

# School Principals' Emotional Coping Process

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## Abstract

The present study examines the emotional coping of school principals in Quebec. Emotional coping was measured by stimulated recall; six principals were filmed during a working day and presented a week later with their video showing stressful encounters. The results show that school principals experience anger because of reproaches from staff members and experience anxiety when they anticipate situations which are likely to worsen. Emotional inhibition is the most frequently used coping strategy. Overall, these findings point to the need to emphasize the role of emotional competence in the study of school principals' stress.

*Keywords:* stress, coping, emotional coping, emotional inhibition, school principals

## **Résumé**

Cette recherche s'intéresse aux stratégies d'ajustement émotionnel des directions d'école au Québec. Les stratégies d'ajustement émotionnel ont été mesurées par rappel stimulé. Six directions d'école ont été filmées durant une journée de travail avant d'être confrontées une semaine plus tard à leur vidéo montrant des situations stressantes. Les résultats montrent que les directions vivent de la colère devant les critiques du personnel et de l'anxiété devant l'anticipation de situations qui risquent de dégénérer. L'inhibition émotionnelle est la stratégie la plus fréquemment utilisée. Cette recherche montre l'importance de considérer les compétences émotionnelles dans l'étude du stress des directions scolaires.

*Mots-clés* : stress, stratégie d'ajustement cognitif, stratégie d'ajustement émotionnel, inhibition émotionnelle, directions d'école

## Introduction

A school principal's professional world is characterized by many challenges and comes with a multitude of potential sources of stress. By comparing the wages, the responsibilities, and the workload, some authors consider that being a school principal is "the toughest job in America" (Carr, 2003, p. 15).

Since the 1960s, a considerable amount of research has been conducted on the subject. Gmelch (1988) points out that between 1966 and 1988 more than 1,300 articles on the stress of school principals were published. However, despite several more recent studies that continue to confirm the high levels of stress of school principals (Cubitt & Burt, 2002; Poirel, 2010; Welmers, 2006), more research needs to be done in order to better understand the phenomenon. Not only should the sources be identified but also a better comprehension of the coping processes needs to be addressed (Dewe & Trenberth, 2004), particularly, the distinction brought about between emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping (Lazarus, 1966), which has been considered as the foundation in coping theory in many studies on school principals.

## Coping Research on School Principals

Many authors have investigated how principals cope with stress. In her classic study, Roesch (1979) has developed a questionnaire to assess the best coping strategies of school principals. Her findings, showing that the main coping strategy for principals dealing with stress is to spend more hours at work, have been replicated in other studies (Abdul Muthalib, 2003; Gmelch & Torelli, 1994; Shumate, 2000). Shumate (2000) used Roesch's coping preference scale on a sample of 221 high school principals and found that planning for the future, discussing with colleagues, exercising, and delegating tasks are also part of the best strategies evoked by principals. Abdul Muthalib (2003) also used Roesch's questionnaire on a sample of 50 principals and found that discussing problems with colleagues was the most popular coping strategy used by principals. Making plans for the future, listening to music, delegating tasks, and taking a break were also mentioned. Liming (1998) created a survey instrument and structured interviews to measure stress and coping on a sample of 24 secondary school principals, and reports that exercise and rest as well as social support were generally evoked, but only out of the school

environment with family and friends. Roberson and Matthews (1988) report that 30% of the principals found exercise to be the best way to cope with stress, whereas 13% indicated better time management, and the rest identified delegating tasks and having a positive attitude. More recently, following a review of literature on stress and coping, and on the basis of the frequencies in which they were identified in the literature, Hawk and Martin (2011) have identified five categories of coping by school leaders: (1) exercise/nutrition; (2) getting away/time off from work; (3) artificial means, stimulants, or prescription drugs; (4) relaxation techniques; and (5) mentoring/guidance from peers.

