# Mixed Messages: The enduring significance of email in school principals' work.

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## INTRODUCTION

Digital technology is now an unavoidable element of contemporary schooling and, by extension, a key element of contemporary school leadership. Day-to-day school activities are now sustained by various digital technologies – from email to online calendars, learning management systems to text messaging. Studies of schools and digital technologies have explored the implications of this ever-expanding digital landscape in terms of changing form of school management and governance, intra-school communication, and ways of working with students (e.g., Hogan et al., 2018; Selwyn et al., 2017; Williamson, 2019). Yet, while there is a thriving academic literature on issues relating to the use of digital technologies for teaching and learning, there has been little examination of how digital technologies impact on the working lives of school leaders themselves, or how their effects might be mitigated. This article sets out to redress this shortfall - developing realistic understandings of how school principals are using digital technologies in their day-to-day work – with a particular focus on the enduring presence of email. In doing so, we contribute to the fields of educational leadership and the digital sociology of education, though our findings have relevance for research into digital labour and the work of educators more broadly.

Our focus on an old 'new' technology such as email is deliberate. Our reasons for doing so are twofold. The first is our recognition that while many recent advances in digital technology are now evident in modern school leadership, email remains a long-standing – and seemingly unshakable – element of

principals' work. For example, despite industry hyperbole, few school leadership teams are making sustained use of 'business intelligence systems', 'predictive analytics' or AI decision-making software to guide recruitment, procurement and planning. While a few school principals make extensive professional use of social media such as Twitter and Facebook, these remain a minority of the overall workforce. In contrast, email remains one of the core defining digital technologies in the working lives of nearly all school principals, with the volume of principals' email use appearing to have increased continuously since the early 2000s (Pollock & Hauseman, 2019; Schiller, 2003). This is important, in light of evidence of principals' growing workloads and pressures on their time. In this sense, email remains a central component in the work of contemporary school leaders, and merits further scrutiny. Our second reason for focussing on emails is drawn directly from the data generated within this project.

We began this study intending to explore the impacts of digital technologies on the work of school principals. We wanted to better understand how the changing nature of principals' work might be affected by increasing shifts towards digital labour for educators (e.g., Selwyn et al., 2017). We anticipated wide-ranging discussions that built on existing knowledge - and offered new perspectives from leadership - about digital technologies in schools, including learning management systems, social media, and school dashboard management systems such as Queensland's *OneSchool* platform (which houses everything from student attendance and behaviour data to student achievement data and analytics). Having engaged with research about the effects of digital technologies on the types of work that happen in schools today (e.g., Manolev et al., 2019; Selwyn, 2021; Williamson, 2019), we were surprised that our participants focussed quickly and specifically on emails, with very little discussion about other digital technologies. The extent to which emails have permeated school leadership is a clear and important finding of our research. In this paper we focus on the ways principals described emails influencing the intensification and extension of their work, with particular attention to the affective impact of emails on their working lives.


### Background: Email and the intensification of principals' work

Contemporary forms and usages of 'email' are significantly different from the 'email' of the early 2000s. Email services are now integrated and 'synched' with all manner of other apps and software – notably school management systems and electronic calendars. Perhaps most significantly, today email is accessible across all manner of mobile devices. What was once confined to a 'fixed' desktop computer can now be accessed continuously through personal smartphones and other mobile devices. The 'ping' of an email alert is now a familiar part of every waking hour – whether an individual is 'in work' or not. Without considerable amounts of willpower and reconfiguring one's system settings, the default position is for an email user to be 'always on' – a situation that might be experienced as relieving the pressure of being in control of one's work, or a source of additional work-related pressure and stress (Cambier & Vlerick, 2020; Stich et al., 2019). Either way, while it may not be seen as

a cutting-edge technology, email remains a central digital component of most workplaces – schools included. As David Levy (2016, p.44) concludes:

> It isn't hard to see why email persists. We use it so extensively, especially in the workplace, because it is the common coin of the realm, because we have a great deal of facility with it that comes from many years of experience, and because it works.

One of the key emerging contentions from the school leadership literature is the extent to which digital technologies such as email are associated with changes in the nature and form of principals' work. As such, this article follows a growing body of previous research on the nature of principals' work – not least the sociological literature on recent intensifications and extensions of principals' work. In this paper, we take up the definition of work intensification as experiencing an increase in the intensity and pace of workload – thereby encompassing common traits of contemporary school principalship such as completing more tasks, taking on extra roles and therefore "doing more on a day-to-day basis" (Lawrence et al., 2019, p. 189). Pollock and Hauseman (2019) describe work intensification as resulting from an increasing pressure to do more with less, to meet more targets and measurable outcomes, and to be responsive to a greater range of demands from external sources.

