

Investigating the Occupational Well-being of Hong Kong School Principals and Influential Psychosocial Risk Factors: A Mixed-methods Approach

The occupational well-being of school principals is crucial to the effective operation of schools. When the occupational well-being of principals declines it significantly affects school functioning, and whole-school well-being also declines. In some jurisdictions, a decline in the occupational well-being of principals has led to high attrition rates and a shortage of qualified principals. Indeed, understanding the occupational well-being of principals has become a priority for researchers around the world but has largely been neglected in Hong Kong. Addressing this gap in knowledge is critical given the current social and political instability in Hong Kong. In this turbulent environment, principals need to take special care not only of the well-being of their students and staff but also of their own well-being to maintain the development and effective and sustainable functioning of their schools. Thus, the high risk to principals posed by the current Hong Kong context makes research into understanding and identifying concrete ways to support the well-being of principals both timely and urgent.

Building on my previous research on the well-being of principals and teachers (Chen, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2020; Chen & Guo, 2018) and informed by research on the occupational health and wellbeing of principals by the Co-Investigator (Co-I) (Riley (2018), this project has two aims: 1) to validate two robust instruments for evaluating principals' well-being and influential psychosocial risk factors, namely, the Assessment of Quality of Life (AQoL-8D) and the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ-II), using a sample of Hong Kong principals; and 2) to investigate principals' occupational well-being and influential psychosocial risk factors at work in the current Hong Kong context.

To achieve these aims, the proposed project will employ an explanatory sequential research design using a mixed-methods approach. First, a quantitative survey study will be conducted to validate the AQoL-8D and COPSOQ-II and explore the occupational well-being and influential psychosocial risk factors with a sample of at least 300 principals (approximately 150 primary and 150 secondary) in Hong Kong. The effects of participants' individual-related, school-related, and context-related characteristics will be also examined in relation to principals' well-being. Second, a qualitative study comprising in-depth individual interviews will be conducted with a sample of 48 principals (24 primary and 24 secondary) to elaborate the findings from the quantitative data analysis. This phase of the project will further explore how influential psychosocial risk antecedents and relevant participants' individual-related, school-related, and context-related characteristics affect the occupational well-being of principals in depth.

This project is expected to improve the capacity of principals and their schools to serve the community, elucidate the psychosocial drivers that seed success and wellbeing, build Hong Kong's human capital, and enrich and advance the international research agenda in relation to theory, research, and practice. First, this project will produce two validated surveys (Chinese version), the COPSOQ-II and the AQoL-8D, for educational settings and enrich the understanding of principals' well-being and psychosocial risk factors using a Hong Kong sample. The findings will have the potential to construct a framework on the nature of principals' well-being and their influential antecedents for future research. This will advance the knowledge base of principals' well-being. Practically, the project will generate knowledge to support the well-being of Hong Kong principals and suggest ways to improve working conditions and school functioning. The findings will inform the development of training programs and interventions for the preparation, selection, and on-going support of principals. The project will afford international comparisons with similar studies in Australia, New Zealand, Finland, and Ireland.