practices that value principal well-being as a foundational necessity, rather than an afterthought, is an important way to ensure a vibrant, nurturing, resilient environment for educators and learners alike. By recognizing the complexities of principal well-being, educational institutions can craft holistic system level strategies, fostering healthier, more resilient school leadership, thereby enhancing the overall educational landscape for them and for those they serve.

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Table 1

Participant Demographic Data (N=124)

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Leadership Role		
Building Principal	92	74.2
Assistant/Vice/Associate Principal	32	25.8
School Level		
Elementary	60	48.4
Middle or Junior High	26	21.0
High	25	20.2
K-8	6	4.8
K–12	3	2.4
6-12	2	1.6
Alternative Learning Environment (ALE-any grade)	2	1.6
Years in Role		
0-1	10	8.1
2–5	31	25.0
6-10	40	32.2
11-15	16	12.9
More Than 15	27	21.8
Location		
Rural	41	33.1
Suburban	68	54.8
Urban	15	12.1
Number of Administrators in Building		
1	39	31.4
2	56	45.2
3	15	12.1
4 or More	14	11.3

Size of District		
Small	37	29.8
Medium	61	49.2
Large	26	21.0
Gender		
Female	86	69.9
Male	36	29.0
Non-Binary	0	0.0
Transgender	0	0.0
Prefer Not to Disclose	2	1.6
Gender Not Listed, My Gender is (Please Specify)	0	0.0
Primary Caregiver		
Yes	86	69.9
No	37	30.1
Race or Ethnicity Category		
African American/Black	3	2.4
Asian or Asian American	3	2.4
Indigenous/Native American	0	0.0
Latinx/Hispanic	3	2.4
Multi-racial	3	2.4
Pacific Islander	0	0.0
White	108	87.1
Prefer Not to Disclose	3	2.4
I identify as (Please Specify):	0	0.0
Missing (not answered)	1	0.8

Table 2

Sample Analysis for Participants' Responses to Open-Ended Questions

Code examples	Pattern Recognition	Emerging Theme
Anxiety/depression Blood Pressure Chronic Health Issues Dental Issues Emergency Medical Leave Exhaustion/Fatigue Insomnia Frequent Illness Healthy Eating/Diet Lack of Motivation Lack of Sleep Loss of fitness Mental Health Challenges Medication New Health Concerns No Time to Eat Stress Impact on Health	Codes like "anxiety/depression," "medication," and "stress impact on health" formed a pattern indicating adverse health effects.	Through pattern recognition, these codes were synthesized into the overarching theme of "Impact on Health," signifying the diverse health challenges experienced by principals due to their roles.

Table 3

Study Variables Means, Standard Deviation, Kolmogorov-Smirnov, Skewness, Kurtosis

Variable	n	Mean	K-S *p* value	Skewness	Kurtosis
Perceived Stress	124	1.99 (.77)	.001	-.215	-.489
Self-Compassion	124	3.12(.69)	.200*	.208	.154
Overall Workplace Well-being	124	5.96(1.50)	.084	-.151	-.262
Positive Emotion	124	5.54(2.02)	.015	-.158	-.827
Engagement	124	5.72(1.96)	.010	.014	-.545
Relationship	124	5.92(2.27)	.008	-.462	-.466
Meaning	124	6.87(2.06)	.004	-.669	.065
Achievement	124	6.32(1.71)	.200*	-.350	-.105
Loneliness	124	5.79(3.31)	<.001	-.622	-.965
Negative Emotion	124	4.86(1.99)	.038	-.182	-.398
Happiness	124	5.50(2.52)	<.001	-.243	-.943
Health (PERMA)	124	5.00(2.58)	.050	-.102	-1.019
Health Compared to Pre-Pandemic	120	1.56(1.05)	<.001	.483	-.096
Intent to Remain in Position	113	2.85(1.42)	<.001	-1.036	-.263
Job Satisfaction Compared to Pre-Pandemic	123	1.55(1.13)	<.001	.533	-.324
Relationship with Supervisor	124	5.04(3.23)	<.001	-.083	-1.325

Notes. * This is a lower bound of the true significance. K-S refers to the Kolmogorov-Smirnov value.

Table 4

Female Study Variables Means, Standard Deviation, Kolmogorov-Smirnov, Skewness, Kurtosis

Variable	N	Mean (SD)	K-S p value	Skewness	Kurtosis
Self-Compassion	86	3.13 (.73)	.200*	.261	.255
Perceived Stress	86	2.04 (.764)	.003	-.105	-.627
Well-being	86	6.05 (1.59)	.073	-.214	-.271
Positive Emotion	86	5.61 (2.14)	.172	-.162	-.849
Engagement	86	5.84 (1.85)	.002	.229	-.536
Relationship	86	5.98 (2.44)	.013	-.533	-.582
Meaning	86	6.86 (2.20)	.179	-.683	.050
Achievement	86	6.38 (1.74)	.200*	-.336	.088
Loneliness	86	5.93 (3.39)	<.001	-.626	-.968
Negative Emotion	86	4.96 (2.03)	.169	-.187	-.368
Happiness	86	5.54(2.65)	<.001	-.235	-1.008
Health (PERMA-WWS)	86	5.25 (2.45)	.077	-.079	-.925
Health Compared to Pre-Pandemic	86	1.55(1.07)	<.001	.348	-.283
Intent to Remain in Position	86	2.81(1.42)	<.001	-1.009	-.298
Job Satisfaction Compared to Pre-Pandemic	86	1.53(1.17)	<.001	.621	-.302
Relationship with Supervisor	86	5.24(3.45)	<.001	-.127	-1.453

Notes. a. What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice = Female. *This is a lower bound of the true significance. K-S refers to the Kolmogorov-Smirnov value.

Table 5

Male Study Variables Means, Standard Deviation, Kolmogorov-Smirnov, Skewness, Kurtosis

Variable	N	Mean	K-S p value	Skewness	Kurtosis
Self-Compassion	36	3.14 (0.59)	.200*	-.035	-.399
Perceived Stress	36	1.83 (.773)	.036	-.419	-.077
Well-being	36	5.72 (1.26)	.186	-.092	-.594
Positive Emotion	36	5.34 (1.74)	.200*	-.264	-1.188
Engagement	36	5.34 (2.22)	.200*	-.076	-.83
Relationship	36	5.73 (1.88)	.200*	-.186	-.281
Meaning	36	6.81 (1.72)	.075	-.510	-.629
Achievement	36	6.17 (1.66)	.015	-.404	-.701
Loneliness	36	5.33 (3.16)	<.001	-.64	-1.064
Happiness	36	5.54(2.47)	<.001	-.418	-.883
Negative Emotion	36	4.60 (1.91)	.200*	-.217	-.446
Health (PERMA-WWS)	36	4.35 (2.82)	2.819	.039	-1.336
Health Compared to Pre-Pandemic	36	1.50(1.04)	<.001	.967	.836
Intent to Remain in Position	36	2.82(1.47)	<.001	-1.032	-.353
Job Satisfaction Compared to Pre-Pandemic	36	1.61(1.07)	.002	.489	.265
Relationship with Supervisor	36	4.46(2.70)	.200*	-.122	-1.175

a. What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice = Male. *This is a lower bound of the true significance. K-S refers to the Kolmogorov-Smirnov value.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics (N=124)

Variable	Range	*n*	Mean(SD)
Stress	0-4	124	1.99(.77)
Self-Compassion	1-5	124	3.14(.69)
Overall Well-Being	0-10	124	5.96(1.50)
Positive Emotion	0-10	124	5.54(2.02)
Engagement	0-10	124	5.72(1.96)
Relationship	0-10	124	5.92(2.27)
Meaning	0-10	124	6.87(2.06)
Achievement	0-10	124	6.32(1.71
Happy with Work	0-10	124	5.50(2.52)
Loneliness	0-10	124	5.79(3.31)
Negative Emotion	0-10	124	4.86(1.99)
Health (PERMA-WWS)	0-10	124	5.00(2.58)
Health Compared to Pre-Pandemic	0-4	120	1.56(1.05)
Intent to Remain in Position Next Year	0-4	123	1.55(1.13)
Job Satisfaction Compared to Pre-Pandemic	0-4	113	2.85(1.42)
Relationship With Supervisor	0-10	124	5.05(3.23)

Table 7

Correlation Table: Perceived Stress, Self-Compassion, Workplace Well-Being, Health and Job Satisfaction Compared to Pre-Pandemic, Intent to Remain in Position Next Year, and Relationship with Supervisor

Variable	Range	*n*	Mean(SD)	1	2	3	13	14	15	16
1. Perceived Stress	0-4	124	1.99(.77)	-						
2. Self-Compassion	1-5	124	3.14(.69)	-.556**	-					
3. Overall Workplace Well-being	0-10	124	5.96(1.50)	-.607**	.459**	-				
4. Health Compared to Pre-pandemic	0-4	120	1.56(1.05)	-.211*	.246**	.328**	-			
5. Job Satisfaction Compared to Pre-pandemic	0-4	123	1.55(1.13)	-.428**	.192*	.544**	.102	-		
6. Intent to Remain in Position Next Year	0-4	113	2.85(1.42)	-.338**	.153	.529**	.155	.435**	-	
7. Relationship with Supervisor	0-10	124	5.05(3.23)	-.444**	.290**	.619**	.179	0.519**	0.503**	-

Notes. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 8

Correlation Table: PERMA Elements, Job Satisfaction Compared to Pre-Pandemic, and Intent to Remain in Position Next Year

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Overall Workplace Well-being	-												
2. Positive Emotion	.835**	-											
3. Engagement	.712**	.677**	-										
4. Relationship	.750**	.544**	.427**	-									
5. Meaning	.839**	.686**	.543**	.599**	-								
6. Achievement	.752**	.622**	.515**	.455**	.597**	-							
7. Happiness	.792**	.872**	.641**	.582**	.671**	.571**	-						
8. Loneliness	-.533**	-.497**	-.350**	-.557**	-.422**	-.468**	-.463**	-					
9. Negative Emotion	-.629**	-.658**	-.430**	-.501**	-.559**	-.550**	-.629**	.502**	-				
10. Health (PERMA-WWS)	.442**	.154	.063	.174	.253**	.256**	.129	-.036	-.020	-			
11. Health Compared to Pre-pandemic	.328**	.205*	.145	.148	.244**	.068	.241**	-.038	-.165	.554**	-		
12. Job Satisfaction Compared to Pre-pandemic	.544**	.541**	.460**	.327**	.453**	.448**	.541**	-.260**	-.482**	.104	.102	-	
13. Intent to Remain in Position Next Year	.529**	.556**	.421**	.456**	.370**	.364**	.503**	-.274**	-.419**	.068	.155	.435**	-

Notes. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 9

Moderation of Self-compassion on Perceived Stress and Well-being Coefficients

				95.0% CI		
Model	Estimate	*SE*	*t(121)*	LL	UL	*p*
(Constant)	8.191	.321	25.519	7.560	8.832	<.001
Perceived Stress Mean Score	-0.288	.144	-8.005	-1.434	-.865	<.001
Intercept of standardized PSS and SCS	-0.092	.101	-.905	-.291	.109	.367

Note. PSS refers to perceived stress and SCS refers to self-compassion.