Of course, work intensification is not unique to schools and school principals. For example, Franke (2015) characterises feelings of being rushed and having too much to do as being typical in contemporary Western societies, noting that work intensity has increased significantly since 1991, stabilising on a high level since 2005. Regardless of sector, work intensification has been shown consistently to have negative effects on employees' health and wellbeing (Williamson & Myhill 2008). Numerous studies cite work intensification as a key challenge facing employers and organisations today (Lawrence et al., 2019; Williamson & Myhill, 2008). It has been suggested that work intensification in knowledge industries is being exacerbated by "information and communication overload" (Lawrence et al., 2019, p. 189) and that this has flow-on effects for employee engagement, productivity, and health and wellbeing.

Against this background, this paper joins the growing literature detailing the particular ways these issues are playing out in the work of school teachers and leaders. Researchers have responded to the clear increases in volume and complexity of tasks being undertaken by educators over the past 30 years (Pollock & Hauseman, 2019) – detailing educators' ongoing loss of control over their work in school systems that face increased external scrutiny and mounting accountabilities which direct work from a distance (Brennan et al., 2015; Kickert, 1995). This has led to a distinct body of research examining the correlation between increasing workloads in schools and symptoms of burnout for educators (Lawrence et al., 2019; Williamson & Myhill, 2008), to which this paper contributes.

While this literature has tended to focus primarily on the effects of intensification and workload for teachers, critical educational leadership researchers are beginning to

document the impact of increased and sustained pressures on principals' work. Recent studies have highlighted a "sociality of anxiety" (Keddie, 2013, p. 752) amongst many principals – reflected in sustained levels of heightened stress and workload (Riley et al., 2021). This literature has developed understandings of how principals' work is evolving in response to highly pressurised policy environments that are characterised by heightened external accountabilities for improved individual and institutional performance. Those heightened pressures have resulted in the *extension* of principals' work, where the intensification of work (including the pace and complexity of their work) has increased significantly to the point of extending into what was traditionally considered personal time. While not focussed on technology *per se*, our own previous research (Heffernan, 2018; Selwyn et al., 2017) has begun to point to the ways digital technologies (including email, mobile phones, online reporting and monitoring of schools) are complicit in sustaining expectations of constant availability for principals, changing the nature of their working lives in the process.

The intensification and extension of principals' work has significant implications in the current policy climate, where concerns about principal wellbeing are ongoing. For example, Riley et al. (2021) have conducted over a decade of longitudinal research that consistently highlights principals as a group being at high risk of fatigue, mental health decline, and burnout due to the intensity of their work. Concerns have subsequently been raised about issues of attraction and retention. This paper contributes to further understandings of leaders' experiences, providing nuanced accounts of some contemporary challenges that affect their ability to thrive in their work.


## CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

We draw on a number of relevant conceptual approaches to extend the issues highlighted by these existing empirical literatures. First, are the ideas and issues explored under the banner of 'virtual work' studies – i.e. "[the] range of tasks performed by humans on, in relation to or in the aftermath of software and hardware platforms" (Gregg & Andrijasevic, 2020, p. 1). This approach offers a rich framework for understanding the distinct ways in which digital work is spatially and temporally organised, redistributed amongst online populations, and subject to various 'networked effects' (Huws, 2013). Virtual work scholars draw attention to issues such as the productive significance of user-generated content, the increased prominence of unpaid online work and the outsourcing of online work to remote others. Another key concern raised in these literatures is the ongoing collapse of 'work' times and places, and the resulting encroachment of online work into all aspects of everyday life. Applying these concepts to the working lives of school principals therefore directs our attention toward the new forms of work and working practices that are being established through the increasing prevalence of email and associated digital technologies in school settings.

At the same time, we are mindful of the enduring relevance of 'pre-digital' concepts from the literatures on labour process and critical labour theory. While the labour

process of working as a school principal or teacher clearly differs from the industrial work that much labour process scholarship was initially rooted in, education professionals have still been noted to experience similar fragmentations, reorganisations and intensifications of their work (see Reid, 2003; Williamson & Myhill, 2008). One specific concern arising from labour process theory is the de-professionalisation of educational work, especially in terms of on-going separations of the conception of school-related work from its execution, and the opportunities for outsourcing and/or automation of tasks. These all constitute significant changes in the nature and form of control over educational labour. Of course, school principals and teachers are not subject to the subordination of their labour to capital *per se,* but more accurately should be understood as working as part of the managerial classes. As such, school principals are best understood as 'workers' in terms of being subject to ongoing impositions and struggles around their agency relationships (Armstrong, 1989). This therefore raises questions over how 'new' forms of technology-based work are implicated in long-standing struggles over trust, principals' direction over their work, and an altered sense of autonomy.

In particular, we draw upon the concepts of *work intensification and extension* to theorise these data, as informed by the conceptual foundations of critical work studies and virtual work described above. The concepts of work intensification and extension help us to analyse these broader issues of context, overwork, spatial and temporal organisation of digital work, and the unpaid labour that accompanies digital technologies in the workplace. Work intensification and extension have been taken up by researchers interested in the changing nature of schooling, and the increasing intensity and complexity of teachers' work (see Fitzgerald et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2019).

