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# **INVISIBLE LABOUR: PRINCIPALS' EMOTIONAL LABOUR IN VOLATILE TIMES**

**REPORT ONE:  
TECHNICAL OVERVIEW  
OF THE PROJECT**

NOVEMBER 2025

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emotional labour

noun

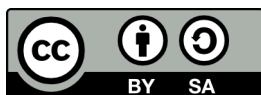
1. the mental activity required to manage or perform the routine tasks necessary for maintaining relationships and ensuring smooth running of a household or process, typically regarded as an unappreciated or unacknowledged burden borne disproportionately by women.

2. the management of one's emotions in order to present oneself and interact with other people in a certain way while doing a job. (Oxford Languages, 2025)

**This research project is dedicated to the 6,727 public schools and their educators across Australia.**

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We acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which we work and live. Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung people, communities of the Kulin Nation, who are the ongoing custodians of the lands on which Monash University now stands, the Ancestors and Elders of Wadawurrung Country, Eastern Maar Country and Wurundjeri Country, where Deakin University's physical campuses are located and the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation on which the University of Sydney now stands.

#### THE RESEARCH TEAM

This four-year project (2022–2026) is funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant (DP230100594) led by Monash University in collaboration with Deakin University and the University of Sydney. The research team comprises Lead Investigator Professor Jane Wilkinson, Chief Investigators Professor Lucas Walsh, Professor Amanda Keddie, Dr Fiona Longmuir and Dr Christine Grice, and Research Fellows Dr Philippa Chandler and Tim Delany.

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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# Executive Summary

This report provides a technical overview of the ARC Discovery Grant (DP230100594) research project: *Invisible Labour: Principals' Emotional Labour in Volatile Times*. The study is a collaboration between Monash University, Deakin University and the University of Sydney.

The report is the first in a series of four and provides a technical foundation for a national study examining the emotional labour of Australian public-school principals. Drawing on 298 critical incident testimonies from 256 principals, as well as stakeholder interviews, case studies and a policy audit, the study reveals how principals' emotional labour – often invisible and unacknowledged – has intensified and become central to their role. The research highlights the toll this labour takes on principals' health, wellbeing and professional sustainability and calls for systemic reform to acknowledge and better support the emotional demands of the principals' role.

## METHODOLOGY

The study uses a multi-method qualitative approach, including 298 critical incident testimonies from 256 public school principals, stakeholder interviews and focus groups, a policy audit, and case studies of emotional labour in diverse school settings. The project has an activist stance, amplifying principal voices and advocating for public education as a public good. It aims to influence policy reform, workforce development and public awareness to better support the emotional wellbeing of school leaders.

## KEY FINDINGS

1. Public-school principals face escalating psychosocial risks, including violence, burnout, and emotional exhaustion.
2. Emotional labour is intensified by systemic underfunding of public schools, complex student needs and increasingly polarised communities.
3. The emotional demands of leadership are gendered, racialised and classed, with women and principals in disadvantaged, rural and remote schools disproportionately affected.
4. Emotional labour is largely absent from policy frameworks and principal role descriptions, despite its centrality to effective leadership.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations are detailed in Reports Two, Three and Four.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

Our research study examines the following questions:

1. How is emotional labour currently understood and experienced by Australian public-school principals?
2. What broad and specific contextual and personal factors are significant in such understandings and experiences?
3. What theoretical and practical tools can help to better understand, prepare and support principals and systems to navigate the increasingly complex and demanding emotional labour that characterises leaders' work?

Our study has three overarching key objectives:

- (i) Develop a theoretically rigorous conceptualisation of public-school principals' work that addresses the intensified emotional demands of the role in times of heightened social divisions;
- (ii) Generate a robust evidence base to inform scholarship, education policy and workforce development reforms to enable educational systems and principals to recognise and productively manage these new and intensified forms of labour; and
- (iii) Develop theoretical and practical tools to better understand, prepare and support principals and systems to manage the increasingly complex emotional demands that characterise principals' work.

### WHAT DO WE MEAN BY EMOTIONAL LABOUR?

The definition we use in our project varies from the standard definition provided at the start of this report. Emotional labour

has been defined as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display [that is] sold for a wage" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). It was originally coined as a term to describe service industry work, where workers had to project a different emotion than the one they were experiencing, e.g., a flight attendant tasked with maintaining an air of friendly calm, even amidst passenger complaints or turbulence (Hochschild, 1983). More recently, the concept of emotional labour has been extended to study the 'caring' industries of healthcare (Riley & Weiss, 2016) and education (Steen-Johnsen et al., 2024), as well as management (Bolton, 2009).

Our study documents how emotional labour is currently experienced by Australian public-school principals and how this labour differs from other 'caring' professions. Emotional labour in the principalship is a poorly researched and understood phenomenon (Maxwell & Riley, 2017). What is known is that the nature and characteristics of principals' labour involves repeated, ongoing interactions with key stakeholders at varied developmental levels versus 'one-off'

brief encounters typically experienced in other 'caring' professions such as health (Maxwell & Riley, 2017).

The skills required to manage competing demands, and the emotional capacity to switch seamlessly between stakeholder interactions whilst simultaneously impression managing, can impact on health and wellbeing, e.g., chronic stress, feelings of burn out and lowered job satisfaction levels (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2020). Moreover, this work is highly gendered, 'raced' and classed, with women viewed as skilled emotional managers (Blackmore, 1996) and over-represented in challenging, hard-to-staff public schools where disadvantaged students are predominantly located (MacDonald et al., 2021).

Understanding the emotional labour of principals matters because it provides key insights into the broader phenomenon of rapidly declining principal and teacher workplace health, safety and wellbeing that is negatively impacting the attraction and retention of Australian educators into the profession.