Nevertheless, on the basis of an analysis of these studies, we can reconsider the research on coping within three main categories: (1) life habits utilized prior to the stressful encounter (healthy eating, regular exercise, sleep), which may increase hardiness (Kobassa, 1979); (2) relaxation techniques utilized after the stress has had an effect (exercise, yoga, meditation, massage), which help evacuate stress-related tensions (Everly & Lating, 2002); and (3) problem-focused coping or emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) in real time during the stressful encounter.

From this point of view, despite the theoretical foundations on which they lie, most studies we found on coping have, for the most part, focused mainly on the two first categories mentioned above. To explain this query in research, it is noteworthy to mention that many authors have argued that the use of questionnaires designed to measure coping is part of the problem (Cooper, 1988; Lazarus, 1999, 2000; Ponnelle, Vaxevanoglou, & Garcia, 2012; Somerfield, 1997; Somerfield & McCrae, 2000; Weber & Laux, 1990). With respect to these authors, we also agree that using questionnaires to measure coping strategies limits the comprehension of the stress phenomenon to a static coping dimensional state. Such an approach is far from Lazarus's conceptualization, which shows the dynamic coping processes involved that are linked to the cognitive appraisal of the situation (Poirel & Yvon, 2011). The quantitative methods used to better understand this phenomenon tend to isolate the different concepts of the transactional theory of stress, and thus create a distance from the reality of the dynamic processes involved. The problem with research on school principals' stress is therefore also methodological and "coping research needs to adopt measurement methods that reflect the techniques of clinicians. The emphasis is for coping methods to become more ecologically sensitive, person-centered, daily processing and narrative in application" (Dewe & Trenberth, 2004, p. 143).

From this perspective, it is obvious that there is a need to research the coping of school principals in a real life setting during a stressful work-related encounter. This is particularly true in order to better understand the processes the principals go through when they are trying to cope with their own emotional experience. This is especially important when considering that emotions are fundamental to the realities of life in schools (Brennan & Ruairc, 2011; Cai, 2011). The results of Bailey's (2007) research on the necessary abilities for being an efficient principal show that 84% of the principals believe in the importance of understanding and managing their own emotions because of their impact on school efficiency. With regard to these results, the existence of a crossover of strain from principals to teachers cannot be dismissed (Westman & Etzion, 1999). In their study on 47 principals and 183 teachers, these authors found a contagious job-induced tension in the school environment, thus demonstrating the influence emotions can have not merely on the principal but also on the school as a whole. Principals therefore need social and emotional skills as much as they need technical and academic ones (O'Connor, 2004; Schmidt, 2010). However, even though several studies have shown the best strategies used by school principals to cope with stress, emotional coping research on school principals has been neglected. The purpose of this study is thus to have a better understanding of the process by which principals cope with their own emotions.