Informed by the interviews and participants' frequent discussions about their emotions, physical reactions to work, and the impact of digital work on their personal and professional relationships, we also turned to notions of affect to help us better understand the *effects* of work intensification and extension on the principals in this study. The notion of affect allows for a deeper theorisation of the flow-on effects described by principals and contributes to a growing body of literature about the emotional demands associated with leading schools (e.g., Blackmore, 2010; Mahfouz, 2020; Maxwell & Riley, 2017). As Kostogriz (2012) noted, the 'affective turn' has resulted in increased attention being paid to notions of emotions, feelings, and physical impacts of the work of educators.

Given the multiplicity of definitions of 'affect' that have been taken up in education research as part of the affective turn, we build upon Kostogriz's (2012) work about *affective labour* for educators, which recognises issues of power – in our case, this relates to leaders who are in the 'middle' in a wider system hierarchy and being held increasingly accountable, while also leading large teams of staff and working in particular ways as a result. Kostogriz's theorisation of affective labour also recognises the importance of the personal and the social, described as bodily experiences, emotions, and feelings, as well as social relations.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS and METHODS**

We developed the project with a seemingly straightforward line of questioning, i.e. **how are digital technologies being taken up in the work of school principals, and with what consequences?** In more detail, this headline question relates to these more specific areas of inquiry:

- **What work are school principals doing with digital technologies?** For example, when, where and how are principals carrying this work out? What rationales and implicit logics are inherent in this work?

- **How are digital technologies changing the nature of principals' work?** For example, how are digital technologies intensifying or extending traditional features of school principals' work? Conversely, to what extent is this work introducing new 'virtual work' characteristics into the working lives of school principals?

- **What are the broader consequences of school principals' work with digital technologies?** For example, how are digital technologies changing principals' experiences, interpretations and understandings of their work? How does principals' digital work impact on other aspects of their working (and social) lives? How does this work make school principals feel?

With these questions in mind, the remainder of this paper now goes on to develop a critically-focussed account of the digitally-related work being undertaken by school principals in the state of Queensland in Australia. Our research focussed on one school district in Australia that encompassed rural, remote, and city schools, involving 19 principals from primary and secondary government schools. This particular region was selected because we were interested in exploring the impact of rurality on school leaders' digital work. In choosing a location with a mixture of rural, remote, and city schools, we anticipated that geographic context might make a difference for principals, but this was not directly borne out in the data. Instead, career stage, perceived power within a hierarchy, and confidence in one's own autonomy made much more of a difference in principals' experiences, as will be discussed in relation to principals' capacity to counter some of the negative effects of digital technologies. The study focussed specifically on government schools so that we could capture the nuances of a large schooling system (such as departmentally-mandated software, and shared policies and practices) which would not be possible in most independent schools, for instance, which hold much more freedom for local school choice regarding these topics.

After receiving ethical clearance from our university, all principals in the region were invited to participate in a study that examined the ways digital technologies were shaping the work of school leadership. Primary, secondary, and combined (e.g., P-12) schools were invited to participate, due to commonalities shared in policies and a common mandated use of school management and reporting systems across these

sectors. The single geographical context limits generalisability, but we do not seek to generalise from these findings. They instead provide important nuanced insights into principals' experiences that reflect some common experiences across the participants' stories, and enable us to see the both the "bigger picture and the small one" about principals' working lives (Thomson & Hall, 2017). We can see patterns of the ways principals' work is changing and being carried out through digital technologies. Nineteen principals chose to participate, and were interviewed for approximately 60 minutes via telephone or video conference between June 2018 and May 2019. Semi-structured interview topics related to a wide range of digital technologies including personal devices, departmentally-mandated software, email, social media, and school-based systems. Interviews explored the consequences of digital technologies on principals' work, workload, and their lives beyond the school gate. Time was also taken to discuss policies and practices relating to digital technologies at both a state government (education department) and school-based level, as well as local community expectations about the use of digital technologies.

These interview data were then analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019) reflexive thematic analysis. We worked through the transcripts and engaged in iterative (re)readings informed by the literatures relating to the sociology of work and the sociology of digital education, as well as our understandings of the field of leadership research. This process generated themes that related broadly to key domains within those fields and reflected issues and topics that we identified as recurring within and across the interviews. As we shall now go on to discuss in subsequent sections, the following three themes are worthy of analysis:

> i. The role of email and associated digital technologies in exacerbating the intensification and extension of principals' work
> ii. Digital technologies and the affective dimensions of principals' work
> iii. Principals' capacity to counter the negative impact of digital work.


**FINDINGS**

***i. The role of email (and associated digital technologies) in exacerbating the intensification and extension of principals' work***

We began by asking interviewees to reflect on the types of digital technologies that they used in the course of their work. With only a couple of exceptions, all immediately raised their use of email, followed by school management platforms and government-specific systems. Some principals made specific mention of their schools' public Facebook pages, followed by their personal use of devices such as smartphones and laptops for everything from word-processing through to mandatory reporting.