## ABOUT THESE REPORTS

This report (Report One) provides a technical overview of the ARC funded (DP230100594) project, *Invisible labour: Principal's emotional labour in volatile times*. The reports aim to identify the knowledge and practices required by education systems and governments to support and nurture a healthy and resilient principal (and ultimately teacher) workforce. For too long schools, and in particular, principals have been held solely responsible for the academic, social and physical outcomes of their students. Whilst principals are a key factor in students' flourishing (Edwards et al., 2018; Global School Leaders, 2024; Hughes et al., 2015; Leithwood et al., 2019), our reports reveal the crucial role that governments and education systems can play in thoughtfully supporting – or alternatively undermining – the agency of the principal workforce, and public schools more generally, in carrying out their important work. Our research cannot promise to directly benefit issues of principal turnover, preparation, improved teacher retention, improved student outcomes and greater social cohesion, but action from these reports may ameliorate these issues.

Report Two is the first in a series of thematic reports that draws predominantly on findings from a survey of public-school principals' critical incidents to examine how emotional labour impacts principals. Report Three examines how violence and other social volatilities in relation to gender in schools impact the emotional labour of principals. Report Four examines the impact of education systems on principals' emotional labour. The reports focus on the principals' emotional labour in relation to these intersecting domains. They cover the following themes:

### Report Two: The Impact of Emotional Labour on the Individual Principal

1. Wearing a professional mask
2. The diverse geographies of emotional labour
3. The bodily impacts of emotional labour.

### Report Three: Schools and Emotional Labour

4. The escalation of violence in schools and its repercussions for principals' emotional labour
5. Social volatilities and gender
6. Emotional labour as a collective act of solidarity

### Report Four: Emotional Labour, Schooling and Education Systems

7. Emotional labour and principals feeling "hung out to dry"
8. Who would want to be a principal?

Note that these themes overlap and intersect, with threads running throughout the themes, such as wearing a professional mask and the exploitation of principals' care.

Reports Two, Three and Four are based on extensive analysis of principal critical incident testimonies, drawn from a survey of Australian public-school principals conducted from 2023-2024. These findings are corroborated by close analysis of stakeholder interviews, an extensive literature review, case studies and policy audit (see detailed explanation below). The recommendations at the conclusion of Reports Two, Three and Four are drawn from these research findings.<sup>1</sup>

The attraction and retention of high-quality educators into the principalship and lower turnover accrues significant social benefits: positively impacting teacher retention, school-community engagement and students' outcomes, particularly those from more marginalised backgrounds (Bartanen et al., 2019; Kelchtermans, 2017). The project supports governments to foster healthy and resilient Australian communities by reducing the significant social costs associated with high principal turnover, stress and burnout.<sup>2,3</sup> This is a crucial benefit given Australia's significant economic investment in its public-school systems. By adopting an activist approach in its methodology, through the publication of (anonymised) principals' testimonies from public school principals that promote principal voice, our research aims to raise public consciousness and engender dialogue about the hazardous occupational conditions of public-school principals.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The wording of critical incident testimonies and stakeholder interviews sometimes has been slightly changed to protect the anonymity of participants.

<sup>2</sup> When it comes to principal health and wellbeing, "all principals do significantly worse than the general population" (Victorian Auditor-General's Office, 2023). Mental injury was consistently the highest cause of principals' workers compensation claims between 2015 and 2021. It made up almost half (48 per cent) of all claims. By comparison, mental injury makes up an average of 29 and 20 per cent of teachers' and non-teaching school staff claims, respectively (Victorian Auditor-General's Office, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> WorkSafe Victoria reported a 22% increase in claims from educators in 2022-2023, with total costs for the two-year period of more than \$50 million (Al Afreed, et al., 2022).

# 01

## INTRODUCTION

We are at a critical juncture of global events — social, political and economic — that is fuelling international and national tensions. These events are experienced in the form of increased social volatility at national and local levels.

These volatilities heighten emotions such as anger, anxiety or despair, circulate 'on the ground' in varied ways in local communities, and diversely impact the affective atmosphere or 'mood' of schools (Ahmed, 2004a). Given that leading and educating is primarily relational work (Edwards-Groves et al., 2025; Helstad & Moller, 2013), principals (and teachers) are major recipients of these heightened emotions and effects.

These volatilities arise from a variety of factors. They include the impact of climate change on our environment; the economic pain caused by increasing gaps between rich and poor; the emergence of populist and sometimes extremist politics that foster fears and anxieties about immigration; heightened levels of racism as experienced in the campaign for the 2023 Australian Indigenous Voice referendum; a rise in misogynist attitudes; the elevation of conspiracy theories fueled by social media, and a related decline in trust in scientific knowledge and governments (Biddle et al., 2023; Keddie, 2024; Milne et al., 2024; O'Neill, 2002; Over et al., 2025).

At the national and state levels, these volatilities also result from the hollowing out of the Australian public education system and the public sector more broadly (Macdonald et al., 2023; Smyth, 2008). Four decades of government policies favouring the marketisation of and competition between government and non-government schools have taken its toll<sup>4</sup> (Cobbold, 2024; Mockler, Thompson et al., 2023). An increasingly depleted public education system and its educators are being asked to support more complex student populations with less resources and systemic support. All the while they are accompanied by a long-term chorus of political and media disparagement of public education (Cobbold, 2024; Longmuir et al., 2024).