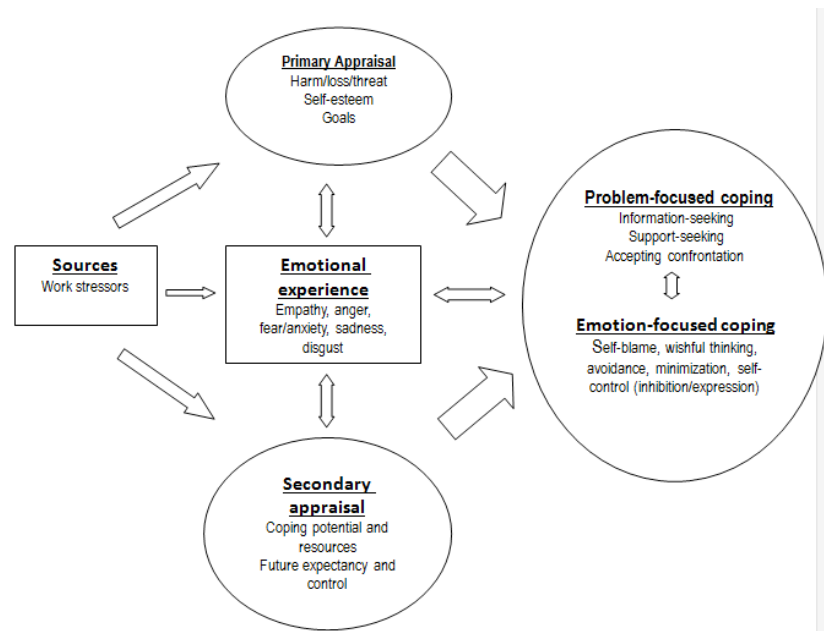
## **Theoretical Framework**

The present study lies within the scope of the transactional theory of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In accordance with this theory, the cognitive appraisal of a stressful situation precedes the coping process. The basic distinction between primary appraisal and secondary appraisal has been extensively studied since the publication of Lazarus's (1966) first work on stress and coping. Primary appraisal refers to the process by which people appraise a situation as being a threat, a harm/loss, or a challenge, whereas secondary appraisal points to the coping options for dealing with the situation. From this transactional process perspective, emotions can be understood as a product of cognition. Later, Lazarus insisted on the importance of giving more space to the emotions in the transactional process. However, even if Lazarus (1991, 1993) emphasized the importance of the emotional experience in his most recent work, the place accorded to the emotions

in the appraisal process has, nevertheless, been disregarded in past studies (Austenfeld & Stanton, 2004).

It is from this perspective, in line with Lazarus's theoretical work on expanding stress and coping with emotions (Lazarus, 1999), that an emphasis was therefore put on the four basic "negative" universal emotions, namely, fear/anxiety, disgust, anger, and sadness (Power & Dalgleish, 2008). Also, with regard to the studies showing the importance of principals controlling their own emotions and understanding the emotions of others (Brennan & Ruairc, 2011; O'Connor, 2004), empathy was added in this study because of the importance of this dimension in the context of educational leadership (Opengart, 2007). It is, however, noteworthy to mention that if empathy is not considered as an emotion but as a capacity to understand the emotions of others (Lazarus, 1999), nonetheless, it cannot be dismissed from the emotions experienced by an individual (Goody, Connelly, Griffiths, & Gupta, 2010).

The emotional-transactional model used in this research thus takes as its starting point the transactional theory of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and the cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion (Lazarus, 1999). From such a point of view, the coping process follows upon the appraisal process and the emotional experience (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Emotional-Transactional Model for Studying Stress and the Emotional Experience. Inspired by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and by Lazarus (1999).

## **Method and Research Strategy**

The goal of this study is to acquire a better understanding of the emotional-transactional coping process of school principals in real-life work settings. Understanding the relationship between appraisal, emotions, and coping is thus necessary to reveal such a process.

### **Sample Population**

Six school principals in the Province of Quebec were observed and filmed during a working day. These six included three high school principals, two high school vice-principals, and one elementary school principal from the Saguenay region, the south shore of Montreal, and the island of Montreal, respectively.

The sample consisted of four men and two women who each had at least 10 years of experience as principal, vice-principal, or both. They were referred to us by a former principal, who was a professor in our faculty, on the basis of being able to cope successfully with the high demands of the job. The subjects were therefore not necessarily representative of the larger sampler of principals in Quebec. This was considered more a strength than a weakness, because it was thus possible to explore what was expected to be the most efficient emotional coping strategies in real-life settings.

### **Instruments, Procedures, and Data Processing**

In order to capture the emotional coping process involved, the strategy applied was to observe and film six principals during a working day rather than to use questionnaires, which were considered too static to provide a valid account of the emotional-transactional process. However, in order to identify objective sources of stress on the video recordings, the Administrative Stress Index (Gmelch & Swent, 1984) was first distributed to a sample of 238 school principals and vice-principals. Once the data were analyzed and the main stressors were identified by a larger sample, it was thus possible to recognize specific situations on the videos that corresponded to objective sources of stress (administrative constraints, administrative responsibilities, role expectations, interpersonal relations, intrapersonal conflicts, and reform constraints). The results of the statistical data have been submitted for another publication.