Table 10

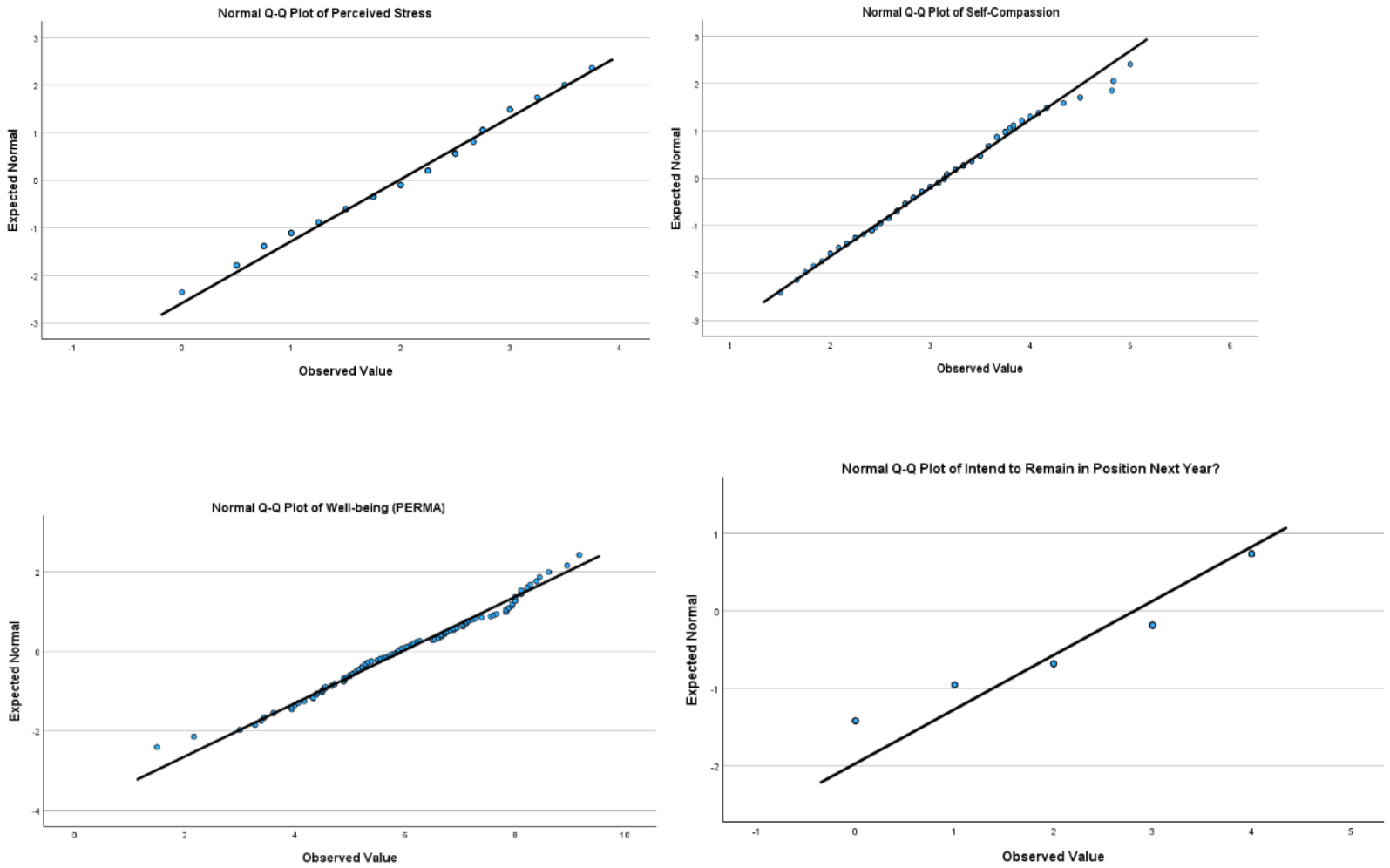
Difference Between Female and Male Principals in Perceived Stress, Self-Compassion, and Well-being

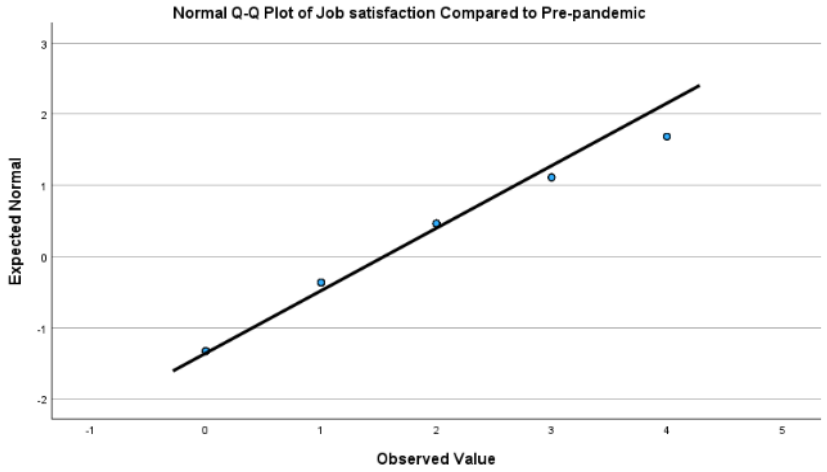
Variable	Female		Male		*t*(*df*)	*p*	Cohen's *d*
	M	SD	M	SD			
Perceived Stress	1.83	.77	2.04	.76	.456(120)	.649	.090
Self-Compassion	3.13	.73	3.14	.59	.060 (120)	.950	-.012
Well-being	6.05	1.59	5.72	1.26	1.114 (120)	.270	.221
Positive Emotion	5.61	2.14	5.34	1.75	659 (120)	.510	.131
Engagement	5.84	1.85	5.34	2.21	1.269 (120)	.210	.252
Relationships*	5.98	2.44	5.73	1.88	.608 (120)	.550	.109
Meaning	6.86	2.20	6.81	1.74	.133 (120)	.890	.026
Achievement	6.38	1.74	6.17	1.66	.613 (120)	.540	.122
Happiness	5.56	2.63	5.31	2.33	.500 (120)	.618	.099
Loneliness	5.93	3.39	5.33	3.16	.904 (120)	.370	.179
Negative Emotion	4.96	2.03	4.60	1.91	.897(120)	.370	.178
Health (PERMA-WWS)	5.25	2.54	4.35	2.82	1.767 (120)	.080	.351
Health Compared to Pre-Pandemic	1.58	1.08	1.52	1.00	.281(116)	.779	.058
Intent to Remain in Position Next Year	2.84	1.42	2.87	1.43	.098(111)	.922	.393
Job Satisfaction Compared to Pre-Pandemic	1.56	1.17	1.53	1.06	.163(119)	.871	.032
Relationship with Supervisor*	5.24	3.45	4.46	2.70	1.336(120)	.185	.240

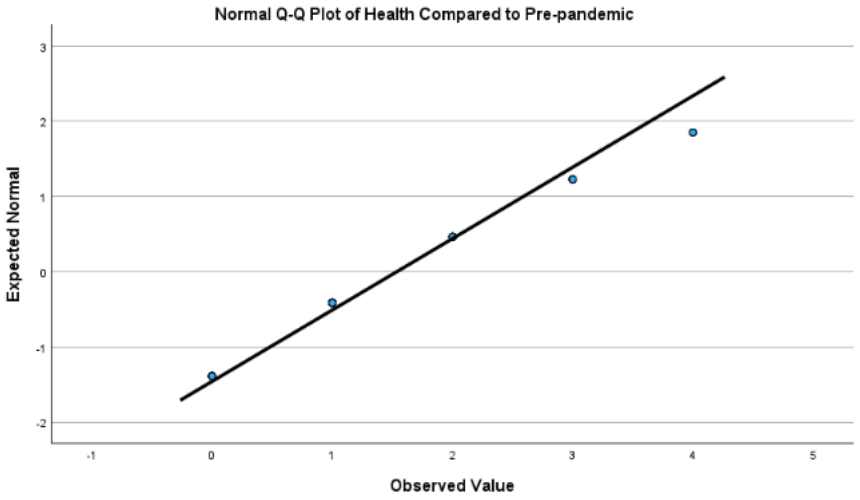
Note. *Equal variances NOT assumed

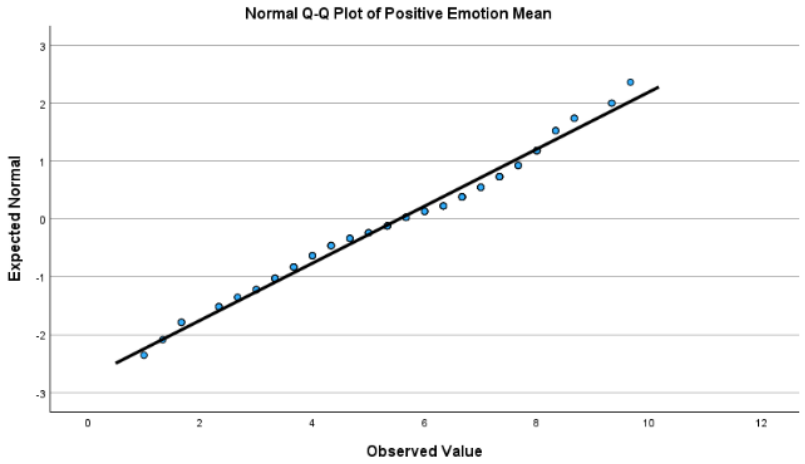
Figure 2

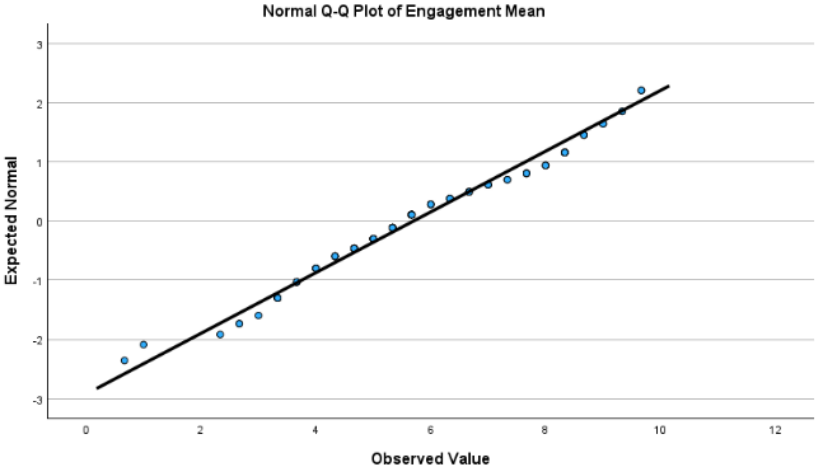
Q-Q Plots Study Variables

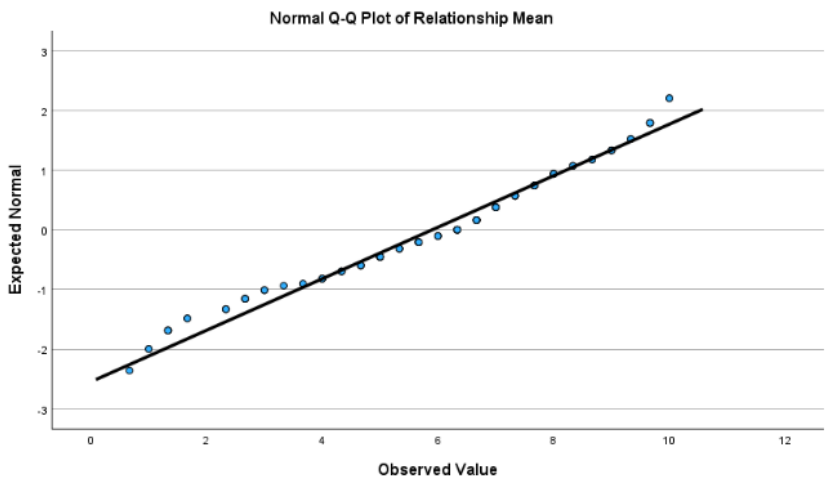


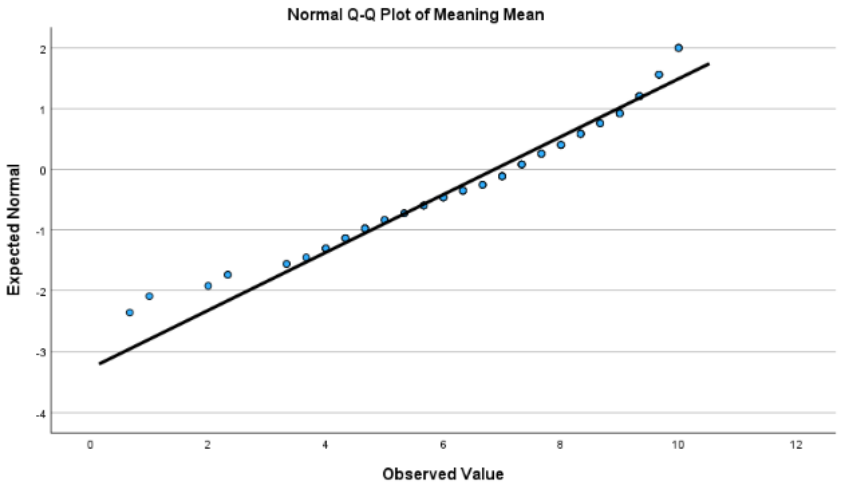

Normal Q-Q Plot of Job satisfaction Compared to Pre-pandemic
Expected Normal
Observed Value