Schools and principals must navigate the relational tensions that arise from these global and national events. These play out in the form of heightened anxieties and greater levels of violence as caregivers, students and communities grapple with a more unsafe, uncertain and hazardous world (ACU 2024; Walsh et al., 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2020). From this perspective public schools are proverbial canaries in the coalmine – a warning signal of the social and emotional impacts of increasing volatilities which are playing out in classrooms and playgrounds across Australia. As our reports document, principals are on the receiving end of these tensions. They are forced to engage in heightened levels of emotional labour as they navigate parent, student and community tensions, anxieties and alienation that arise from these increasing social, economic and political volatilities. It is adversely impacting their mental and physical health, sense of safety and wellbeing and in turn, their desire to stay in the job (Chandler et al., in press; Dicke et al., 2025).

Our research looks beneath the impact of excessive workload to the increased emotional intensity of public-school principals' work. Drawing on the voices of principals themselves, our reports document its emotionally draining nature and the long, hard hours where principals deal with more demanding situations as they support troubled staff, students and parents.

The ratcheting up in the emotional intensity of principals' work has been a less visible element of principals' work. It is one that is not easily quantified or measured but plays a significant role in increasing the stressors that impact their health and wellbeing. In turn it is adversely impacting the attraction and retention of teachers into the principalship. For instance, the Australian principal class is experiencing the highest-ever recorded levels of burnout and cognitive stress (Dicke et al., 2025) attributed to a range of factors. These include excessive workloads<sup>5</sup>, as well as dealing with record levels of mental health issues for children and youth (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2025; Brennan et al., 2021), and rising levels of student absenteeism, school disengagement<sup>6</sup> and violence<sup>7</sup> (Dep. of Ed., Australia, 2023).

We now turn to a review of the emotional labour literature to examine these issues in more detail.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>4</sup> Since 2009, government funding increases have favoured Catholic and Independent schools over government schools (Cobbold, 2024). This has led to severe underfunding of public education systems across Australia, with only the Australian Capital Territory [ACT] meeting the School Resource Standard [SRS] for students (Department of Education, 2023). This matters because Australian public schools enrol most students from the lowest SEA quartile – the most disadvantaged students in our society (Cobbold, 2025). Just over 80% of low SEA students attend public schools compared to 11.8% in Catholic schools and 7.7% in independent schools (Cobbold, 2025, p. 7).

<sup>5</sup> Analysis of 2021 Census data report the following:

Female classroom teachers worked longer hours than males at all ages ... School teachers worked extraordinarily long hours compared with workers in comparable occupations. They worked particularly longer hours than individuals with school teaching qualifications working full-time in other occupations. Similarly, full-time school teachers with highest qualifications in selected fields of study worked much longer hours than individuals in other occupations with highest qualifications in the same fields of study ... The incomes of public sector classroom teachers were on average lower than their counterparts in the private sector, especially in the peak career age range 45 to 49 (Preston, 2023, p. 2).

<sup>6</sup> Year 10-12 full-time apparent retention rates reveal that between 2014-2024 Catholic and Independent sectors have had little change. In the government sector there has been a decline from 78.6% in 2014 to 74.3% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024). In Australia in 2022, "The proportion of the Year 12 population that met the requirements of a Senior Secondary Certificate or equivalent was 76.3% ... Year 12 certification rates ... were higher in major cities (79.4%) than in inner regional areas (67.6%), outer regional areas (69.2%) and remote/very remote areas (55.5%)" and "for the population living in high socio-economic status areas (82.9%) than those in medium and low socio-economic status areas (75.2% and 69.7% respectively) ... the gap between Year 12 certification rates in high socio-economic status areas compared to low socioeconomic status areas has widened" (ACARA, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> From 2022 to 2023, the largest increase cited by educators intending to leave the profession was student behaviour (+9 percentage points) and parent behaviour (+5 percentage points). Between 2019 and 2023, there was a large percentual increase in student behaviour as a reason to leave the profession (rising from 30 to 42%) (Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership, 2025a).

The concept of 'emotional labour' first appeared in Hochschild's *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1983). Hochschild argued that a crucial aspect of the service industries is workers being paid to project a different emotion than the one they might be experiencing.

They do so by suppressing or concealing their emotional responses in order to placate others and behave in a way that is deemed professionally appropriate. Emotional labour is “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display [that is] sold for a wage” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7).