Stimulated recall by video feedback was used to access the appraisal of the situation, the prevailing emotional experience, and the emotional-transactional coping process. The purpose of such a method is to explore the internal states of consciousness when facing specific situations at work (Theureau, 2010). In order to document the person's state of mind (the situation perceived by the actor in real time), the methodological technique encourages the actor to participate in the study by observing himself or herself on video in real work situations, by commenting upon it during its unfolding, and by giving meaning to the course of his or her work activity. Such a method adds to the study of emotional coping in an "intrinsic reconstruction" by the actor, and by doing so enhances the richness in the analysis of work activity obtained only by the eye of an external observer.

The method consisted in presenting each principal, within a week following the incidents, his or her own sequences (between six and 10 stressful encounters) during a one-hour semi-structured interview for a total of 47 situations. The video feedback was also filmed for analysis purposes.

Each situation was analyzed by coding the coping strategies with reference to the eight dimensions of the Ways of Coping Checklist (WCCL) (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused coping included three dimensions (information seeking, seeking social support, accepting confrontation) and emotion-focused coping included five (self-blame, wishful thinking, avoidance, minimization, self-control). The concept of self-control, which is one of the five emotion-focused coping strategies, was considered to be synonymous with emotional regulation (Gross, 1998) and was coded according to the expression or the inhibition of the emotional experience per se.

In the end, 21 sequences out of the 47 met the necessary criteria for the final analysis, and it was possible to analyze the coping process, from the appraisal and the emotional experience to the coping strategies used. For the final analysis, two researchers used the same grid, which consisted of the appraisal (primary or secondary), the emotional experience (fear/anxiety, disgust, anger, sadness, and empathy) in accordance with Lazarus's core relational themes (1999), and the eight dimensions of the coping strategies according to the WCCL (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Each sequence was coded twice, once by observing the video and once by going through the verbatim. The analysis of the grounded codes was compared between video and verbatim before being compared between the two researchers for content agreement and clarity.



## Results

The results after coding of the cognitive appraisal, the emotional experience, and the coping strategies are presented in Table 1. When possible, extracts from the videos are translated from French to English and are presented to support each point in order to illustrate the ideas emerging from the discussions.

**Table 1:** Results of the Analysis of the Emotional-Transactional Process.

	<b>SITUATION AND COGNITIVE APPRAISAL</b>	<b>EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE</b>	<b>EMOTION-FOCUSED COPING</b>	<b>PROBLEM- FOCUSED COPING</b>
1.	Urgent paperwork: Anticipates time running out.	Fear/anxiety	Inhibition	Confrontation
2.	Messy document to be produced with secretary: Anticipates potential difficulties.	Fear/anxiety Empathy	Inhibition	Support-seeking Confrontation
3.	Unforeseen meeting: Teachers are waiting, must attend meeting.	Anger	Expression-inhibition	Information-seeking
4.	Unjustified reproach from teacher: How can I make them understand?	Anger Empathy	Inhibition	Confrontation
5.	Does not have the quorum: Little control, can't comply with the rules. Staff will be upset.	Fear/anxiety Anger towards self	Expression Self-blame	Information-seeking
6.	Confronting the collective bargaining process: Little control and resources. How to convince staff?	Anger Fear/anxiety	Inhibition Inhibition	Confrontation
7.	Important budget costs: Looks for solutions.	Anger towards self	Expression-inhibition Self-blame Minimization Wishful thinking	Support-seeking
8.	Unjustified reproach from teacher: How can I maintain a good climate?	Anger	Inhibition Wishful thinking	Confrontation Support-seeking
9.	Tensions between vice-principal and teacher: Little control and resources.	Fear/anxiety	Inhibition Avoidance	NONE
10.	Disallowance by a teacher: How can I make her understand?	Anger	Inhibition	Confrontation
11.	Unjustified reproach by a teacher: Looks for defense. Thinks about school climate.	Anger	Inhibition	Information-seeking
12.	Pressures to suspend a student: Little control on student's motivation.	Fear/anxiety Anger	Inhibition	Confrontation
13.	Unjustified reproach from school district: Looks for defence.	Anger	Inhibition	Information-seeking