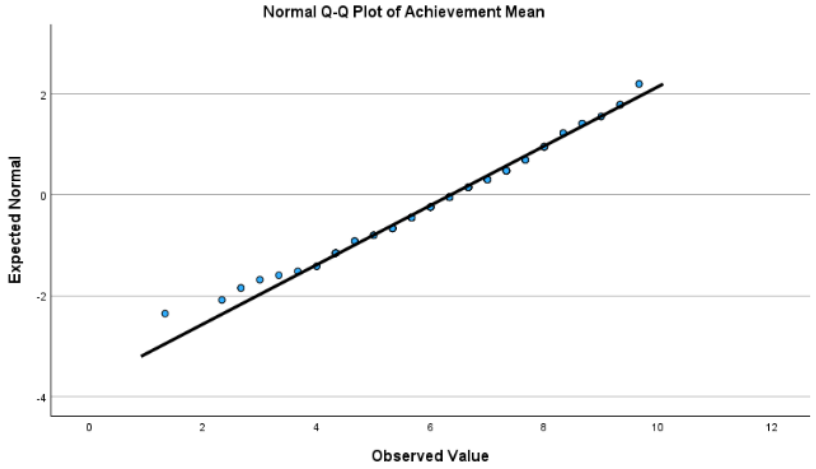

Normal Q-Q Plot of Health Compared to Pre-pandemic
Expected Normal
Observed Value

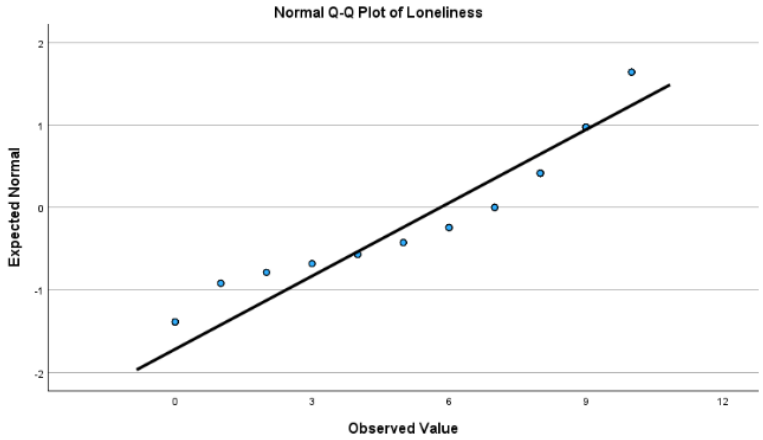

Normal Q-Q Plot of Positive Emotion Mean
Expected Normal
Observed Value

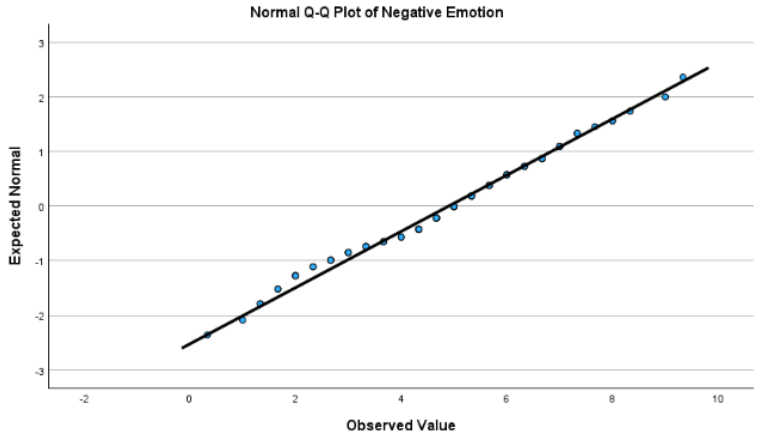

Normal Q-Q Plot of Engagement Mean
Expected Normal
Observed Value


Normal Q-Q Plot of Relationship Mean
Expected Normal
Observed Value

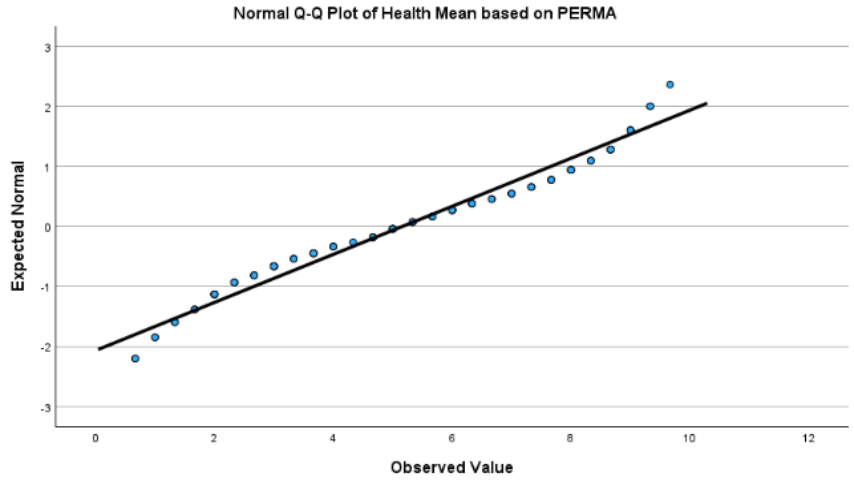

Normal Q-Q Plot of Meaning Mean
Expected Normal
Observed Value


Normal Q-Q Plot of Achievement Mean
Expected Normal
Observed Value


Normal Q-Q Plot of Loneliness
Expected Normal
Observed Value


Normal Q-Q Plot of Negative Emotion
Expected Normal
Observed Value


Normal Q-Q Plot of Happiness
Expected Normal
Observed Value


Normal Q-Q Plot of Health Mean based on PERMA
Expected Normal
Observed Value

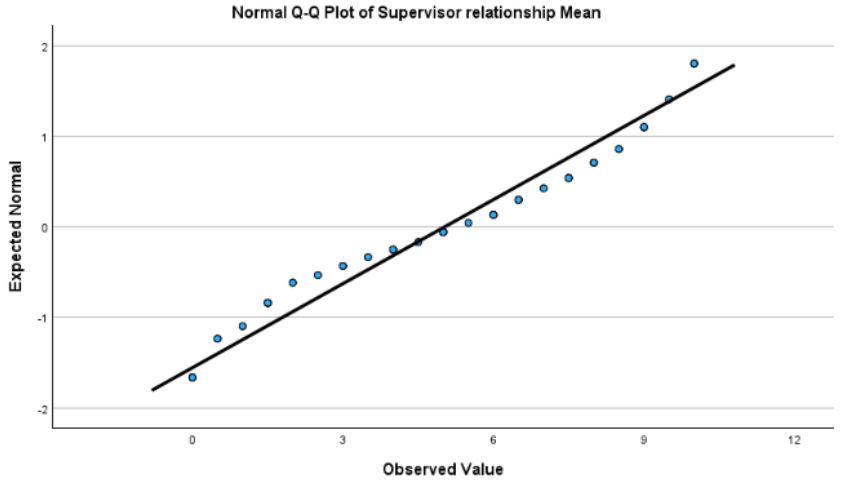
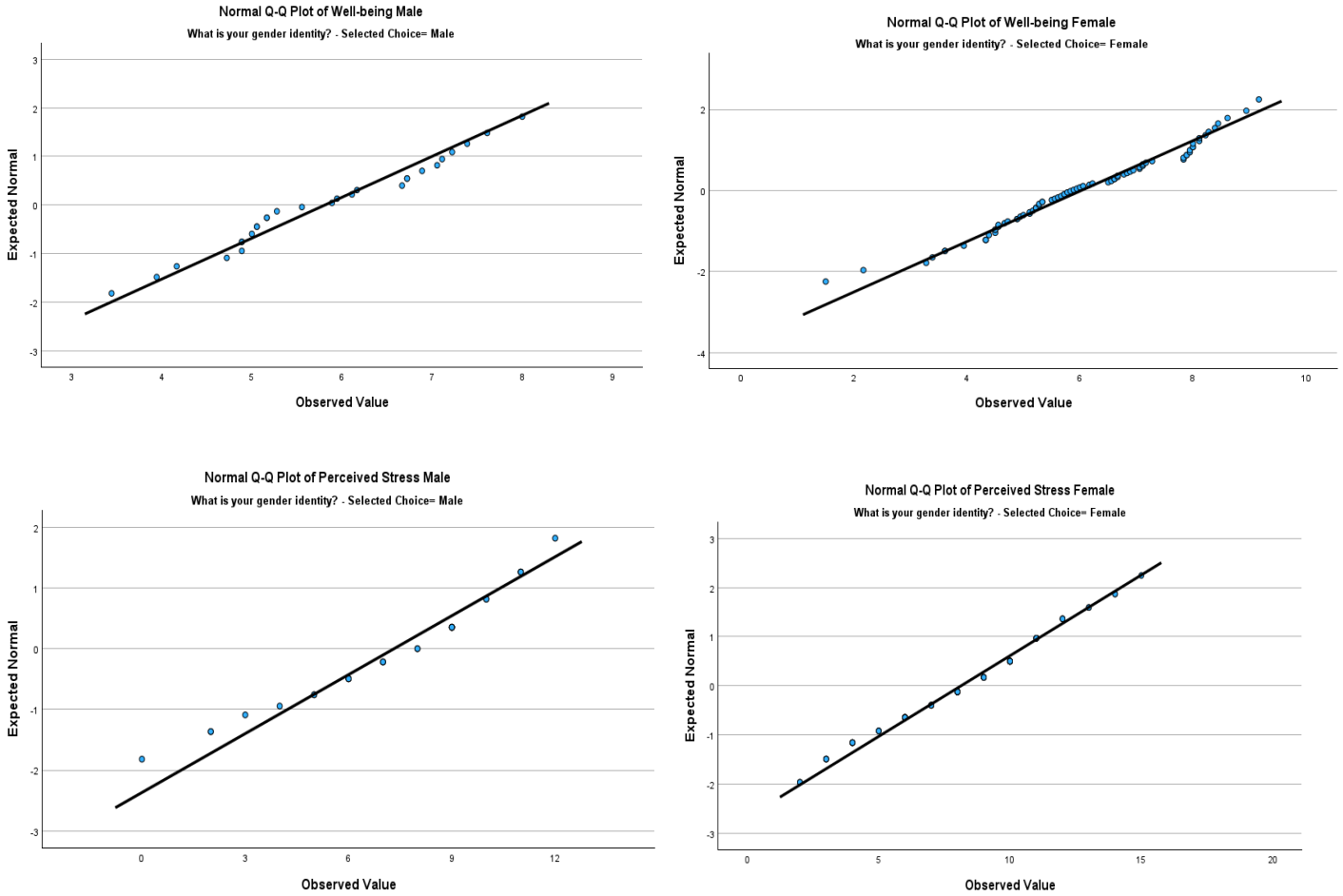
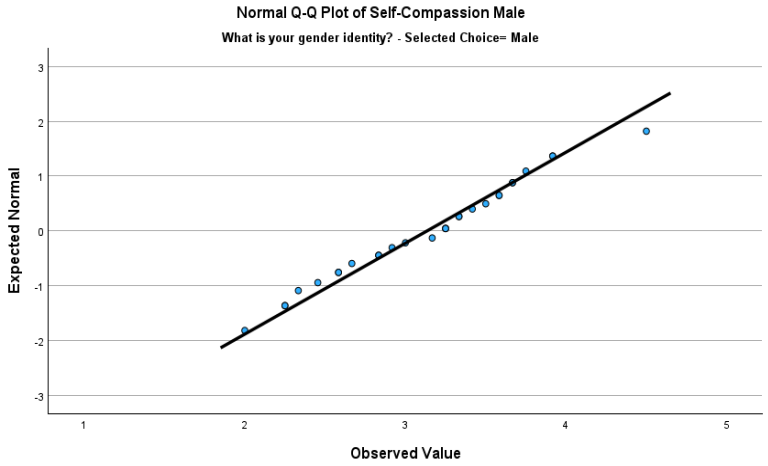
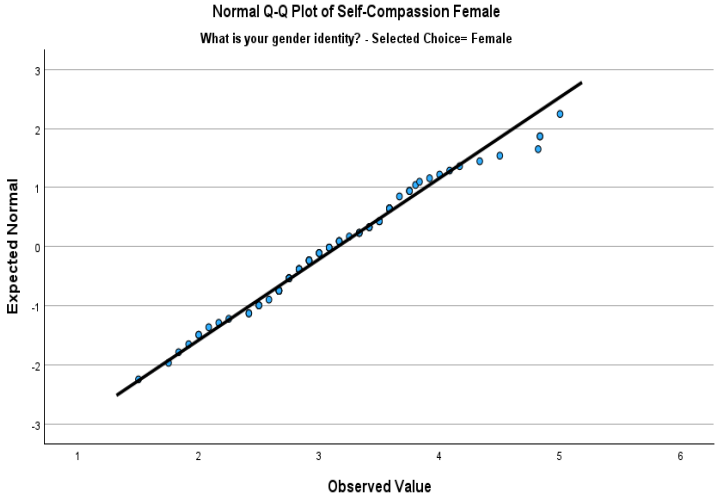