# 02

## LITERATURE REVIEW

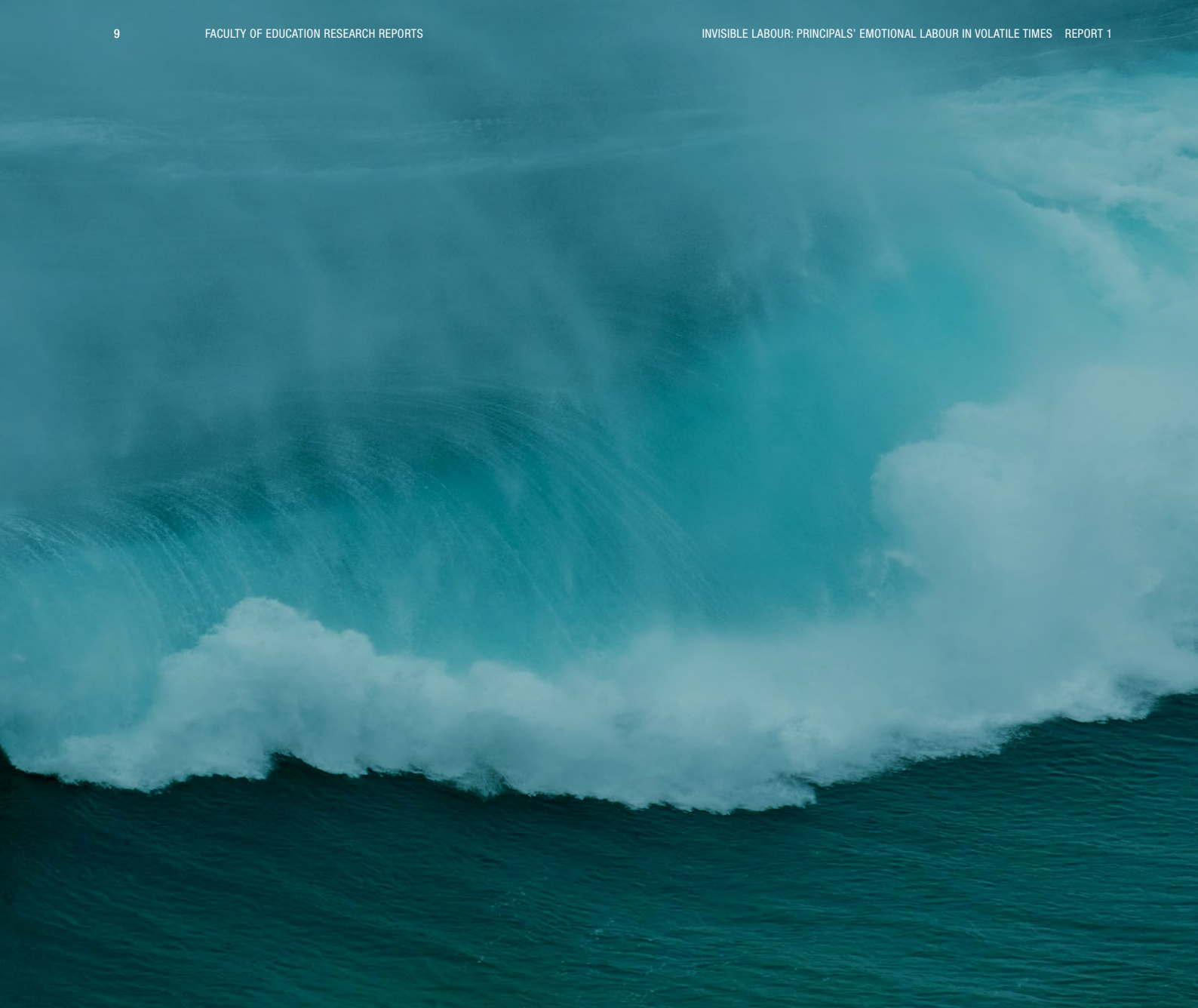
Unlike psychological notions of emotions as an individual and private experience, Hochschild (2012) draws on sociological notions of emotions as socially constructed. She argues that the emotions we experience operate under the norms of “feeling rules” (Hochschild, 1979) that determine what is socially and culturally appropriate to feel at a given time, e.g., experiencing sadness at the death of a friend or family member. The pinch between what we should feel and what we actually feel tells us that we are doing emotional labour

(Hochschild, 1983). Wharton (1993) argues that emotional labour can be positive and depends on workers’ autonomy, involvement and ‘self-monitoring’ abilities (Wharton, 2009). Principals in our research have spoken about both the positive and negative aspects of their work. We explore how emotion is integral to understanding the labour of principals.

Emotional labour is now a crucial aspect of the modern principalship (Beatty, 2000; Blackmore, 1996; Crawford, 2009; Oplatka, 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2021). It may be heightened for principals working in more socially disadvantaged settings with

greater student and community diversity. Alternatively, when supported by education systems and community, it can be a source of considerable emotional nourishment and satisfaction (Hirsh et al., 2023; Langelotz et al., in press). Moreover, the commodification of one’s feelings and those of others to gain and retain market share is now an integral aspect of the twenty first century principalship (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015).

Despite this, much remains unknown about the emotional labour of leaders, and principals in particular (Maxwell & Riley, 2017). What is known is that the nature and characteristics of principals’ labour involves repeated, ongoing interactions with key stakeholders with complex and varied needs versus ‘one-off’ brief encounters typically experienced in other ‘caring’ professions such as health (Maxwell & Riley, 2017).



Feminist research on the emotional labour of women principals interrogates how normative notions of leadership as an individualistic rather than collective form of practice maintain a masculinist, rationalist hegemony. Strength in the principalship is defined as denying or concealing one's emotions. As the women principals in an Australian study of school leadership recounted, "You never show you can't cope" (Sachs & Blackmore, 1998). More recent research in the principalship has examined the 'crisis' facing principals in Australia and internationally, including their declining wellbeing (Maxwell & Riley, 2017) and the resultant "looming shortage of people who want to take up the role" (McKay et al., 2022, p. 673). This recent Australian scholarship employs

diverse theoretical frameworks including critical feminist and practice architectures theory to examine the emotional labour of women principals from diverse ethnic and class backgrounds (Wilkinson et al., 2021), affective justice to explore love, care and solidarity (McKay & Mills, 2022) and quantitative approaches stemming from large-scale surveys (Maxwell & Riley, 2017).

Studies in Australia (Cole, 2024; Kamara, 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2021) and the USA (Ipsa-Lander & Thomas, 2019) have provided suggestive findings that intersectionality factors matter when it comes to how emotional labour is experienced by principals, e.g., how gender intersects with Indigeneity, gender class, stage of career

etc. Given the overwhelming Anglo-Celtic whiteness of the Australian principalship and the under-representation of teachers and principals from historically excluded groups<sup>8</sup> (Hawkins et al., under review), this is a particularly important area to explore. But precisely what the implications may be for more enabling and productive forms of emotional labour in the principalship, such as understanding the crucial contribution of Indigenous caring pedagogies (Bishop, 2024) remains unclear. Report Two explores this aspect of emotional labour when it comes to Indigenous principals.

#### FOOTNOTE

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix One.