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14.	Pressures by staff for students' files: Looks for solutions.	Fear/anxiety	Inhibition Avoidance	Confrontation
15.	Did not get important information: What can I do?	Fear/anxiety	Expression	NONE
16.	Too late for teacher performance evaluation: What can I do?	Anger Fear/anxiety	Expression-inhibition Avoidance	Confrontation
17.	Violence in the class by student and teacher: Looks for solutions. What can I do?	Fear/anxiety	Expression Minimization	Support-seeking
18.	Helplessness with vice-principal's decisions: Little control.	Anger	Inhibition	NONE
19.	Dealing with the frustration of a teacher: Must assure school climate.	Empathy	Inhibition	Confrontation
20.	Teachers not using the manuals: Losing time and money.	Anger	Expression	NONE
21.	Pressures from the teachers against the school board principals: Little control over colleagues decisions.	Fear/anxiety	Inhibition	Confrontation

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## The Emotional-Transactional Appraisal Process

The analysis of the emotional-transactional process, made possible by viewing the videos and applying stimulated recall, gives access to the appraisal by the principals of the stressful encounters they have to deal with and the emotions they go through. In general, the results show that the emotions felt by the principals are vivid and sometimes even violent. They are triggered by the cognitive appraisal of the situation, mainly in relation with hindrances, reproaches from staff, and anticipations of problems that might become worse. As can be seen in Table 1, the results show that the principals mainly experience anger and anxiety when confronted with their work-related stressors. Empathy is also experienced in some cases.

### Experiencing Anger

Three observations came out of the 13 situations showing the experience of anger. Anger is triggered by (1) multiple unforeseen interruptions and constraints; (2) unjustified reproaches coming from the staff; and (3) self-blame when the principals feel responsible for bad decisions they have made.

Principals are continuously interrupted in their daily activities and they must deal with unexpected situations. As a result, their work is regularly interrupted and they must put aside the task at hand to deal with a new and more urgent problem. In each one of the situations showing the multiple contingencies, interruptions, and constraints, the principals are angry because of an unexpected request to process and settle a matter quickly. They are angry because they lose control over what they were doing and then fall to the mercy of the emergency at hand. For example, in the third situation (Table 1), the principal is perturbed by an unexpected meeting: "I hadn't planned it. I had planned something else." This situation is emblematic of the constant interruptions principals must deal with. Our results show that principals are interrupted in nine out of the 21 sequences analyzed. In such situations, where what they are doing is disrupted and they are required to refocus on another emergency, the principals experience frustration and anger.

Another source of anger comes from the frequent reproaches the principals have to contend with. Principals have to make numerous decisions during the day and they are often blamed for the decisions they make. They regularly face criticism from the staff and feel that such reproaches are unfair. Five out of the 21 situations show reproaches from staff members that are addressed directly at the principals. In one situation, during a meeting with the teachers' council, the principal is openly blamed by the teachers' council president for the aggressiveness between the teachers and the impact on the school's climate, because of her lack of leadership shown during the general assembly. President of the teachers' council: "I cannot be part of such a process. This is shocking. You cannot insult the colleagues like that, and if you absolutely wish to be in the room, you should not be in charge of the meeting." In this example, the principal's incompetency in leading the school's general assembly is addressed. The principal's self-esteem is threatened as well as her leadership: "I don't like it that they blame me for the aggressiveness between the teachers. I have nothing to do with it. I feel that I am treated unfairly." It is in such cases that the principals also experience anger and frustration. Of special interest is the fact that the five situations all occurred during staff meetings. In such circumstances, the principals are openly criticized in the presence of teachers or vice-principals. Considering that the principals feel that they are treated unfairly, they also feel humiliated, and it is not surprising that the criticism may have an impact on their self-esteem and trigger frustration. With the pressures exerted by the power of the group, it is thus quite understandable that the principals are angry.

Two situations also showed that anger can be triggered by self-blame. The principals sometimes feel responsible for certain difficult situations: “G-d it! I should have left the meeting on the first date”; “I was blaming myself”; “I should have”; and, “I was saying to myself, it’s been three times now, you never learn.”