Normal Q-Q Plot of Supervisor relationship Mean
Expected Normal
Observed Value

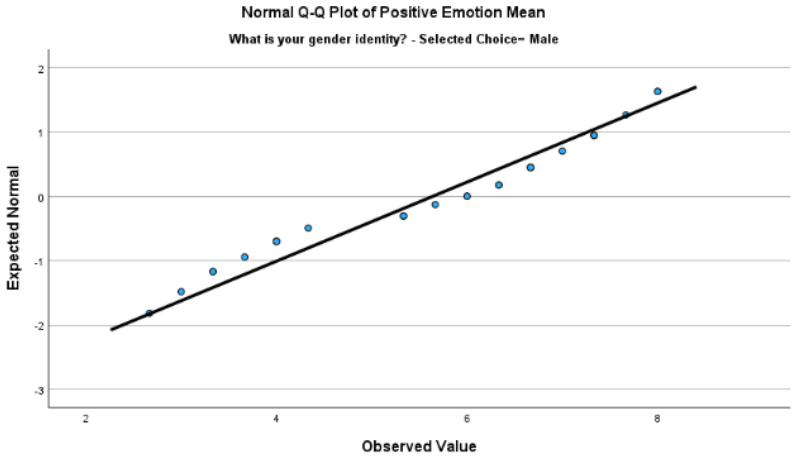
Figure 3

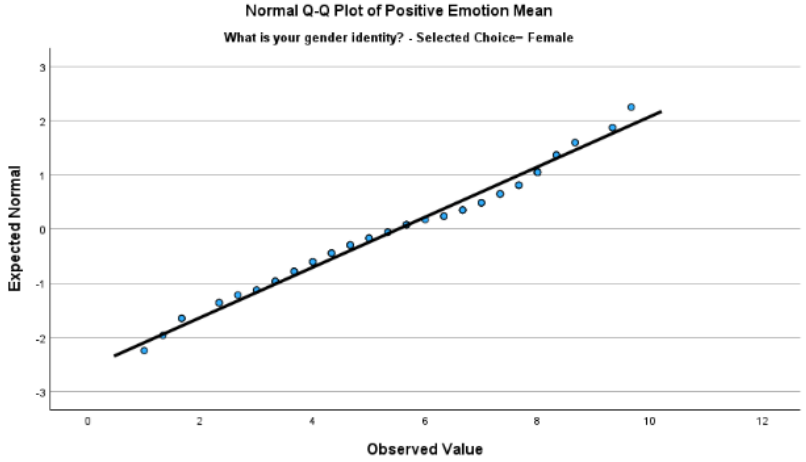
Q-Q Plots Study Variables by Gender

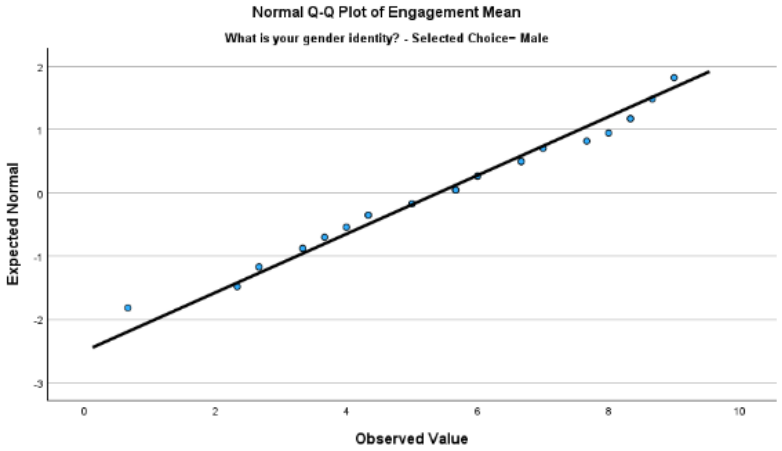


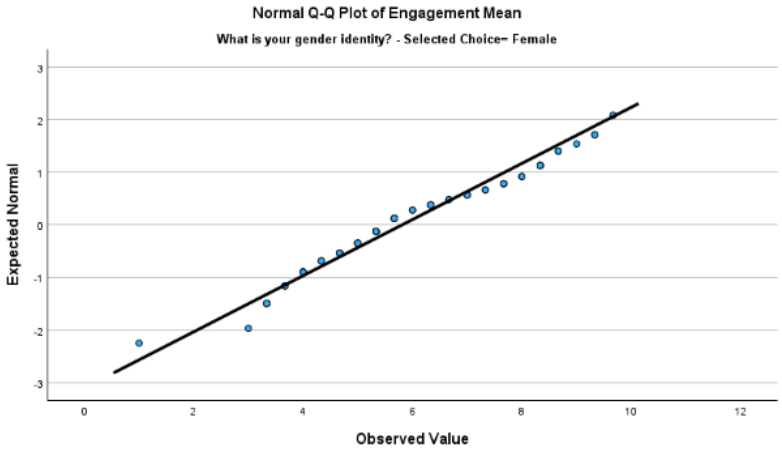

Normal Q-Q Plot of Self-Compassion Male
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Male
Expected Normal
Observed Value

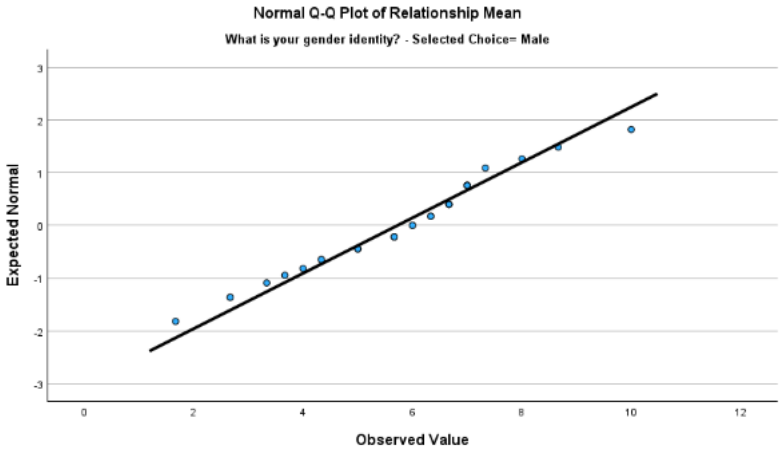

Normal Q-Q Plot of Self-Compassion Female
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Female
Expected Normal
Observed Value

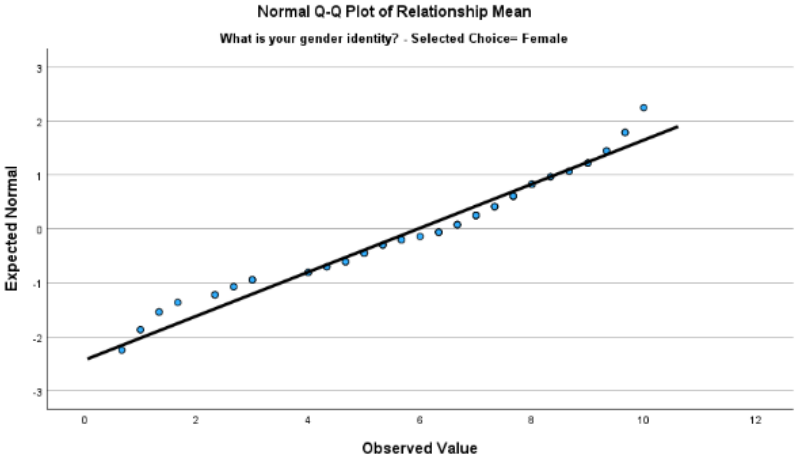

Normal Q-Q Plot of Positive Emotion Mean
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Male
Expected Normal
Observed Value

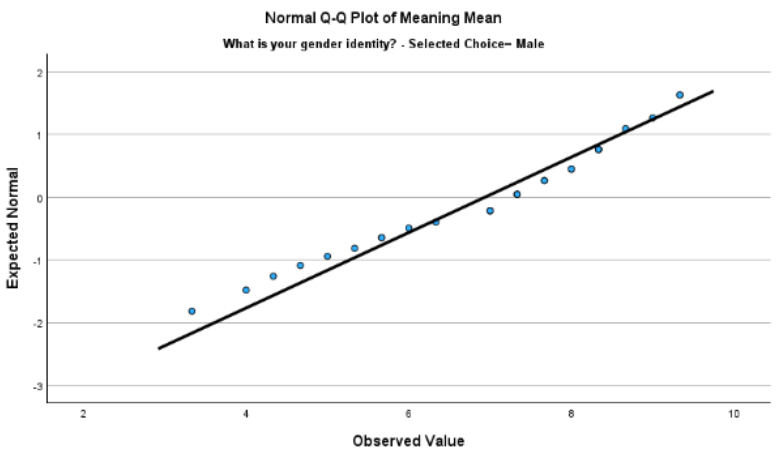

Normal Q-Q Plot of Positive Emotion Mean
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Female
Expected Normal
Observed Value