# 03

## THE INVISIBILITY OF EMOTIONAL LABOUR

IN PRINCIPAL ROLE DESCRIPTIONS AND THE AUSTRALIAN PRINCIPAL STANDARD

'Invisible labour' was first introduced by Daniels (1987) as a sociological understanding of work that takes place in private realms that are emotional and relational. Lewis (2007) related this work to the invisible aspects of teaching work. We are now relating this work to public-school principals.

While the emotional labour of principals is still poorly understood and largely invisible, the challenges and emotional toll of the role is significant. Its complexity, variance and nuance are misunderstood or unacknowledged in principals' role descriptions and the Australian Principal Standard.

<sup>8</sup>See Appendix One.

Our study of public-school principals' emotional labour commenced with an audit of Australian education policies and principal role descriptions. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL] Australian Professional

Standard for Principals "set[s] out what school principals are expected to know, understand and do to succeed in their work" (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2025b). It integrates "three Leadership Requirements" and "actions that effective principals implement as they progress to higher levels of proficiency" with a focus on their own learning. The Standard seeks to "empower school leaders across the country to develop and support teaching that maximises impact on student learning." It aims to make visible aspects of the principals' role and connects closely with state and jurisdiction role descriptions.

The AITSL Principal Standard was first released in 2011 and at the time of writing this report, is currently under revision. It acknowledges the “relational” nature of principal’s daily work, which includes “engaging and working with the community” as leaders of learning and leaders of their community. The national profile in the area of community encompasses “coaching”, “reflecting” and “giving feedback”, “planning teaching and learning” with others, “building a culture of trust”, “embedding collaborative practices”, “continuous improvement”, “partner

with stakeholders”, “build strategies for hard-to-reach parents and carers” and building feedback loops and trust. The Standard also declares that principals are leaders of wellbeing, stating that “They model the importance of health and wellbeing, watch for signs of stress in self and others and take action to address it”.

In sum, The Standard for Principals (AITSL, 2025b) places the wellbeing of school staff on the shoulders of Australian principals. Whilst being held responsible for the health and wellbeing of themselves and others, there

is little/no mention of who should provide support for principals. What is invisible in the Standard is the current conditions of increased stress and work intensification for principals that have been escalating over the past decade. These conditions have implications for principals’ work requirements. For instance, principals may simply be unable to “model the importance of health and wellbeing” (AITSL, 2025b) given these current conditions. As one principal recounted in their critical incident testimony, dealing with a critical incident was:

*“like juggling 10 chainsaws. . . You are caring for students and staff, managing media, responding to the community, responding to the Minister’s office, reaching out to the actual family of the child, shutting down ridiculous gossip, working with police and attending to a multitude of other tasks. You go home at night, don’t sleep and repeat the next day. After a few weeks it dies down and life returns to normal for everyone else. As my DP [Deputy Principal] said to me two weeks following, ‘I don’t know how you’re still standing. Adrenalin was my only answer.’”*

**(MALE PRINCIPAL, F-12 SCHOOL, CAPITAL CITY).**

Each Australian state and territory has a principal role description that is modelled on or defers to the AITSL Principal Standard. For instance, the New South Wales [NSW] Principal role description (2021) states, "This role description should be read in conjunction with the Principal Role Description Companion Resource" (New South Wales Department of Education [NSW DoE], 2021). Specific emotional dimensions in the role description are mandated for NSW principals, e.g., "The principal develops a *positive school culture* in partnership with the staff and school community. Principals are collaborative, collegial and *empathetic leaders*", who "demonstrate personal and *interpersonal qualities* that influence and impact relationships". The responsibility for principal wellbeing in NSW appears to be placed on principals who "are committed to their own professional development and wellbeing in order to enhance their resilience and manage the complexity of the role". It is the principals' responsibility to "establish a positive, collaborative workplace culture in order to maintain an inclusive, effective and safe working and learning environment" (NSW DoE, 2021). According to the NSW role description, principals are held responsible for their emotional wellbeing and that of others. The Principal Standard and NSW role description are silent on who else may or should be responsible for principals' emotional health and wellbeing.

In the Western Australian principal role description (Western Australian Department of Education, 2025), principals are expected to be "developing self and others" through "respectful relationships". However, there is no mention of the wellbeing of the principal or staff. The Victorian Government Schools guidelines for principals that come

under Schedule 2 and 3 of the Victorian Government Schools agreement is similarly silent on principal wellbeing, but states that the principal is responsible for running the school (Victorian Department of Education, n.d.). Queensland's Department of Education principal role description also states that principals "nurture positive relationships between students, teachers, the community and stakeholders" (Queensland Department of Education [Qld. DoE, n.d.]). Principals should "uphold the principalship as a values based, ethical and moral activity" with "demonstrated strong interpersonal skills" and have the "ability to manage effectively human resources" (Qld. DoE, n.d.). There is little to no mention of principal wellbeing.

The South Australian principal role description (South Australia Department of Education [SA DoE], 2021) is distinct in its model of governance. Principals are responsible to the "Chief Executive" of the Department of Education with a "joint responsibility" to govern their school with their "governing council", to "deliver the department's goals" and "code of ethics" (SA DoE 2021). Here, responsibility in their role description is shared. Principals are responsible for wellbeing and compliance, where "the principal is required to maintain a safe and healthy environment for staff, children and young people and comply with all provisions of the relevant workplace health and safety legislation and related departmental health, safety and wellbeing responsibilities and procedures, including child safety" and to "promote and create a safe work environment" (SA DoE, 2021). It is unclear who is responsible for principals' health and wellbeing.

The Tasmanian Principal role description (Tasmanian Department of Education [Tas.