The most commonly-recounted stories involved the dominance of email, coupled by the generally 'always-on' nature of technology-based work. The ease with which these technologies could be engaged with, coupled with perceived expectations of availability, meant the lines between working and private hours had blurred for the

majority of interviewees. One example was given by a principal when reflecting on the way their smartphone represented the 24/7 nature of their work:

> [Emails and social media are] the voice in your head that doesn't shut up. So it is quite invasive and because it's on your phone, you never actually get away from it […] and all of those things, they don't happen between nine and five, or eight and four. They happen [when] the kids have gone home [whereas] previously it wouldn't.

In particular, then, it is worth considering the various accounts we heard about email as emblematic of the digitally-mediated intensification and extension of principals' work. Indeed, interviewees were generally keen to expand at length on the changing nature of their work as played out through email (c.f. Pollock et al., 2015).

Their stories provide new insights on work intensification and extension from a leader's perspective. The extension of work into Australian teachers' lives is well documented. Particular attention has been paid to the effects of digital work for teachers. For example, Williamson and Myhill (2008, p. 30) noted that electronic communication – particularly emails – are "perceived to have added very considerably to [teachers'] workload" and teachers in their Australian study described email as "an extra job on top of preparation and marking" which takes them away from what they "should" be doing. Similar sentiments were expressed in a study of New South Wales teachers, who described the additional workload required as a result of increased digital work, including technology-based assessment and reporting (Fitzgerald et al., 2019).

In contrast, other research about Australian school leaders has reflected a similar theme to our findings - that emails were a consistent point of pressure for principals in their work (Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2020; Thompson et al., 2021). The intensification and extension of work through digital technologies, and emails in particular, was evident for the principals in this study. There are some core differences between teachers' and leaders' work that could go some way to explaining the sense of pressure felt acutely by principals in this study. First is potentially the volume of emails described by participants, who reported receiving hundreds of new emails each day that needed to be sorted through carefully because of the potential to miss vital information among what was described as a 'mountain' of emails. The second difference, and a possible reason that principals spoke about emails above all other digital technology in their work, is the nature of principals' work and how it differs to that of teachers'.

Principals are frequently reminded that they are the 'accountable officer' in their school and major issues eventually come to their attention – often when they have escalated in scale, scope, or stakes. They described needing to be 'on top' of all issues – and *possible* issues – in their schools. This was echoed by Riley et al. (2021, p. 7) who noted that "the position requires [principals] to always be alert and aware of all matters that relate to their schools, communities, and the reporting requirements, at times dealing with the most stressful of situations in life". Principals in our previous research have described being unable to switch off from their work

due to the 'incredible burden' of being responsible for addressing deeply complex challenges and their sense of responsibility as the leader of a school – and by extension, a school community (Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2020).

Because of the nature, urgency, and potential fallout of issues that arise in schools, many interviewees described checking emails continuously each day – a habit that was exacerbated by expectations of fast response times from the likes of parents, teachers, colleagues, and departmental / systemic communications. The heightened sense of urgency and rapidity of response resulted in a large number of reports from interviewees concerning occasions when emails infringed on other aspects of their lives – both work commitments and personal time. These email incursions were exacerbated by the large number of interviewees who frequently accessed work emails on mobile devices - meaning that there was little opportunity to compartmentalise their work into manageable or focussed chunks or sections. While other researchers warn of overstating the direct effects of mobile devices on the extension of working hours (Mullan & Wajcman, 2019), our interviewees did raise the constant availability associated with mobile devices as a distinct source of additional pressure and workload.

The inability to switch off is another way that work extends into principals' own time, and participants described it as being exacerbated by the presence of digital technologies and expectations of swift responses when issues are raised. For example, one interviewee described travelling away from school to attend a professional development (PD) event that they then largely failed to engage with due to being distracted by emails. In the past, it is likely that many of the issues associated with the emails on that particular day could have been resolved in the principal's absence. However, the continuity of contact associated with a personal smartphone means that participants are now rarely *really* stepping away from their work. As another interviewee reflected:

> I go to PD, on a Friday, and I'm paying attention … [but] I *really* have to answer my emails while I'm in the PD. Because again it's around the urgency of the need. The fact that some staff […] are part time, so if I don't do it now, it could be three days before they do it. So, I *have* to action things as quickly as possible. So, while I'm attending to PD I still have to do that. It's not particularly good for the person who's presenting, but that's a fact of life that I have to do.

The lack of disconnecting physically and metaphorically from the pressures of the principalship has serious implications for principals' health and wellbeing. Kostogriz's (2007) theorisation of affective labour provides an opportunity to understand the impact of contemporary working conditions and practices, recognising the importance of exploring issues associated with feelings, emotions, and social relations. We shift now to an analysis of the affective dimensions of principals' digital working practices.