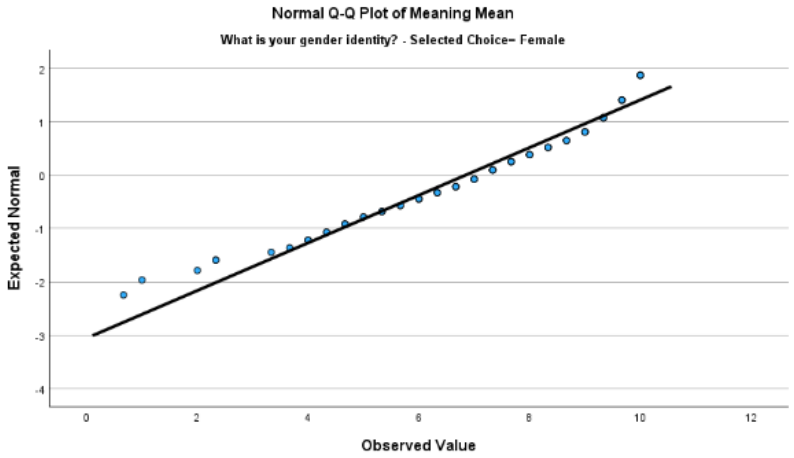

Normal Q-Q Plot of Engagement Mean
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Male
Expected Normal
Observed Value

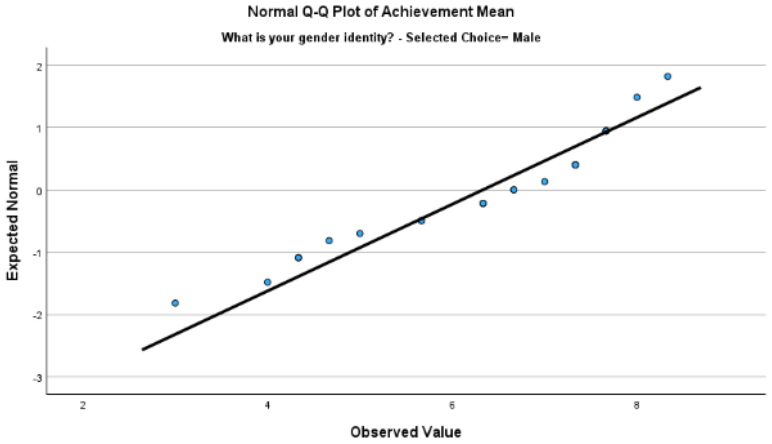

Normal Q-Q Plot of Engagement Mean
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Female
Expected Normal
Observed Value

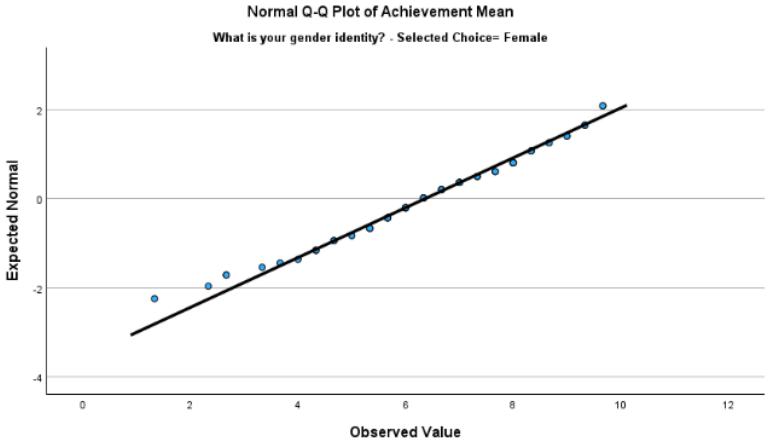

Normal Q-Q Plot of Relationship Mean
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Male
Expected Normal
Observed Value

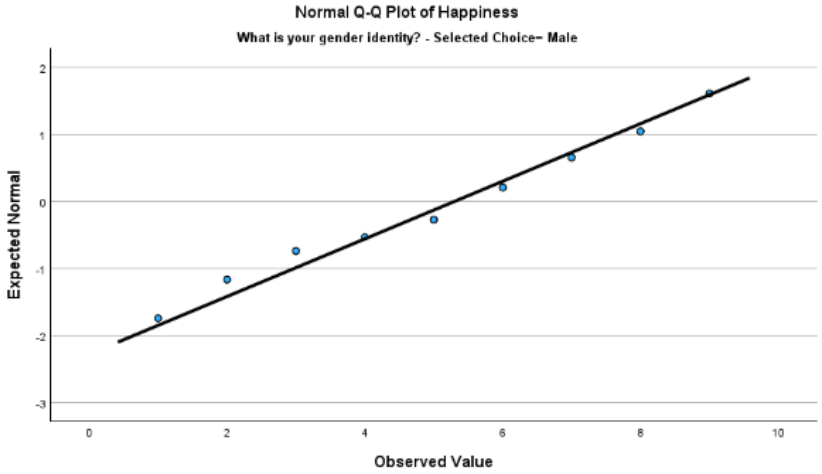

Normal Q-Q Plot of Relationship Mean
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Female
Expected Normal
Observed Value

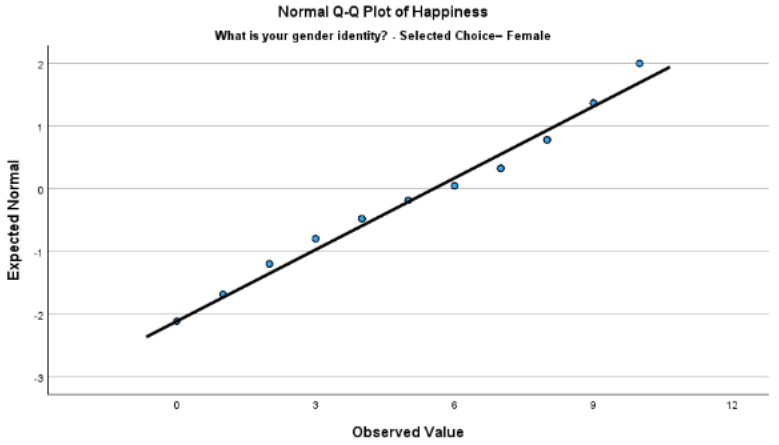

Normal Q-Q Plot of Meaning Mean
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Male
Expected Normal
Observed Value

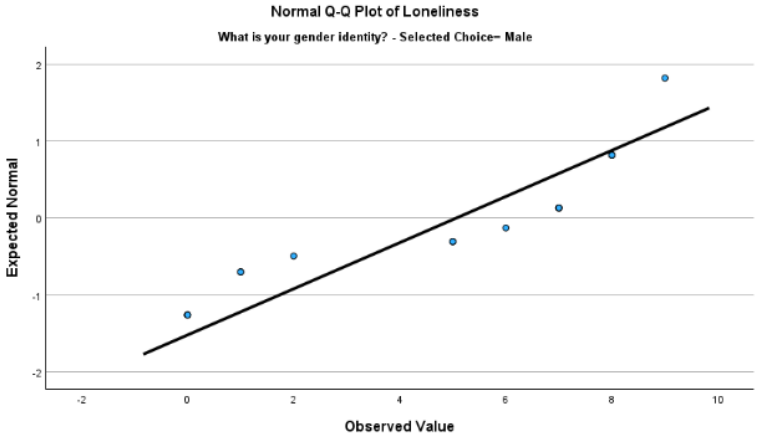

Normal Q-Q Plot of Meaning Mean
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Female
Expected Normal
Observed Value

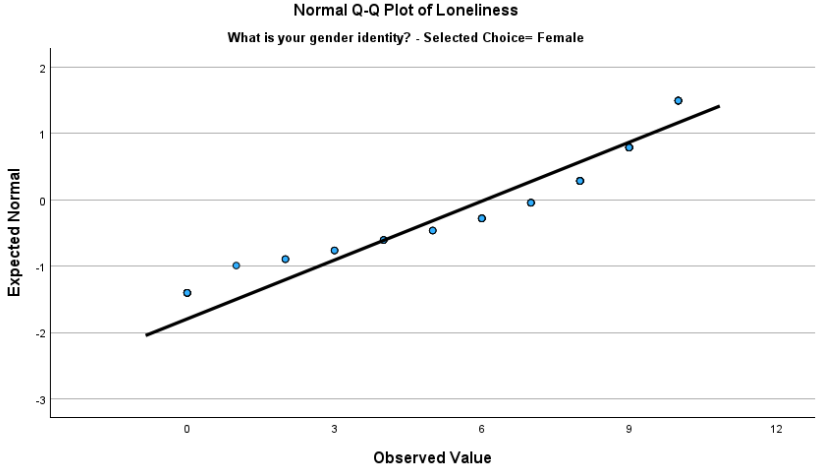

Normal Q-Q Plot of Achievement Mean
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Male
Expected Normal
Observed Value

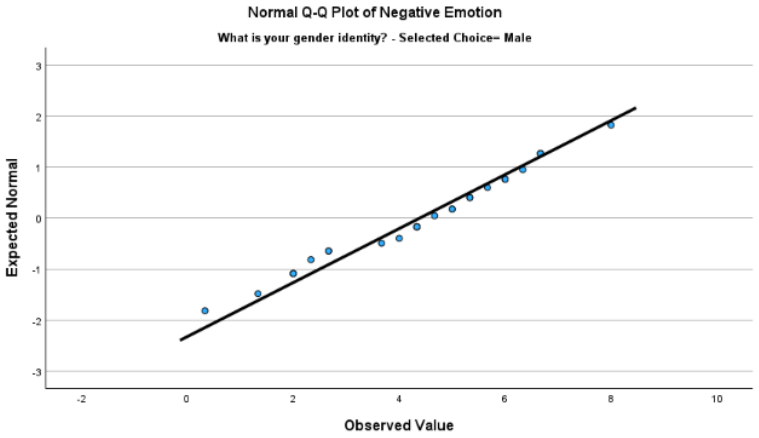

Normal Q-Q Plot of Achievement Mean
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Female
Expected Normal
Observed Value

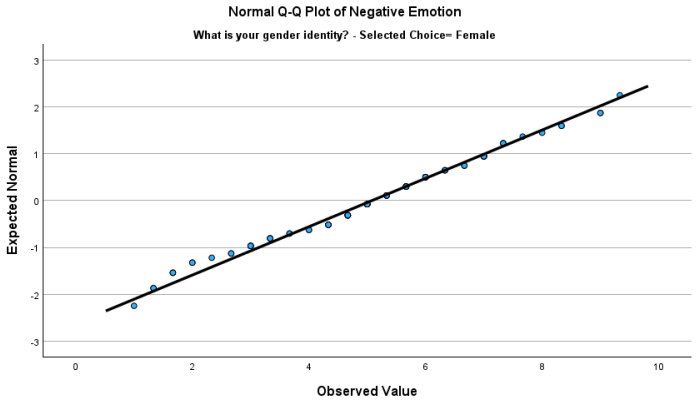

Normal Q-Q Plot of Happiness
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Male
Expected Normal
Observed Value

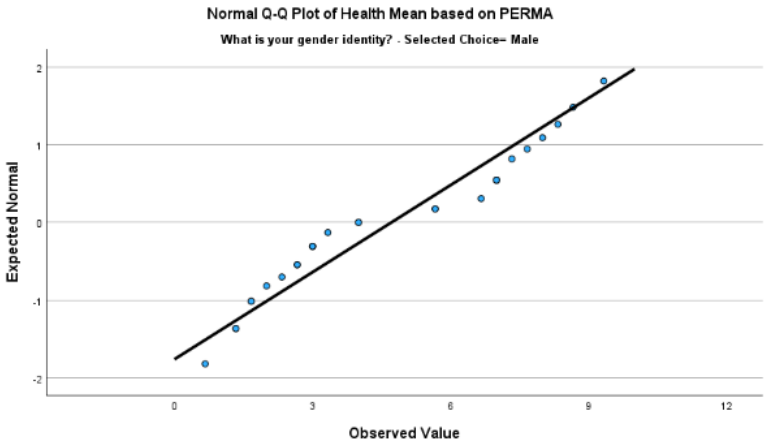

Normal Q-Q Plot of Happiness
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Female
Expected Normal
Observed Value