DoE] 2024) states that "it is the responsibility of the occupant to actively participate, promote and model behaviours which are consistent with the Department's commitment to the safety and wellbeing of children and young people" and "provide for the well-being and safety of students and staff" (Tas. DoE, 2024). Tasmanian principals are expected to have "excellent interpersonal skills and the capacity to develop and sustain productive relationships and partnerships with staff, students, parents and the broader community" (Tas. DoE, 2024). Like other states and territories including Northern Territory (Northern Territory Government Department of Education and Training, n.d.) and ACT (Australian Capital Territory Education Directorate, 2020), there is no mention of who is responsible for the principals' health and wellbeing.

The role descriptions for principals in each state and territory rightly highlight the importance of the role of the principal in supporting the health and wellbeing of students and staff. However, except for the South Australian role description, principals appear to be held solely responsible for these tasks with no mention of how broader systemic and government arrangements such as policy and resourcing steer the landscape in which public school principals operate. Moreover, the role descriptions appear to place the onus of responsibility for principals' health and wellbeing on the principals themselves. AITSL's Principal Standard and role descriptions within each state and territory are silent when it comes to acknowledging system or government responsibility for the workplace and social conditions in which government school principals operate. This is the context in which Australian principals conduct their invisible emotional labour.

# 04

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### (A) THEORETICAL LENS

Our study conceptualises emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) as a sociological phenomenon, exploring how it manifests through “complex interrelations of discursive practices, social and cultural forces, and individually experienced but historically situated emotions and affects” (Zembylas, 2014, p. 4). We do not view emotional labour as an individual phenomenon rooted in a psychological notion of emotions. Instead, we see emotions as socially constructed. We draw on the theory of

practice architectures (Kemmis et al., 2014) to examine how particular emotions attune our practices – helping us to understand how we should think, what we say and how we act and relate to one another (Wilkinson, 2021). We combine our understanding of emotions with Sara Ahmed’s (2004b) notion of emotions and affect as relational, moving between bodies and signs in a constant circulation.

To illustrate, rather than seeing emotions as an individual set of feelings or ‘intelligences’ (such as emotional intelligence), we examine

how practices – the everyday, often taken-for-granted ways of being and doing in the world – are crucial in learning how to socialise in our society (Wilkinson, 2021). Emotions are an important means by which we learn how to go on in our world – they signal what is appropriate to feel, say, do or how to relate to people in different situations. As Hochschild (1983) tells us, emotions are not individual qualities but are socially regulated, e.g., little Australian boys in our Anglo-Celtic majority population learn quickly that in the public arena of schools, ‘big boys don’t cry’.

Theory of Practice Architecture views practices as composed of sayings (how we talk and think about our world), doings (how we act in our everyday lives) and 'relatings' (our emotions, how we feel and what values we draw on). These are all held together by the intention or 'project' of the practice (Kemmis et al., 2014). However, our social practices do not occur in a vacuum (Kemmis et al., 2014). Instead, they are prefigured – enabled and constrained – by the arrangements (or practice architectures/conditions) that make practices more or less possible in specific sites such as schools. These conditions include cultural-discursive arrangements – the language or ideas we draw on; material-economic arrangements found in or brought into a site – objects, 'set-ups', spatial and temporal arrangements; and social-political arrangements found in or brought to a site – such as system roles and lifeworld relationships (Kemmis et al., 2014).

In our study, we examine the specific arrangements that make certain practices of the emotional labour of the principalship more or less possible. For instance, in Report Three, we examine how gendered constructions of the principalship prefigure what principals should feel, say or do, e.g., males are expected to disguise feelings of vulnerability or fear. We found that societal expectations of women as caregivers and nurturers appear to lead to additional emotional burdens in female principals' professional roles. Many of the women principals report feeling that they should prioritise the emotional needs of others over their own needs. This can lead to neglect of their own emotional and mental health needs.

By examining the relational and situated ways in which principals experience emotions and how these experiences are enabled and constrained by the (cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political) arrangements of specific schooling sites (Wilkinson, 2021), we aim to add new knowledge about the nature of emotional labour for principals. Report Two documents how the practice architectures that enable and constrain the emotional labour of government school principals are informed by their multiple intersectionalities (e.g., gender, Indigeneity) enacted across diverse sites of practice (eg. rural, remote, urban).

## B) ACTIVIST FOCUS

The project deliberately has adopted an activist focus. We have done so in several ways.

Firstly, we have created a website [monash.edu/education/research/projects/school-principals-emotional-labour-in-volatile-times](https://monash.edu/education/research/projects/school-principals-emotional-labour-in-volatile-times) where anonymous, de-identified critical incident testimonies are shared in order to raise awareness amongst the general public about the complex nature of the emotional demands of principals' roles (see methods below for more detail). Secondly, we have established an Industry Reference Group comprising education stakeholders from state systems, principals' associations, teacher unions and parent groups. The group meets twice a year and has provided invaluable advice and insights.

Thirdly, from the beginning of the study, we have consulted widely with and presented to public principals' associations, parent groups, teacher unions and departmental personnel about our study's aims and its emerging findings. An unintended but important consequence of this ongoing consultation and sharing has been that it has helped to 'break the silence' about the range of emotions – both desirable and undesirable – that principals experience in their role. Presentations of the critical incident testimonies – which recount often harrowing stories of major incidents in principals' work – have helped to create a forum where some principals can feel safe to share their experiences of emotional labour in their work. This sharing has helped to create an affirming environment in which principals come to understand that the emotions they are experiencing are not an isolated experience but one which many others experience. This, in turn, has helped to build a shared sense of solidarity and camaraderie. As one principal remarked after he saw testimonies from the critical incidents, "I thought I was alone in feeling this way but now I see that is not the case". Our stakeholder consultation on our reports during 2025 is a further step in fulfilling this activist approach.