### ii. The affective dimensions of principals' work with email and associated digital technologies

Our interviewees were often keen to reflect on how digital technologies made them feel about their work. These affective dimensions of principals' digital work were evident in both indirect and direct impacts on how interviewees described their working and home lives. Indirect impacts were evident in the spill-over of emotional and physical aspects of the work into interviewees' lives, whereas direct impacts resulted from how digital technologies brought work tasks into traditionally private times. Similar themes are evident in other Australian research, where principals spoke about checking emails as soon as they woke up (Thompson et al., 2021). One interviewee recounted how emails played a part in exacerbating feelings of being physically and emotionally fatigued on Friday afternoon:

> I think that being in a principal role, there is always an element of anxiousness. I think every single day, all day every day, weekends, school holidays, there's always this sense of anxiety around not knowing or being able to predict what's happening. So I find that the emails or the phone calls, I instantly go "What's wrong? What's happened?" and it really ramps up my anxiety. And creates a bit of fear, I suppose as well, of the fear of the unknown. And I find that come Friday afternoon, I'm absolutely physically and emotionally drained.

Such a description of fatigue and exhaustion raises the issue of burnout - a noted form of principal stress (Maxwell & Riley, 2017; Riley et al., 2021). Unfortunately, this was not an isolated incident in our interviews. Indeed, the direct impact of digital technologies described by other interviewees included descriptions representative of affective labour, with bodily responses and feelings including anxiety, stress, feelings of being overwhelmed, and anger and frustration. Of particular note were recurring discussions about the affective impact of the extension and intensification of digital work, and the impact on personal lives and time exacerbated by email and smartphones enabling work to creep beyond traditional boundaries. For example:

> We took a long weekend and went [to the beach] and were out to breakfast Monday morning and everyone else is at work and I was feeling guilty and I was checking my emails while we were all having breakfast on the water. And I got an email from a staff member […] sort of […] doing the exact opposite to what I'd asked her to do [about duty of care on a school trip]. And […] it instantly wrecked my day, it wrecked breakfast. I then had to spend the next 20 minutes away replying to her email. And then ringing school to put things in place. And it just really took that day away from me and my family. And that was one of the recent times where I went, is it worth it? […] We can't even enjoy this day off, you know, so to me that's sort of being constantly on call, whereas if I didn't have my phone, if I didn't have my work emails on my phone, then I would have just dealt with that routinely or it'd be in the same way but 24 hours later.

As we addressed earlier in this paper, the extension of work has been consistently reported by teachers as well. However, a key point of difference here is the nature of principals' work, particularly the urgency and high-stakes nature of the issues that arise (Riley et al., 2021). The 'duty of care' example described above is a critical safeguarding issue for which the principal is ultimately responsible, and the range of feelings and emotions described – guilt about not being at school, anxiety about the issue itself, and the imperative of needing to deal with the issue at that moment, all combine to provide an insight into the intertwined nature of emotions and the way school leadership is being enacted through digital technologies.

All our interviewees were aware of generic wellbeing advice to check emails less frequently (or even remove emails from their mobile devices altogether) but this was dismissed as an unrealistic option by most. Interviewees spoke about 'keeping on top' of emails by checking them frequently throughout the day, night, and weekends. This was sometimes justified by a sense of risk-aversion by principals keen to minimise issues before they escalated. For example, the principal who spoke about the email interrupting their family breakfast felt compelled to respond quickly because 'things could have gone pear-shaped very quickly'.

This emotional burden of email was exacerbated in some cases by intentionally challenging and/or intrusive interactions. Findings from research with Australian teachers has shown that parents expected to be able to contact teachers outside of traditional working hours, and one teacher described parents demanding their personal contact information, indicating an expectation that they would be on-call at all times (Fitzgerald et al., 2019). Email was seen to essentially bring challenging relationships home on a 24/7 basis. This was described as a nagging concern for school leaders wanting to sequester private time and have the vital rest and recovery time that is needed to sustain a long-term career. As one interviewee described:

> Last year, I had a parent who […] had a vitriol like you couldn't believe. […] she would send these horrific emails, not only to me but to teachers and so I was getting phone calls at 11 o'clock at night from teachers saying, "I've just read an email from this person and blah, blah, blah," so that's horrific in itself. But it almost got to the point that […] whenever I'd go and hit 'refresh' on my email, my heart almost skipped a beat - was this parent's name going to come up? Or I'd be out of my office for an hour and I'd quickly come in and look at my inbox and then you go, "Phew, there's not an email from this person". Now, I'm not normally stressed, I'm not a stress head, I don't think. But when I look back at it now, how much it affected me and if I think, "Wow, if it affected *me* like that" - where I had the privilege of being a principal and had some authority to deal with it […] how that would affect teachers and whatnot when it had that effect on me? It was quite illuminating because prior to that the teacher would come in and say, "Such-and-such has written to me". I'd go, "Well, you know what? Get over it". But it does physically, actually affect people […] and I'm not sure we're emotionally equipped to deal with that very well.