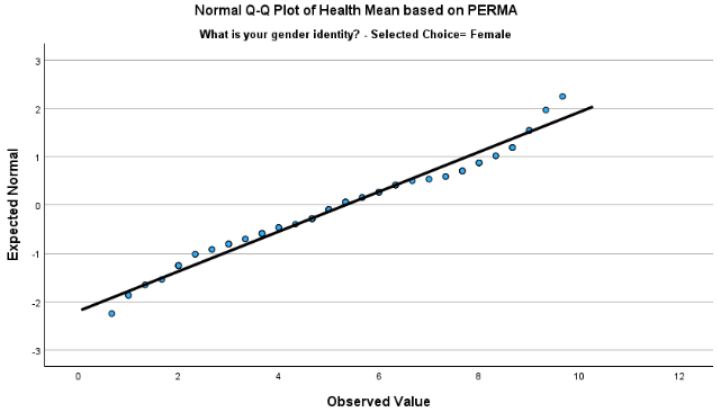

Normal Q-Q Plot of Loneliness
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Male
Expected Normal
Observed Value

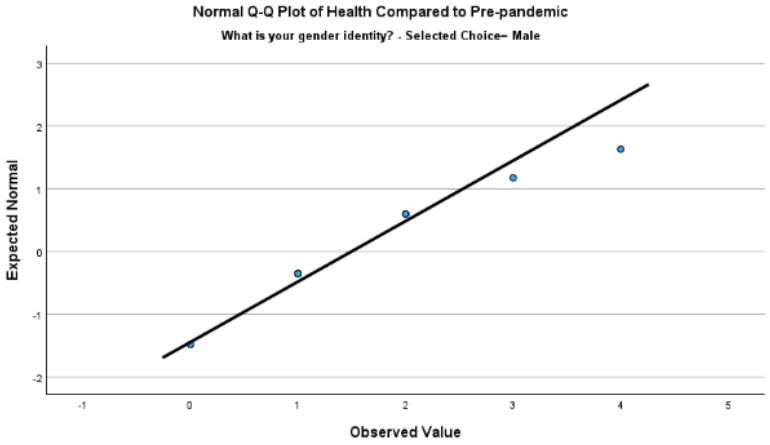

Normal Q-Q Plot of Loneliness
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Female
Expected Normal
Observed Value

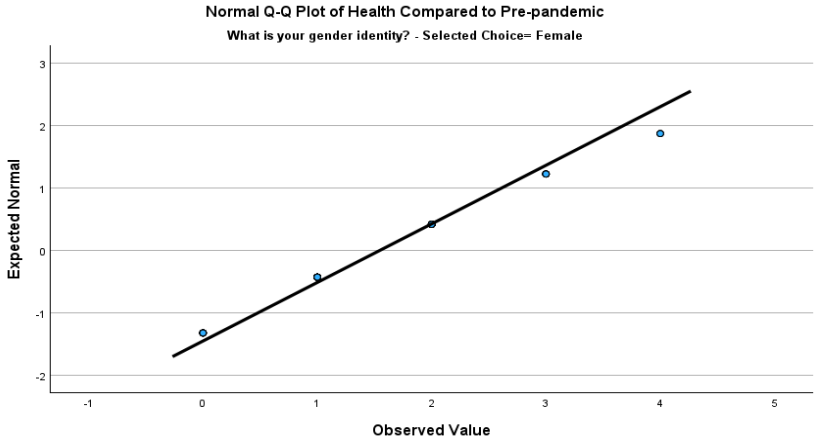

Normal Q-Q Plot of Negative Emotion
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Male
Expected Normal
Observed Value

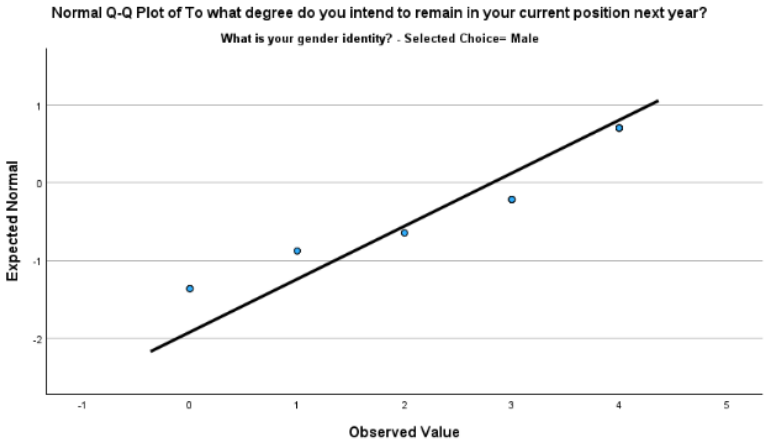

Normal Q-Q Plot of Negative Emotion
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Female
Expected Normal
Observed Value

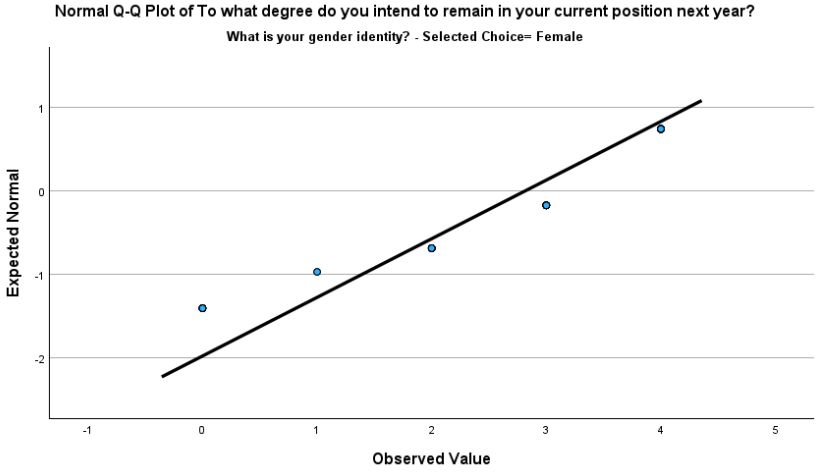

Normal Q-Q Plot of Health Mean based on PERMA
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Male
Expected Normal
Observed Value

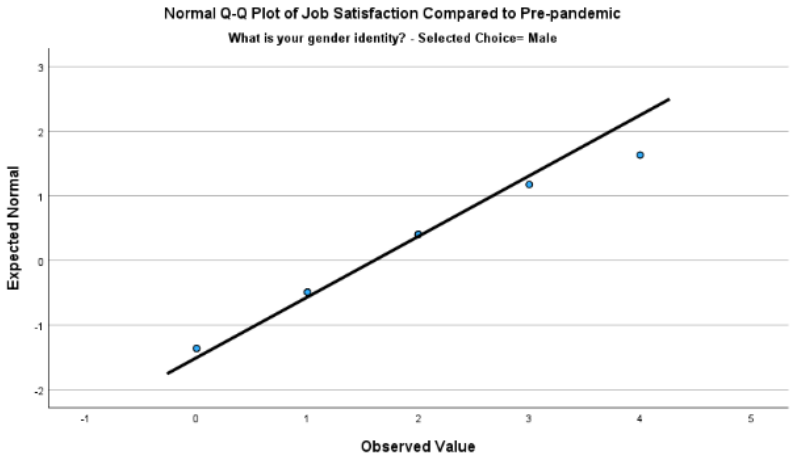

Normal Q-Q Plot of Health Mean based on PERMA
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Female
Expected Normal
Observed Value

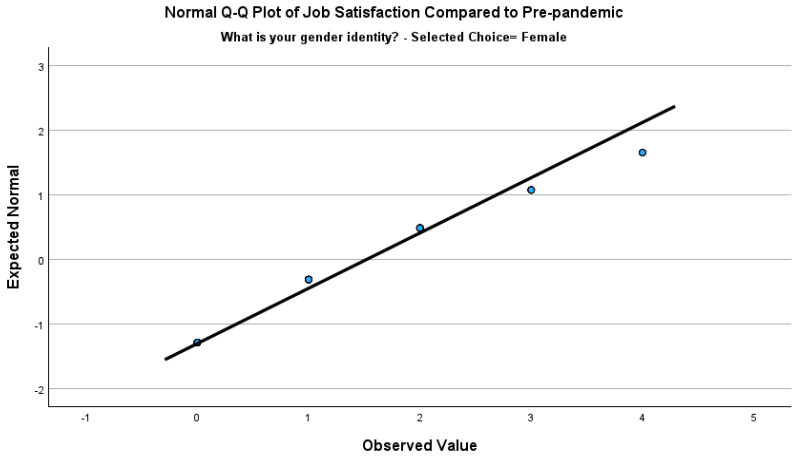

Normal Q-Q Plot of Health Compared to Pre-pandemic
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Male
Expected Normal
Observed Value

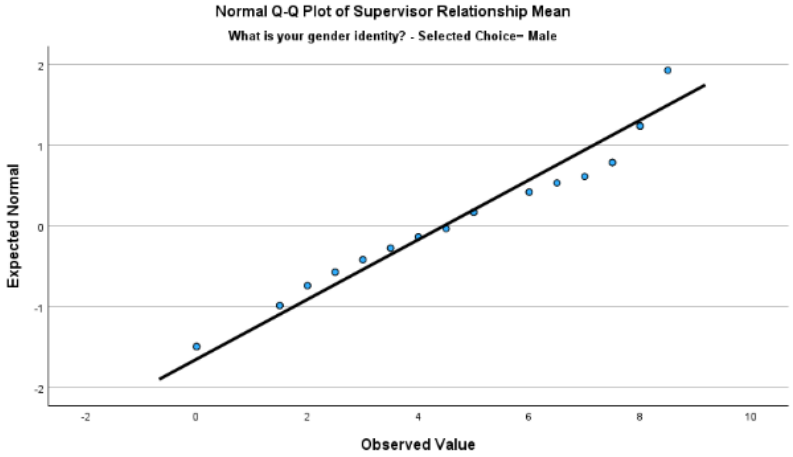

Normal Q-Q Plot of Health Compared to Pre-pandemic
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Female
Expected Normal
Observed Value


Normal Q-Q Plot of To what degree do you intend to remain in your current position next year?
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Male
Expected Normal
Observed Value


Normal Q-Q Plot of To what degree do you intend to remain in your current position next year?
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Female
Expected Normal
Observed Value


Normal Q-Q Plot of Job Satisfaction Compared to Pre-pandemic
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Male
Expected Normal
Observed Value


Normal Q-Q Plot of Job Satisfaction Compared to Pre-pandemic
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Female
Expected Normal
Observed Value


Normal Q-Q Plot of Supervisor Relationship Mean
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Male
Expected Normal
Observed Value