### **Experiencing Anxiety**

The 11 situations involving anxiety show that this emotion is generated by the anticipation of situations which are likely to worsen. It is noteworthy to mention that in this research we are concerned with state, and not trait, anxiety. With this in mind, in reference to the situation presented above concerning the reproach the principal received during a meeting with the teachers council, even though she seeks ways to deal with the problem, she has few coping options and must constantly rely on her own resources: “How can we, because we are such a good team, go ahead, and not hurt each other?” As is shown in this particular sequence, such elements are important challenges to creating a favourable school climate. In most of the situations we observed and analyzed, we found that school principals are constantly preoccupied by this, and every time they appraise a new problem and search for coping options, they must deal with the risk of damaging the school climate, and thus the emotional experience of anxiety. Directly linked to this secondary appraisal is the following comment: “What means do I have to find a solution, because I don’t have any solution.” The principals experience anxiety because they are often on standby and do not have all the information necessary to cope with the situations for which they anticipate negative repercussions: “I’m crossing my fingers”; “I’m scared that something might happen, something dangerous”; “I’m not panicking but [I’m] preoccupied”; “Now the trouble is starting”; and, “I was scared that he does not support me.”

### **Experiencing Empathy**

Although empathy is not considered as an emotion but as the ability to understand and identify with the emotional perspective of another person, we have nonetheless considered this capacity in our study because it cannot be dismissed from the emotional experiences of school principals. The results show three situations in which the principals have empathy: once involving a secretary and twice with teachers. What is of particular

interest concerning these situations is that for every one of the three situations, the principals feel, in part, responsible for the situation.

## **The Coping Process**

As mentioned earlier, the coping strategies used by the principals when facing stressful encounters follow the appraisal process and the emotional experience. The results of this study confirm that the emotional-transactional process involves problem- and emotion-focused coping.

### **Problem-focused Coping**

The results found in this study show that the principals are quite adept at problem-focused coping, which they do by confronting the problems they are faced with, seeking information or support, and sometimes even expressing their emotions. Although principals confront the problem directly, either in action or through discussion, the results show that they are continuously preoccupied in maintaining a harmonious school climate; insofar as conflict can burst out at any moment, they make all kinds of compromises in order to prevent tense situations from degenerating or interpersonal conflicts from being exacerbated.

We also found that the principals sometimes address the situation by being sympathetic, by taking the time to listen attentively, and by showing openly that they understand the feelings of the person involved: “She is not well [teacher], how can I help her,” and, “I’m saying to myself, I have to pay attention to her [secretary].” This finding is noteworthy because it shows that empathy can be used as a problem-focused coping strategy by managing the emotions of others.

### **Emotion-focused Coping**

It was also found in some situations that the principals voluntarily express their emotions in order to solve the problem. They sometimes express their anger against unjustified reproaches or even share their concerns with a view to promoting solidarity: “You’re telling me that you are scared. I’m also scared that something might happen.” Although

this type of coping strategy is not always successful in solving the problem, the results highlight the fact that the emotional experience can also be used as a strategy that enables principals to cope by confronting the difficulties they have at work.

As for emotion-focused coping strategies, the results illustrate that cognitive efforts are made by the principals when trying to cope with the psychological distress caused by the stressors. Principals sometimes cope using wishful thinking and optimism, or they distance themselves from the situation and avoid the problem instead of confronting it. By doing so, the principals are able to protect themselves from the emotional tensions which arise from the perceived stress. It seems, however, that in most situations, it is not possible for the principals to be optimistic, to avoid the problem, or to minimize it. In such cases, the principals have no other choice than to inhibit their emotions, maintaining, however, an outward image of control: "I'm finished, completely finished. In my head I'm saying to myself, s\*\*\*, it's not working," and, "I'm waiting. I don't have any control over the situation."

Another important finding emerging from this research concerns self-control and emotional regulation and, more precisely, the inhibition of anger against personal attacks and unjustified reproaches. When criticized openly by the staff members, the competence and the credibility of the principals are brought into question. In such cases, the stake is personal and the principals must strive even harder to contain and inhibit their anger: "It's almost harassment. That same teacher, if he continues to harass me, because he said things about me," and, "I want people to be well at work. So this is very demanding physically and mentally."