Our study spans 2023-2026. It employs a variety of methods including an audit of principal policies and role descriptions (see above), interviews with key education stakeholders, critical incidents testimonies and case studies of principals. The purpose of the policy audit and key education stakeholder interviews was to provide a sense of the broader practice architectures (Kemmis et al., 2014) shaping the emotional labour of public-school principals. The critical incident testimonies and case studies have provided a more detailed examination of how this labour plays out in the daily work of principals. We now turn to an outline of each of the methods.

## (C) CRITICAL INCIDENT TESTIMONIES

A critical incident is "an emotional event in the life of a person or an organization in that it is a period of intense feelings" that help render the invisible, visible (Gherardi & Rodeschini, 2016, p. 272). Critical incidents permit the examination of breakdowns in 'normal' practices, "to gain deeper understanding of the values, rules, and behaviours that are taken for granted in the principalship and are therefore almost invisible for most of the time" (Gherardi & Rodeschini, 2016). These incidents have major affective and ethical dimensions with which principals often feel ill-equipped to grapple (Levinson & Fay, 2016; Wilkinson et al., 2020). The incidents refer to acute moments in their work, including violence, suicide, accidents and abuse. Critical incident analysis has provided a 'point in time' glimpse from diverse perspectives into the varied conditions in which principals' labour is experienced, and how such work plays out in terms of the relational tensions of diverse sites – rural, remote and urban, primary, secondary and special schools, and principals ranging from early career to highly experienced.

Public school principals across Australia were invited to contribute a short anonymous testimony (in written and audio forms) in response to the following open-ended questions:

1. Describe a critical incident that has occurred in your role as a principal. What was your professional response?
2. How did the incident make you feel? What do you wish people understood about the incident and what you went through? What did you learn from this experience?
3. Is there anything else you wish to add?

The critical incident survey ran from July 2023 to October 2024. A total of 256 principals across Australia shared a response, with 298 testimonies. Principals were invited via principal association newsletters, teacher union newsletters and social media.

Principal locations were varied, as shown below and in Appendix One of this report. The data was organised in NVivo and analysed according to a coding framework that was both deductive and inductive. In the deductive analysis, data was categorised into key themes drawn from Hochschild's theory of emotional labour (1983, 2012). In the inductive analysis, key themes were discerned from the data in a collaborative process inspired by grounded theory (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020).

**FIGURE 1: LOCATION OF PRINCIPALS**

WHERE IS YOUR SCHOOL OR OTHER EDUCATIONAL SETTING LOCATED?	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
In a regional city	49
In a remote area	9
In a rural area	61
In an inner suburb of a capital city	60
In an outer suburb of a capital city	77
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>256</b>

Key themes in the data have been identified through thematic analysis of recurring, dominant and subordinate themes. These themes were then coded and checked by the team – within and driven by the study's broader theoretical frameworks. Reports Two, Three and Four share key thematic findings focusing on the critical incident testimonies, corroborated by stakeholder interviews and case studies.

As the data included sensitive themes including violence, suicide and despair, the research team were informed by Burrell et al (2023)'s recommendations on working with emotionally demanding research. Note that the wording of these testimonies has at times been slightly changed to protect anonymity of participants.

#### **(D) POLICY AUDIT**

The project team conducted a system/policy audit in 2023 to analyse broader policies of schooling reform nationally and at state levels to investigate the broader conditions shaping principals' labour in relation to the 'invisible' emotional aspects of this work. This audit has informed the broader project by highlighting the different policy arrangements that inform and shape principal work. Across Australia's eight states and territories, relevant agencies communicate and describe principal expectations differently. For example, published principal position descriptions and industrial agreements describe principals work in managerial terms, whereas principal health and wellbeing policies – released by most systems over the past eight years – describe principal work more explicitly as part of a broader education system. The policy audit has supported our research team to critically examine the different ways that the role of the principal is imagined by governments, and compare that with principal testimonies, key stakeholder interviews and case studies.

#### **(E) STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS**

In addition to principal testimonies, interviews and focus groups were held with key education stakeholders across Australia (N=28). These have included principal associations, teacher unions, school council/parent/citizens associations, and senior education system personnel, e.g., policy makers. The aim of these interviews/focus groups was to identify:

- (i) stakeholders' understandings of the broader conditions at system and societal levels that are shaping the specific conditions of schooling (e.g., policy discourses, resourcing and staffing demands, changes in parenting, societal volatilities);
- (ii) how stakeholders see these conditions being enacted (at national, state and local levels) in encounters between principals and various stakeholder groups, such as students, educators, parents, community members and system personnel; and
- (iii) the implications for principals' emotional labour of these understandings and enactments.

Findings from the stakeholder interviews are included in Reports Two, Three and Four.

#### **(F) CASE STUDIES**

The aim of the case studies is to capture the daily nature of principals' emotional labour as it unfolded in a range of diverse sites. Four case studies were conducted in Victoria. The case studies included: one rural primary school led by a mid-career female principal; a secondary urban school of high religious and ethnic diversity led by a new female principal; an urban primary school led by a mid-career male principal, located in an area of acute socioeconomic disadvantage and which was ethnically and linguistically diverse; and a case study spearheaded by a highly experienced male principal. In order to explore the variety of ways in which emotional labour plays out in different sites, the case studies were deliberately selected to represent a diversity of school types, sizes, demographics and locations, as well as principal demographics, e.g., career stage, gender, ethnicity and class origin.