Such stories were raised in a number of interviews. Another interviewee described these unwelcome emails as "invad[ing] your space". She now refused to read emails at home, because "once you've read it you can't un-view the words in your head [and] it eats away at you". This approach was triggered by the experience of receiving an email and post on the school's Facebook page at 8:30pm regarding an incident that had occurred earlier at the school. The principal described trying to calm the parent via email, while also seeing the issue and discussion escalating on the Facebook group. As she recalled:

> [it] was a diatribe, it became a real attack on me, it must have gone on until 10 […] and then I had a group of parents go "What on earth are you complaining about? Your principal is emailing you, communicating with you, at quarter to 10. I reckon that's pretty good stuff". So I could actually shut up at that point in time and leave it alone. Because the community took over until the post got shut down. Now the problem is, that was in my head. You wake up with it in your head. That's the first thing you think about.

Despite the supposedly ephemeral nature of online communication, interviewees could still recall the physical and emotional effects of such types of experiences. The principal quoted above recalled trying to use exercise as a way of managing the stress of online incidents such as this, and it taking 45 minutes of the hour-long yoga class before they "managed to drop everything out of [their] head and just be present in the yoga class". That said, our interviews were not wholly concerned with the stresses of working with technology. In contrast, three interviewees were able to describe some positive affective impacts – usually relating to the feeling of joy when deleting emails, or reducing their inboxes to what they deemed a manageable state. One interviewee described the "enormous amount[s] of joy" of deleting emails, in contrast to three other interviewees who spoke of being "afraid" of deleting emails in case they needed them in the future.

Some interviewees were well aware of the affective burden being placed on others in their lives, reflecting the social element of affective labour (Kostogriz, 2012). Our own previous research has explored the impacts of school leadership on principals' personal relationships (Heffernan, 2021), and these themes were evident in this study as well. We heard stories about the impact of email habits or the fallout of email-based issues on family members. Most interviewees had found themselves developing habits of checking emails more frequently at non-working times in order to keep the load manageable. One interviewee described his wife as getting "very frustrated" during school holiday breaks at him "sitting there answering emails, which I do because if I don't keep on top of it, it builds up". Another interviewee - who had initially proclaimed himself to 'never' work outside of working hours – later described checking emails "a few times a night". Late in the interview he recalled: "I was at my own kids' awards night on Tuesday night and I was checking emails while I was sitting there, and my wife actually got upset with that and said 'this is your kids' awards night'". This interviewee also described his wife getting similarly upset about his frequent checking of emails in the school holidays. Such issues are indicative of the blurring of boundaries between the work and family dimensions of workers' lives as a result of digital technologies (McCloskey, 2018). Throughout our interviews, we

heard stories describing the tangible diminishment of principals' relationships and family lives as a result of technology-based (over)work. This raised the question that is addressed in our third analytical theme – how interviewees felt some of these issues might potentially be mitigated in the future.

### iii. Principals' capacity to counter the negative impact of digital work

While no-one described themselves as wholly unaffected by these stresses, many interviewees felt that it was possible to act differently and push back against the most negative aspects of working with email and associated digital technologies. Most common was interviewees who acknowledged a desire to resist, but nevertheless felt unable to do so. In contrast, a few interviewees shared strategies they used to avoid or minimise some of the more detrimental affective impacts of email and online communication. These tended to be principals who were further along in their careers and had more security in their work and their positions. Clearly, then, any instance of 'thinking otherwise' about working with technology along more autonomous lines was entwined with issues of power and hierarchy. This reflects other research about principal autonomy, which increases with career progression and confidence (e.g., Keddie, 2013). We note that research has previously highlighted the agency that can be held by workers in relation to email, and we are careful not to describe emails as solely being imposed *upon* educators. For example, Selwyn et al. (2017) showed the ways educators used digital technologies to their advantage to create electronic paper trails and meet accountabilities where necessary. Principals in this study also described the importance of (some) emails for these purposes. However, largely, participants described the imposition of high volumes of emails as taking them away from what they saw as their core business.

As briefly discussed in the previous section, a common strategy was for principals to attempt to set boundaries around the times, places and purposes that they accessed personal devices or engaged with email for work purposes. This sometimes took the form of maintaining rigid spatial and/or temporal boundaries around their technology access. These deliberately bounded modes of engagement included not using personal devices to access work emails or work-based technology, or not accessing digital technologies (emails, reporting software, calendars, sharepoints) outside of working hours or at home. One very experienced interviewee commented: "I will never, in my life, allow emails to be on my phone. So that's the first trick of the trade." Other interviewees echoed this sentiment - describing the importance of setting boundaries between work and home, and maintaining those boundaries for their own health and wellbeing:

> I'm not here to give everything of myself and have nothing left. And that's certainly how you feel from time to time. I exercised yesterday for the first time in two weeks […] So yeah, technology is […] just one of those strategies. Stay off that. Eat, sleep, spend time with your friends. Go to work, do it there. Prioritise. And then go home.

While a few interviewees were clearly exercising these intentions (evident in the time it took us to arrange interviews with them), others found this sort of overt resistance difficult to sustain. A number of interviewees spoke about being well-aware of the need to create these sorts of separation, but struggling to do so in light of their desire to keep 'on top' of school-related issues that might arise. One mid-career interviewee exemplified the challenges associated with acts of setting such boundaries:

> [work mobile phones are] sort of like a necessary evil in a way. It's probably just about me putting more parameters around maybe when I use it, when I don't use it, and taking my work email off my private phone and stuff like that.