It seems the choice principals make to inhibit their anger at work is related to the importance accorded to the school climate and the risks arising from multiple interpersonal conflicts, which have the potential for becoming aggravated within the school's context.

In opposition to anger, the expression of anxiety may give an impression of brittleness and failure. It is noteworthy to mention that even though principals have good reasons and choose to inhibit their anger, the expression of anger at work can be used to solve a problem by means of assertiveness and leadership. If principals express their anxiety, they are at risk of weakening their leadership qualities. Moreover, if the results show that the principals only use avoidance and inhibition when they deal with anxiety, it is to be wondered whether they really have other choices in coping with such an emotion

at work. In fact, the results tend to indicate that it is because they do not have any other possibilities that they inhibit their anxiety. Anxiety is also inhibited because the principals are unable to minimize the impact of the situation and they cannot reappraise it positively through wishful thinking. From this point of view, avoidance and inhibition seem to be their only resort for coping with anxiety.

Lastly, the results also show that emotions are frequently hard to deal with and to control. If the principals rarely express their emotions, preferring rather to inhibit them, it would appear to be because the expression of negative emotions is not well accepted in the workplace, especially for principals who must maintain an outward image of being in control of the situation at all times. The difficulty inherent in properly regulating their emotions by inhibition is, however, not surprising considering the unforeseen emergencies principals are regularly faced with. In fact, certain situations, where their emotions are openly expressed, show the objective difficulties of the principals trying to cope with their emotions. For instance, in situation 5 (Table 1), the principal does not have a quorum for the governing board's meeting, which must be held during the week. He must decide between two different times to hold the meeting and whether to sacrifice either the teachers or the parents. He is clearly upset and is unable to suppress his feelings in front of his secretary (and the camera). His response is to sigh, put his hands over his face, walk around like a lion in a cage, sit down at his desk while ruminating out loud "hell of a situation," and to mechanically move his papers on his desk for more than 15 seconds. In this situation, it takes some time for the principal to regain control. In most cases, however, the principals did regain control quickly in order to avoid showing their emotions openly and to maintain a semblance of being in control of the situation.

## **Discussion**

Principals must cope not only with external sources of tensions but also with their own emotions—a dimension that has been neglected in the coping literature, particularly with regard to the health outcomes (Austenfeld & Stanton, 2004).

From the analysis of the observations and the narrative data, it was found that a major concern of school principals relates to school climate. This is not surprising considering that it is one of the major aspects by which school principals contribute to school

effectiveness (Lapointe & Gauthier, 2005). Indeed, school principals are concerned with the school as a whole and are therefore constantly worried as to the repercussions of their decisions and actions which could have an impact on staff job satisfaction, on the school climate in general and, ultimately, on student learning. This is clearly one of the reasons why they continue to make multiple compromises when facing challenges within the school context. The compromises which school principals make, however, can be costly on an emotional level.

Nevertheless, the six participants in our study seem to be in control of their emotions and quite efficient at regulating them, in most cases, by inhibition. This is not surprising, considering that all the participants of the study were experienced principals. However, regardless of what seems to be efficient emotional regulation, the fact is that some emotions are more difficult to handle than others and have a different impact on physical and emotional health and well-being (Bruchon-Schweitzer, 2002; Power & Dalgleish, 2008). The results showing that the principals mostly experience anger and anxiety are in accordance with the work of Lowe and Bennett (2003), who also found that the main emotions experienced at work are anger and anxiety. Mikolajczak, Nelis, Hansenne, and Quoidbach (2008) argue about the importance of considering specific emotions in accordance with the different reasons why they occur. From this perspective, even if these authors have shown that the ability to regulate one type of emotion may extend to other types of emotions, the results of our study show that this is not the case concerning anger and anxiety. The process by which individuals cope with specific emotions depends greatly on the appraisal of the situation; that is, what is at stake and what resources are at hand. In terms of anger, on rare occasions, the principals blame themselves, which could be considered maladaptive coping. However, most of the time, they choose to inhibit their anger for the sake of school climate. While doing so, they may use other strategies to protect themselves from the emotional tensions—wishful thinking, optimism, or distancing themselves from the situation. Another option they have is to be more expressive and assertive. The emotion is thus regulated strategically for an organizational purpose as is understood by emotional labour (Hochschild, 2003). Crawford (2007) has shown the importance for the management of such emotions for school principals' leadership.