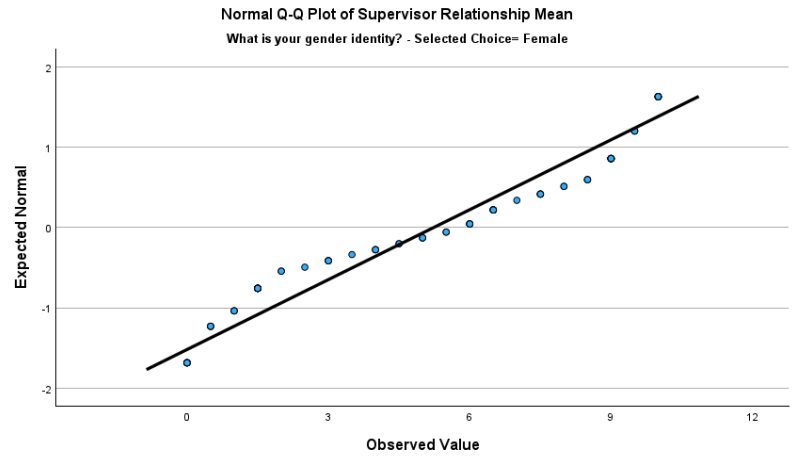
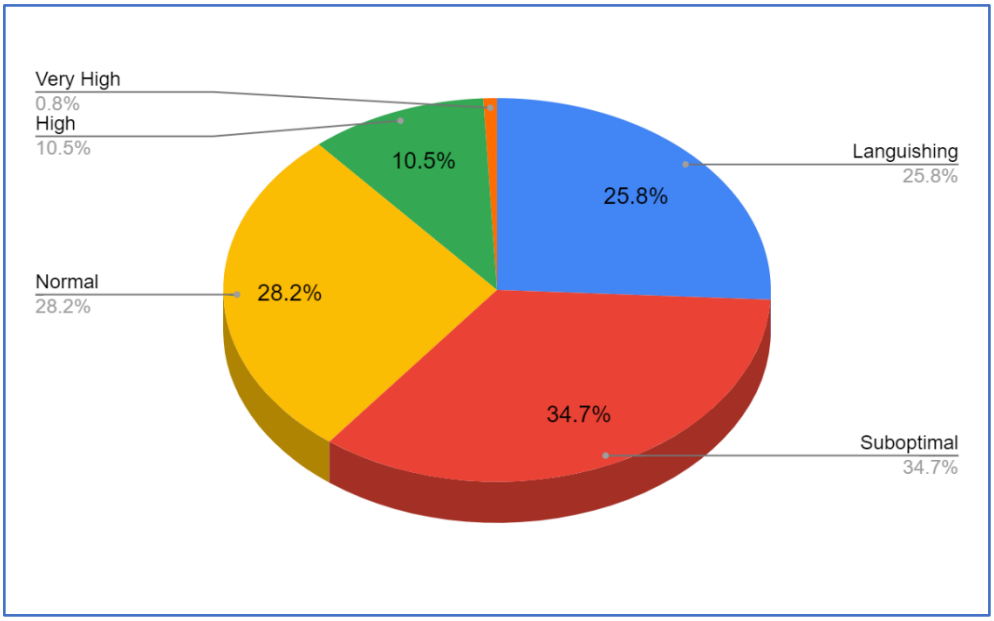

Normal Q-Q Plot of Supervisor Relationship Mean
What is your gender identity? - Selected Choice= Female
Expected Normal
Observed Value

Figure 4

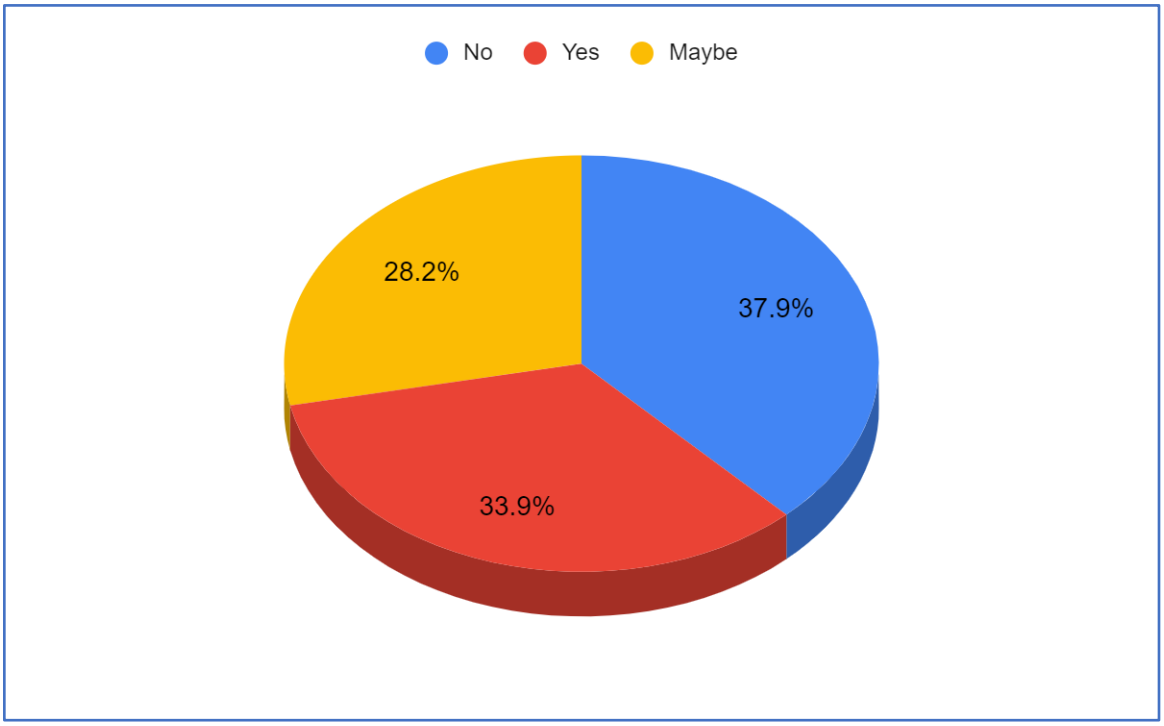
Workplace Well-Being Among Principals



Note: *N*=124

Figure 5

Principals Considering Leaving Administration



Note: *N*=124

Figure 6

Job Satisfaction and Intent to Remain (N-123)

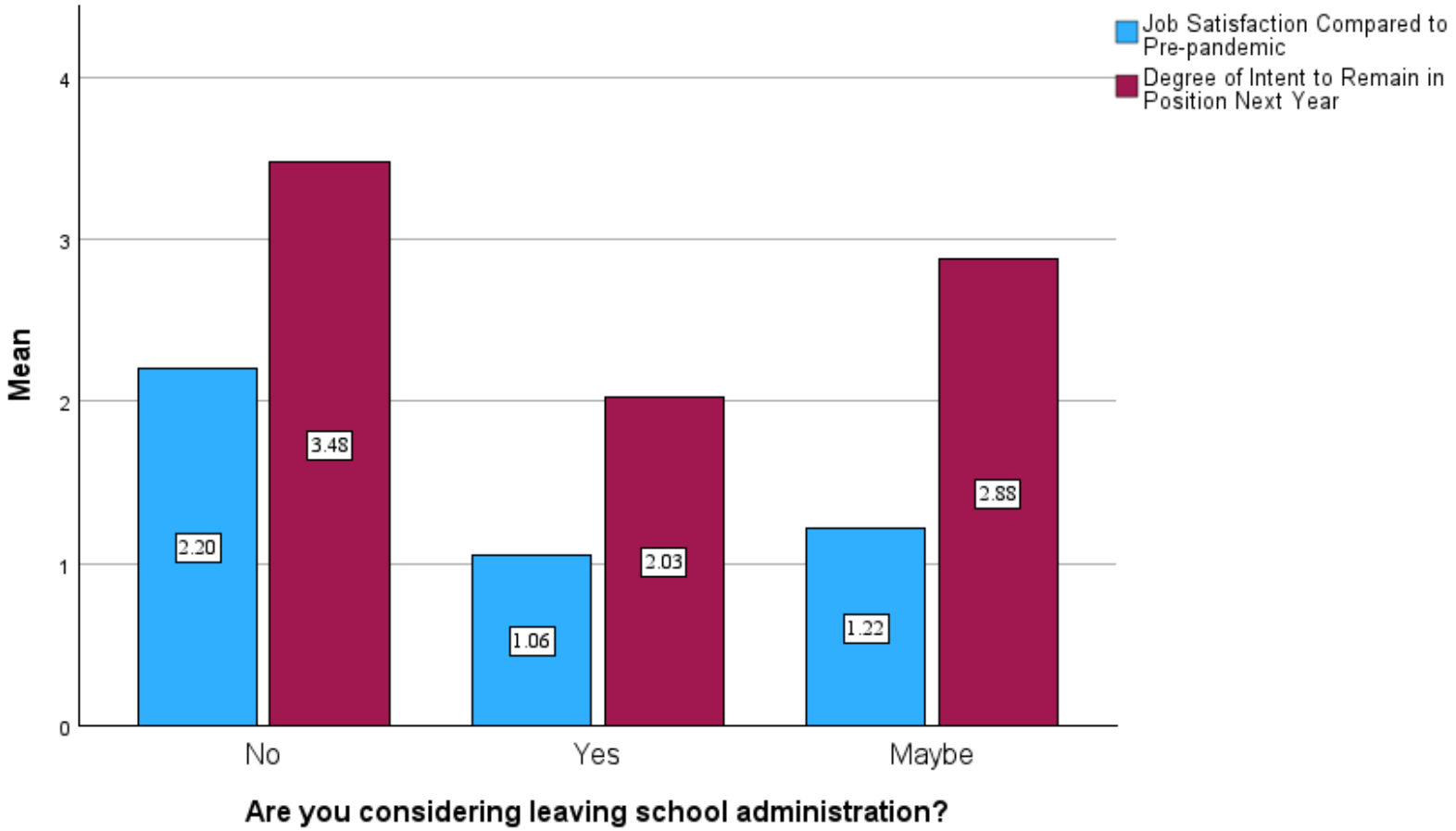
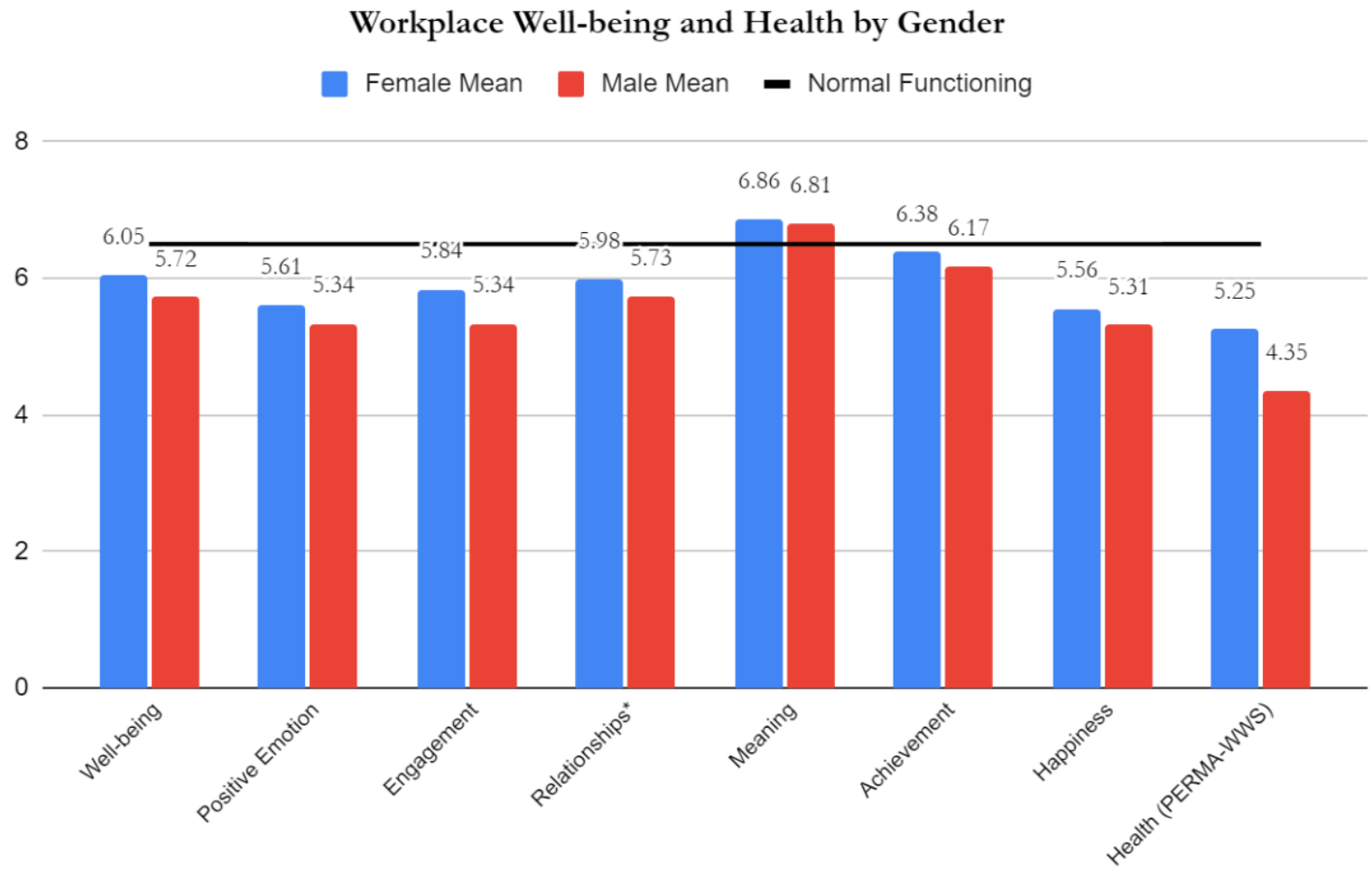