When asked whether they had colleagues who had set those boundaries, the interviewee responded:

> No. I'm sure they exist. I think people just say that. But I don't think they're telling the truth. They're still emailing at 3:00am. And look, I'm not one to come home and sit on my laptop typing emails until midnight, but I am one to sit there and constantly be checking. And reading and thinking and do that sort of stuff. So I don't necessarily delegate work or email at all hours, but I'm always just checking and keeping an eye on things.

Regardless of their own personal struggles, most interviewees felt aware that their behaviours set a tone and norms for the school's culture. Interviewees were mindful of their impact in overtly modelling healthy digital practices to their staff – especially in relation to social media, emails, and digital working hours. One interviewee commented: "You do feel a bit of pressure to be a role model to the staff about how you use technology. If you're firing off emails at 7:00 on a Sunday, they're going to think that's what you have to do". This reflects Russell's (2017) findings that workplaces quickly create norms around emails and workers fall into line with each other's email habits. A common approach shared by leaders in this study was to avoid sending emails late at night, or during weekends and holidays. The most common strategy to manage this was to create drafts of emails or schedule emails to be sent during reasonable working hours (thus not appearing to be working online out-of-hours, while still actually doing so).

Some principals described their attempts to set arbitrary rules about when email could be sent within their schools. These rules included guidelines to not send emails for the first 10 days of any school holiday period, or after 7pm on a weeknight, and/or on weekends. In practice, it was noted that these efforts were only partially successful. Staff involved in meetings and classroom teaching were often unable to access email for a sufficient period of time during conventional 'working hours'. Our interviewees were aware that their policies might potentially discriminate against working parents or people with caring commitments who might need to balance their work and lives in different ways. In this sense, these policies tended only to be loosely enforced. Other interviewees described trying to establish overt expectations with their staff members about healthy digital practices. One leader recounted: "One of my teachers got married this year. She did the trip of her lifetime for her

honeymoon [overseas] and she answered an email. And I wrote back and went 'Don't do that again. That's ridiculous. Stop answering emails' ".


## CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In many ways, email, smartphones, social media and other commonplace digital technologies might not seem an especially distinct element of the work of our school principals. There are particularities relevant or specific to this context, such as the challenge raised by the Department's dual email address approach, and system-determined reporting and school management systems (though, as noted, these were less of a concern for the principals within this study). Thinking beyond the local context, though, the findings of this study enabled us to see the bigger picture of principals' work with digital technologies and this paper offers some important insights for school leaders, and for those who are concerned with their work. Many of these stories, reflections and accounts are entwined with broader tendencies and pressures for principals to feel the need to (over)work to remain 'on top' of their responsibilities, to model best practices to their staff, and generally survive until the end of the school week, school term and/or academic year. In one sense, then, many of the working conditions and logics just described are aligned closely with ongoing general intensifications of school principals' work and imperatives to be working longer and working harder (Hochbein & Meyers, 2021). Email can certainly be a key source of 'demanding work' (Findlay & Thompson, 2017) – i.e. longer working hours, role expansion, increased administrative duties, and increased accountability. In all these ways, then, it is important to recognise that digital technologies in and of themselves do not wholly (re)constitute or (re)shape work practices. Instead, digital technologies provide opportunities for new practices to emerge _and_ for existing practices to be reconfigured (Chesley, 2014).

In this latter sense, then, one important point arising from our research is how the capacity for our interviewees to engage with a technology such as email in ways that were effective, empowering or simply non-harmful was entwined with their 'offline' professional status, privilege and/or autonomy. In other words, not all principals were able to engage with email and other digital technologies along similarly empowering lines. For example, fathers were more likely than mothers to talk about working in the evenings and weekends to the detriment of their family lives. Later-career, more-established principals were more likely to talk about refusing to "bring work home". Some researchers have suggested that these patterns might be understood as individually initiated – i.e. stemming from "discretionary effort and an employee's willingness to invest in his or her work" (Mustosmäki, 2018, p. 86). In contrast, we can see in our study how the 'freedoms' and/or 'oppressions' associated with email are entwined with existing asymmetrical power relations and inequalities including perceived and actual autonomy for principals. As such, it is important to make sense of why some principals clearly feel able to make agentic uses of email to self-organise, save time, delegate, and generally 'get things done' (Gregg, 2018), as well as others who feel that they benefit from resistant uses of technology. Being able to quickly work through an email inbox, delete swathes of messages, and digitally

handle 'office hours' and everyday school issues, could be a "source of personal autonomy and flexibility" (Wajcman, 2015, p. 107-108). Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to simply presume any individual 'benefits' to be separate from existing power relations. Many other principals clearly experience the same technologies as impeding their judgment, expertise, and capacity for agentic action.