Conversely, the principals also inhibit anxiety, but they do not seem to do it by choice. When the principals are unable to be optimistic, to avoid the problem or to minimize it, emotional labour becomes much more demanding physically and mentally.



This must be taken very seriously for its impact on health, because the process by which people inhibit anxiety does not foster making sense of negative emotions—a favourable component of well-being (Pasquier, Bonnet, & Pedinielli, 2008), as opposed to the appraisal of anger and its regulation.

Another important finding that must be discussed concerns the fact that the principals often find themselves powerless, which is why they make multiple compromises and inhibit their emotions. This element is crucial, since a person with power can direct the behaviour of others (Stets & Turner, 2008). It seems obvious that when principals are confronted by staff members and they make compromises to maintain the school climate, they lose some kind of power in exchange. As shown by Brennan and Ruairc (2011), this transaction may have important emotional consequences for the principals: “When individuals have power or gain power, they experience positive emotions such as satisfaction, confidence, and security. Conversely, when individuals lose power, they experience fear, anxiety, and loss of confidence” (p. 134).

The situations analyzed in this study show some of the difficulties school principals are confronted with in Quebec, and even though emotional labour is essential for school principals that have to manage and regulate their emotions at all times, the situations also show the emotional intensity for which the principals are required to make accommodation. On this point, the relevant studies on school principals using the Maslach Burnout Inventory should not be disregarded in view of the fact that the highest scores are related to the subscale pertaining to emotional exhaustion (Abdul Muthalib, 2003; Gmelch & Torelli, 1994; Shumate, 2000). If emotional inhibition hides a negative experience at the source of psychic suffering, then the accumulation of such tensions should be considered in terms of its impact on the health of school principals as well as its possible impact on organizational school health as a whole.

## **Conclusion**

By applying the emotional-transactional model, this study shows the importance of considering cognitive appraisal as well as the specific emotions during principals' coping with stressful encounters. Revealing emotions experienced at work and finding ways to regulate them point to the necessary advantages of applying a more clinical method for

understanding the appraisal and coping processes. Indeed, it should be noted that without the use of video viewings applied in conjunction with the stimulated recall activities, there would have been no access to the resulting wealth of information, nor would there be any possibility of the “unpacking” of the subjective emotional experience of school principals. Compared to the use of questionnaires to measure coping, this method provided a better picture and an increasingly detailed understanding of the whole dynamic transactional process. It is, however, necessary to consider the limits inherent in the choices of this type of method. The findings come from a restricted number of subjects and must only be considered as assumptions with regard to all the school principals of Quebec.

Despite its limitations, given the potential of such a method for a better understanding of the phenomenon of stress in the workplace, it is to be hoped that, from a heuristic point of view, this study will encourage (a) a more clinical approach to the study of emotional-transactional coping, and (b) further studies on the relationship between stress, emotion-specific experience and coping, and the health of school principals.

It should also be noted that anger and anxiety are sources of psychological discomfort; school principals face situations in which they seem to have no choice but to make compromises and to inhibit their emotions in order to preserve a harmonious school climate. Emotional competence seems to be a necessary skill that principals must possess in order to cope with the stress that comes with the profession (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004), and “leadership preparation programs in the new millennium should be required to train school leaders emotionally as well as cognitively” (Schmidt, 2010, p. 626).

It is recommended that future research emphasize the role of emotional competence in the study of school principals' stress by drawing attention to the above issues. Studying the emotional-transactional process using an approach more clinical than those used hitherto will provide a better understanding not only of the coping of school principals but also of the nature of the emotional experience and its possible consequences for mental health.

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