Figure 7

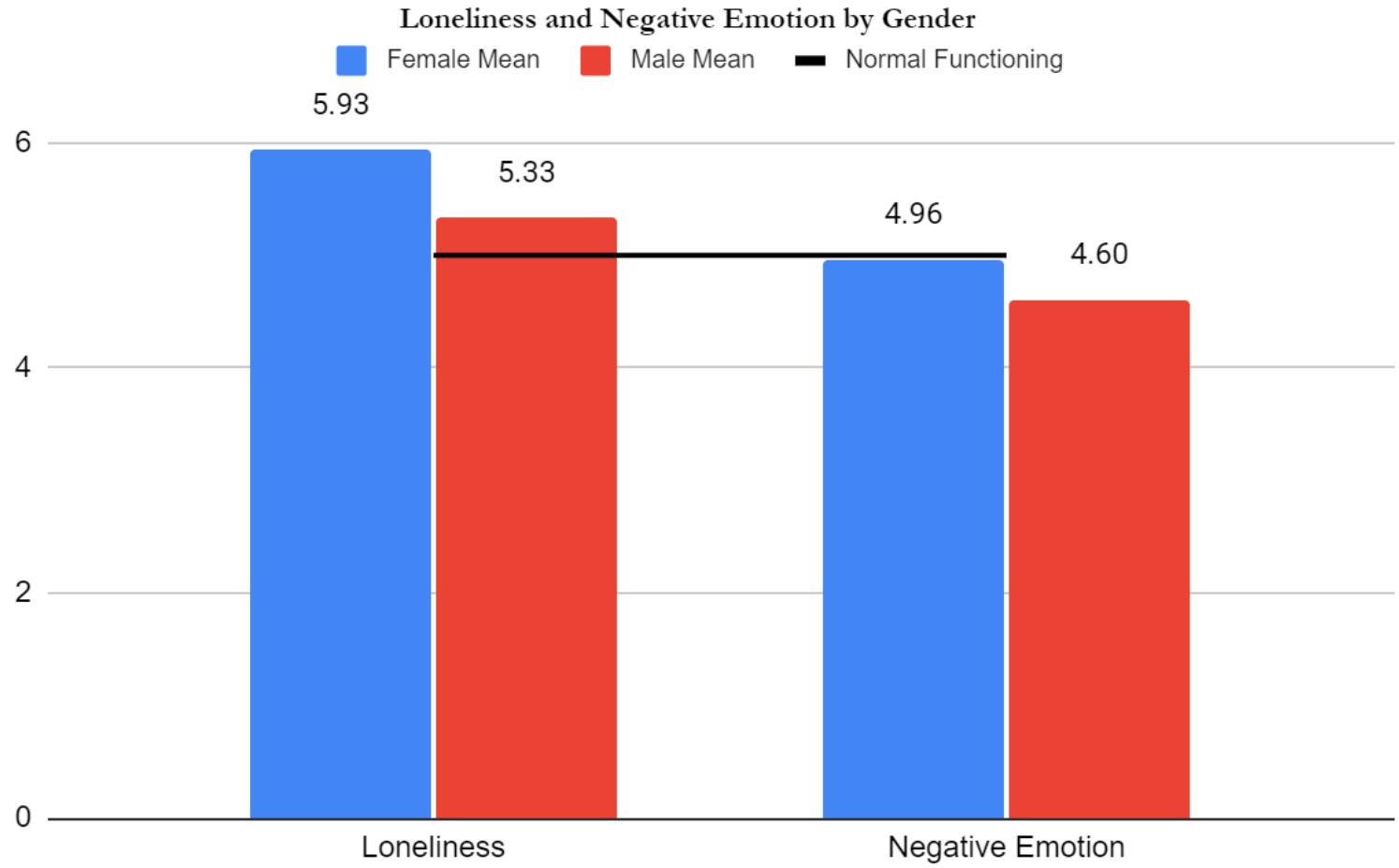
*Workplace Well-being and Health by Gender**



Note. *Normal functioning > 6.5

Figure 8

*Loneliness and Negative Emotion by Gender**



Note. *Normal functioning < 5.0

Appendix

Principal Well-Being Survey

Start of Block: Default Question Block

You are invited to participate in a survey as part of a research project examining school leader stress and well-being. As a school leader, your voice and participation will be valuable in this research. The study has been approved by the Seattle Pacific University's Institutional Review Board, [IRB# 222306015]. For more detailed information, see this Letter of Information.

The purpose of this study is to understand building administrators' (principals and assistant principals) sense of wellbeing within the context of leading schools through recovery, approximately one school year after the COVID-19 state of emergency has been lifted. Your answers will be kept strictly confidential, and the proposed study involves no known risk.

To participate in this study, you must be

(a) a school principal or assistant principal,
(b) at least 18 years old, and
(c) willing to complete a survey between the dates of April 26, 2023, and July 15, 2023.

By proceeding to answer the questions in the survey, you indicate that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding your participation in this research project and agree to participate in this study. If you do not wish to participate in this study, you may exit the survey at any time. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities.

Your answers should reflect your current state of experience. Please try to answer all questions if you are able. There is no right or wrong answer. At the end of the survey is a link if you would like to be entered into a drawing for one of two $25 Amazon Gift Cards as a token of appreciation for taking the time to complete this survey.

_____

End of Block: Default Question Block

Start of Block: Section 1

What was your leadership role in the 2022-2023 school year?

- ○ Building Principal
- ○ Assistant/Vice/Associate Building Principal
- ○ Administrative Intern
- ○ Other _____

At what building level were you an administrator in the 2022-23 school year?

- ○ Elementary
- ○ Middle/Jr. High
- ○ High
- ○ K-8
- ○ K-12
- ○ 6-12
- ○ Alternative Learning Environment (ALE - any grade)
- ○ Other _____

What is your gender identity?

- ○ Female
- ○ Male
- ○ Non-Binary
- ○ Transgender
- ○ Prefer not to disclose
- ○ Gender Not Listed, My Gender Is (Please Specify): _____

With what group/category do you most identify?

- ○ African American/Black
- ○ Asian/Asian American
- ○ Indigenous/Native American
- ○ Latinx/Hispanic
- ○ Multi-racial
- ○ Pacific Islander
- ○ White
- ○ Prefer not to disclose
- ○ I identify as (Please Specify): _____

How many years total have you been a principal and/or AP/VP?

- ○ 0-1
- ○ 2-5
- ○ 6-10
- ○ 11-15
- ○ More than 15

How would you describe your district?

- ○ Rural
- ○ Suburban
- ○ Urban

How would you describe the size your district?

- ○ Small
- ○ Medium
- ○ Large

How many administrators (Principals and APs/VPs only) are assigned to your school building?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4 or more

Are you the primary caregiver for other individuals (e.g. child, parent, spouse, adult child)?

- Yes
- No

End of Block: Section 1

Start of Block: Block 2

To what degree do you intend to remain in your current position next year?

Definitely Not	○	○	○	○	○	Definitely Remain

Are you considering leaving school administration?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

If you are considering leaving school administration, please share your primary reasons for making this decision.

If you are planning to remain in your position, please share your primary reasons for making this decision.

_____

What is your level of job satisfaction now compared to before the Covid-19 pandemic (prior to March 2020)

Significantly Less Satisfied	○	○	○	○	○	Significantly More Satisfied

Please elaborate on your level of job satisfaction now compared to before the Covid-19 pandemic (prior to March 2020).

End of Block: Block 2

Start of Block: Block 3

Please indicate your response by selecting the option representing HOW OFTEN you felt or thought a certain way in the LAST MONTH at work.

	Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Fairly Often	Very Often
In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?	○	○	○	○	○
In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?	○	○	○	○	○
In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?	○	○	○	○	○
In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?	○	○	○	○	○

What do you consider your greatest source of work stress?

Please indicate your response by selecting the option representing how often you experience these feelings:

	Never										Always
How often do you feel you are making progress toward accomplishing your work-related goals?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
At work, how often do you become absorbed in what you are doing?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
At work, how often do you feel joyful?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
At work, how often do you feel anxious?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
How often do you achieve the important work goals you have set for yourself?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Block 3

Start of Block: Block 4

Please respond to the following:

	Not at All										Completely
To what extent is your work purposeful and meaningful?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
To what extent do you receive help and support from coworkers when you need it?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
In general, to what extent do you feel that what you do at work is valuable and worthwhile?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
To what extent do you feel excited and interested in your work?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
How lonely do you feel at work?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
To what extent do you receive help and support from your supervisor when you need it?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Please respond to the following:

	Never										Always
At work, how often do you feel positive?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
At work, how often do you feel angry?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
How often are you able to handle your work-related responsibilities?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
At work, how often do you feel sad?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
At work, how often do you lose track of time while doing something you enjoy?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Please respond to the following:

	Not at All										Completely
To what extent do you feel appreciated by your coworkers?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
To what extent do you generally feel that you have a sense of direction in your work?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
How satisfied are you with your professional relationships?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
At work, to what extent do you feel contented?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
To what extent do you feel appreciated by your supervisor?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are with your work?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Block 4

Start of Block: Block 5

Please read each statement carefully before answering. Indicate how often you behave in the stated manner.	Almost Never					Almost Always
When I fail at something important to me I become consumed by	○	○	○	○	○	

feelings of inadequacy.					
I try to be understanding and patient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like.	○	○	○	○	○
When something painful happens I try to take a balanced view of the situation.	○	○	○	○	○
When I'm feeling down, I tend to feel like most other people are probably happier than I am.	○	○	○	○	○
I try to see my failings as part of the human condition.	○	○	○	○	○
When I'm going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need.	○	○	○	○	○
When something upsets me I try to keep my emotions in balance.	○	○	○	○	○
When I fail at something that's important to me, I tend to feel alone in my failure.	○	○	○	○	○
When I'm feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that's wrong.	○	○	○	○	○

When I feel inadequate in someway, I try to remind myself that feelings of inadequacy are shared by most people.	○	○	○	○	○	End of
I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies.	○	○	○	○	○	
I'm intolerant and impatient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like.	○	○	○	○	○	

Block: Block 5

Start of Block: Block 6

Compared to others of your same age and gender, how is your health?

Terrible	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Excellent

How satisfied are you with your current physical health?

Not at All	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Completely

In general, how would you say your health is?

Terrible	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Excellent

How is your physical health now compared to before the Covid-19 pandemic (prior to March 2020)?

Significantly Worse	○	○	○	○	○	Significantly Better

Please elaborate on your answers above regarding your current physical health:

End of Block: Block 6

Start of Block: Block 7

Is there anything else you would like to share about your work related stress and well-being that will provide insights into your previous answers?

End of Block: Block 7