That said, there are a number of issues raised in our interviews that point to some distinct characteristics of working specifically with email and associated digital technologies that are worth highlighting. These are aspects of working as a school leader that (at least partially) stem from the specific nature of email and digitally-mediated practices. As such, these need to be factored into the broader ongoing discussions around work and school leadership. First, are the issues of the temporal and spatial rearrangements of how principals engage in work – not least the collapse of the times and places that 'work' occurs, and the encroachment of digital tasks into most aspects of everyday life. During the formal workday, the work intensification and experience of doing multiple forms of work by 'doing more at the same time' can be significantly enhanced by the expectations of digital work along asynchronous and multi-tasking lines. Similarly, what was traditionally considered to be 'leisure' time can be disrupted by digital technologies. In exploring these issues for principals in this study, we have extended understandings of the digitally mediated intensification and extension of working practices. We have contributed to a broader understanding of how the current working conditions for leaders are evolving and playing out through digital technologies. The knowledge of principals' work intensification and extension is not a new revelation. Of course, principals have always engaged in work also outside of 'school hours', yet digital technologies such as email and smartphones extend the scope of this additional labour. For example, principals can now interact directly with staff and parents regardless of time or place. For some principals, this constitutes an opportunity to 'keep on top' of emerging issues. However, as some of our interviews illustrated, these digital interactions take on a different tone when interactions are not respectful or enriching (such as online abuse from parents).

These spatio-temporal rearrangements therefore raise the issue of "context collapse" (Marwick & Boyd, 2011, p. 613) – i.e. "where different audiences or social groups who would be dealt with separately in 'offline' contexts are co-present within a single [online] platform". The digital relocation of principals' work blurs divisions between 'public' and 'private' contexts across multiple spheres. In theory, the ethos of modern leadership suggests that principals should embrace these convergences – engaging informally with parents and local community through social media, or eagerly combining their 'local' school work with global online publics. In contrast, the principals in our study talked mainly of working hard to avoid such overlaps of audience, struggling to maintain a state of 'context control' and work to avoid unwanted or even unintended exposures of their different contextual positions. As Mel Gregg (2018, p. 7) puts it, "one's relationship to time is a primary means by which power is experienced".

Second, are the issues raised in relation to the affective demands of technology-based work – in particular the 'networked affects' of online interactions and

engagements. Of course, the affective dimensions of school leaders' work are well-recognised as a key aspect of the emotions, relationships, and the physical effects of the role (e.g., Blackmore, 2010; Mahfouz, 2020; Maxwell & Riley, 2017). Similar to these other authors, our interviewees conveyed a range of ways that email reflects the affective demands of school leadership – from the coldness of online communications, the panic induced by an overflowing inbox, and the general sense of fatigue from being immersed in online work tasks. However, our findings also show the distinct amplified and extended nature of these aspects of digital work – what Hills et al. (2015) term 'networked affect'. The example of witnessing parental and community concerns exacerbate in real-time on email and social media, reflects the phenomenon of online contagion – where networked publics can exacerbate and accelerate feelings of mob anger and indignation in ways that is not possible offline. Knowing that one's actions are potentially visible to unknown extended audiences in different contexts and at later times evokes additional sources of worry and concern for a mindful professional. What is particularly important about this paper is the evidence of the ways digital work has not only contributed to the intensification and extension of principals' work, but has direct consequences for the affective dimensions of leaders' work. Bringing together these two theoretical devices provides an opportunity to develop nuanced understandings of the actual *effects* of work intensification and extension in ways that highlight the impact of working conditions and practices on leaders' lives and identities outside of their work.

This all leads us to the concluding question of what can we learn from these principals - what steps might be taken to mitigate such pressures, and perhaps move toward alternative forms of digitally-supported work that are more sustainable? Any suggestions that arise from our investigations for individual strategies and tactics are likely to be modest and of limited effectiveness. After all, many of our interviewees were already cognisant of the detrimental influence of digital technology on their work experiences, but felt unable to substantially alter their patterns of engagement. Simply changing email protocols, practices and other shared norms around email and digital communication within a school does not address the wider issue of work expectations and work culture. As such, many of the issues raised in this paper relate to the need for broader reforms to the professional expectations currently being made of principals. That said, it was notable that none of our interviewees raised affective *benefits* of working with digital technology – the pleasures, reassurances and thrills that are often associated in other areas of digital culture. Tellingly, many of the beneficial 'affective flows' associated with digital technologies are seen to stem from collective, communal and relational modes of 'doing' online work (see Döveling et al., 2018). In contrast, our interviewees' engagement with the dominant technologies in their working lives (such as email) was highly individualised, fragmented and task-focussed. Encouraging principals to explore more collective and connective modes of technology use (perhaps, for example, to move beyond individualised engagement with technologies to instead engage with peers for professional support and socialising) might prompt digital technologies to be seen as a more positive presence in what is undoubtedly going to continue to be a stressful and work-laden profession for the foreseeable future. Future research could focus on effective ways for principals to collaborate, build networks, and

collectively engage in digital spaces with a view to easing some of the burden of leadership, and on finding ways to support principals in relation to the high-stakes and emotionally-intense nature of their work.

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