The cases aimed to add new knowledge about the heightened emotional dynamics shaping principals' work; the dialectical interactions between these emotional dimensions and principals' individual demographics; and how such labour is undertaken. Its aim was to bring depth to studies of emotional labour, in contrast to the shortcomings of 'one-off' insights from surveys and interviews that dominate current research on principals' emotional labour.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted with: executive staff; teachers ranging from novice to highly experienced; students (range of year levels and diverse backgrounds); parents (with children across diverse grades and backgrounds); and community members (e.g. school council and parent/community associations). In-depth interviews with the principal were conducted (initial interview, midpoint of study, and conclusion) to examine their life history and career development. Interviews provided deeper insights into how particular factors influencing principals' leadership journey shaped the practices of emotional labour in which they engaged (e.g., deflecting/minimising/denying their or others' emotions, distancing from staff and students, passionate advocacy for groups within a school community). To explore the emotional intensities of their work, leaders were asked to identify and reflect on critical incidents that had shaped their work, including the impact of

these incidents on their leadership practices and ways of 'doing' the principalship.

Observations allowed for a deeper insight into the relational tensions and site-specific conditions shaping principals' work, and the emotional dimensions of this labour. They encompassed sites of practice where relational tensions may play out, e.g., classrooms, play time, boundaries between community and school exemplified in school entrance gates at opening or closing times of the day, staff meetings, principal meetings with parents or students, principal's office, front office, and so forth. Observations included micro-shadowing (1-2 days with principal) which recognised how busy participants are while giving an opportunity to observe their everyday "micro" interactions with diverse stakeholders and place-based familiarity with the broader conditions in which the school is situated (Thomson & Hall, 2017).

These case studies will be explored in future publications.

### **(G) REFERENCE GROUPS**

The project has drawn from two reference groups. The first is an Industry Reference Group comprising Australian education stakeholders from state systems, principals' associations, teacher unions and parent groups. The group met twice a year and has provided invaluable advice and insights. The study has also drawn from our International Expert Reference Group of internationally-renowned scholars who have discussed and debated emerging cross national, national and local findings from the first phase of the project and supported further lines of inquiry. The work of both groups has been crucial in informing our reports and we thank them for their generous and thoughtful insights and contributions. As a result, our work has been considerably strengthened.

# Conclusion

Our project began with the insight that despite the crucial nature of emotional labour in the work of the principalship, the emotional dimensions of the role were largely invisible in policy settings and principal role descriptions. Our findings seek to make this labour visible and foreground its crucial role in the work of the principalship.

In response to model work, health and safety laws put forward by Safe Work Australia (2022), many Australian states and territories are now amending existing legislation to require workplaces to identify and ameliorate both physical and psychosocial hazards for their employees (Safe Work Australia, 2022). Hence, an in-depth study of principals' emotional labour is both timely and significant.

Our qualitative study champions public education by examining the emotional labour of public-school principals at system and school levels nationally. There are major economic and social benefits to understanding this aspect of public-school principals' work. Economically, Australia has a significant economic investment in its public-school systems. The New South Wales and Victorian sectors are responsible for a combined 1,471,000 students, 3773 schools, 103,000 teachers and total budgets of approximately \$28 billion (NSW DoE, 2021). The attraction and retention of high-quality educators into the principalship and lower turnover accrues significant social benefits: positively impacting teacher retention, school-community engagement and students' outcomes, particularly those from more marginalised backgrounds (Bartanen et al. 2019; Kelchtermans, 2017). Conversely, the "costs of principal turnover are significant, and likely to have the most serious impact on vulnerable communities and students" (Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2020, p. 6). In conclusion, there is an opportunity cost to governments and systems doing nothing and it is the most vulnerable children and young people in our communities who will be impacted.

To find out more, explore our other reports on the challenges and rewards of emotional labour on our project website

☞ [monash.edu/education/research/projects/school-principals-emotional-labour-in-volatile-times](https://monash.edu/education/research/projects/school-principals-emotional-labour-in-volatile-times) which contains rich principal testimonials.

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## APPENDIX ONE

Demographics of principals who responded to our survey:

GENDER	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
Man	91
My gender identity isn't listed, I identify as...	1
Prefer not to say	1
Woman	163
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>256</b>

AGE	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
30-39	8
40-49	66
50-64	166
65 or older	16
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>256</b>

WHERE WERE YOU BORN?	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
Australia	224
Other country	32
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>256</b>

WHERE WERE YOUR PARENTS BORN?	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
Australia	185
Other country	71
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>256</b>

DO YOU IDENTIFY AS ANY OF THE FOLLOWING?	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
Aboriginal	1
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	1
Neither	252
Prefer not to answer	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>256</b>

DO YOU IDENTIFY AS HAVING A CULTURALLY OR LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE BACKGROUND?	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
No	235
Unsure	2
Yes	19
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>256</b>

ARE YOU CURRENTLY EMPLOYED IN A PRINCIPAL ROLE, OR HAVE YOU CHANGED ROLES/RETIRED/RESIGNED WITHIN THE PAST FIVE YEARS?	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
Retired/resigned within the past five years	5
Currently in a principal role	237
Changed to a different education-focused role within the past five years	10
Other	4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>256</b>

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN A PRINCIPAL?	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
Less than a year	6
1-5 years	64
6-15 years	141
16+ years	45
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>256</b>

WHERE IS YOUR SCHOOL OR OTHER EDUCATIONAL SETTING LOCATED?	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
In a regional city	49
In a remote area	9
In a rural area	61
In an inner suburb of a capital city	60
In an outer suburb of a capital city	77
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>256</b>

WHICH BEST DESCRIBES THE TYPE OF SCHOOL WHERE YOU ARE CURRENTLY A PRINCIPAL?	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
F-12 / Central School	20
Primary school	112
Secondary school	100
Specialist School or Special Developmental School	12
Other – responses included K-10, K-12, senior secondary, primary with kinder, primary and secondary combined with special development.	12
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>256</b>

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